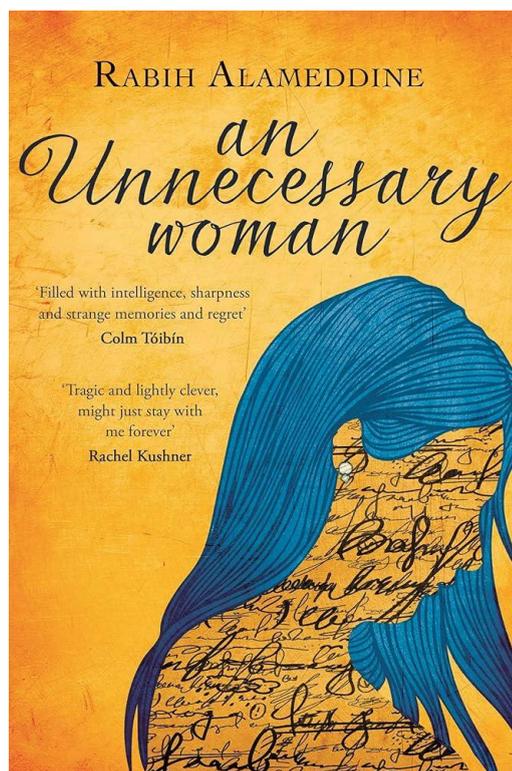


February 2026

An Unnecessary Woman was written in 2014 and nominated for the US National Book Award. The story is told in the first person by Aaliyah, a 72 year old woman who lives a hermit-like life in Beirut, translating books into Arabic that no-one will ever read. She is, according to the society she lives in, her family and even herself, an unnecessary woman, a burden. As she says, Beirut society isn't fond of divorced and childless women.



Her books are hers alone, kept in a dank little storeroom and never seeing the light of day once completed. She knows that her work has no value to anyone but it's the journey that she loves, the intellectual challenge, the excitement of starting and the satisfaction of finishing.

The plot of the book is quite limited, lurching as it does among Aaliyah's musings on the past and present, fascinating and descriptive. We loved the use of language and the wryly comic and often bitter asides.

Much of the story revolves around Aaliyah's relationships. Ahmad is the only man in her life other than her husband, who disappears into the Civil War and emerges as the most feared of men - a torturer. Her relationship with her family is fraught. Aaliyah is the unwanted child, cast to one side after her father's death and mother's remarriage.

Her relationship with her neighbours is equally problematic. She has lived in the same apartment for over 50 years but has failed to create any sort of connection with the 'three witches' as she calls them.

Her one true friend, Hannah, dies by suicide. The juxtaposition of Aaliyah and Hannah is revealing. Hannah devotes herself to her family, to the harm of her inner life and self-care while Aaliyah is shunned by her family but builds a deep and satisfying inner life - both are 'unnecessary women' but it's an interesting take on two opposite 'versions' of women's lives.

Then disaster strikes! 'My soul screams, my voice is mute. I stand in the dank and dark, amid my wasted life and weep.' But there is unlooked-for hope, laughter, encouragement and anticipation. The unexpected happy ending is uplifting and satisfying.

It's interesting that the book was written by a man, and there was much discussion about whether the characterisation of Aaliyah was a reflection of his own 'otherness' in Arab society - and also a vehicle to show off just a bit about his very extensive knowledge and love of literature, language, music and philosophy.

Ratings: Dianne F 3.5, Dianne H 3.5, Kim 4, Janet 4, Margie 3.5, Lesley 4, Veronica 4, Nicola 3, Viv 3.5

Other Books We Read

Orbital by Samantha Harvey, 3.5

Gunk by Saba Sams

Lincoln in The Bardo by George Saunders

The Luminaries by Eleanor Catton

Mother Mary Comes to Me by Arundhati Roy, 4.5

The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny by Kiran Desai, 3.5

The Correspondent by Virginia Evans, 3.5

Life in the garden by Penelope Lively, 3

The wrong end of the telescope by Rabih Alameddine, 2.5

Dream Count by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 4.5

Burial Rites by Hannah Kent, 4.5

The Rest of our Lives by Benjamin Markovits, 4

Departures by Julian Barnes, 3.5

The Dalai Lama's Cat by David Michie, 3

Tell No One by Brendan Watkins, 3

The Great Gatsby by F Scott Fitzgerald, 5

Letters to Camondo by Edmund de Waal, 3

Man's Search for Meaning by Victor Frankl, 4