

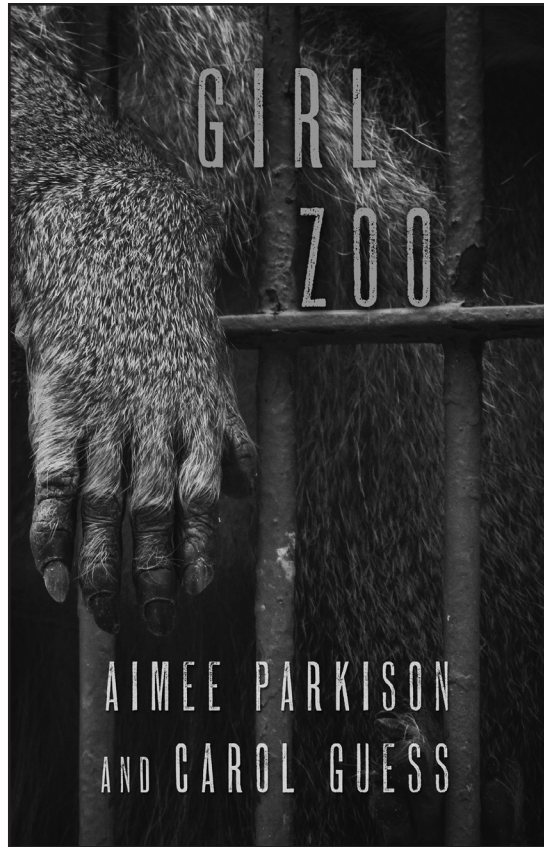
wiggle into noses and blow heads apart as she grew inside a skull, often emerging fully formed like Athena from Zeus.

“The Girl in the Clock” begins small — two girls discussing something bizarre in a classroom — and ends in a huge and mythic space that feels both right and impossible to predict.

At the heart of this collection is the question of the violence and the oppression of women carried out by men — and, occasionally, the ways women, out of self-doubt, out of a feeling of powerlessness, out of politeness, collaborate in this violence. In “Girl in Doubt,” the narrator can’t decide whether she’s being kidnapped or whether she’s on a date, a situation that highlights the lack of agency in either: “I can’t choose my own adventure because I’m not writing this story,” the narrator says — a line which seems to purposefully call attention to the fact that this story *is* being written, and being written by female authors. At the end of the story, the narrator greets her potential abductor/date with a “smile so wide my lips crack and bleed,” literally wounding herself in her efforts to appear polite and docile.

Many of these stories — perhaps a third of the collection — take the form of a main narrative with copious footnotes. I found myself assuming (without any way to know for sure) that one author was responsible for the main text and the other for the notes. In some cases, we are presented with a text that would “naturally” have footnotes — a medical or legal text, for example — but mostly the footnotes are attached to what would otherwise be complete and coherent stories without them. The footnotes tend to be mocking, arch, sarcastic. Often the voice seems explicitly gendered male, speaking with an authoritative “we”: “one of our girls escaped from the Girl Zoo.... To protect our agenda, surveillance and damage control are needed.”

Rather than an integral part of the story, the footnotes feel like the interruptions of a compulsive joker. Some of these jokes are quite good. I particularly like the footnote to “metrosexual” in the



story “Girl in Windows”: “Meaning: his sexuality revolves around the Metro bus. He sits in the back and touches himself every time the bus stops for someone carrying a shopping bag.” Others can be too on-the-nose, making explicit what was already implicit in the main narrative, such as when we are told, in reference to a girl trying to complete a maze for food, that “Hunger is the greatest teacher,” or when multiple notes in “Girl in Pageants” rib-nudge us towards recognizing that the pageant judge is none other than our current president. For the most part, the footnotes feel as though they’re imposed on the story, written to fulfill an agreed-upon form. Perhaps, though, the unpleasantness of the footnotes’ intrusion is the point, considering how often the footnotes are explicitly gendered male? Nevertheless, I found it a relief whenever I turned the page to discover a lack of footnotes in the next story.

The strongest stories in this collection wear their collaborative nature on their sleeve in other ways. “Girl in Trouble,” just over a page and a half, is a series of fragments, each formatted as its own paragraph, each ending in a conjunction or some other incomplete syntactical unit:

It was all words, but  
Off-roading, you could  
A lot of trails back there became

Sometimes the next phrase seems to continue the syntax or thought of the previous phrase, sometimes not. The result is a long, fragmented, ultimately incomplete, jittery sentence, reflecting the anxiety and lack of resolution following an assault: “They say there’s nothing they can do because.”

There are moments in *Girl Zoo* where the collaboration doesn’t quite click, where one can feel a story struggling with itself, not quite becoming one thing or another. But the best of the stories here have an ability to shape-shift thrillingly from sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph: what appeared to be a third-person story turns out to be told by a previously unspoken *I*; what seemed to be a real life encounter is, in fact, a movie titled *Night in Harpy Hotel*. There’s a breathlessness and wonder to the prose, a sense of two minds building on each other. *Girl Zoo* can be uneven in places, but that, to my reading, is in the nature of the performative, collaborative work that Parkison and Guess are up to here: the danger that a story might not succeed makes it all the more thrilling when so many do.

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## COFFEE CULTURE

Jan Garden Castro

### THE COFFEEHOUSE RESISTANCE: BREWING HOPE IN DESPERATE TIMES

Sarina Prabasi

Green Writers Press

www.greenwriterspress.com

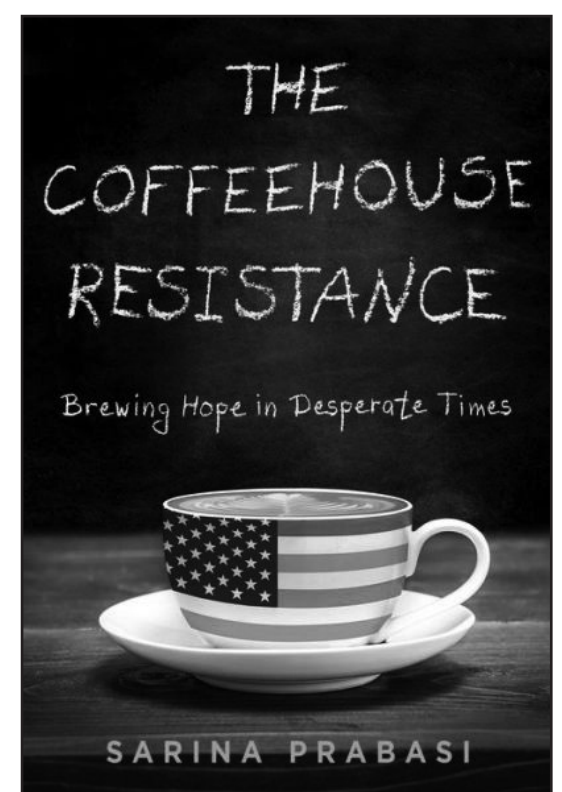
224 pages; Print, \$19.95

Sarina Prabasi’s *The Coffeehouse Resistance* journeys through selected memories that led this Nepali-heritage woman born in Amsterdam to marry an Ethiopian man, move to the United States, and become a fervent spokesperson for immigrant rights and safe communities. The subtitle *Brewing Hope in Desperate Times* further alerts us that Prabasi’s memoir focuses on brewing activist strategies and coffee. The author avoids the word racism and rarely mentions the dark and tan skin colors of her family of four. Six engaging chapters have sections separated by coffee bean emojis which focus on overcoming a particular challenge related to family, researching coffee’s Ethiopian origins, and becoming American. The main years covered are from 2009 to 2018. In the opening scene, set in 2011, readers meet author Sarina, eighteen-month-

old Juni, and her husband Elias as they arrive at JFK Airport on a humid July night. The next day, as they open the door of their small, as-yet-unseen Hudson Heights apartment rented online, claustrophobia sets in. Next, the downstairs neighbor complains that their fan is too noisy. Prabasi confides,

I wonder what we’re going to do with these old towels, with a downstairs neighbor who can hear our fan, with an active daughter in a dollhouse apartment, in a city of millions with no job, no real connections. For the first time since we decided to move, I feel a little afraid.

Prabasi then skips through memory and growing up: “There’s an irony in the fact that I am writing a memoir. Or perhaps it makes perfect sense. I have a deep fear of forgetting. I’ve had to let go of places, friends, family, over and over again.” The author shares a few early memories, such as her best friend Julie’s move to the United States and her family’s move back to Nepal in fifth grade, but not that, growing up, she also lived in India and China. The reader learns that, thanks to education, Sabrina’s father, born in a remote Nepali village, became an academic at an “acclaimed university” and later a senior diplomat. Her father both sends her



to Nepal’s American international school and also overrides his own mother’s adherence to cultural traditions that ban menstruating women from the kitchen and from the dinner table. College in

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Massachusetts seems like a lonely time until Sarina discovers the Haymarket Café, named for the May 4, 1884 “Haymarket Affair” in Chicago that led to International Workers Day. This introduces the coffeehouse-as-study hall and meeting place theme.

“Addis Ababa” is the next chapter. Sarina is working for a nonprofit in Washington, D. C. when her boss invites her to be part of a work trip to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Sarina had heard about the city from her father’s travels there in the late 1960’s. Readers aren’t given the exact year, only told that when she and her boss Liz arrive, many soldiers with rifles are at the airport. Liz speaks Amharic, and she and Sarina visit her favorite places — they buy coffee freshly-roasted coffee at Tomoca. One page and five years later, roughly around 2007-8, Sarina is regularly visiting Ethiopia for work. She has become a macchiato coffee aficionado, often accompanied by Elias, a cute taxi guy who’s a childhood friend of one of her co-workers. As they become close over macchiatos, Elias starts a restaurant, they begin living together, and the political situation in Ethiopia worsens. Unlike the novels by Ethiopian author Maaza Mengiste, which delve into the high losses of life as a result of military power struggles that began in the mid-1930s and are ongoing, this memoir understates the disappearance of one of Elias’s friends, Elias’s own arrest, and the man following him. Sarina gets a diplomat friend to call off the man shadowing Elias. Even Prabasi’s account suggesting that a national election has been rigged and the hope for democracy dashed is restrained. The joy of their wedding, the birth of their daughter, and their decision to move to New York all seem more important. Prabasi keeps the focus on her own and her family’s journey — until they move to America. Additionally, in Addis Ababa and New York, the delectably-described roasting, brewing, and drinking of coffee is central to family life.

Two thirds of the book — Prabasi’s last four chapters, titled “New York,” “Becoming American,” “Shadows,” and “Coffeehouse Resistance” — are filled with activism and politics fueled by good coffee. The struggle for her family to get jobs is intense. Sarina barely notes her work life: consulting for one nonprofit, then a full-time job with benefits at another nonprofit, and at some point becoming CEO of an international nonprofit water corporation. Elias’s coffee business is key. As he researches everything from buying coffee in Ethiopia to roasting and sales, he knows he needs a difficult-to-attain business visa, or he could be deported. At an earlier spot in the memoir, we learn that Kaldi, an Ethiopian herder, discovered coffee berries when he noted that they energized his goats. One day the couple finds a vacant shoe store which could be converted into a neighborhood coffee spot. As they brainstorm a name for their nascent coffee company, Sarina coins the word Buunni, after the Amharic words *bunni* and *bunna*, which respectively mean brown and coffee. Fast forward: the family celebrates their one-year anniversary in New York by moving into a two-bedroom apartment. Café Buunni is ready to open. Prabasi narrates an incident in front of the store — a passerby addresses their seventeen-year-old Barnard intern as the owner even though Elias and Sarina, older but with darker

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**The Coffeehouse Resistance signals a new type of memoir with a limited time period and focus.**

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skins, are present. Prabasi does not mention skin color or race in her narration of this incident, but she conveys the point that racist incidents happen daily even in the darker-skinned neighborhoods of New York.

Café Buunni opens to lines wrapped around the block and begins to clear a profit six months later. The couple creatively addresses issues from coffee bean suppliers to holiday markets in Bryant Park to expanding their retail stores and mail order business.

In the chapter “Becoming American,” Prabasi reports some of the many sacrifices she’s made to become a US citizen and the importance of voting in 2016. Juni now has a sister Maya. Prabasi puts her family ahead of everything but also strongly feels it’s important to participate in politics:

To someone like me, a candidate like Donald Trump could be from a different planet. I am confused that he isn’t disqualified from running. Surely there are some minimum thresholds in order to be considered a candidate for the highest office in the country? ... Why is his message being amplified and repeated on every news channel, and every printed paper?

Prabasi discusses submitting five years of tax returns, her FBI background check, and the many requirements to become a US citizen: “I had been vetted. And I expect a candidate for president to be vetted at least as much as I had.” Juni hears Trump saying, “Mexicans are rapists!” and asks, “Mama, what are rapists?”

“Becoming American” discusses Prabasi’s years in America as a “resident alien” before she became a citizen — paying taxes and other obligations without the right to vote. The chapter on “Shadows” looks beyond her family to the roles that individuals with diverse backgrounds and religions contribute. Elias meets a Mexican named Julio who bakes *enjera* Ethiopian bread that reminds him of his childhood.

“Coffeehouse Resistance” goes into helping politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez get elected and worrying about Amanda, a Guatemalan woman with three children who fears she will be deported. The author worries that despite “New York’s Immigrant-friendly identity, ... I’ve come to realize that there is very little actual legal protection for immigrants.” She reports some positive political changes in Ethiopia. This memoir ends with Buunni still expanding as it promotes and sponsors new community arts programs. The writer invites the reader to continue these “conversations” at a local coffeehouse. She proposes that independent coffee houses could organize to make a difference.

*The Coffeehouse Resistance* signals a new type of memoir with a limited time period and focus. It addresses both the challenges of becoming an American and the necessity of being an activist for human rights. Green Writers Press, based in Vermont, publishes books on environmental activism and making “the world a better place.” They use soy-based inks, print on demand (POD), use only FSC-certified papers, and donate a percentage of profits to protect the environment.

Prabasi’s website, blog, publisher, and Buunni Coffee all promote her book. Yet this is a small grass roots effort in comparison to larger forces that fuel racism. As I write this, Donald Trump has been tweeting that the four new Democratic congresswomen, three of whom were born in the United States, should “go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came,” as detailed in the *New York Times* article “Trump Tells Freshman Congresswomen to ‘Go Back’ to the Countries They Came From” by Katie Rogers and Nicholas Fandos, published on July 14, 2019. This is all over the morning radio and TV news, more so than a six-hour electricity blackout affecting over 70,000. This reinforces Prabasi’s point that Trump’s comments regularly receive huge amounts of free publicity. Her book discusses the hurdles that immigrants face, including “skyrocketing rents” which she claims are “partly due to the nefarious dealings between politicians, landlords, and the real-estate industry.”

I’m super self-conscious that this year I’ve read books by Ece Temelkuran (sixteen plus books, journalist exiled from Turkey), Jennifer Clement (four plus novels, based in Mexico, President of Pen International), and Maaza Mengiste (author of *The Shadow King* [2019], and *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* [2010]) that demonstrate what forceful, brilliant writers women can be — and that few readers have heard of these writers or will ever read their work. Their “fictions” about women living under brutal or oppressive conditions teach readers things they need to know. For example, Jennifer Clement’s novels *Gun Love* (2018) and *Prayers for the Stolen* (2012) spell out, using actual, dangerous research, how easily US guns cross into Mexico, and how easily Mexican girls can be kidnapped or stolen. I’m convinced that the networks these women writers are building are the beginnings of new ways to help us better understand and organize to change the dangerous world in which we live. Sarina Prabasi’s memoir brings this message home.

*Jan Garden Castro* wrote *The Art & Life of Georgia O’Keeffe* (1985), *The Last Frontier* (2001), and co-edited Margaret Atwood: *Vision and Forms* (1988). See (<https://www.jancastro.com>).

