



August 30 - September 13, 2023

Dear Reader,

What a pleasant surprise to see that *Hotline* has been selected for Together We Read this summer!

*Hotline* recounts the story of Muna Heddad, a young teacher from Lebanon who moves to Canada with her son in 1986, a few years after her husband is kidnapped. As such, she's leaving behind a civil war filled with bad memories in Beirut, memories that continue to haunt her as she works to set up a new life in Montreal. Before immigrating, she had been told that as a French teacher she would have no trouble finding a job, but after months of unsuccessful applications she's learning that no one in Quebec trusts her to teach the language. She needs to start making money, and fast. The only work Muna can find is at a weight-loss center as a hotline operator.

All day, she takes calls from people responding to ads seen in magazines or on TV. On the phone, she's Mona, and she's quite good at listening. These strangers all have so much to say once someone shows interest in their lives--marriages gone bad, parents dying, isolation, personal inadequacies. Even as her daily life in Canada is filled with invisible barriers at every turn, on the phone Muna is privy to her clients' deepest secrets.

With *Hotline*, which is my fourth novel in eighteen years, I wanted to set a story in the city I call home for the first time. In Muna Heddad, I see something of my mother's story when we first arrived in Montreal in the 80s. A French teacher by training, she also couldn't find work in education as a newly arrived immigrant, and she had to resort to working at a diet-plan clinic, selling boxed food to make ends meet. From today's vantage point, this episode in her life speaks to me in ways that were not evident in childhood.

The novel is suffused with nostalgia for what I remember Montreal to be like in that era, but also to capture something of the systemic barriers that keep its new arrivals at the margins of its society. These scenic charms and socio-economic obstacles still co-exist today, not only in Montreal but all across Canada, and many immigrants still endure these challenges on their way to building new lives in this country.

Save for a select few of us, practically all Canadians has a story of immigration somewhere in their lineage, whether it is still fresh on the surface or a distant footnote after generations of settling. My hope is that this story speaks to your own past and allows you to reflect upon a journey that is so prevalent that we sometimes forgets it is there at all.

Sincerely,

Dimitri Nasrallah