

Review of Annia Ciezadlo's *Day of Honey: A Memoir of Food, Love, and War*

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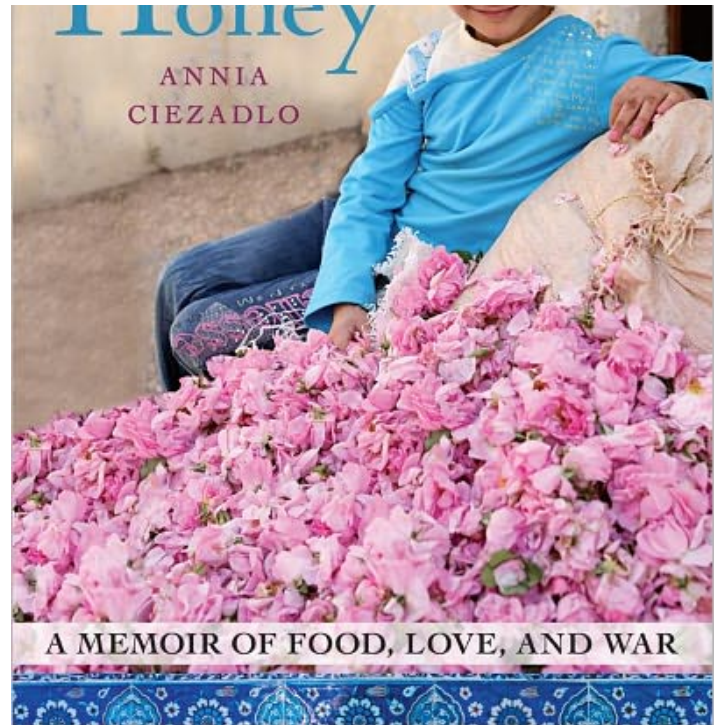
By Stephanie Susnjara

As a divorced mother of two, I often feel as if I'm at war. I combat stacks of bills, clogged toilets, kids who balk about excess chores, dying oak trees that threaten to fall on the house, unresolved feelings for my ex-husband, and sharp mood swings related to perimenopause. I experience constant external and inner battles. It's woman against



man, woman against nature, woman against herself. I feel sorry for myself at times, especially when I encounter other middle-aged women whose struggles seem limited to hunting for the perfect sofa or fitting in their weekly mani-pedi.

The magnitude of my own personal battles shrinks, however, when I read a book like American journalist Anna Ciezadlo's *Day of Honey: A Memoir of Food, Love, and War* set primarily in war-riddled Baghdad and Beirut. An artful account of Middle Eastern history and food blended with shrewd reporting, Ciezadlo's memoir takes the reader beyond the region's battle lines and political landscape, creating a crisp portrait of how war disrupts the lives of everyday people.



Ciezadlo's story begins during the fall of 2003, when she and her Lebanese husband, both newspaper reporters who met in the United States, move to Baghdad. Her husband's job as Middle East bureau chief for *Newsday* is the reason behind the move to this ancient city on the Tigris, where Ciezadlo lands a position as special correspondent for *The Christian Science Monitor*.

As a writer, I've often fantasized about being a war correspondent, drawn by excitement of placing oneself in life or death situations, all for the sake of a critical story. I'm curious about the fight-or-flight adrenaline rush war correspondents speak of, and how it can become addictive. Now add some food writing to the mix, as Ciezadlo does beautifully throughout: "I haunt the local markets and cook whatever I can find: fresh green almonds, fleshy black figs, just-killed chickens with their heads cut off." And her job seems even sexier.

Food provides an anchor for Ciezadlo in her new and dangerous surroundings. As bombs go off in the near distance of her Baghdad neighborhood, she seeks refuge by breaking bread with Iraqis, who help her discover the region's most authentic cuisine, such as the country's national dish, masqaf. Ciezadlo writes, "I have never eaten trout right after it's been smoked, but I imagine it might taste something like masqaf. Using scraps of tanoor bread, I pulled off pieces of the white flesh. I folded them into tiny sandwiches, alternating smoky mouthfuls of fish with an acidic burst of tomato, onions, and parsley."

"Every society has an immune system, a silent army that tries to bring the body politic back to homeostasis," writes Ciezadlo. "People find ways to reconstruct their daily lives from the shambles of war; like my friend Leena, who once held a dinner party in her Beirut bomb shelter, they work with what they have....the baker keeps the communal oven going so his neighborhood can have bread; the restaurateur converts his café into a refugee center. The farmer feeds his neighbors from his dwindling stock of preserves; the parents drive all over Baghdad trying to find an open bakery so their daughter can have a birthday cake."

I think I'll take a few days off from complaining about my difficult existence.

Stephanie Susnjara is a freelance writer and editor living in Katonah, New York. She has written previous book reviews for *Brevity* and her work has appeared in the literary journals *Creative Nonfiction*, *MotherVerse*, *Brain Child: The Magazine for Thinking Mothers*, *Italian Americana*, and more. She holds an MFA from Goucher College and is an online writing instructor for the Creative Nonfiction Foundation. She dreams of becoming a war correspondent but not until the kids are out of the house.