Feted then demonised, Norma Khouri, author of the best-selling book, Forbidden Love, was revealed as a literary hoax. Now, as a new documentary about Norma premieres in Australia, David Leser

IMAGINE CONCOCTING a story so fantastic – and initially so credible – that you end up with agents, publishers, journalists, booksellers and an adoring public eating out of your hands.

You’ve become an international best-selling author, published in 16 countries, translated into a dozen languages. There are television interviews, feature-length articles about you, packed writers’ festivals. A fan has penned a love song in your honour. You’ve been given permanent residence in a new land – in this case, Australia – on the basis that you’re a “distinguished talent”. There’s even a letter from the daughter of the US vice-president testifying to your credentials.

Everyone wants to read you, hear you, help you, especially given all the death threats. Only trouble is, you’re a con artist and a fraud. You’ve told so many barefaced lies, that it’s all you can do to keep the floor show from collapsing. One false move and you’re gone.

Welcome to the dark night of Norma Khouri’s soul.
I first met Norma Khouri in May 2003, when I was invited to chair several panels at the Auckland Writers’ Festival. One of the panels was about the art of writing memoirs and how these personal stories helped us understand political issues. Norma was one of the three women on the panel, the other two being Kim Mahood, the Australian writer and visual artist, and Aminatta Forna, the London-based writer and broadcaster from Sierra Leone.

Norma was quite clearly the star attraction, despite her being the least gifted of the three writers. Her story was dramatic, racy and it played well to people’s prejudices about Islam and backward, patriarchal Arab men. I had met Norma the night before our interview and we’d hit it off immediately. She was warm and ebullient, and her story quite clearly sensational. It reminded me of why I’d been so drawn to the Middle East as a young correspondent during the 1980s. The region held everything for me – desert traditions, messianic faiths and ancient conflicts.

Over dinner and a bottle of wine, Norma and I talked for nearly five hours about the tragedy of her life in Jordan and about her campaign to save other women from fates similar to Dalia’s. “I hardly sleep,” she said, talking non-stop and smoking obsessively. “I have women writing to me begging me to help them. I couldn’t stop laughing. And I thought, ‘Oooh … all the other movies, what have I been missing?’ ”

It was at this point that I asked her whether she had ever had a lover. She was 34 years and had lived almost her entire life in the often harsh and patriarchal world of the Middle East. Had she ever known what it meant to be loved?

“No,” she replied softly. “There was a man in Greece who I liked and we would kiss and he would hold me … but nothing more.” She was quite clearly claiming to be an Arab virgin.

Three months later, when I interviewed her again at the Byron Bay Writers Festival in northern NSW, we again returned to this theme. “Now I’m turning all shades of red,” she replied when I asked, this time publicly, if she had ever had a sexual relationship. “I’d like to say that I am married to the cause, but I have had some experiences with someone that I care about deeply.”

The audience was enthralled. Here she was, a standard-bearer for oppressed women, at once so alone, but so courageous, stubborn, forthright. At the end of the hour-long session, they applauded for a full 30 seconds. Many people were moist-eyed as they joined the queue to meet her, my own daughter – who happens to be named Jordan – among them. Little did we know then that she’d just misled, exaggerated or lied to us at least 80 times during the previous 60 minutes.

Malcolm Knox, the literary editor of The Sydney Morning Herald, was standing in his kitchen preparing with his one-year-old son when the phone rang one morning in February 2003. The call was a tip-off from a Sydney-based journalist alerting him to information coming out of his country. Two prominent Jordanian women had become sufficiently concerned about Norma Khouri’s book to have begun compiling a dossier on the author. This would result in them asking Norma’s publishers, Random House, to reclassify her work as fiction, a request which the publishers rejected.

A full 18 months transpired before Malcolm Knox was able to write the first of what turned out to be a Walkley Award-winning series of articles with his colleague Caroline Overington. “Norma Khouri is a fake,” he wrote, “and so is Forbidden Love.”

“Khouri’s real name is Norma Majid Khouri Michael Al-Bagam Toliopoulos and she only lived in Jordan until she was three years old. She has a US passport and lived from 1973 until 2000 in Chicago. She is married with two children and three.”

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I sit up all night answering their emails.” She talked about how much she missed her family in Jordan, particularly her mother, but how she believed she would be killed if she returned to her country. She had disowned the family by running away and speaking out. “I can’t go back,” she said.

I was amazed by her fluency in English and her absorbing sophistication with all things Western. How did she speak English so well? “Private American schools in Jordan,” she replied. And what was the extent of her exposure to Western art, music and cinema? “Oh, my God,” she gushed like a child. “I became a movie-holic when I first got to Greece.”

“The friends I was staying with at the time said to me, ‘Have you seen the movie There’s Something About Mary?’” And I said, ‘That’s one of the dumbest movies I’ve ever seen. It didn’t make any sense.’ But that was because, in Jordan, the American movies we saw lasted only 40 minutes. So when they showed me Something About Mary I watched it three times in a row and
from her. But she has managed to conceal this double life from her publishers, her agent, lawyers in several continents, the Australian Department of Immigration and, until now, the public.

There was more to come. Norma had fled the US in 1999 with her Greek-American husband, John Toliopoulos, to avoid being questioned by the FBI and prosecuted for fraud. In 1998, she had been arrested for allegedly bashing her mother-in-law and threatening to kill her. (The charges were dropped only when her mother-in-law failed to show up at the trial.) At the time of Dalia’s so-called honour killing – when Norma wrote she was living in Jordan – she was working on various real estate transactions in the Chicago area.

Further revelations continued to flow in the wake of the death of the two Jordanian women – Rana Hussein, a prominent journalist, and Dr Amal al-Sabbagh, director of The Jordanian National Commission for Women. The two had discovered 73 lies and exaggerations in the book, among them that the unisex salon – which Norma and Dalia had supposedly worked in during the early to mid-1990s – could never have existed by law, nor could it be remembered. (One of the questions asked: “Do you have reason to believe that your friend Dalia’s death was an honour killing?”) Norma also said she was suing Malcolm Knox for defamation – the suit has since been dropped – and insisted to me that Dalia had been a “very close friend” of hers who really “did exist” and really had been “killed by her father”.

“I really do wish I could sit down with you,” she wrote, “and show you everything and one day soon I will. But for now, unlike Malcolm Knox, I must first safeguard the privacy and safety of others involved.”

By this stage – polygraph or no polygraph – I didn’t believe a word she was saying. Rather, it was a Hobbesian nightmare in which Norma and Dalia had been seriously maligned. “I had this feminist line running in my head,” she tells The Weekly now, “that this was a typical witch-hunt … with mostly male journalists out to make her look evil. That’s why I thought I would make this film.”

In May 2005, she paid for Norma to fly to San Francisco from an unknown destination in the US, principally to attend the premiere of her latest film, Helen’s War – a documentary about her dissident aunt, the anti-nuclear campaigner Helen Caldicott. Anna hoped the film would convince Norma to co-operate with her. It did.

For the next 18 months, the two worked together – in America and Jordan – with Anna hoping not just to vindicate Norma, but also hoping to alert the world further to the horrors of honour killing. Over time, she began to seriously doubt Norma’s word.

In August 2004, The Sydney Morning Herald had revealed that Norma’s worst crime had been, not the literary hoax, but the theft of US government bonds worth more than half a million dollars. They had belonged to Norma’s demented 89-year-old neighbour, Mary Baravikas, and she had stolen them from her safety deposit box, along with $42,500 in cash. She had also managed to have signed into her name Mary’s home. Later, it was alleged, she had used some of this money to have her breasts enhanced.

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Predictably, Norma told Anna that it wasn’t her fault, that it was her mother-in-law and husband, John Toliopoulos, who had forced her at gunpoint to forge Mary’s signature. She said he had abused her physically and emotionally for years. “I have a criminal record for attacking him,” John Toliopoulos asked Anna Bronowski when she put the accusations to him in Brisbane. “Not of my awareness.” (John Toliopoulos is believed to still be living in Australia.)

In Jordan, Norma finally admitted to Anna that there was no friend called Dalia who had been stabbed by her father in Amman in 1996. Norma, we need some proof. We want a name. Where killed? How killed? When killed? Rather, it was a woman with a different name, who had been shot by her brother while pregnant. The murder had taken place in 2001 and not in Amman, but in another Jordanian city. Even this would prove to be another false trail Norma had laid. After 300 hours of footage, Anna could no longer separate fact from fiction. She was utterly exhausted. “I don’t know that I am sane even now,” she says wearily. “The reason I was immediately a believer in Norma is that I had all of the white noise of the media in my head – ‘She’s evil, she’s manipulative, she’s a con woman’ – and she did it brilliantly [con us].”

“When I met her, she opened the door and she was the antithesis of anything I’d ever expected. She was vulnerable. She was gentle. She was compassionate. She was generous. She was utterly sweet and slightly..."
putting up Norma to the charges because and embarrassment of a drawn-out court doing so only to spare Norma the shame According to Anna, Norma's father pleaded charges against him and he was arrested. Such a theory. Norma told Anna that child, although I can't prove that in any corridors of Norma Khouri's mind. she existed only inside the silhouetted Dalia was never going to be found because she existed only inside the silhouetted corridors of Norma Khouri's mind. “I think Dalia is part of Norma,” she says. “I think she is the inner, wounded OF COURSE, I FEEL REMORSE. I'VE ALWAYS SAID I THOUGHT I WAS doing so only to spare Norma the shame and embarrassment of a drawn-out court doing so only to spare Norma the shame. Another lie? Who can say for sure? According to Anna, Norma's father pleaded guilty to the charges, but claimed he was doing so only to spare Norma the shame and embarrassment of a drawn-out court case. He accused Norma's mother of putting up Norma to the charges because of their crumbling marriage. Anna Broniowski met Norma's mother, Auma Bagain, in the same Chicago neighbourhood that Malcolm Knox door-knocked back in July 2004. Auma agreed to speak to Anna, but not for the film. “She talked with some pride and humour,” Anna says now, “about the way Norma [as a young girl] had a little bird that she loved and how Norma would leave bird seed for it on all the window ledges. And her mother, who was working as a nurse, said to her one day: ‘If that bird seed is still there when I come home, I’m going to kill it’. And the bird seed was still there when she got home … and the mother sort of laughed at me and said: ‘So I went like this’, and she snapped the bird’s neck in front of Norma.” Norma was seven years old at the time. N orma Khouri is back in Chicago, living in the same working-class district she was in before she fled the country eight years ago. Her two children are reunited with her, having been put on a plane by a private investigator in November 2004. By all accounts, neither Norma nor the children have seen John Toliopoulos since they left Australia. According to Anna, Norma still owes Rachel Richardson, her former neighbour on Queensland’s Bribie Island, $15,000, and her Australian publishers Random House, as much as $300,000 for the advance on the now-cancelled sequel to Forbidden Love. A first draft of the book, entitled Matter of Honour, is said to have been a true account of Norma’s freedom in the West, following her escape from Jordan. Among her Australian time. “I’ve always said I thought I was doing something for the right reason, but I did it the wrong way.” What about the money you stole from Mary Bavarkas? “I didn’t do anything with Mary Bavarkas. It was John [Toliopoulos]. If I did do something, the federal government would have taken me into custody.” As for the money owed to Random House, Norma insists it was $50,000, not $300,000, and she’s paid it back. (Random House has refused to confirm or deny the amount and whether it’s been repaid. “We haven’t commented on anything to do with the Norma Khouri case before and we’re not going to start now,” Karen Reid, head of publicity for the company’s international book division, told The Weekly.) Similarly, with Rachel Richardson, Norma says now she never owed her $15,000. “We are still going over what she says I owe her, but it’s absolutely not $15,000. And if you want to talk about me bearing false witness, politicians do that all the time and the Jordanian government has been doing it for 20 years.” “Look, I did lie, but I lied for a reason. It wasn’t fame and fortune I was after, not at all. It was about the issue [of honour killings]. And I apologise to you for lying. I justified it in my head as the ends justifying the means. I hated lying to anyone about anything.” After 10 minutes of frosty conversation, I thank Norma for her time and for her apology. I then hear myself wishing her well in whatever she chooses to do next in her life. “Thank you,” she says finally. “If you are ever in Chicago, drop by.” And then she laughs that coquettish, slightly embarrassed half-laugh of hers and, absurd though this might sound, I’m tempted to believe her all over again.