



AMREEKA

A FILM BY CHERIEN DABIS www.AMREEKA.com



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
ENTERTAINMENT

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A TALE OF IMMIGRANTS' STRUGGLES AND SUCCESSES

By Steven Rea

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'It's like a tree that's pulled from its roots and planted somewhere else,' says Muna Farah (Nisreen Faour), grappling with the sense of isolation and alienation that she and her teenage son, Fadi (Melkar Muallem), are experiencing in their new home in small-town Illinois.

Immigrants from the West Bank, the Palestinian mother and her boy have made the move to America - Amreeka, as the title of Cherien Dabis' emotional family saga has it - after 9/11. Muna wanted a better life for her son: no more Israeli army checkpoints, no more ethnic and religious hostility.

Unfortunately, being an Arab in the United States after the attack on the World Trade Center, and as scenes from the first days of Operation Iraqi Freedom are everywhere on TV, isn't much better. When the U.S. Customs agent at the airport asks, "Occupation?" the bright, bubbly Muna answers, "Yes," thinking he means that her homeland, Palestine, is an occupied state. The Homeland Security officer proceeds to search through Muna and Fadi's belongings; they are detained for hours.

Settling in with her sister (Hiam Abbass), her sister's doctor husband (Yussel Abu-Warda), and their daughters, Muna struggles to find work. With two degrees and years of experience in banking, she believed she would have little trouble finding a job.

Eventually, she is hired - at a White Castle, selling burgers and fries.

Fadi, accepted into the junior class at the area high school, encounters prejudice and hostility. Students, some with siblings in the military in Iraq, harass him. The debates in his social-studies class, led by a well-meaning but clueless teacher, don't make things better.

Filmmaker Dabis based Amreeka on her own family's experiences in the rural Midwest during the first Gulf War. Although the drama heads on a predictable course, Faour brings intelligence and humor to her performance and Muallem, as the smart adolescent turned surly and scared, is likewise sharp.

In the end, the resilient spirit of its central character makes Amreeka less a grim tale of disillusionment and estrangement than an immigrant story where optimism and hope shine through.