

Natasha Tynes

FROM THE NEIGHBORHOODS OF AMMAN, JORDAN TO A Published AUTHOR IN THE US

I was born in Amman, Jordan. I had a happy and modest childhood. I grew up in different apartment buildings in different neighborhoods of Amman in the 80s. My dad worked at a bank, and my mom worked as a school teacher. Neither of them finished college. We were a low middle-class family. We didn't have much. We bought clothes twice a year: on Christmas and on Easter, and a new pair of shoes once a year if we were lucky. We never went out to eat, and we played with our cousins in the street.

I loved reading from an early age and excelled at writing. But I had a challenge: English. I was behind, mostly because I changed schools and the school that I ended up with had an advanced English curriculum. I lagged behind.

I dreaded looking at English books. My dad, who grew up poor, and was lucky to get educated by being accepted in an educational facility affiliated with the Catholic church in Bait Jala in Palestine, noticed my struggle and told me that the only way I can improve my English was by reading books.

The only problem was that it was Amman in the late 80's and English books were rare. To get me books my dad would scout the flea markets and look for English books left by expats. I would read anything he would bring. I remember the very first English book he got me, the very first book I read: *Super Fudge* by Judy Bloom. I devoured this book. Protected it like a shrine and read it so many times. It was a rare find in a land where English books were a scarcity.

My dad continued on his journey of scouting books from various flea markets while I waited for him anxiously, dreaming about my next read.

My English improved, and so did my grades.

After I grew up, got a job and started traveling on my own, I would come back home with a suitcase filled with English books.

"You didn't buy any new clothes? Only books," my mom would ask, her eyebrows raised.

I never abandoned my love for writing. I wrote columns for newspapers and started experimenting with short fiction. I focused on English because I wanted to reach a global audience.

Then I moved to the US. I didn't have much. All my savings evaporated after I put down the rent deposit and bought a used car. My saving grace was that I got a job a few months after I moved to the US. I remember how during my first few days in my new job, my colleagues suggested we go out to eat. I turned down their invitation, because I simply had no money for

lunch. I was counting the days until my first pay check. Writing was the last thing on my mind. I was more concerned with the daily survival.

A few months after I got settled in the US, I came across an article in the *Washington post* that changed my life. It was a profile of Chinese-American award -winning author Yiyun Li (ee-yoon lee). I was really struck by the fact that when Yiun, Li moved to the US she hardly knew any English, and that she switched her college major to pursue her love of writing.

I thought to myself that if Yiun, Li now an acclaimed author who moved to the US when she was 20 and hardly spoke any English can do it, then I can do it.

The very next day I talked to one of my colleagues at work who was a writer and told him I really wanted to pursue writing. He advised me to start taking writing workshops at The Writers Center in Bethesda. So I did. I took one workshop after the other and started writing short stories. I naively thought I was a genius and that my short stories would be celebrated worldwide. I submitted my short stories to literary journals and I was certain that I would gain instant fame. I got one rejection after the other. The rejections continued for years. I eventually quit writing. I was a fool to pursue this, I told myself. English is not even my native language.

Then one day and out of the blue, a journal that I had submitted a short story to a year earlier contacted me saying they wanted to publish my story. That was when I picked up the pieces of whatever confidence I had left and got back to writing. I wrote more short stories and submitted them and kept being rejected, but I kept going until I managed to publish a total of three short stories in different literary journals.

I can do this!

Eventually, I decided to work on a novel.

“You know how hard it is to publish a novel in the US,” a former colleague told me when I shared my dream with her. “I have many friends who tried and couldn’t do it,” she added.

I kept quiet.

I can do it, I told myself. I know I can.

It took me a couple of years to finish the manuscript of my first novel then I started submitting it to agents. I got one rejection after the other. I ended up with over 100 rejections from various literary agents. Giving up was the only option left.

Until I saw a tweet. It was from a small press that was looking for unagented submissions. I submitted a few chapters. The publisher got back to me within a few hours of my submission. He was intrigued and asked for the whole manuscript. A few months after I submitted my manuscript I heard back from him saying he wanted to acquire my book.

My novel *They Called Me Wyatt* will be out in June by California ColdBlood Books, an imprint of Rare Bird Books. It's a murder mystery set between Jordan and the US. In a way it's a love letter to Amman, the city where I grew up, it's also a tale of resilience and keeping your eye on the goal in spite of all the challenges and the failures that come your way. Don't let anyone tell you are not fit to pursue a dream or that the road is too hard to cross. Humans are resilient beings. We can always pick up the pieces and start over. Remember, if an accented Jordanian woman who grew up in the neighborhoods of Amman can publish a novel in the US, then anything is possible.