

*Long years of suffering without a murmur,  
She continues, 'til finally,  
One notices that it is time to let her rest  
To pamper her and give her due  
Yet she gently turns them aside,  
Unused to the attention, for once,  
Shining on her and not on others.*

DHAHRAN — It is a very personal, compassionate passage typical of the verse in Saudi Aramco employee Ni'mah Ismail Nawwab's recently published first book of poetry, "The Unfurling."

An article by Anuj Desai on Nawwab and her debut book was featured in the Feb. 21, 2005, international edition of *Newsweek* magazine. Desai wrote that the book's central theme is "the push of globalization versus the pull of older traditions — a struggle that is particularly acute in Saudi Arabia."

In the poem "The Hidden Layers," Nawwab wrote: "Some think I am hiding/underneath my black cloak/with narrow slits for my eyes/cloaked in mystery, medieval modesty/wondering, what is going on behind the mask?"

The book of 80 poems is not only a turning point in Nawwab's creative life, but also a quiet watershed in Saudi Arabia's social and cultural evolution. Her January 8, 2005, book signing at Jareer Bookstore in the Saudi west-coast city of Jiddah was reportedly the first public book-signing by a Saudi author. Book signings are a literary convention in the West but have yet to catch on in the traditionally poetry-loving Kingdom.

Ghada Aboud, a reporter for the Jiddah-based English-language daily *Arab News*, wrote in the Jan. 9 edition of the newspaper: "Saudi Arabs and expats of different nationalities were among the large number of book lovers who converged on the scene. There were ladies and men as well as students and academics."

Abeer Zahid, a student at Jiddah's all-female Effat College, was quoted by Aboud: "I feel proud to be the owner of a book by Saudi Arabia's well-known writer and poet with her own signature on it. I'll cherish it all my life."

Nawwab previously held similar pre-publication signings at bookstores and other venues in the United States to promote "The Unfurling," published by Selwa Press of Vista, California, in the U.S.

Nawwab's "The Unfurling" is "her poetic expression of life experiences, women, freedom, society and the younger generation, enveloped in universal themes of love, loss, change and the simple joys in life," Aisha W. Kay wrote in a review.

Dr. John Duke Anthony, president of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, wrote: "In this book of verse and searing insights, Nimah Ismail Nawwab shares her uncanny gift for linking disparate peoples and cultures through her poems of the heart. A daughter of Arabia, she writes with a knowledge and

Muslims, and, indeed, non-Muslims today. It is must reading for its artistic merits as well as its relevance and timeliness."

Audrey Shabbas of Arab World and Islamic Resources and School Services, Berkeley, California, in America, said, "There is a wealth of insight (in "The Unfurling") for

## The Unfurling:

*Saudi Aramco poet  
frees banner of creativity*

Written by Rick Snedeker



passion that is as deep and telling of her attachment to family and ancestral origins as she does of her understanding of the world and its ways beyond her country's shores."

John L. Esposito, founding director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., in the United States, wrote: "Nimah Nawwab's poetry reflects the faith, hopes, fears, disappointments, expectations and dreams of many ordinary



Clockwise from top: Poet Nimah Nawwab addresses members of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore on "Prespectives on Saudi Arabia: Past and Present." She also addressed a youth forum in Singapore. The cover of Nawwab's book of verse, *The Unfurling*.



everyone, and I highly recommend it to teachers, students and those who are interested in Arab culture as seen through the eyes of a modern writer and poet.”

In a review of “The Unfurling” in *Saudi Aramco World* magazine, Robert W. Lebling wrote: “Western readers with preconceived notions about what it means to be a woman in today’s Saudi Arabia will find this book an eye-opener. Those without preconception will find it a most pleasurable learning experience.”

remembers. “Later on, I read a Dutch orientalist’s account of his stay in Makkah and felt the need to document the customs, social life and arts of our people, both past and present.”

Reading was strongly encouraged in Nawwab’s home when she was growing up. “I read everything I touched. *Newsweek*, *Time*, politics, memoirs, biographies of Islamic figures, profiles of athletes — I was into basketball — animal stories, space exploration, whatever. I once

it would be only English. I started this very early on, when they were each about a year and 2 months old.”

She honed her written English skills every summer by working with her father on writing projects and on other skills as well from the age of 14, when Nawwab worked for Saudi Aramco — in the Media Productions Division, News

Kunitz, Adrienne Rich, Carolyn Forché, Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon; among others.

“I chose to write poetry in English because I wanted

From left on facing page: Ni’mah Nawwab is introduced at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., by Dr. Paul Taylor, director of the Asian Cultural Program and curator of Asian, European and Middle Eastern Ethnology. A student is introduced to Nawwab by Ali Bakhsh, Saudi Aramco’s regional vice president of Saudi Petroleum Ltd. in Singapore, during a book signing. Nawwab discusses her book with Mary Jane Deeb at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.



Nawwab was born to internationalism — in Selangor, Malaysia, where her father was then a professor at the University of Kuala Lumpur. She was 5 when her family moved back to Saudi Arabia. During her childhood, she

*“With poetry you cross barriers, when readers feel the feelings of the author. No matter where you are in the world, you can build bridges of understanding with poetry. You can bring people together through their common knowledge and common concerns.”*

lived in Dhahran, Riyadh and Jiddah at various times as her father was transferred to different assignments as an executive with Saudi Aramco.

“I first became interested in English literature due to my scholarly father reading Shakespeare’s plays to me as bedtime stories when I was 8 years old,” Nawwab

read 35 books in English on sharks, a self-imposed writing project and my first extensive writing piece.” she said. “I often stayed up reading until 2 and 3 in the morning. My father would knock on my door and say, ‘Turn off the lights.’ Five minutes later they would be on again.”

She added, “Now, when my own daughter is up late reading, I can’t say, ‘Turn out the lights.’”

She always remembers being bilingual, says Nawwab, because her father would speak to her regularly in English, while her mother, although she is fluent in English, would speak to her mostly in Arabic.

Nawwab has carried on the tradition with her own daughter and son, Aminah and Ibrahim. “Some days I would tell my kids, ‘Today is Arabic day.’ The next day

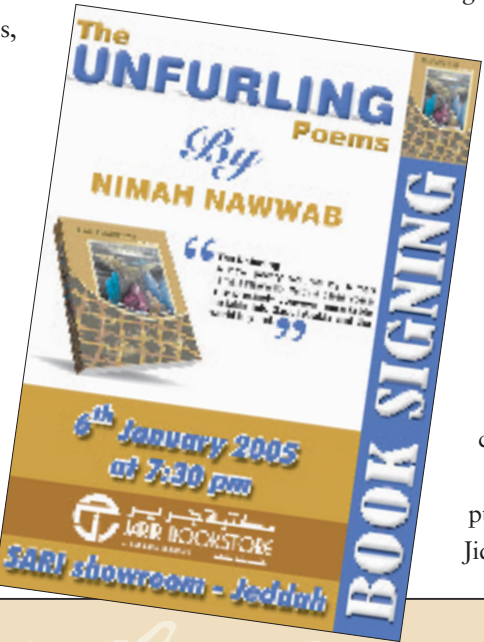
Monitoring and Translation. During the regular school year, she attended Arabic-language Saudi schools, improving her fluency in her native tongue. In the late 1980s, she graduated from the Dammam College of Arts, where her interest in English poetry blossomed.

Her long list of favorite poets is globally diverse: Naomi Shihab Nye (“my inspiration”); Chilean Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda; Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska; Mahmoud Darweesh; African-American poets Amiri Baraka and Lucille Clifton; Native American poet Joy Harjo; and American poets Robert Bly, Jane Herschfield, Stanley

to make people aware of their aspirations and dreams,” she said. “With poetry you cross barriers, when readers feel the feelings of the author. No matter where you are in the world, you can build bridges of understanding with poetry. You can bring people together through their common knowledge and common concerns.”

Her book is a collection of poems about the unique lives of Saudi women, old and young; about the sights and sounds of the Kingdom; about freedom; as well as love, loss and joy. It is divided into three thematic parts: awakenings, contours and crossroads.

She said she wasn’t prepared for the public response to her book signing in Jiddah. An *Arab News* story about the





event was the *Google* search engine's top hit that day when using the term "Saudi."

“I was amazed. Stunned,” Nawwab said. “People waited for 45 minutes to get a signed copy. One guy bought eight copies and wanted all of them signed. The most enjoyable part was meeting all the young Saudi writers and poets and to talk to them about matters of common interest. Also, it was an honor that several Saudi women pioneers were there, whom we all owe a

During the event, Nawwab said, “I was mostly just focused on interacting with the readers and signing. I was too busy to be feeling much of anything.”

The momentum began in 2000, when *Arab News* published “Awakenings,” and the poem was picked up by educators in Saudi Arabia and put into the English literature curriculum at the women’s College of Arts in Dammam. Her poetry was later featured on poet Michael Skinner’s internet site, *Web Tracks*. Other

Nawwab poems were later published in *Arab News*. She has performed readings of her poems at schools and universities in the Kingdom and has held book signings abroad. Recently she read selections of her poetry to conclude an education conference in Bahrain headed by organizational-learning guru Peter Senge of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the United States.

“It was surprisingly special how hard-core businessmen from various countries greeted the poems — how some were so touched by ‘The Coming,’ which is about the

future generation, that their eyes teared.”

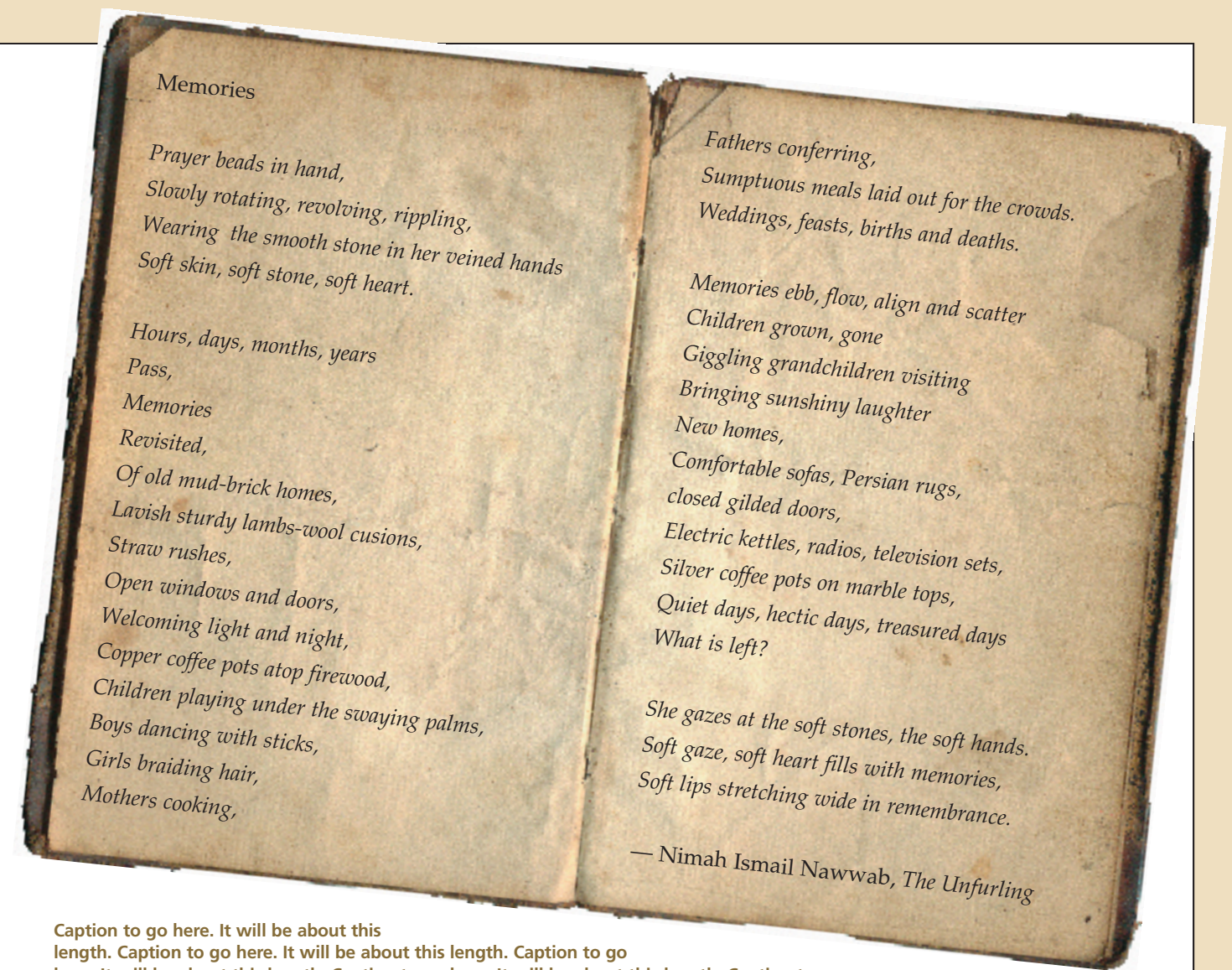
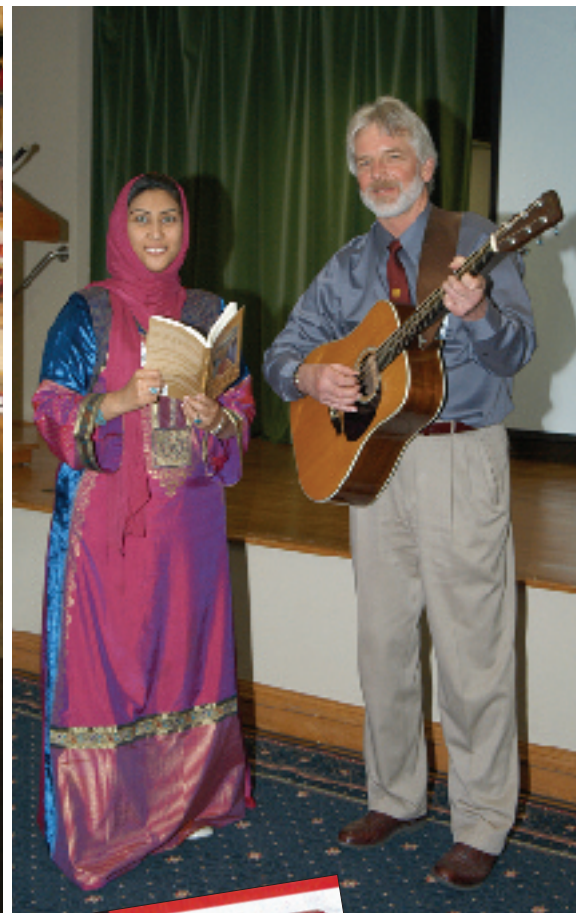
She recently went on a second book tour in the U.S., where she visited more

Left to right: Vicci Thompson, founder of the [www.aramcoexpat.com](http://www.aramcoexpat.com) web site, was on hand for Nawwab's book signing at a Barnes and Noble book store in XXXXXX XXXXXX. Saudi Aramco employee Jim Davidson accompanies Nawwab's poetry reading on guitar at a gathering in Dhahran. Inset left, the *Newsweek* article.

lot to for all they have achieved.”

She added, “The sustained coverage of the event really brought home the role of the media in affecting change.”

The signing was advertised beforehand in the *Arab News*, and Jarir's Bookstore sent posters previewing the event to 55,000 people on its mailing list.



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than 23 schools and universities in Texas and then flew to Washington, D.C., for a Barnes and Nobles book signing and more functions. Recently she has also taken part in an international educational conference in Bahrain and was a main speaker. She has also returned from a trip to Singapore, where she gave presentations to various audiences on Saudi youth, women and culture. "Reaching out to the East as well as to the West is a must," she says as she gets ready to head to Japan and then Europe in the coming months.

The poet makes it a point to wear traditional Saudi dress while on tour and at presentations and reading sessions, as well as when greeting expatriate visitors at home. The dresses reflect her abiding and deep interest in the traditional heritage of the country.

“Ten years from now, there will no longer be a ‘typical’

Saudi,” she said. “The challenge is to retain a sense of identity in a global world, picking up best practices while keeping a sense of value and pride in one’s essence, faith and roots. Being Muslim, Arab and Saudi is integral to our thoughts and very souls.”

Nawwab continues to work in Saudi Aramco's Public Relations Department as a PR specialist, writer and editor, and to write poetry after hours. She is also currently at work producing a CD of her poetry accompanied by music, which should be completed in a few months.

“I can’t imagine life without books or music,” Nawwab said.

And poetry keeps her going as Nora Boustany aptly noted in a piece in *The Washington Post* published March 25, 2005: “Her poetry is her fuel. It has carried her across boundaries assumed non-traversable.” ■