

# POEMS HELP CRAFT CULTURAL BRIDGES

By Suzan Zawawi  
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## RIYADH

**THE acclaimed pioneering poet Nimah Nawwab continues with her personal mission to bridge the cultural gap between East and West.**

Nawwab recently held a poetry reading from her book *The Unfurling* at the American ambassador's residence in Riyadh.

"We want to follow up on what the president and crown prince said in Texas and really try to increase the interaction between Americans and Saudis. People like Nawwab can help us do that because they understand both worlds," said Carol Kalin the Counselor for Public Affairs at the Embassy.

She was referring to the joint statement issued by HRH Crown Prince Abdullah and President George W. Bush after their talks in Crawford, Texas, last month.

The poetry reading was attended

by a women-only audience. Saudi and American women mingled before the poetry session and then discussed the reading afterwards.

Some poems received strong applause. Most appreciated was a poem written about Nawwab's daughter. The Saudi audience also strongly applauded *Hidden Layers*, a poem about wearing the Abaya.

Nawwab discussed matters relating to youth, women, Arabia and change, while skillfully interweaving poems related to the themes.

"I wanted to document the change that is accruing in the country," said the poet. "As a writer I had noticed changes taking place every five years, then, four years ago, this change took place annually, and nowadays it's on a monthly if not weekly basis."

"It is phenomenal and unprecedented. We can barely catch out breath. It is so rapid, affecting every aspect of our lives, economically, socially and professionally. Imagine it as a quantum leap, in the sense of a country that was pulled straight from

the 15th century into the 21st century in only 60 years. "Yet we still have a long way to go."

One of the American ladies was so inspired by Nawwab's poem *Lost Love* that she asked the poet to sign her copy of *The Unfurling* and write "Go get a box." Though confused, the poet complied.

"I loved your poem about lost love," said the American lady. "I am going to get a box, put all my feelings in it, dig a hole, and bury it in the desert before I leave the country," said the lady. "I have been carrying the burden with me for a long time and it's time to let go."

Another American, Susan Bartlit who was waiting in line to get the book and have it signed, said: "I am getting emotional... The *Layers* poem made me think of covering my face and go to a mall... just to see what they (Saudi women) see."

The poet did the Saudi women proud.

"She's a pioneer," said Maha Teebah head of the elementary department at Al-Tarbiyah Al-

Islamiyah girls' school who met Nawwab at the TARA conference in Bahrain. "Now it's time to celebrate her."

"Her poems are very exciting, emotional and moving," said Dr. Kathy Knight, coordinator of The American Women of Riyadh group.

"Just by writing in English on topics about the Arab world and women, (she) automatically bridges the cultural gap," said Knight.

"I thought she did a wonderful job. I am very grateful to have her presence and for the women to be exposed to her writings to bridge the cultural gap," said Mrs. Anita Johnson Oberwetter wife of the Ambassador of the United States of America.

"Many things we share are wonderful; family, children, grandparents, our faith - even though it's different we are still countries of faith. I felt she talked about all issues and was successful in bridging the gap between cultures," she said.

"I have been in Saudi Arabia for six months, so the idea of the veil is

not new to me. When I first arrived I was anxious to talk to women who were totally veiled. It was refreshing to hear someone talking from that perspective."

Nawwab had just come back from a trip to Singapore where she met with students, educators, professionals, the media and scholars. The poet participated in the open ceremony of the exhibition "Meeting the Middle East - People and Culture" in which Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates took part to commemorate International Friendship Day celebrated in the country.

The exhibition, which drew 4,700 students from 18 national schools and had an extensive gallery of photos and other exhibits depicting modern and old Arabia, was held in a fully furnished Bedouin tent flown in for occasion.

Nawwab also recently visited Effat girls' college in Jeddah and discussed poetry writing with the students.

The poet will continue her cultural bridge building next week by visiting Japan.



Nimah Nawwab signing a book while chatting with an American woman in Riyadh - The Saudi Gazette photos by Susan Zawawi.



(From left) Dr. Kathy Knight, president of the American Women of Riyadh group, Mrs. Anita Johnson Oberwetter, and poet Nimah Nawwab.