

"I did lie, BUT I LIED FOR A REASON"

The inside story of disgraced author NORMA KHOURI

Feted then demonised, Norma Khouri, author of the best-selling book, *Forbidden Love*, was revealed as a literary hoax. Now, as a new documentary about Norma premieres in Australia, **David Leser**

IMAGINE CONCOCTING a story so fantastic – and initially so credible – that you end up with agents, publishers, journalists, booksellers and an adoring public eating out of your hands. You've become an international best-selling author, published in 16 countries, translated into a dozen languages. There are television interviews, feature-length articles about you, packed writers' festivals. A fan has penned a love song in your honour. You've been given permanent residence in a new land – in this case,

Australia – on the basis that you're a "distinguished talent". There's even a letter from the daughter of the US vice-president testifying to your credentials. Everyone wants to read you, hear you, help you, especially given all the death threats. Only trouble is, you're a con artist and a fraud. You've told so many barefaced lies, that it's all you can do to keep the floor show from collapsing. One false move and you're gone. Welcome to the dark night of Norma Khouri's soul. >>>



This is Malcom Knox and Caroline Overington. Caption Intro to go here is nulla amet wisi. Faccum ver se facil



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You remember her, don't you? The woman whose stirring account of her best friend's honour killing caused such a sensation here four years ago – 200,000 books sold in Australia alone, voted by readers as one of their 100 all-time favourite books.

Perhaps it was the timing – two years after September 11, three years after a series of rapes by Lebanese gang members in Sydney – that inspired so much interest about a woman's place in the Arab world.

Here was the "harrowing true story" of "Dalia", a Jordanian Muslim who had been murdered by her father for having an illicit relationship with "Michael", Catholic man. She had been stabbed 12 times in the chest for daring to fall in love with this Royal Jordanian Army officer, whom she had met while working with Norma in a unisex hair salon in the Jordanian capital, Amman.

Her barbaric killing was of a kind regularly visited on women in the Middle East and Jordan in particular. Women could be killed for losing their virginity through rape or, in Dalia's case, a few stolen kisses in a pine forest. Anything that violated the family's honour could result in death.

Norma's book, *Forbidden Love*, was an attempt to try to avenge her friend's



"I HARDLY SLEEP. I THEM. I SIT UP ALL

murder, while at the same time, issuing a worldwide call to action against this ancient practice. "I made Dalia a promise that her death would not be in vain," she told *The Weekly* in 2003, when this magazine – like many other publications – chose to highlight her extraordinary tale. (The *Weekly* published an interview with Norma, along with a six-page extract from the book.)

"As long as those laws continue to exist and as long as women continue to be killed and men get off, I cannot rest," she said.

By her own account, Norma fled Jordan after Dalia's death in 1996 and went to live in Greece, where, between housekeeping jobs, she wrote her best-seller in an internet cafe. She was snapped up by a New York literary agent and an international publishing house, and by the second half of 2003, her book was a runaway success. She began appearing on network television in America and at literary festivals around the world, including Australia and New Zealand. She had become the literary diva of the year.

I first met Norma Khouri in May 2003, when I was invited to chair several panels at the Auckland Writer's Festival. One of the panels was about the art of writing memoirs and how these personal stories helped us understand political issues. Norma was one of the three women on the panel, the other two being Kim Mahood, the Australian writer and visual artist, and Aminatta Forna, the London-based writer and broadcaster from Sierra Leone.

Norma was quite clearly the star attraction, despite her being the least gifted of the three writers. Her story was dramatic, racy and it played well to people's prejudices about Islam and backward, patriarchal Arab men.

I had met Norma the night before our interview and we'd hit it off immediately. She was warm and ebullient, and her story quite clearly sensational. It reminded me of why I'd been so drawn to the Middle East as a young correspondent during the 1980s. The region held everything for me – desert traditions, messianic faiths and ancient conflict.

Over dinner and a bottle of wine, Norma and I talked for nearly five hours about the tragedy of her life in Jordan and about her campaign to save other women from fates similar to Dalia's. "I hardly sleep," she said, talking non-stop and smoking obsessively. "I have women writing to me begging me to help them.

I couldn't stop laughing. And I thought, 'Oooh ... all the other movies, what have I been missing?'"

It was at this point that I asked her whether she had ever had a lover. She was 34 years and had lived almost her entire life in the often harsh and puritanical world of the Middle East. Had she ever known what it meant to be loved?

"No," she replied softly. "There was a man in Greece who I liked and we would kiss and he would hold me ... but nothing more." She was quite clearly claiming to be an Arab virgin.

Three months later, when I interviewed her again at the Byron Bay Writers Festival in northern NSW, we again returned to this theme. "Now I'm turning all shades of red," she replied when I asked, this time publicly, if she had ever had a sexual relationship. "I'd like to say that I am married to the cause, but I have had some experiences with someone that I care about deeply."

The audience was enthralled. Here she was, a standard-bearer for oppressed women, at once so alone, but so courageous, stubborn, forthright. At the end of the hour-long session, they applauded for a full 30 seconds. Many people were moist-eyed as they joined the queue to meet her, my own daughter – who happens to be named Jordan – among them. Little did we know then that she'd

just misled, exaggerated or lied to us at least 80 times during the previous 60 minutes.

Malcolm Knox, the literary editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, was standing in his kitchen playing with his one-year-old son when the phone rang one morning in February 2003. The call was a tip-off from a Sydney-based Jordanian alerting him to information coming out of his country. Two prominent Jordanian women had become sufficiently concerned about Norma Khouri's book to have begun compiling a dossier on the author. This would result in them asking Norma's publishers, Random House, to reclassify her work as fiction, a request which the publishers rejected.

A full 18 months transpired before Malcolm Knox was able to write the first of what turned out to be a Walkley Award-winning series of articles with his colleague, Caroline Overington. "Norma Khouri is a fake," he wrote, "and so is *Forbidden Love*." "Khouri's real name is Norma Majid Khouri Michael Al-Bagain Toliopoulos and she only lived in Jordan until she was three years old. She has a US passport and lived from 1973 until 2000 in Chicago. She is married with two children, 13 and 11.

"She has four American siblings and a mother who are desperate to hear news >>>

HAVE WOMEN WRITING TO ME BEGGING ME TO HELP NIGHT ANSWERING THEIR EMAILS."

I sit up all night answering their emails."

She talked about how much she missed her family in Jordan, particularly her mother, but how she believed she would be killed if she returned to her country. She had dishonoured the family by running away and speaking out. "I can't go back," she said.

I was amazed by her fluency in English and her seeming sophistication with all things Western. How did she speak English so well? "Private American schools in Jordan," she replied. And what of her exposure to Western art, music and cinema? "Oh, my God," she gushed like a child. "I became a movie-holic when I first got to Greece.

"The friends I was staying with at the time said to me, 'Have you seen the movie *There's Something About Mary*'?" And I said, "That's one of the dumbest movies I've ever seen. It didn't make any sense." But that was because, in Jordan, the American movies we saw lasted only 40 minutes. So when they showed me *Something About Mary* I watched it three times in a row and



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This is Dr Amal al-Sabbagh
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"I REALLY DO WISH I COULD SIT DOWN WITH YOU AND SHOW YOU EVERYTHING AND ONE DAY SOON I WILL. BUT FOR NOW ... I MUST

from her. But she has managed to conceal this double life from her publishers, her agent, lawyers in several continents, the Australian Department of Immigration and, until now, the public."

There was more to come. Norma had fled the US in 1999 with her Greek-American husband, John Toliopoulos, to avoid being questioned by the FBI and prosecuted for fraud. In 1998, she had been arrested for allegedly bashing her mother-in-law and threatening to kill her. (The charges were dropped only when her mother-in-law failed to show up at the trial.) At the time of Dalia's so-called honour killing – when Norma wrote she was living in Jordan – she was working on various real estate transactions in the Chicago area.

Further revelations continued to flow with the help of the two Jordanian women – Rana Hussein, a prominent journalist, and Dr Amal al-Sabbagh, director of The Jordanian National Commission for Women. The two had discovered 73 lies or exaggerations in the book, among them that the unisex salon – which Norma and Dalia had supposedly worked in during the early to mid-1990s – could never have existed by law, nor could it be remembered by any hairdresser in the capital.

Within 48 hours of Malcolm Knox's revelations, Norma was on a flight to New York, leaving behind her young children in the care of neighbour and friend Rachel Richardson. By the end of the week, her book had been removed from the shelves.

On August 8, 2004, I received a five-page fax from Norma in the US informing me that her solicitors were holding

documents and photos proving she had been in Jordan between 1973 and 2000. She included in the fax the results of a voluntary polygraph test which confirmed, she said, that she had been telling the truth. (One of the questions asked: "Do you have reason to believe that your friend Dalia's death was an honour killing?")

Norma also said she was suing Malcolm Knox for defamation – the suit has since been dropped – and insisted to me that Dalia had been a "very close friend" of hers who really "did exist" and really had been "killed by her father".

"I really do wish I could sit down with you," she wrote, "and show you everything and one day soon I will. But for now, unlike Malcolm Knox, I must first safeguard the privacy and safety of others involved."

By this stage – polygraph or no polygraph – I didn't believe a word she was saying.

When Anna Broinowski, the Australian filmmaker, first read about Norma in July 2004, her first reaction was to assume that she had been seriously maligned.

"I had this feminist line running in my head," she tells *The Weekly now*, "that this was a typical witch-hunt ... with mostly male journalists out to make her look evil. That's why I thought I would make this film."

In May 2005, she paid for Norma to fly to San Francisco from an unknown destination in the US, principally to attend the premiere of her latest film, *Helen's War* – a

documentary about her dissident aunt, the anti-nuclear campaigner Helen Caldicott. Anna hoped the film would convince Norma to co-operate with her. It did.

For the next 18 months, the two worked together – in America and Jordan – with Anna hoping not just to vindicate Norma, but also hoping to alert the world further to the horrors of honour killing. Over time, she began to seriously doubt Norma's word.

In August 2004, *The Sydney Morning Herald* had revealed that Norma's worst crime had been, not the literary hoax, but the theft of US government bonds worth more than half a million dollars. They had belonged to Norma's demented 89-year-old neighbour, Mary Baravikas, and she had stolen them from her safety deposit box, along with \$42,500 in cash. She had also managed to have signed into her name Mary's home. Later, it was alleged, she had used some of this money to have her breasts enhanced.

Predictably, Norma told Anna that it wasn't her fault, that it was her mother-in-law and husband, John Toliopoulos, who had forced her at gunpoint to forge Mary's signature. She said he had abused her physically and emotionally for years.

"I have a criminal record for attacking her?" John Toliopoulos asked Anna Broinowski when she put the accusations to him in Brisbane. "Not of my awareness." (John Toliopoulos is believed to still be living in Australia.)

In Jordan, Norma finally admitted to Anna that there was no friend called Dalia who had been stabbed by her father in Amman in 1996. *Norma, we need some proof. We want a name. Where killed? How killed? When killed?* Rather, it was a woman with a different name, who had been shot by her brother while pregnant. The murder had taken place in 2001 and not in Amman, but in another Jordanian city. Even this would prove to be another false trail Norma had laid. After 300 hours of footage, Anna could no longer separate fact from fiction. She was utterly exhausted.

"I don't know that I am sane even now," she says wearily. "The reason I was immediately a believer in Norma is that I had all of the white noise of the media in my head – 'She's evil, she's manipulative, she's a con woman' – and she did it brilliantly [con us]."

"When I met her, she opened the door and she was the antithesis of anything I'd ever expected. She was vulnerable. She was self-deprecating. She was gentle. She was compassionate. She was generous. She was utterly sweet and slightly >>>



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frail. And beautiful. And I looked at her and just wanted to hug her. I just thought, 'Oh, you poor wounded creature.'

"I immediately felt like I had to be some kind of saviour to her. And then, of course, I film her for a year-and-a-half and she cons us, too. And I don't mind that. I don't feel angry or betrayed or hurt because she gave us an amazing story.

"I'm just annoyed on her behalf and on behalf of the cause that she didn't prove Dalia existed because we would have really helped the issue of honour crimes and her campaign, if she'd done that."

Sally Regan, Anna's producer, believes Dalia was never going to be found because she existed only inside the silhouetted corridors of Norma Khouri's mind.

"I think Dalia is part of Norma," she says. "I think she is the inner, wounded child, although I can't prove that in any way, shape or form."

Perhaps not, yet there is good reason to posit such a theory. Norma told Anna that from the age of four, her father, Majid Bagain, had sexually abused her and that this "sexual perversity" had continued for 14 years. It only stopped when she filed charges against him and he was arrested.

Another lie? Who can say for sure? According to Anna, Norma's father pleaded guilty to the charges, but claimed he was doing so only to spare Norma the shame and embarrassment of a drawn-out court case. He accused Norma's mother of putting up Norma to the charges because of their faltering marriage.

Anna Broinowski met Norma's mother, Asma Bagain, in the same Chicago

neighbourhood that Malcolm Knox door-knocked back in July 2004. Asma agreed to speak to Anna, but not for the film.

"She talked with some pride and humour," Anna says now, "about the way Norma [as a young girl] had a little bird that she loved and how Norma would leave bird seed for it on all the window ledges. And her mother, who was working as a nurse, said to her one day: 'If that bird seed is still there when I come home, I'm going to kill it'. And the bird seed was still there when she got home ... and the mother sort of laughed at me and said, 'So I went like this', and she snapped the bird's neck in front of Norma." Norma was seven years old at the time.

Norma Khouri is back in Chicago, living in the same working-class district she was in before she fled the country eight years ago. Her two children are reunited with her, having been put on a plane by a private investigator in November 2004.

By all accounts, neither Norma nor the children have seen John Toliopoulos since they left Australia. According to Anna, Norma still owes Rachel Richardson, her former neighbour on Queensland's Bribie Island, \$15,000, and her Australian publishers Random House, as much as \$300,000 for the advance on the now-cancelled sequel to *Forbidden Love*.

A first draft of the book, entitled *Matter of Honour*, is said to have been a true account of Norma's freedom in the West, following her escape from Jordan. Among her

flourishes with the pen is a description of her losing her virginity at the age of 36 to a handsome Greek.

Anna Broinowski says Norma is now studying to become a human rights lawyer. She says that despite everything, despite the lies and deception, she can't help loving her. "I adore Norma because she's one of the most charismatic women I've ever met and because her audacity knows no bounds. She is the modern equivalent of Machiavelli."

I decide to call Norma myself. I want to know what motivated her to bear such false witness to so many. Was it really the issue of honour killings, or was it fame and fortune she was after? Had she calculated the whole thing from the beginning or was she improvising on the run? And did she feel any remorse?

"Of course, I feel remorse," she replies when I reach her at home early one morning,

slightly embarrassed half-laugh of hers and, absurd though this might sound, I'm tempted to believe her all over again. ■

Anna Broinowski's documentary, *Forbidden Love*, premieres on February 25 at the Adelaide Film Festival and is due for national release by Palace Films later this year.

WAY."

speaks to Norma about the scandal.

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Australian time. "I've always said I thought I was doing something for the right reason, but I did it the wrong way."

What about the money you stole from Mary Bavarikas? "I didn't do anything with Mary Bavarikas. It was John [Toliopoulos]. If I did do something, the federal government would have taken me into custody."

As for the money owed to Random House, Norma insists it was \$50,000, not \$300,000, and she's paid it back. (Random House has refused to confirm or deny the amount and whether it's been repaid. "We haven't commented on anything to do with the Norma Khouri case before and we're not going to start now," Karen Reid, head of publicity for the company's international book division, told *The Weekly*.)

Similarly, with Rachel Richardson, Norma says now she never owed her \$15,000. "We are still going over what she says I owe her, but it's absolutely not \$15,000. And if you want to talk about me bearing false witness, politicians do that all the time and the Jordanian government has been doing it for 200 years.

"Look, I did lie, but I lied for a reason. It wasn't fame and fortune I was after, not at all. It was about the issue [of honour killings]. And I apologise to you for lying. I justified it in my head as the ends justifying the means. I hated lying to anyone about anything."

After 10 minutes of frosty conversation, I thank Norma for her time and for her apology. I then hear myself wishing her well in whatever she chooses to do next in her life. "Thank you," she says finally. "If you are ever in Chicago, drop by."

And then she laughs that coquettish,