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A mother's poem becomes a book about displacement, resilience

On the 20th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, UC Santa Barbara assistant professor Mona Damluji wrote a poem to her daughters to explain why they cannot return to the places their ancestors once called home. That text has now become “I Want You to Know” (Penguin Random House, 2025), a children’s book that brings together poetry and watercolor illustration to reflect on memory, displacement and the legacies of war.

“I want you to know that you are still of the place / That our ancestors have known. / The place that they called home,” [Damluji](#) writes.

Published by Seven Stories Press and distributed by Penguin Random House, [“I Want You to Know”](#) is written in simple, direct verse and paired with illustrations by Iraqi-Swedish artist [Ishtar Bäcklund Dakhil](#). The book opens a conversation with young readers about family bonds and the lasting impact of war, offering parents language to explain why ancestral lands may no longer be accessible.

The poem began as an intimate family message. Damluji read it first to her older daughter, then seven, on the day of the invasion’s 20th anniversary (March 20, 2023). Her daughter, who had grown up hearing fragments of family history alongside silences about Iraq, listened carefully; eventually, she also offered insight. “At first, the poem ended on a somber note,” Damluji recalled. “She told me, ‘There needs to be something to leave kids with hope.’ Her insight really affected me. I went back and added lines about how ‘from this fire something beautiful can grow.’”

She was absolutely right. It is so important that a vision of a brighter future and a more just world is part of the book's message."

Finding the right illustrator gave the poem a visual life of its own. "Everything she paints makes you want to dive into that world," Damluji said of [Bäcklund Dakhil's](#) artwork. "Her illustrations create vibrant, textured spaces full of life that stand in contrast to the destructive imagery that often dominates representations of Iraq." The cover, inspired by Maysoon Pachachi's film "[Our River...Our Sky](#)," depicts a mother and daughter on the Tigris River, capturing both belonging and departure.

Although written for children, the book reflects themes central to Damluji's scholarly work in film and media studies. Her teaching, research and creative practice engage underrepresented media histories and cultural studies of energy, cities and infrastructure centered in the Middle East and its diasporas.

Her current book project, "[Pipeline Cinema](#)" (UC Press, forthcoming) examines how multinational petroleum companies shaped cultural norms and global imaginaries of oil in Iran and Iraq through film sponsorship in the 20th century. Her research has been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Mellon Foundation, the Social Science Research Council and the Arab Council for the Social Sciences, and her publications appear in journals including *Media+Environment*, *Urban History*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* and the *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*.

In addition to her academic scholarship, Damluji has worked as a freelance producer and editing assistant for independent documentary filmmakers and outlets such as PBS, NBC Olympics and the National Geographic Channel. She is a Peabody and Emmy Award-nominated producer of the short documentary series "[The Secret Life of Muslims](#)," and a co-curator of the traveling exhibition "[Arab Comics: 90 Years of Popular Visual Culture](#)." Her earlier children's book "[Together](#)" ([Seven Stories Press, Penguin Random House, 2025](#)), illustrated by Innosanto Nagara, celebrates the power of collective action. Originally published as a board book, "Together" was released this year as a hardcover picture book and in a [Portuguese translation](#).

Though rooted in her own family's history, "I Want You to Know" is intentionally universal, foregoing geographic specificity in its wording so that families navigating many forms of migration and displacement can see themselves in its pages.

“Parents and kids have told me, ‘Sadly we need this book more than ever — we need ways to talk about the impacts of war on families with our kids,’” Damluji said. “Families affected by displacement need more stories that help them discover and reflect on why their ancestral homelands may no longer or not yet be safe to return to.”

Tags

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