



Life Without a Recipe

Diana Abu-Jaber

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On one side, there is Grace: prize-winning author Diana Abu-Jaber's tough, independent sugar-fiend of a German grandmother, wielding a suitcase full of holiday cookies. On the other, Bud: a flamboyant, spice-obsessed Arab father, full of passionate argument. The two could not agree on anything: not about food, work, or especially about what Diana should do with her life. Grace warned her away from children. Bud wanted her married above all—even if he had to provide the ring. Caught between cultures and lavished with contradictory “advice” from both sides of her family, Diana spent years learning how to ignore others' well-intentioned prescriptions.

Hilarious, gorgeously written, poignant, and wise, *Life Without a Recipe* is Diana's celebration of journeying without a map, of learning to ignore the script and improvise, of escaping family and making family on one's own terms. As Diana discovers, however, building confidence in one's own path sometimes takes a mistaken marriage or two—or in her case, three: to a longhaired boy-poet, to a dashing deconstructionist literary scholar, and finally to her steadfast, outdoors-loving Scott. It also takes a good deal of angst (was it possible to have a serious writing career and be a mother?) and, even when she knew what she wanted (the craziest thing, in one's late forties: a baby!), the nerve to pursue it.

Finally, fearlessly independent like the Grace she's named after, Diana and Scott's daughter Gracie will heal all the old battles with Bud and, like her writer-mom, learn to cook up a life without a recipe.

Life Without a Recipe Details

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From Reader Review Life Without a Recipe for online ebook

Taryn Pierson says

I've been on a memoir kick lately, and this one is sweet and poignant and full of baked goods. Abu-Jaber writes about her complicated relationships with her German grandmother and Arab father, who were almost always at odds with each other and influenced her life in equal, if competing, ways. It's also the story of her roundabout route to marriage (third time's the charm) and motherhood (domestic infant adoption when she was well into her forties). This is the kind of memoir that's less a recounting of events than it is a smattering of reflections on life. Abu-Jaber's voice is charming, but I didn't come away with any big revelations or experience any of that memoir-catharsis I so love.

Sara says

This book is exactly what I was hoping for: a heartfelt, sumptuously written account of one woman's life. There was more about motherhood than I cared to read, but I enjoyed how she made her father appear so vividly on the page.

The musings on life and death are poignant yet realistic and even quite funny at times. The author played with time by shuffling events around to suit her narrative, making it a memoir and thus an example of how time and memory interact.

My favorite were her thoughts on creativity and the writing life which were sprinkled throughout.

Victoria Allman says

Having fallen in love with Diana's writing and her grandiose real-life characters in *The Language of Baklava*, I was thrilled to see them continue to be portrayed in *Life Without a Recipe*.

Who could not love Bud when he is so lovingly portrayed in scenes like: "the priest presented Dad with a contract to raise his children within the Catholic faith, Dad signed in Arabic. He nudged Gram in the ribs; as if she were in on the joke, and, instead of writing his name, wrote: I make no promises.

The other return character is Grace, Diana's grandmother, who advises her: Never learn how to sew, cook, type, or iron. That's how they get you.

Bud and Grace agree on one thing: Men are terrible.

But in forging her own recipe for life, Diana defies both strong characters to fall in love with Scott and adopt her own child to teach her recipes to.

This is a beautifully crafted and elegantly written story of Diana's daughter Gracie who brings all of the strong characters in Diana's life together through love and laughter.

I loved delving deeper into Diana's life and continuing the family story. I can't wait until the third installment, as I know Gracie will provide enough fodder for a lifetime of stories.

Victoria Allman

Author of: *SEAsoned: A Chef's Journey with Her Captain*

Rebecca says

The Jordanian–American writer reflects on how various food cultures have sustained her through a life that hasn't always turned out as expected. Three marriages, a move from Portland to Florida, a winding path to motherhood in her forties, and her father's death from leukemia are some of the main events, but Abu-Jaber is just as good at pinpointing life's quiet shifts.

Like Sasha Martin's *Life from Scratch*, this is more about family and personal history than it is about food (and there are no recipes). Still, food is the stuff of memories, and it is what binds her to two strong characters: her Jordanian father Bud with his stuffed grape leaves, and her maternal grandmother Grace with her frequent baking and the pastries they consumed together in Paris. My favorite anecdote is about Bud meeting his future mother-in-law: Grace presented him with shrimp (which he had never seen before and refused to eat) on one occasion, and a ham (taboo for Muslims) on the other. The dishes were a perfect metaphor for what would become an always combative yet jovial relationship.

Although roughly chronological, the book comes across as slightly unstructured, especially in the later chapters. However, the fact that the author's adopted daughter is also named Grace provides a symbolic link between the generations and helps account for an enduring love for sweets – which proves problematic when she's diagnosed with high blood pressure and cholesterol and has to change her eating habits.

Vegetables, vegetables. And no more sugar. Even if offering something sweet out of an oven feels almost exactly like doling out love.

I'd recommend this to anyone who enjoys foodoirs and/or memoirs about women's lives. I'm eager to get hold of Abu-Jaber's first memoir and also to try out her fiction.

Related reading:

- *Make Me a Mother* by Susanne Antonetta
 - *The Temporary Bride* by Jennifer Klinec
 - *A Homemade Life* by Molly Wizenberg
-

Whitney Page says

Sad and haunting, a look into a writer's real life, dealing with loss, attachment, the ordinary things.

Lolly K Dandeneau says

Gorgeous. I spent so much time highlighting sentences. This is one of my favorite short lines. "Advice is offered like food from the hand- a loving, unwanted gift." It tickled me because I think of all the advice women have fed me and being that my grandmother was a Hungarian immigrant- I had so much food forced on me, just as full on that as advice. I admit, I was expecting non-stop kitchen stories and this is not that type of book. It is a journey- every bit of her from her limbs to her soul pulled in many directions, exceeding expectations, loving and aching, losing and gaining- the recipe for a life. Her honesty into her marriages who refreshing. Particularly this "Though I'd already half-guessed it, already half-involved with someone else myself, I felt clobbered, a frying pan to the gut." She admits her own imperfections and regales us with stories about food and family, the connections it has to memories fond and otherwise. If her fiction reads

anything like her memoir, I am on board! It has moments of heartbreak and beauty, laughter and joy, family-always family. I adored it.

Bookworm says

Lacks the charm of her other memoir. Even though I wasn't in love with her other memoir, 'The Language of Baklava', this still sounded quite charming. In the previous book it seemed like she merely skimmed over other parts of her life and so I had hoped this would fill the other parts she didn't talk about.

Instead, the book is more like snapshots of her life and pieces that were just not all that interesting. She talks a bit about her grandmother, her marriages, the adoption of her daughter, etc. Her other family (including her parents and especially her father, who featured prominently in 'Baklava') do pop up but this is a different type of memoir that was less of a continuation and more of a different story.

It was terrible. It lacks the charm of her original book and has less of her dad (who appears to be quite the character).

Honestly I'm shocked at the all the positive reviews. I don't know if the reviewers knew what to expect or if I went in with the wrong expectations. It might stand on its own if you hadn't read the previous book but this just wasn't interesting. Borrow from the library if you're really curious.

Maureen says

This was my first Net Galley ARC. Thank you! I saw a meme the other day on FB that talked about how sometimes when you finished a book you wished that the author was your good friend and you could call him or her up anytime and talk about anything. This is that book. I go back a ways with Abu-Jaber. She spent part of her childhood an hour away in Syracuse, NY and her first memoir, *The Language of Baklava: A Memoir*, set there in part, was a community-wide read in my hometown, culminating with a reading from her at our local community college. I went on from there to read some of her fiction, including *Crescent*, which was outstanding, and *Origin*, set back in Syracuse, a place that was both familiar and mysterious with her treatment.

Her writing resonates with me in a way few other authors have managed. Her ethnic experience can't be that different from millions of other Americans, in fact I imagine it must be similar in some ways to the experience of my aunt by marriage's Greek family that settled in Syracuse. But she describes something exotic, something the rest of us will envy. She writes about her journey from ambivalence toward parenthood through a positively gripping 48 hours waiting to learn if her wish will be granted, to the first wondrous days of becoming a family.

I miss my own mother; more pointedly than on any given day. I want to ask her more detailed questions about their emotional journey to becoming parents. I have the facts...but not the feelings. I curse my horrible memory; I want to hear the family stories one more time, to know I must commit them to memory. I'm jealous that the death of her father was a process, a slow unraveling, not a sudden tearing apart.

Most of all, I am enthralled by the life that her prose gives to feelings, thoughts, even the smallest details of every day life. They come alive; I think I can feel what she feels, see what she sees. I've spent barely an hour or two in Winter Park, FL, yet when she is there, I am there. It is exactly the place. I suggest you take the trip

with her as well...you won't regret it.

Michelle Arredondo says

I've mentioned before that I LOVE memoirs...maybe even better than I love historical fiction most times. There is hardly a memoir that I don't like...hardly. This memoir is seriously a wonderful one. I just really enjoyed it. Life Without a Recipe by Diana Abu-Jaber came into my life and after reading it, I am certain it is staying. I am placing this book on the shelf of my faves.

I want to spotlight this book with a more thought out review on my blog eventually so I don't want to get into too many details on here...however, in the meantime I will give a shortened version of my review because I want to spread the word about how great this book is. The author..and her most eccentric family life....aaaaaah...I don't think there was anyone she wrote about that I did not like but with certainty I can say I absolutely adored her father. Being a wonderful quirky dad...instantly being an even quirkier, doting, and loving grandfather. Such pure joy....and then there's the food. So much mention of good food...family...food and family...cause yeah they do go hand in hand in many ways. Many of my childhood memories involved weekends with my grandfather and his wonderful BBQ chicken...homemade BBQ sauce...and my grandmother and all her delicious side dishes. Another culture..another world and I got that same nostalgic vibe off of reading of Diana's beautiful story.

There were tears, laughter, anger, sorrow, and faith in this book. I had all those emotions reading this and some. A fast paced book that you want to force yourself to slow down just to embrace fully. I look forward to writing a longer much deserved review on my blog soon. It took me forever to get this review out..as I had finished reading the book awhile back but the story stayed with me the entire time...I love that about a good book. YES, I highly recommend this book.

Thanks to the wonderful peeps here at goodreads for my free book in exchange for an honest review to which I gladly and voluntarily gave.

Jammin Jenny says

I received this book through a Goodreads Giveaway. I was pleasantly surprised by this book. The author brought me into her life, and her experiences, in a very real way.

Ietrio says

When you look at this book - it looks short. When you start reading it - it looks long. The text is clear, but the many ornaments of the text muddy the whole information making me turn the pages faster towards the next chapter, hoping it to be better than this one. A book dedicated to a child and a grandmother. Only to read that the wonderful grandmother is not very intelligent and does good things to the family like self medicating with strong alcohol, including the children. So much for good parenting skills in the family.

But what is this book about? A long text. It resembles a biography. But it is badly structured and most of the biography feeling is from the chronology. Than I get on the biography of the author. Another mislead child.

A girl that was too proud to go about in life without a college degree. But had no idea what to do. So English. Only English is the path you take if you want to bury yourself in the educational system. Which she does not want to. So a magic wand changed English into Creative Writing. Meaning it is the same burial ground, only some yards away in the adult education section where people with pipe dreams of becoming writers come to other uninspired people just like them. And you need books to prove that you are qualified. So here's the proof Diana needed to enroll the minimum number of adults for class.

Patty says

I'm a big fan of Abu-Jaber, which is why I scooped up this book immediately on finding out that it existed. It's a memoir of her life, tied together by frequent referrals to food. There's not really a single topic or focus here; much as the title suggests, it's a meandering path through Abu-Jaber's life, covering subjects as diverse as the contentious relationship between her single, American, Catholic grandmother and her sociable, Jordanian, Islamic father; her own history of romantic relationships, good and bad; her decision to have children, the realization that she biologically can't, the adoption process, and finally the experience of raising a daughter; and the death of several close family members. This lack of plot makes the book move slowly at some points, since there's nothing really to drive you on to the next page, but it was redeemed for me by Abu-Jaber's gorgeous prose, which can be heart-breaking or deep or simply funny. For example, this passage:

The mixer purrs, whirling around the careful minutes. From her stool, she watches closely. It's Gracie's first birthday and her first taste of chocolate. The room smells like a bloom of sugar and cocoa. Out of the oven, all day, the cake sings to her from its high place where we've tried to keep it hidden. She creeps into the kitchen, points at the top cupboard. "Ca," she informs me. At her party, she is briefly shocked by the singing and candles. High-chair-bound, she receives the first fascinating slice. She considers it for a long moment, then picks up a hunk. "Ca." She carefully nibbles. She stops suddenly, staring, motionless. Then all at once, all the cake is going into her mouth. Her face is covered in chocolate; she lifts fistfuls of cake; there are chunks in her hair. She grins fiercely, bares her teeth; she looks angrily awake, flabbergasted that this is the first she's known of such a thing. She is a sugar priestess. Her fist waves in the air, face thrown back, mouth open, as if to say All chocolate is mine.

A good book if you're in the mood to drift along with a thoughtful, insightful narrator.

I read this as an ARC via NetGalley.

Janilyn Kocher says

I received a copy of this book through net galley for an honest review.

I adored this book. It's heartwarming, endearing, and insightful. The author throws open the doors of her life for a reader's introspection with no apologies. I enjoyed her depiction of her father, who was obviously a character. Her diverse background was intriguing to explore as she shifts back and forth between her intermeshed cultures. This is a great read.

Kate says

I love Diana Abu-Jaber's books. They are beautiful, contain these wonderfully descriptive sentences and will make you hungry for days. This is a memoir about food and family, like her previous "Language of Baklava." It surrounds her maternal grandmother, her father and her young daughter and what they have taught her about love, about food, about everything. I highly recommend this for Abu-Jaber's fans and even those who have not yet read one of her books. It is just lovely.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I have read almost every book Diana Abu-Jaber has written so far; this started with a friend's recommendation of Crescent back in library school. This is her second memoir, chronicling more about her adult life - three marriages, adoption, aging parents, career moves, trips back to Jordan, etc. It is the logical continuation of The Language of Baklava: A Memoir, a memoir I enjoyed more than her fiction! Her father Bud continues to be as central of a character as ever, particularly in his relationship opinions and grandfatherly duties.

Thanks to the publisher for letting me read it early!
