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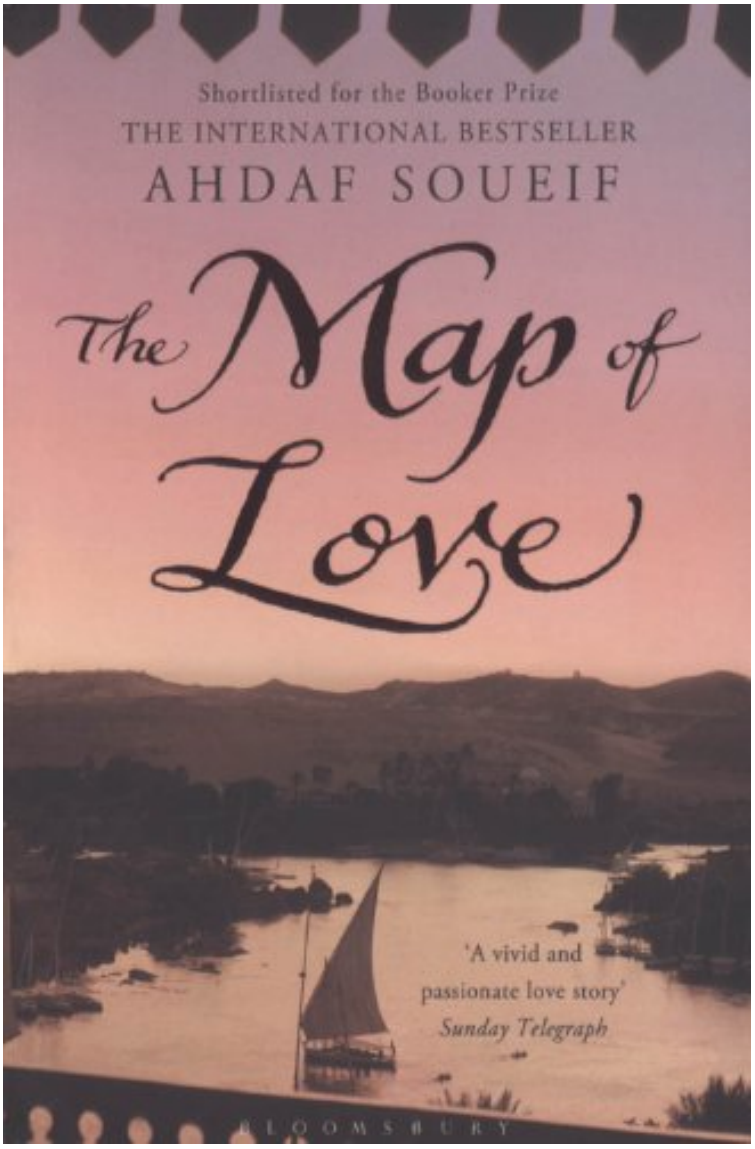
The Map of Love



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(Free read ebook) The Map of Love

Par Ahdaf Soueif : The Map of Love before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Map of Love:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn 1900 Lady Anna Winterbourne travels to Egypt where she falls in love with Sharif, and Egyptian Nationalist utterly committed to his country's cause.A hundred years later, Isabel Parkman, an American divorcee and a descendant of Anna and Sharif, goes to Egypt, taking with her an old family trunk, inside which are found notebooks and journals which reveal Anna and Sharif's secret.ExtraitA BeginningEven God cannot change the past.Agathon (447-401 bc)--and there, on the table under her bedroom window, lies the voice that has set her dreaming again. Fragments of a life lived a long, long time ago. Across a hundred years the woman's voice speaks to her--so clearly that she cannot believe it is not possible to pick up her pen and answer.The child sleeps. Nur al-Hayah: light of my life.Anna must have put aside her pen, Amal thinks, and looked down at the child pressed into her side: the face flushed with sleep,

the mouth slightly open, a damp tendril of black hair clinging to the brow.I have tried, as well as I could, to tell her. But she cannot--or will not--understand, and give up hope. She waits for him constantly.Amal reads and reads deep into the night. She reads and lets Anna's words flow into her, probing gently at dreams and hopes and sorrows she had sorted out, labelled and put away.Papers, polished and frail with age, sheets and sheets of them. Mostly they are covered in English in a small, firm, sloping hand. Amal has sorted them out by type and size of paper, by colour of ink. Other papers are in French. Some are in envelopes, some loosely bundled together in buff folders. There is a large green journal, and another bound in plain brown leather, a tiny brass keyhole embedded in its chased clasp. The key Amal found later in the corner of a purse made of green felt-a purse with an unwilling feel to it, as though it had been made in a schoolroom project--and with it were two wedding rings, one smaller than the other. She looked carefully at the etchings inside them, and at first the only part of the inscription she could make out on either ring was the date: 1896. A large brown envelope held one writing book: sixty-four pages of neat Arabic ruq'a script. Amal recognised the hand immediately: the upright letters short but straight, the sharp angles, the tail of the 'ya' tucked under its body. The definite, controlled hand of her grandmother. The paper is white and narrow-lined, bound between marbled grey boards. The stiff pages crackle and resist. When she smooths them open they lie awkwardly, holding a rigid posture till she closes the book again. Some newspaper cuttings: al-Ahram, al-Liwa, The Times, the Daily News and others. A programme from an Italian theatre. Another purse, this time of dark blue velvet. She had upended it over her palm and poured out a string of thirty-three prayer beads of polished wood with a short tassel of black silk. For the rest of the day her hand smelled faintly of aged sandalwood. Some sketchbooks with various drawings. Several books of Arabic calligraphy practice. She flicked through them, noting the difference in flow and confidence. Several books of Arabic exercises, quotations, notes, etc. A locket, curious in that it is made of a heavy, dull metal and hangs on a fine chain of steel. When she pressed its spring, it opened and a young woman looked out at her. It is an exquisite painting and she studies it repeatedly. She tells herself she has to get a magnifying glass and look at it properly. The young woman's hair is blonde and is worn loose and crimped in the style made famous by the Pre-Raphaelites. She has a smooth, clear brow, an oval face and a delicate chin. Her mouth is about to break into a smile. But her eyes are the strangest shade of blue, violet really, and they look straight at you and they say--they say a lot of things. There's a strength in that look, a wilfulness; one would almost call it defiance except that it is so good-humoured. It is the look a woman would wear--would have worn--if she asked a man, a stranger, say, to dance. The date on the back is 1870 and into the concave lid someone had taped a tiny golden key. A calico bag, and inside it, meticulously laundered and with a sachet of lavender tucked between the folds, was a baby's frock of the finest white cotton, its top a mass of blue and yellow and pink smocking. And folded once, and rolled in muslin, a curious woven tapestry showing a pharaonic image and an Arabic inscription. There was also a shawl, of the type worn by peasant women on special occasions: 'butter velvet', white. You can buy one today in the Ghuriyya for twenty Egyptian pounds. And there is another, finer one, in pale grey wool with faded pink flowers-so often worn that in patches you can almost see through the weave.And there were other things too. Things wrapped in tissue, or in fabric, or concealed in envelopes: a box full of things, a treasure chest, a trunk, actually. It is a trunk.A story can start from the oddest things: a magic lamp, a conversation overheard, a shadow moving on a wall. For Amal al-Ghamrawi, this story started with a trunk. An old-fashioned trunk made of brown leather, cracked now and dry, with a vaulted top over which run two straps fastened with brass buckles black with age and neglect.The American had come to Amal's house. Her name was Isabel Parkman and the trunk was locked in the boot of the car she had hired. Amal could not pretend she was not wary. Wary and weary in advance: an American woman--a journalist, she had said on the phone. But she said Amal's brother had told her to call and so Amal agreed to see her. And braced herself: the fundamentalists, the veil, the cold peace, polygamy, women's status in Islam, female genital mutilation--which would it be?But Isabel Parkman was not brash or strident; in fact she was rather diffident, almost shy. She had met Amal's brother in New York. She had told him she was coming to Egypt to do a project on the millennium, and he had given her Amal's number. Amal said she doubted whether Isabel would come across anyone with grand millennial views or theories. She said that she thought Isabel would find that on the whole everyone was simply worried--worried sick about what would become of Egypt, the Arab countries, 'le tiers monde', in the twenty-first century. But she gave her coffee and some names and Isabel went away.On her second visit Isabel had broached the subject of the trunk. She had found it when her mother had gone into hospital--for good. She had looked inside it, and there were some old papers in English, written, she believed, by her great-grandmother. But there were many papers and

documents in Arabic. And there were other things: objects. And the English papers were mostly undated, and some were bound together but seemed to start in midsentence. She knew some of her own history must be there, but she also thought there might be a story. She didn't want to impose but Amal's brother had thought she might be interested . . .Amal was touched by her hesitancy. She said she would have a look at the thing and sent the doorman to bring it upstairs. As he carried it in and put it in the middle of her living room, she said, 'Pandora's box?"Oh, I hope not,' Isabel cried, sounding genuinely alarmed.My name is Anna Winterbourne. I do not hold (much) with those who talk of the Stars governing our Fate.1A child forsaken, waking suddenly,Whose gaze afeard on all things round doth rove,And seeth only that it cannot seeThe meeting eyes of love.Quoted in MiddlemarchCairo, April 1997Some people can make themselves cry. I can make myself sick with terror. When I was a child--before I had children of my own--I did it by thinking about death. Now, I think about the stars. I look at the stars and imagine the universe. Then I draw back to our galaxy, then to our planet--spinning away in all that immensity. Spinning for dear life. And for a moment the utter precariousness, the sheer improbability of it all overwhelms me. What do we have to hold on to?Last night I dreamed I walked once more in the house of my father's childhood: under my feet the cool marble of the entrance hall, above my head its high ceiling of wooden rafters: a thousand painted flowers gleaming dark with distance. And there was the latticed terrace of the haramlek, and behind the ornate woodwork I saw the shadow of a woman. Then the heavy door behind me swung open and I turned: outlined against a glaring rectangle of sunshine I saw (as I had never in life seen) the tall broad-shouldered figure of my great-uncle, Sharif Basha al-Baroudi, and as I opened my eyes and pulled the starched white sheet up close against my chin, I watched him pause and take off his tarbush and hand it, together with his ebony walking stick, to the Nubian sufragi who leaned towards him with words of greeting. He glanced up at the lattice of the terrace and strode towards me, past me, and into the shadows of the small vestibule that I knew led to the stairs up to the women's quarters. I have not been near this house since my youngest son was nine; ten years ago. He loved the house, and watching him play, and explore while the museum guards looking on benignly, I had found myself wondering: what if we had kept it?But this is not my story. This is a story conjured out of a box; a leather trunk that travelled from London to Cairo and back. That lived in the boxroom of a Manhattan apartment for many years, then found its way back again and came to rest on my living-room floor here in Cairo one day in the spring of 1997. It is the story of two women: Isabel Parkman, the American who brought it to me, and Anna Winterbourne, her great-grandmother, the Englishwoman to whom it had originally belonged. And if I come into it at all, it is only as my own grandmother did a hundred years ago, when she told the story of her brother's love.Day after day I unpacked, unwrapped, unravelled. I sat on the floor with Isabel and we exclaimed over the daintiness of the smocking on the child's frock we found, the smoothness of the sandalwood prayer beads released from their velvet bag, the lustre of the candle-glass. I translated for her passages from the Arabic newspaper cuttings. We spoke of time and love and family and loss. I took the journals and papers into my bedroom and read and reread Anna's words. I almost know them by heart. I hear her voice and see her in the miniature in the locket: the portrait of the mother she so much resembled.At the table under my window, I fit the key from the green felt purse into the delicate lock of the brown journal and turn, and I am in an English autumn in 1897 and Anna's troubled heart lies open before me:--and yet, I do love him, in the sense that I wish him well, and were it in my power to make his lot happier and his heart more content, I would willingly and with a joyful spirit undertake anything--But, in fairness, I must say that I have tried. My understanding--in particular of men--has of necessity been limited. But within that I did strive--do strive--to be a faithful and loving wife and companion--It is not as I thought it would be, in those girlish days--just two short years ago--when I sat by the pavilion and watched, my heart swelling with joy when he glanced smiling in my direction after a good run, or when we rode together and his leg brushed against mine.Put football instead of cricket and she could have been me. She could have been Arwa, or Deena, or any of the girls I grew up with here in Cairo in the Sixties. What difference do a hundred years--or a continent--make?How sadly, more than ever now, I feel the lack of my mother. And yet I could not say that Edward has changed. He has not. It is that same polite courtesy that I thought the mark of greater things to come, that I thought the harbinger of a close affection and an intimacy of mind and spirit.We are roughly in the middle of the journal, which has already moved some way from its girlish beginnings as Anna prepared to chronicle a happy married life--beginnings touching in their assumption of order, of a predicted, unfolding pattern.My mother is constantly in my mind. More so than my dear father--though I think of him a great deal too. I wonder how they were together. I cannot remember them together. Until she died, my memories are of her alone. And in my memory she is

surrounded always by light. I see her riding--fast; always at a canter or a gallop. And laughing: at the table, while she danced, when she came into the nursery, when she held me in front of her on the saddle and taught me how to hold the reins. And it is as if my father only came into being for me when I was nine years old--and she had died. I remember him grieving. Walking in the grounds or sitting in the library. Gentle and loving with me always, but sad. There were no more dances, no more dinner parties where I would come down in my night-clothes to be kissed good night. Sir Charles came to see him, often. And they would talk of India and of Ireland, of the Queen and the Canal, of Egypt. They spoke of the Rebellion, the Bombardment and the Trial. They never spoke of my mother.I asked Sir Charles, a few months ago, after my father's funeral, about my mother. I asked him how she and my father had been together. Had they been happy? And he, looking somewhat surprised, said, 'I expect so, my dear. She was a fine woman. And he was a true gentleman.'Sir Charles does not speak much of private matters. He is more happy on the high road of public life. Although 'happy' is a careless word, for he is most unhappy with public life and was in an ill temper throughout the Jubilee festivities in June. Two weeks ago we were down in Saighton to visit George Wyndham and dined there with Dick Grosvenor, Edward Clifford, Henry Milner, John Evelyn and Lady Clifden. The question of whether savage nations had a right to exist came up, George arguing--from Darwin and the survival of the fittest--that they had none, and the rest of the company being of much the same mind. Sir Charles was much incensed and ended the conversation by saying (somewhat strongly) that the British Empire had done so much harm to so many people that it deserved to perish and then it would be too late to say or do anything. Edward was, for the most part, silent, I fancy because he really agreed with the younger set but was careful of offending his father. Sir Charles's only ally was John Evelyn, who declared his intention of sending his son up the Nile to 'learn Arabic, keep a diary and acquire habits of observation and se!f-reliance and not to imbibe Jingo principles'. I wish--if that is not too wicked a wish--I wish I were that son.Edward visits my apartment from time to time, and he is tender and affectionate of me as he leaves. And I have long thought it was a mark of the waywardness of my character that on such occasions I was beset by stirrings and impulses of so contrary a nature that I was like a creature devoid of reason: I wept into my pillows, I paced the length of my chamber, I opened the casements to the cold night air and leaned out and wished--God forgive me--that I had not been so resilient in physical health that I might not catch a fatal chill and make an end of my unhappiness. Often, in the mornings, I had resort to cold compresses on my eyes so that no trace of unseemly anguish might be detected on my countenance when I came down to breakfast.I have wondered whether any shadow of such turmoil came to him, for I would have been glad to soothe and comfort him as best I could, but as he always left so promptly and with such apparent equanimity, I have come to conclude that these disturbances were mine and mine only and were born of some weakness of my feminine nature, and I strove--strive--to master and overcome them. To that end I have devised various small stratagems, the most successful of which is to leave some small task uncompleted and close to hand. So when my husband rises from my bed I rise with him and walk with him to the door to bid him good night and, having closed the door, return immediately to my drawing or my book until such time as I am certain the wicked feelings have passed and it is safe for me to lift my head.My journal is of no use on such occasions for it would merely encourage the expression of these emotions that threaten me and that I must put aside.I cannot believe that he is happy.2Oh what a dear, ravishing thing is the beginning of an Amour!Aphra Behn, c. 1680Cairo, May 1997Isabel gives me bits of her story. She tells me how she met my brother. A dry, edited version, which, as I get to know her, as I get to be able to imagine her, I fill out for myself. Isabel thinks in pictures: as she speaks I see the pool of light rippling on the old oak table--New York City, February 1997A pool of light ripples on the old oak table, picking out the darker grains of wood, then shadowing them. At its centre shines a glass bowl in which three candles float like flat, golden lilies.'I thought maybe it's like birthdays,' Isabel says. Her voice has that slight, deep-down tremor she has noticed in it lately. She doesn't know whether anyone else can hear it. She doesn't know why it comes. She lays her fork down carefully on her plate.'I mean,' she says, looking down, considering her fingers still resting on the fork, 'you know how when you're a kid every birthday has this huge significance?' She glances up. Yes, she still has his attention. 'You even think,' she continues, encouraged, 'that after a birthday everything is somehow going to be different, you're going to be different; you'll be new--"And then?"And then, later--' she shrugs--'you realise it isn't like that."My dear girl--I'm sorry: my dear young woman--you can't possibly know that already.'Is he flirting with her? He leans back in his seat, one wrist on the table, an arm slung over the back of his chair. Beyond the bowl of light, the woman he arrived with turns laughing towards Rajiv Seth. A sheet of auburn hair falls forward, obscuring her face. My brother fingers the stem of his wineglass;

the back of his hand is covered with fine, black hair. She looks full at him: his face so familiar from television and newspapers. They hate him, but they cannot get enough of him. When he conducts, the line snakes around the block as though for the first showing of a Spielberg film. The 'Molotov Maestro' they call him, the 'Kalashnikov Conductor'. But the box office loves him. Now the dark, deep-set eyes are lit and fixed on her. He is laughing at her.From the head of the table, Deborah calls out, 'Anybody want more salad?'There is a general clinking of cutlery and shifting of plates and after a moment Deborah says, 'I'll go get the ice cream.'Louis, her partner, groans and she flashes him a smile.Isabel gets up and even though Deborah says, 'Sit down, sit down, I'll do it,' she picks up her plate and his and carries them into the kitchen. 'Isn't he just a doll?' Deborah whispers amid the gleaming brass pots, pans and colanders.'He's pretty gorgeous,' Isabel agrees, not pretending not to know whom Deborah means. 'And he's approachable. Who's the lady?"Samantha Metcalfe,' says Deborah. 'She teaches at SUNY."Is she-are they-together?'Deborah makes a face as she leans into the freezer. 'For the moment, I guess. Why?' She straightens up and grins at Isabel. 'Interested?"Maybe."He's fifty-five,' Deborah says, putting two tubs of ice cream on a tray. 'And--"--old enough to be your father,' Isabel completes, smiling. 'Is he really involved with terrorists?' she asks.Deborah shrugs, arranges wafers in a blue porcelain dish. 'Who knows? I'd be surprised, though. He doesn't look like a terrorist.'Isabel picks up the bowls and follows Deborah out of the kitchen.When she sits down, he turns towards her. 'I wasn't laughing at you, you know.' His eyes are still smiling.'No?"No, really. Really. You just looked so solemn."Well-"So, carry on. You were telling me about birthdays."What I meant was--well, for us, this is only the third time we're seeing a new century come in. And we've never had a millennium. So maybe we're--"Like a small kid? That's been said before."What? What's been said before?' Louis leans over from Isabel's right, his high forehead catching the candlelight. He is proud of his receding hairline and wears his black hair brushed back like a Spaniard's.'You can't do that,' Deborah cries.'Can't do what?' asks Louis.'Butt into a conversation like that. This isn't Wall Street. This is--"Why not? It wasn't a private conversation. Was it a private conversation?"No, no, it wasn't,' says Isabel. 'I was just saying that all this fuss about the millennium--"Oh, not the millennium,' Laura says, putting her hands to her head; 'millennium, millennium, everywhere you look it's the millennium. I thought you didn't want to do the millennium?"What are you doing?' asks Louis. 'I thought you were due to complete--"She's added on an option--' Laura begins.'But that's just the point,' Isabel says. 'I think maybe the millennium only matters to us because we're so young--as a country, I mean. Maybe it would be interesting to see what people in a really old country thought of it."It's an angle,' Deborah admits.'India,' Louis says. 'Maybe Raji can help you there. Raji?'The bearded head turns from conversation with Samantha.'What does India think of the millennium?' Louis demands.'Why don't you ask her, man?' A flicker at the corner of the dark lips, but the eyes don't smile.'Come on, Louis, you know better than that,' says Deborah.'Fucking inscrutable,' says Louis.'Let's have coffee through in the living room,' says Deborah, standing up.'What is it you want to do?' he asks as they walk into the living room.'I thought I'd go to Egypt. See what they think of the millennium there."Egypt? Why Egypt? Why not Rome? That's an old country."Yes, but Egypt is older. It's like going back to the beginning. Six thousand years of recorded history."Are they having a millennium there? Do you take cream?' Deborah hands Isabel a cup of coffee and waits, the small silver cream jug poised. 'Don't they use the Muslim years?"They use both,' he says. 'And they have a Coptic calendar as well."I know they celebrate both New Years,' Isabel says, pouring herself a few drops of cream and handing the jug back to Deborah.'Any excuse for a party.' He smiles. 'I won't have coffee, thanks. We have to be going soon."I was wondering,' Isabel ventures, 'if you could give me some pointers. I've been there before, but it was a long time ago, and I haven't stayed in touch."Oh, I think you'll find people will remember you--"There, you see, you're laughing at me again."My dear, not at all. I'm sure you made a powerful impression. What were you doing there?"I did a Junior Year Abroad--"Don't you just adore these apartments?' Laura says, joining them.'They're so gracious."This one is beautiful,' Isabel says. 'And I love the red walls.'They all look around the high, galleried room.'Call me,' my brother says to Isabel. 'Do you want to call me? I'll think of a few people you can go and see. Look, let me give you my number.' He feels in his pockets. 'Do you have a card or a piece of paper or something?'She looks in her handbag and passes him a small white notepad. He takes the cap off his fountain pen and scribbles in black ink.'Can you read this? When do you want to talk? Do you have a deadline?"Yes,' says Isabel. 'Imminent."OK. Call me. We'll talk.'He turns back. 'Are you OK getting home? Can we drop you off somewhere?"I'm fine,' Isabel says. 'I'm on the other side of the Park. I have a cab arranged.'The sky throws back the lights of the city, into her windows and who knows how many others. Isabel kicks off her shoes and stands looking out over the massed treetops below. If she were to open the

window and lean out she would see, beyond the darkness, the lights of the Plaza and then down to Fifth Avenue where--is it her imagination or can she see a glow where Tiffany's windows are? Tempted to open the window, she puts her hand on the catch, but it is a freezing February night and she turns back to the room and switches on one table lamp. Two years on, she is still enthralled by the freedom of not being half of a couple, by the pleasure of coming home to silence, by not having to feel relieved if Irving has enjoyed the evening or to make it up to him if he hasn't--by the absence of resentment in her life.It is after midnight and yet she is full of energy. She crosses over to the desk and checks her answering machine. Nothing. And nothing on the computer or the fax. She goes to a bookshelf and picks out Who's Who:Ghamrawi, Omar A. s of Ahmad al-Ghamrawi and Maryam, n?e al-Khalidi; b 15 September 1942, Jerusalem; educ Cornell Univ New York and . . . coached by . . . Career pianist, conductor and writer; debut with NY Philharmonic 1960 . . . tours . . . The Politics of Culture 1992, A State of Terror 1994, Borders and Refuge 1996 . . .Thirty-seven years of music, and five years of words. And it is in these last five years that he has hit the news. In her bedroom, she flicks the television on and catches Jerry Springer, pointing, haranguing, 'You had his baby--you deliberately entrapped him--' A fat woman with mascara running down her face along with her tears yells back, 'He needs to get real--' Isabel hits the mute button, goes into the bathroom and turns on the taps.Hair caught at the top of her head with a giant black butterfly clip, a rolled-up towel wedged behind her neck, the water pale green pools shimmering amid soft hills of foam, she slings her legs over the edge of the tub, lets her arms float and settles into this, her favourite position. The automatic thought comes that it would be nice to have some music but she pushes it aside. How many times has she put on a disc only to be irritated by it after a few minutes? And then she'd have to pad out on wet feet and switch it off before it drove her crazy. She couldn't do it with the remote because of the position of the player in the bedroom. No, she would settle into the silence, and when it needed to be broken she would shift a part of herself and the soft lapping of the water would give her the sound she needed to hear.Would tomorrow be too soon to call him?Pharaonic toes, Irving used to say, when he was still talking about her toes--about her. Long, straight, even toes that could belong to any one of those sideways figures in the reliefs and the wall paintings, except hers were pale, not brown. She spreads them and frowns to focus on the neat, square-cut nails with their one coat of white pearl. Not chipped; good for another two or three days maybe. And besides it's winter now and who's going to see them? She lets her leg fall and slips further down into the water. Toes to go with the name. It was her father who had explained to her her name. Isa Bella: Isis the Beautiful. 'So you see,' he'd said, that summer's day, in the woods back of the house in Connecticut, 'you have the name of the first goddess, the mother of Diana, of all goddesses, the mother of the world.' She had been walking at his side, carrying a long stick with a fork at the end, engaged in a divine task: holding it out, waiting for it to tremble, to tell her she had found water, there under the grass-covered earth. And then, on the swing, as he had pushed her, and she rose higher and higher with each thrust, a chant had formed in her head 'Isa -- Bella, Isa -- Bella . . .'Revue de presse"Vivid, passionate and shedding, as true love does, a brilliant, revealing light on the world beyond itself."--The Sunday Telegraph (London)"Epic. . . .Soueif is at her most eloquent on the subject of her homeland, her prose rich with historical detail and debate. Ultimately, Egypt emerges as the true heroine of this novel."--The Independent (London)"Ahdaf Soueif has a talent for blending the personal and political and getting under the skin of each one of her characters."--Independent on Sunday (London)"A magnificent work, reminiscent of Marquez and Allende in its breadth and confidence."--The Guardian"A bold and vibrant novel. . . .This is political fiction that is also unashamedly romantic--. A triumphant achievement."--Penelope Lively, Literary