



AMREEKA

A FILM BY CHERIEN DABIS www.AMREEKA.com



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

ENTERTAINMENT

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It's a two-hour commute to her grindingly dull job at a bank. Passing through the West Bank checkpoint is a daily torment. Her husband left her long ago for his svelte girlfriend. Her mother is an unrelenting nag. But Muna Farah (Nisreen Faour), the center of the modest, poignant "Amreeka," stoically carries on. The joy of her life and its solace is her adolescent son, Fadi (Melkar Muallem).

When, unexpectedly, Muna has the opportunity to move to the U.S., she's initially uncertain. But when Fadi mouths off to an Israeli soldier at the checkpoint, the ugly scene that follows puts an end to all hesitation. It's off to Illinois, where the two move in with Muna's sister Raghda Halaby (Hiam Abbass); Raghda's physician husband, Nabeel (Yussef Abu Warda); and the couple's three young daughters.

But this particular land of promise doesn't live up to its billing. The only job Muna can find is behind the counter at a White Castle. The recent opening salvos of the Iraq war have put Fadi in the crosshairs of a gang of bullies at his new school, have sent patients scurrying from Nabeel's medical practice, and have made the family, Christian Palestinians, a target of death threats. "We're a minority here and a minority there," says Muna ruefully.

"Amreeka" deals with the way that conflicts on the home front mirror those on the front lines. One of the Halaby daughters, for example, puts a line of tape down the center of the bedroom she shares with a younger sister, forbidding any incursions; Muna and Fadi are at odds about how to handle the rough situation at school. Raghda fights with her eldest daughter, who is, she thinks, becoming too American, and she quarrels bitterly with her husband about how best to be armed against bias attacks. The movie sometimes feels obvious and schematic. Muna's co-worker, a kid with blue hair and a pierced lip, revels in his outsider posture, and Muna's potential love interest is the Jewish principal of her son's high school—but the fine performances here make up for a lot.

Writer-director Cherien Dabis shot "Amreeka" in a gritty documentary style that reflects the often grim reality of the characters' situation. But she also knows how to mine the comic situations that are often part of the immigrant experience. "Occupation?" demands the U.S. agent at passport control. For a moment Muna is puzzled, then her brow clears in sudden understanding. "Yes," she replies. "We have been occupied for 40 years." Most important, Ms. Dabis knows that home—what a fraught place!—is, in equal measures, where the hurt is and where the heart is.