

Returning home to Somalia after seventeen years in exile during the civil war—you always have this alertness in you. Who's coming? Who's going? You are a stranger, people are always going in and out, so you don't know who could be dangerous. It's a gut feeling: "Am I going to be OK? Am I going to be OK? Am I going to be OK?" Knowing this gut feeling, I tell myself, "Hold on, girl. You've survived West Philadelphia. You can handle this." You adapt and get to know those around you. But when they talk among themselves about violence, and some of them have participated, it makes you—"Hey. I'm sitting next to—next to a killer. I'm having a tea, a chat across the table,

NOMAD. ELDER. SAAXIIB. AUTOBIOGRAPHER.*

with a person who killed. God knows what he will say." Here I am, with a family, feel comfortable, I never keep mace there, but then among these key players is this guy who has been exposed to violence, killed people, and it just, comes up, like having tea: "Oh, have you ever fired a machine gun?" "Hi Mohammed! How are you? How old are you? How old were you when the war started?" I'm asking biographical interview questions with a Western mentality, and Mohammed tells me, "Firing a gun—" "Are you joking? Fired a gun?" "I don't know the number of people I've killed, but I will tell you I participated in this war, this war, this war... I was nearly killed this time, this time, this time..." He is your bodyguard but who are you to know, to feel secure? The familiarity makes you feel secure, but it translates to nothing, nada, zero. The people you are facing are killers. Butchers. Torturers.

– Fouzia Musse



* THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY
PROJECT

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin is the most widely published autobiography of all time. In honor of Franklin's 300th birthday, the Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary and *One Book, One Philadelphia* invited today's Philadelphians to submit memoirs of their own, using no more than 300 words. At the end of the project – May 17, 2006 – a panel of judges selected twenty autobiographies to appear on bus shelters throughout the city. Visit www.theautobiographyproject.com for more information about the project, and to read more Philadelphia stories.

The Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary is a non-profit organization established to mark the 300-year anniversary of Benjamin Franklin's birth. *One Book, One Philadelphia* is a project of the Mayor's Office and the Free Library of Philadelphia.



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