**From:** Elana Cohn-Rozansky   
**Sent:** Friday, March 13, 2015 11:52 AM  
**To:** Betsy Bailey  
**Subject:** RE: Conversation Sandwich #1--Lyrics Alley

A big cheer for the New York Times Book Review!  
  
As luck would have it, as soon as I sent off my first email to you on Sunday, I settled in for more reading and was immediately drawn into the teacher Badr's life challenges, the playful relationship between Soroya and Nur, Nabilah's privileged ways, and Waheeba's care of Nur after his tragic accident.  Having not gotten much past Nur's first surgery, I am wondering what's becomes of Soroya?  I am hoping that their relationship will endure. I am also surprised to see Nabilah so present given the tension between her and Waheeba. What started as a "slow go" has morphed into an engaging read. While I still find the writing style a little subdued, I am convinced the characters and the content will be what most grabs my attention. I am very much looking forward to getting to know this family better and, of course, encountering the poetic elements of the story that you referenced.    
  
Thanks so much!  
Elana

**From:** Betsy Bailey  
**Sent:** Monday, March 09, 2015 9:25 AM  
**To:** Elana Cohn-Rozansky  
**Subject:** RE: Conversation Sandwich #1--Lyrics Alley

Hi Elana:

I’m glad you’ve decided to stick with Lyrics Alley despite the slow start.  As you note, it has so many of the elements we both like in literature, and I am fairly confident that once you plow through the beginning and get to know more of the relationships between the cousins and the role poetry plays in certain characters’ lives (hence the reference to “lyrics” in the title), you will be swept in.  The unfamiliar names of characters was a challenge for me too, and I found myself looking back at the family tree quite a bit as I read.  I didn’t know much about the history of Sudan and its relationship with Egypt, and found it helpful also as I got more into the plot, to look at the map of Africa and read a little on-line about the ancient and colonial history of the region.  As a 6th grade Humanities teacher, you probably know more about that than I did!

You asked what drew me originally to the book.  I am a devoted reader of the New York Times Book Review – and try to keep up with their daily book reviews as well.  The reviews of Lyrics Alley intrigued me for the reasons we’ve both already identified – it’s a family drama set in the middle east at a time of great social and political change.  And as you will soon see, those changes had a significant impact on women.  But perhaps what stood out the most to me in the reviews I read, is that one of the characters you will soon get to know is a poet, and is based on a Sudanese poet who is a relative of the author.  I’m always intrigued how an author’s family stories inform her fiction and how the work of artists are told in fiction.  Anyway, after reading the review of a book that interests me, I add the title to a list I keep in a little notebook I carry with me.  Fortunately, I remembered to actually look at my notebook when I was at Powell’s a few months ago and after glancing at the book, remembered why I had added it to my list!  I hope you end up appreciating the book as much as I did and look forward to continuing our conversation sandwich!

Betsy

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**From:** Elana Cohn-Rozansky   
**Sent:** Sunday, March 8, 2015 8:24 PM  
**To:** Betsy Bailey  
**Subject:** Conversation Sandwich #1--Lyrics Alley

Dear Betsy,  
  
Thank you for recommending *Lyrics Alley* to me.  I have just started the novel and am about 60 pages into it.  I know from your prior literary recommendations, my love of family sagas, and my interest in Sudan that this is going to be a good read for me, but I have to admit I am struggling a bit to get into it.  I see from the book jacket that fairly early in the book there is a catastrophic event that forever changes the Abuzeid family but working my way to that moment has been a "slow go."  I am very aware that the author is trying to set the scene by describing the key players, the situation in Sudan, and other noteworthy cultural details which contribute to this book being educational as well as entertaining.  While I feel as if I am keeping the characters straight (something that is not always easy with complicated family dramas filled with unfamiliar names), I have yet to be drawn to any of them with the exception, perhaps, of Mahmoud's second wife Nabilah who is spunky in a potentially unlikeable way.  I know once I learn more about the characters' emotions and the action picks up, this book will grab me more but for now I am feeling a bit overwhelmed with the details about Mahmoud's business and the economic situation in Sudan.  I would love to know what originally drew you to this book and if you remember feeling similarly unsure about its direction as you read the novel's first 50 pages or so?  
  
Looking forward to another set of great Conversation Sandwiches!  
  
Elana