



# Confusion of languages

By Siobhan Fallon

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## Genre & subject

Domestic fiction

Military spouses

Families

Jordan

## Synopsis

From the award-winning author of *You Know When the Men are Gone* comes a searing debut novel about jealousy, the unpredictable path of friendship, and the secrets kept in marriage. Two women far from home. One terrible misunderstanding. Both Cassie Hugo and Margaret Brickshaw dutifully followed their soldier husbands to the U.S. embassy in Jordan, but that's all the women have in common. After two years, Cassie's an expert on the rules, but newly arrived Margaret sees only her chance to explore. So when a fender-bender sends Margaret to the local police station, Cassie reluctantly agrees to watch Margaret's toddler son. But as the hours pass, Cassie's boredom and frustration turn to fear: Why isn't Margaret answering her phone? Soon Cassie begins to question not only her friend's whereabouts but also her own role in Margaret's disappearance.

Written with emotional insight and stunning prose, *The Confusion of Languages* is a shattering portrait of a collision between two women and two worlds, as well as a poignant glimpse into the private lives of American military families living overseas.

## Author biography

Siobhan Fallon is the author of the 2012 PEN Center USA Literary Award in Fiction winner *You Know When the Men Are Gone*, and the recipient of the 2012 Indies Choice Honor Award and the Texas Institute of Letters Award for First Fiction. Her writing has appeared in *The Washington Post Magazine*, *Woman's Day*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Military Spouse*, *The Huffington Post*, and NPR's *Morning Edition*, among others.

She was raised in Highland Falls, New York, just outside the gates of the United States Military Academy at West Point. She graduated from Providence College and spent a year at Cambridge University in England. After teaching English in Japan, she earned an MFA at the New School in New York City. She and her family moved to Jordan in 2011, and they currently live in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

## Discussion starters

- Discuss Fallon's portrayal of Amman and the Middle East. Were you surprised by any aspects of Jordanian culture? How is life in Amman different than life in the United States? How does life at the US embassy fit in between the two? Why do you think Fallon chose to write about Amman through the perspective of two Western women?
- The novel explores two marriages. How did you feel about Cassie and Dan in the beginning of the novel? Did you feel differently at the end? How does your understanding of Margaret's marriage change as we discover her diary?
- Cassie and Margaret are two very different women with two very distinct approaches to life overseas. Did you relate to one woman more than the other?
- What does it mean to be a good friend? Is Cassie a good friend to Margaret? Why or why not? Is Margaret right to befriend Hassan?
- Have you ever kept a journal? Why do you think Cassie decides to read Margaret's journal? Do you agree with her decision? If you were left alone in a friend's apartment and uncovered a diary, would you be tempted to take a look? Be honest!
- Cassie thinks that Margaret "doesn't recognize that the line between us and them is real. She's infected with our great American hubris of assuming that deep down every single person wants the same thing: autonomy, freedom, democracy, independence. I try to tell Margaret things here are different, that our American tolerance, even veneration, of the rule-breaker is not shared in a place where the literal translation of the name of the faith, Islam, means 'submission'" (p. 45). Do you agree with her? How do you think our American values shape the way we understand others?
- Discuss how Fallon explores military life. How does setting this story at the US embassy change the portrayal of Amman? Does it shape how the characters understand the Middle East? How are Cassie's and Margaret's marriages affected by their husbands' work?
- Margaret tells Cassie, "There's only kindness" (p. 323). What does she mean? Why do you think Margaret believes this? How does Margaret's saying change Cassie?
- Discuss the novel's treatment of motherhood. Is Margaret a good mother to Mather? How has she been changed by the death of her own mother? How does Cassie's desire to be a mother affect her relationship with Dan? How does it change her friendship with Margaret?
- Why do you think Fallon chose to set the story in 2011, during the Arab Spring? How does the political climate of Jordan affect the characters? How would the story be different if it was set in today's Middle East?
- Were you surprised by the ending?

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