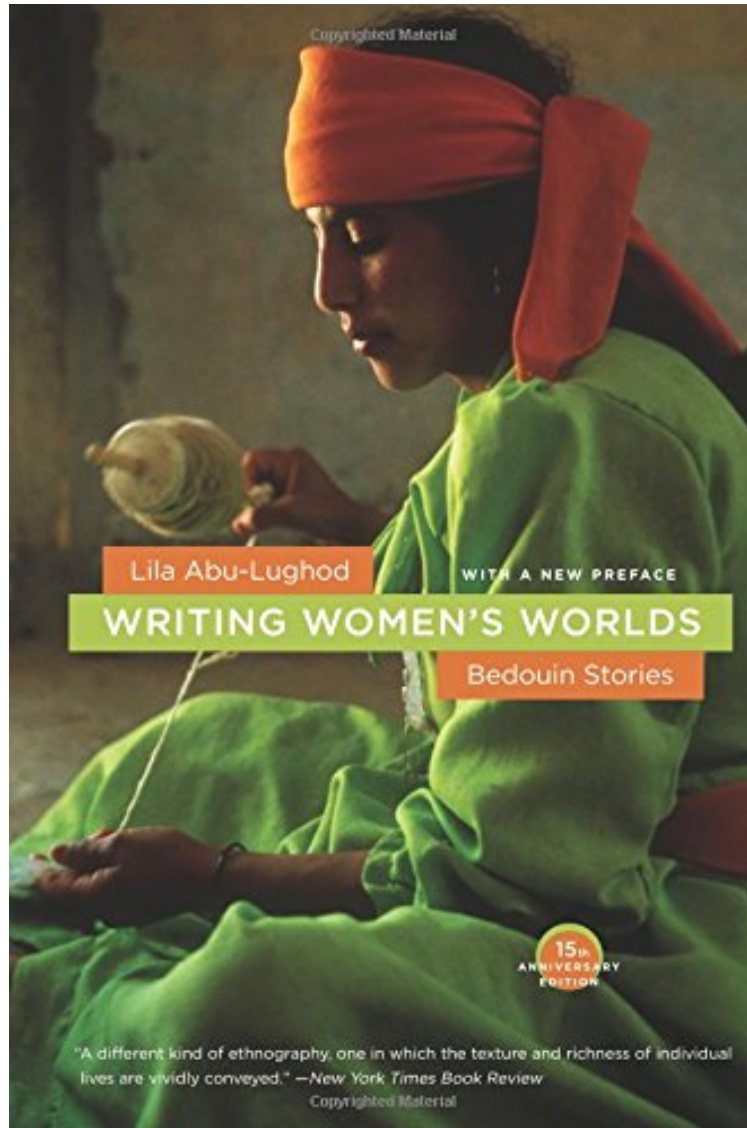


## Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories

*Lila Abu-Lughod*

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#693947 in Books University of California Press 2008-04-07 2008-04-07 Format: Deluxe Edition Original language: English PDF # 1 8.90 x .77 x 5.901, 1.01 #File Name: 0520256514306 pages University of California Press | File size: 67.Mb

**Lila Abu-Lughod : Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories:

11 of 12 people found the following review helpful. Anthropology for Whom? By Etienne RPI In the preface to the new edition, Lila Abu-Lughod confesses that her book failed to reach its public. It was "billed as a book about women and an experiment in feminist ethnography", and its key messages failed to pass through. In any case, she may have tried

to kill too many birds with one stone. As she recalls, "in *Writing Women's Worlds*, I used the narratives, arguments, and everyday lives of some individual families living on Egypt's northwest coast to try to do three things: to confront my discipline of anthropology with the ways it has tended to typify cultural groups, to challenge public discourse about women of the Muslim Middle East, and to show Western feminists that defining patriarchy is not at all a simple matter." The three imagined audiences implied in that statement--fellow anthropologists, writers about women in the Middle East, and Western feminists--broadly belong to the same group: academics, to use a shorthand. It is this targeted public that the book failed to reach, eliciting few reviews and even less scholarly debate. So the author feels compelled, in the new preface written "for the twenty-first century", to restate and to clarify her key messages. She thinks that what *Writing Women's Worlds* has to offer has become all the more urgent in the new context within which these intended audiences might now read a book like this. Anthropologists should discard the concept of culture as they did with the notion of race because "the concept lends itself to usages so apparently corrupting of the anthropological ones as the pernicious theses of Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations". In light of the heightened obsession with the "oppressed Muslim woman", in the name of which wars are wielded as in Afghanistan, she feels it is her duty to give voice to some of these Muslim women, and to illustrate "what Islam means in one particular place at one particular time". Although sympathetic to the feminist cause, she refuses to attribute to the women in her book forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience, and she thinks that their stories of family, honor, piety and modesty, can "complicate" some widely held views and "talk back" to feminists and their agenda. So in Lila Abu-Lughod's view, shared by the editors of the University of California Press, her book deserves a second chance. The spirits of the times, which highlight the urgency of the message, are also more auspicious to its reception. The novel style, which the author labels "narrative ethnography", has since then become more common in anthropology. Other scholars, such as Saba Mahmood or Lara Deeb, have written books about the Islamic revival that also "talk back" to the feminist agenda, which too often conflates description and prescription. And Abu-Lughod's thinking has also evolved, allowing her to be more explicit and specific about arguments that were only hinted at and suggested in her original narrative. But books, once published, have a life of their own, and they sometimes reach unintended publics or are put to uses the author did not think about. In her new preface, Lila Abu-Lughod tells of the many e-mails she received from readers, mostly students, who wanted to know what happened to the individuals they had come to know through the book. These readers were not primarily interested by discussions about feminism, ethnographic writing, or the concept of culture. They read the book as they would have a fiction or a documentary, and they were eager to learn what happened "in real life". This tendency is sometimes seen by some writers as problematic, because of the need to protect the private life of people who confided to the ethnographer from voyeurism. In a way, the author had already anticipated that concern. She notes that "in a sad way the women whose stories I retell here are not the audience of this book"; and yet she is preoccupied with the reception of her writings in Egypt and in the local community depicted in the book. She worries that she has "made public the narratives that women told only to specific others and has made permanent what was meant to be fleeting". She notes that "In an age when the boundaries of "culture" have become difficult to keep in place, when books travel, and when global politics appear increasingly uncertain, we have to anticipate the uncomfortable irony that our most enlightened endeavors might not be received as such by the subjects of our writings". And indeed in the preface written in 2007, she records a meeting with a young woman related to her host family who was studying sociology in Alexandria University and who grilled her with questions and comments.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars  
By Julie R. Met our expectations. Delivery was on schedule.  
2 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Great book!  
By Elisabeth Nuchowich I had to get this book for an ethnography class and I read it pretty much in two-sittings! Just a wonderful compilation of ethnographic research in an unusual manner for an Anthropology book. I loved Lila's prose, as she presented her research through the narrative of conversation and songs. It made me feel like I was there with them! I recommend this book for anyone interested in ethnography, and especially in women's studies.

Lila Abu-Lughod draws on anthropological and feminist insights to construct a critical ethnography of a small Awlad 'Ali Bedouin community in Egypt. She explores how the telling of stories of everyday life challenges the power of anthropological theory to render adequately the lives of others and the way feminist theory appropriates Third World women.

About the Author  
Lila Abu-Lughod is Professor of Anthropology and Gender Studies at Columbia University. She is the author of *Veiled Sentiments* (UC Press) and *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*. She is the editor of *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* and the coeditor, most recently, of *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*.