

Literature or Propaganda? How They Write About the Arab Israeli Conflict

Marjorie Gann

Description: Despite its complexity, the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict is a surprisingly popular theme in contemporary children's fiction and fictionalized memoirs. This presentation will focus on books written in English by American, Canadian and British authors, as well as on translations from Hebrew and from bilingual Arabic-Hebrew picture books from Israel. It will examine this literature from both political and literary perspectives, comparing how authors from different interest groups present the history and lives of Jews and Arabs in Israel and the West Bank. Drawing on personal interviews with several authors, Marjorie will explore their goals in addressing this highly controversial topic in books for young readers. This paper will also examine the sources authors consulted or ignored in their research into the daily lives of the residents of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. Marjorie will situate this wave of political literature within a comparative context, comparing these books with classics of the American Civil Rights Movement. Finally, she will explore the literary quality of these highly political books. The discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of these novels should help school and synagogue librarians choose appropriate novels on the Middle East conflict for middle grade and high school students.

Marjorie Gann is a Canadian author of non-fiction books for middle grade and young adult readers. Her two most recent books, co-authored with Janet Willen, concern the themes of slavery and abolition. *Five Thousand Years of Slavery*, recognized as a 2012 Notable Book for a Global Society by the Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group, International Reading Association, tells the story of world slavery from Antiquity to the present. Most recently, *Speak a Word for Freedom: Women Against Slavery*, tells the stories of fourteen women, past and present, who fought or are currently fighting against slavery and trafficking. A retired elementary teacher, Marjorie was for many years the reviewer of Holocaust fiction for the journal *CCL* (Canadian Children's Literature).

In the winter of 2006, the Ontario Library Association (OLA, in Canada) ran its annual children's book awards competition, the Forest of Reading Awards. For OLA's Silver Birch Award for middle-grade readers, ten fiction and ten non-fiction books were nominated.

Throughout the province, children were invited to read these books and vote for their favorites.

One of these books, Deborah Ellis's *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak*, stirred up considerable controversy. Jewish community organizations contended that it presented Israeli actions in the West Bank during the Second Intifada in a very negative light, without sufficient context, and treated suicide bombers sympathetically.

I happened to be the teacher responsible for my school's Silver Birch Club, and I was concerned about the impression the book would leave on young readers -- so concerned that I jettisoned my anti-censorship principles and pulled the book. Here's why:



Not only does the poster in the photograph (p. 101) claim that Israelis shoot at ambulances; its caption seconds the accusation, claiming that shooting at ambulances is Israeli government *policy* – a claim that Ellis should have questioned.

When I interviewed¹ her about her research process, I asked whether she had investigated this claim by interviewing a representative of the IDF (Israel Defence Forces) or an Israeli soldier who had served on the West Bank during the Second Intifada. She had not.

I did. I asked an Israeli soldier who had performed checkpoint duty during the Second Intifada what his orders were about ambulances. Here is his response:

After it was discovered that [ambulances] were being used to smuggle terrorists and weapons (which they began doing because ambulances were getting special treatment), the policies regarding ambulances were: Only open fire if there is an immediate and direct threat to your life, meaning that

¹ Telephone interview with Deborah Ellis, June 14, 2018. Recorded with permission.

if it doesn't stop at the checkpoint you can only shoot if (A) the vehicle went out of its way to hit you, or (B) somebody shoots at you from the vehicle. If the vehicle didn't stop when approaching a checkpoint, spikes would be spread to puncture the tires of the car, but no shots. There may have been individual cases where specific intelligence was directed at a specific ambulance (identified by licence plate #) and the rules were stricter [meaning, allowing soldiers more latitude to shoot], but I *seriously* doubt that even in those cases there would be an order to fire-without identifying a direct threat. I have personally witnessed a case where an ambulance was used as a troop transport (it brought four or five armed terrorists to the battle line).²

Further damaging Israel's reputation was this unconfirmed claim by an Arab boy, Salam: "I've even seen soldiers shoot at an ambulance," he said to Ellis. "They don't care. They just want to kill us all."³ (Ellis, p. 101.)

Deborah Ellis wrote this book, like her other books about children living in conflict zones (under the Taliban in Afghanistan, at war in Iraq) to show how innocent children suffer from wars that adults start. But how do you further peace by circulating libels against Israeli soldiers? Ellis is undoubtedly not anti-Semitic. Her book alternates between testimonies of Jewish and Arab children, sympathizing equally with them. But in this case, she didn't do her homework, and was all too ready to believe a widespread slur against the IDF. Ellis leaves her impressionable young readers with an image of Israelis that could last a lifetime.

² Email from Israeli soldier (name kept confidential) – September 16, 2010.

Recognizing the harm that slurs like this can do, I decided to survey the field. I read thirty-six books for middle or YA readers, covering three categories

- Books by non-Jewish authors
- Books by Arab or Muslim authors (some living outside of Israel, mostly in the U.S., but a few published in Israel)
- Books by Jewish authors, some Israeli, some not

For the purpose of this presentation, I have highlighted eleven representative titles, each reflecting characteristics of others like them. Though the books I've chosen to highlight present the most shocking examples of anti-Israeli bias, each mirrors attitudes in at least two other similar books.

To evaluate the books, I applied three standards:

- Accuracy (Did the author get the facts right?)
- Fairness (If a fact is disputed, did the author show both sides of the argument?)
- Literary quality (Can the book stand on its own as a work of art, or is it purely polemical?)

A Blood Libel

Anne Laurel Carter's *The Shepherd's Granddaughter* delivers a pretty clear message: Israelis, in the person of IDF soldiers and privileged settlers, are usurpers in the West Bank.

Her heroine Amani, a twelve-year-old Arab girl whose family has been herding sheep "for more than a thousand years" (p. 11) in the West Bank village of Al-Khalil, wants to

continue that tradition, but regulations to protect Israeli settlers put her family at the mercy of debilitating restrictions on their movement, making it hard for them to earn a living under the Israeli occupation. (This pastoral motif – the Arab as shepherd, the grandmother painting pictures of an idealized past of picking fruit, harvesting olives and living off the land – runs through many stories of displaced Palestinians. It blames Israel for the loss of the Palestinian Eden, overlooking the natural evolution of the entire Middle East towards urbanization, the uptick in women’s education, and the sophistication of today’s Palestinians. Infantilizing the Arab, it is a type of the very Orientalism of which Israel’s defenders are accused.)

What Carter does *not* tell her readers is that Al-Khalil has another name -- Hebron. Until the Jewish community of Hebron was driven out by the murderous Arab pogrom of 1929,⁴ Jews had been living there virtually uninterrupted since the Byzantine era, likely longer than the purported thousand-year presence of Amani’s family.

Carter also accuses settlers of poisoning the water supply of Amani’s sheep. There are indeed extremists among West Bank settlers, but Carter seems unaware that accusing Jews of poisoning has a long and shameful history. European Christians blamed the Great Plague of 1348-49 on the Jews, whom they accused of poisoning their wells. In 1983 a yellow dust on a West Bank school’s windowsill was cited as evidence that Israel was deliberately releasing poison. In the end, the yellow dust proved to be nothing but pollen, and the Israelis uncovered a deliberate PLO plot to spread the rumour.⁵ The Palestinian Authority revived this libel in June,

⁴ In 1929, instigated by the Mufti of Jerusalem Haj Al-Amin Hussaini, Arabs in Hebron attacked the Jewish residents, killing sixty-seven and wounding another sixty. The pogrom was sparked by a rumour that Jews were attempting to take over the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

⁵ The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, called on by Israel to conduct an independent investigation, concluded that the schoolgirls’ symptoms, attributed by the PLO to poisoning by Israel, were psychological or caused by hydrogen sulphide, a smell released by raw sewage. For more details, see

2016, accusing a nonexistent rabbi and rabbinical council of calling on Israelis to poison all Palestinian water sources.⁶ Given the long history of this anti-Semitic canard, Carter would do well to ask herself why she received the malicious libel so uncritically⁷.

Demonization of Israelis

I found the book *A Little Piece of Ground*, by Elizabeth Laird with Sonia Nimr (2003) on a list of recommended titles for youth on the website “reframing Israel: Teaching Jewish kids to think critically about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”⁸ When its award-winning British author, Elizabeth Laird, was challenged over its anti-Israel bias⁹ on the grounds that “there is not even one mildly positive portrait of an Israeli in the entire book,” this was her answer: “The book is written through the eyes of a twelve-year-old who just sees men with guns. It would not have been true to my characters to do otherwise.”¹⁰

“‘Poisoning’ Accusations Are a Palestinian Tradition,” Raphael Medoff, in *The Algemeiner*, June 27, 2016. www.algemeiner.com/2016/06/27

⁶ Palestinian Media Watch, June 21, 2016: www.palwatch.org/main.aspx?fi=157&doc_id=18211

⁷ There have been many similar accusations. For example, in 1999, Suha Arafat, Yassir’s wife, announced publicly that the Israelis used poisonous gas against Palestinians to increase cancer cases among women and children, and poisoned the PA’s water sources with chemicals. The director of the PA’s Committee for Consumer Protection said Israel supplied chocolates that cause mad cow disease to the Palestinian market. The Palestinian UN representative accused Israeli authorities of injecting 300 Palestinian children with the HIV virus. See Palestinian Media Watch for a comprehensive list: www.palwatch.org/main.aspx?fi=779

⁸ <http://reframingisrael.org/> Although the website specifies no affiliation with any denomination or organization, many of the rabbis on its advisory board have Reconstructionist ordination.

⁹ Phyllis Simon, co-owner of a Vancouver, Canada, bookstore, wrote Laird’s publisher Macmillan, urging them to reconsider publication. She further argued that “*A Little Piece of Ground* . . . is for children, the overwhelming number of whom clearly haven’t a clue about this conflict, and thus depend on books like this for the opinions they form about what goes on in the Middle East.” Annie Zirin, *Teacher’s Guide for A Little Piece of Ground*, p. 7.

¹⁰ Annie Zirin, *Teacher’s Guide for A Little Piece of Ground*, p. 9.

But this is disingenuous: Who made the decision to paint the Second Intifada exclusively through the eyes of a twelve-year-old Arab boy, if not the author? As a gifted, award-winning writer; surely Laird can construct her story from multiple perspectives. (*Huck Finn*, anyone?)

The book's protagonist Karim and his friends are confined to their homes by endless curfews which to them seem arbitrary and which are never explained. When soldiers damage the boys' school, we don't know why they go there in the first place -- just to throw their weight around, or to uncover stashes of weapons or explosives? Laird doesn't bother to tell us, but she sure lets us know what she thinks of Israeli soldiers. They're not the teenage boys in tanks we thought they were; they're the tanks themselves:

- The Israeli tank that had been **squatting** at the crossroads just below the apartment block for days now had moved a few metres closer." (pp. 4-5)
- "He could imagine the great armoured machines **lying down** there, **like a row of green scaly monsters, crouched waiting to crawl back up the hill and pin the people of Ramallah down in their houses again.**" (p. 12)

As mutant *green scaly monsters*, Israeli soldiers *squat, crouch, and pin the people of Ramallah down*.

If a book about a gang of African-American teenagers used loaded language like that --

"She could imagine the great **hulking panthers, crouched** behind the parked cars waiting to **pounce** on any passerby who neared their hiding place"

– you can bet the sensitivity reader would be after the writer in a flash for dehumanizing and stereotyping blacks. Where are the sensitivity readers for books on Israel? Or perhaps, when it comes to *insensitivity*, Israelis are fair game?

Malicious – or just naïve?

The complexities of a conflict can be lost on authors who parachute into a conflict zone for a brief visit, don't know the language, and are dependent on local guides to select and interpret what they will see. The visitors' conclusions may be simplistic and naïve. Michael Morpurgo is a celebrated British author whose book *The Kites are Flying* betrays his failure to understand the powder keg he visited. *The Kites are Flying* depicts Arab and Israeli children on both sides of the separation fence (which he calls a “wall”) flying kites carrying the words “shalom” and “salaam” back and forth to each other.¹¹

When it comes to kites, Israelis living on the southern border with Gaza are experts. Since the summer of 2018, Hamas terrorists have incited youth to launch kites and balloons to burn Israeli fields and deliver explosives over the security fence between southern Israel and Gaza. And far from being raised to value peace, Arab children in schools run by the UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency) are taught by teachers who glorify stabbing Israelis on their Facebook pages,¹² and use textbooks that encourage violence. Physics lessons teach Palestinian boys to calculate the tensile strength of slingshots used against Israelis soldiers; they don't teach them to construct kites inscribed with the word “salaam” (“peace”). This, and many other examples of manipulation of math, science, and Arabic lessons, are uncovered in the

¹¹ The Afterword of Morpurgo's book is by notorious BBC journalist Jeremy Bowen, whose anti-Israel bias has been tracked on the BBC Watch website. Two complaints against Bowen for bias in his reporting were upheld by the BBC Trust in 2009.

¹² See UN Watch website, www.unwatch.org/report-un-officials-inciting-murder-of-jews-call-to-stab-zionist-dogs/

exhaustive studies of Palestinian school textbooks by IMPACT-se, the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education, which concludes that “the curriculum exerts pressure over young Palestinians to acts of violence.”¹³

Two Sides to the Question

Even Jewish writers can promote anti-Semitism. *The Book of Trees*, by Canadian Leanne Lieberman, tells the story of Mia, who runs away from problems at home, comes to Jerusalem to live with a religious family and attends a girls’ seminary. The students visit Canada Park (near Latrun overlooking the Ayalon Valley), and for the first time Mia learns that it is constructed on destroyed Arab villages. The book’s claim is that Canada Park, built by the Jewish National Fund, is on stolen land and Israel is in violation of international law. I interviewed the author about her process of research into the legality of developing Canada Park: Did she consult a specialist in international law, I asked.

“I wouldn’t have spoken to anyone, like, from a legal perspective,” Lieberman said. “. . . I did a lot of reading at the time. . . . One of my friends here in Kingston is a film prof. [who made a film about houses in Katamon owned by Arabs until ‘48] . . . I remember reading Sandy Tolan’s *The Olive Tree* [sic: *The Lemon Tree*].”¹⁴

On a question of international law, there are more reliable legal sources than filmmakers and novels. Lieberman could, for example, have consulted the legal opinion of Alan Baker, an

¹³ *Reform or Radicalization: PA 2017-18 Curriculum, A Preliminary Review*. Eldad J. Pardo et al, October 2017, p. 1. See IMPACT-se website, <http://www.impact-se.org/about-us/>, for this report and for the final report, *The New Palestinian Curriculum: 2018-19 Update—Grades 1–12*. Eldad J. Pardo, September 2018.

¹⁴ Telephone interview with Leanne Lieberman, June 4, 2018. Recorded with permission.

expert in international law with the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and former Israeli Ambassador to Canada. Here is Baker's take:

During the War of Independence, this area “played an active and strategic role in blocking the route to Jerusalem and in attacking and bombarding both Jerusalem itself and convoys driving to and from the city.” Following the 1949 Jordanian-Israeli armistice agreement, it was simply designated as no-man's-land, a demilitarized zone. It is in Area C under the Oslo accords and is therefore entirely under Israeli control.¹⁵ (The opposing view is that Israel is in violation of Article 49, Paragraph 6, of the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits occupying powers from transferring population to occupied territory.)

There are *two sides* to many of the controversies surrounding the '48 and '67 wars. Taking hearsay from a filmmaker and relying on a novel rather than a respected international lawyer, Lieberman misinforms her young readers and brainwashes them against Israel.

***Prima Facie* Anti-Semitism**

When it comes to blatant anti-Semitism, Lieberman is obtuse. Mia's boyfriend in *The Book of Trees* is Andrew, a cool, guitar-toting guy we're supposed to like. Andrew is involved with an anti-Israel NGO and at one point says, “Seems to me the Jews are always killing for their land.” (p.85)

“Some readers might take that as being kind of an anti-Semitic statement, and I wondered what you would say to that?” I asked Liberman. From her rambling reply, I concluded that no

¹⁵ Alan Baker, “Opinion: Canada Park wasn't stolen from the Palestinians,” in CJN, September 24, 2015. <https://www.cjnews.com/uncategorized/opinion-canada-park-wasnt-stolen-palestinians>

one had drawn her attention to these troubling words before. She tried to explain: “I think you would have to put it in context, of, not all of Jewish history Jews were killing for their land, obviously, but in the seventy years that Israel has existed.”

Then, like Laird, she hid behind her character: “So, as an author, I would say that I don’t necessarily agree with each and every thing that my characters say, but I think that here Andrew is speaking not in the role that the Jews are killing everybody,. . . but that the Jews – not the Jews, the Israelis, have to be very careful what I’m saying here – are in the position of power in this situation.”¹⁶

Would it trouble Lieberman if a thirteen-year-old reader’s take-away from this book were exactly what Andrew said: “The Jews are always killing for their land”?

When Memoirs Distort

It is a commonplace that there are two narratives about the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Jewish version and the Arab one. So it is not surprising that “*Marked for Destruction*,” Ibtisam Barakat’s account of her family’s experience of the Six-Day War in Laurel Holliday’s anthology *Why Do They Hate Me? Young Lives Caught in War and Conflict*, places the blame for her family’s loss of their home on Israel. While we can acknowledge that this is how they explained their loss, we don’t have to accept Barakat’s memoir as historically accurate, especially when it is at variance with documentary evidence of why and how the Six-Day War unfolded.

Barakat’s family was living on the West Bank when Israel struck Egypt pre-emptively, following weeks of Arab threats and the *casus belli* of the blockade of Eilat. As war broke out, her father ran home, crying, “Run back and tell your mother the war has started!”

¹⁶ Transcribed from telephone interview with Lieberman, June 4, 2018. Recorded with permission.

“Now, standing in the kitchen as my father’s words hung in the air like a brandished sword, my mother was reminded that her family, her people, and everything Palestinian were bound for *mass destruction* once again. (p-240) [My italics]

But “mass destruction” was not the Israelis’ objective. This was a defensive war against four enemy nations (not the Palestinians) whose leaders openly declared their genocidal intentions:

- “Our basic objective will be to destroy Israel.” (Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, May 26, 1967)
- “In the event of a conflagration, no Jews whatsoever will survive.” Ahmed Shukeiri, future chairman, PLO)¹⁷

Barely two decades after the Holocaust, Israel was defending itself against a second annihilation, not perpetrating “mass destruction” on the Palestinians.

Barakat revisits these events in her own book, *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood*, in 2007. She doesn’t repeat the “mass destruction” allegation, but does accuse Israel of deliberately shelling Arab civilians and their homes, which is unlikely since their target was the Jordanian army. Jordan’s shelling of western Jerusalem is absent from her account, which is written through the eyes of a three-year-old.¹⁸

¹⁷ Quoted in Daniel Gordis, *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn*, p. 270

¹⁸ To her credit, Barakat acknowledges Jewish suffering and attachment to what she calls “the Holy Land” in her introduction: “[R]educed to its core, this conflict is about two peoples, both of whom have suffered difficult histories. A major obstacle . . . seems to be the inability to find a common ground that would allow both sides to understand and accept each other’s history . . . “. (p. x)

And yet the educators or rabbis responsible for the “reframing Israel” website referred to earlier recommend *Tasting the Sky* for young readers. To them, it is legitimate to educate synagogue youth that the Israelis in 1967 were not fighting a defensive war aimed at their annihilation, but were out to destroy Arab communities.

Israeli Books

Fouzi El-Asmar is an Israeli Arab whose 1986 book, *Through the Hebrew Looking Glass: Arab Stereotypes in Children’s Literature*, surveys the portrayal of the Arab in Israeli children’s literature. El-Asmar criticizes Israeli children’s writers for miseducating Israeli youth with the Zionist myth of an empty, uncultivated land rehabilitated by Zionist pioneers. His many examples from early Zionist children’s books paint the Arab as filthy, a thief, corrupt and corruptible, a Bedouin with no ties to the land. The only positive Arab, he says, is one who says things like “in the name of God there are many things we have to learn from you, the Jews” and who betrays his army and his people.¹⁹

But El-Asmar is writing about an early period, when Israelis were using children’s books to acculturate refugees from the Holocaust and the Arab world, and to affirm their national myths. A lot has happened in Israeli children’s literature since 1986.

A 1998 article by Nira Fradkin,, “On Arab-Israeli Relationships as Depicted in Hebrew Children’s Literature in Recent Years”²⁰, tracks the portrayal of the Arab from the early period,

¹⁹ Salu, Yehudah, *Fire in the Mountains*. Am Oved: Tel Aviv, 1970, p. 141, quoted in Fouzi El-Asmar. *Through the Hebrew Looking Glass: Arab Stereotypes in Children’s Literature*. Vermont: Amana Books and London: Zed Books" 1986, p. 87.

²⁰ Nira Fradkin, *על יחסי ערבים-יהודים כפי שהם מתוארים בספרות הילדים העברית בשנים האחרונות* [On Arab-Jewish Relationships as Depicted in Hebrew Children’s Literature in Recent Years]. *Bamichlala* 9. Jerusalem: David Yellin College of Education, 1998, pp. 35-46. My translation. Fradkin taught Israeli children’s literature at a teacher’s

when he was “either . . . a monstrous figure or . . . a charming folkloric figure”²¹ to a period of compensation for the earlier stereotype. “If in the past the Arab was depicted as wicked and hostile,” Fradkin notes, “now he is described as essentially good, regardless of the fundamental conflict. The general trend is **de**-dehumanization and his portrayal as a man . . . not as part of a hostile community.”²² Her article cites one survey which found that “[i]n the majority of novels published . . . the Jew does not behave properly and the Arab behaves properly. The Jew causes injustice to the Arab because he is an Arab.”²³

The danger of overcompensation is obvious: these new and improved Arab characters don’t ring true. For example, in Tsipi Shachror’s 1989 novel *Friends of Bashir*, the Jewish child protagonist, Lior, steeped in anti-Arab stereotypes, doesn’t want to visit his Arab friends. But off he goes, and discovers that the Arab kids include him in their soccer game and are “clean and exemplary. . . . In other words: Bashir is nicer than any ordinary child.”

“It was as if he had no right to be a mere child, possessed of virtues and shortcomings. The eradication of stereotypes is expressed in the fact that the Arab is ‘fine’ and more so. It is as if we accept the Arabs only on the condition that they have no drawbacks, as if they do not have permission to have non-sympathetic people among them.”²⁴

college in Jerusalem and worked in the Ministry of Education, where she campaigned for including books in the curriculum portraying Arab families as well as Jewish ones.

²¹ Fradkin, citing the research of Adir Cohen, *An Ugly Face in the Mirror: Reflections of the Arab-Israeli Conflict in Hebrew Children’s Literature*, Reshafim, 1985.

²² Fradkin, p. 37.

²³ Fradkin refers to a 1994 survey by Smadar Zek, but fails to cite this source in her bibliography.

²⁴ Fradkin, p. 40.

In more recent Israeli novels, the depiction of Arabs is more nuanced. They may hate Israelis, they may even be terrorists – but they are not dehumanized. Instead, an effort is made by the writer to understand them.

Born in Mandate Palestine, Devorah Omer was the acclaimed author of over a hundred books for children and was awarded an Andersen International Honor Citation in 1986. She won the Ministry of Education Prize for Lifetime Achievement in 2005 and the Israel Prize for Lifetime Achievement in 2006.

Her *Path Beneath the Sea*, published in 1969, confirms El-Asmar's criticism of the portrayal of the Arab in early Israeli children's books. After Omer's hero Uri, a navy frogman, is captured with his team by the Arabs in 1967, the men are marched before a bloodthirsty Arab mob, whom the narrator characterizes with raw stereotypes: "I was familiar with the character of the Arabs from my own childhood days in Morocco. . . . The mob was enjoying the feeling of having the *Yahood* at its mercy; seeing their blood flow was to be the main performance." (p. 163)

Yet even at this primitive stage of Israeli children's literature, Omer goes beyond mere flag-waving. Having managed to escape their captors, Uri's team of frogmen slips into an abandoned Arab house and steals the family's food. They then await their rescue as Uri reflects on the common humanity of Arab and Jew:

Suddenly I heard a voice—a child's laughter. Was it my [son]
Gal? My eyes were now wide open. Again I heard the sound of
laughter. I crept to the doorway. A little Egyptian boy was

perched on his mother's back, on the way to the house. He was very much like Gal, with laughing black eyes that knew nothing about war. He sat safe on his mother's back—but her eyes were not laughing. . . . I was thinking of the little boy. Perhaps it was his food that we had eaten. . . “ (pp. 181-182)

Daniella Carmi's *The Explosion on Ahlan Street* is one example of a book in which “the Jew does not behave properly and the Arab behaves properly.” Samir Marouan, the Arab father of fourteen-year-old Natasha, is arrested in the wake of an explosion at a neighborhood supermarket after a report places him near the site of the explosion. After a prolonged investigation (Samir is held for about a month), it turns out that the explosion was caused by a faulty gas canister. The book focuses on the family's fears and the father's humiliation.

During the ferocious Second Intifada that killed over a thousand Israelis, Pnina Moed Kass wrote a book that tries to understand the enemy. Her *Real Time* (2004) offers a minute-by-minute graphic account of a terrorist attack. Moed Kass neither mitigates nor excuses the atrocity; the grisly horror of the bus bombing, the undeserved suffering of the innocent victims and their families – all are graphically recorded. Yet Moed Kass opens a window into the mind of the young terrorist, Sameh, as he sets out to blow himself up.

Sameh believes he has nothing to live for: “All over the world sixteen is paradise, opportunity, girls, cars, everything. . . . Here, sixteen is the magic age of death. No children, no responsibilities, no wife. A sixteen-year-old is a walking grave. Why give a job to someone about to die? Kids who explode themselves and kill Israelis have no future, so don't give them a future.” (pp. 21-22)

The boy's hopelessness is compounded by despair for his family. His mother was a beautiful woman when he was little, but since his father's death from cancer has had to work hard just to feed her children, which has taken its toll. The money she will receive after he "martyrs" himself will feed the family; his brothers won't have to continue peddling and may even be able to go to school. While Moed Kass in no way excuses terrorism, she makes an attempt to understand how a young man who feels as Sameh does can be manipulated by terrorist handlers.

Tamar Verete Zehavi is an Israeli children's and YA writer who views children's books as a potential bridge between Arab and Jew. Together with Israeli Arab writer Abedalsalam Younis she has co-authored two bilingual picture books (Hebrew-Arabic), which enable Israeli Jewish readers to step into the lives of Arab children. (The co-authors won the Jerusalem Foundation Award for Furthering Tolerance in the City.) Like Moed Cass, Verete Zehavi paints an honest and rounded picture of both sides. In *HaShir Shel Rosie (Rosie's Song)*, the rebellious teenage protagonist escapes home and boyfriend troubles, and by a series of fortuitous encounters ends up in one of the most tense places in Israel – Hebron, where through the music she loves, she makes two friends: a settler girl and an unhappily married Arab woman.

In the following scene, she is seated on the bus to Hebron with the young delivery boy she knows from her home supermarket:

"I have a lot of family in Hebron," he says, and then asks, "Why are you going to Hebron? Are the squatters there friends of yours?"

"What do you mean by squatters?" I asked.

“You [Jews] call them settlers, but in Arabic we call them squatters. That’s like they’re thieves, who enter your place quietly and steal your homes and everything that’s yours,” he explained.

“The Arabs call the settlers squatters?” I was surprised, and I found the courage to say to him, “The houses that the Jews live in now were theirs at the time when Jews and Arabs lived with good relations in Hebron. They didn’t steal them at all. And then the Arabs suddenly fell upon the Jews and killed them. Those who didn’t die, fled.

I observed him, and it seemed to me that he didn’t listen, that it annoyed him.

“Bad, bad. The Jews there are bad, he said. “They threw a [cinder] block at my cousin. A ten-year-old. I’m going to the hospital to visit him.”

“Why?” I was frightened. I remembered that Emuna [the Jewish girl] told me that sometimes she and her friends throw stones at the Arabs.

“I don’t know. They’re crazy. They run to kill him. They don’t know him but they run to kill him. He’s walking home from school, and they throw a block from the roof.” (pp. 99-100)²⁵

Through this carefully-balanced tit-for-tat conversation, the author demonstrates how intractable the conflict is, given the competing, and mutually-exclusive, narratives. The tragic end to her story (Rosie’s Arab friend Sana is killed by an Israeli bullet during a violent

²⁵ My translation, p. 99.

demonstration) leaves the reader with little hope. The author's goal is not reconciliation, but mutual comprehension.

Like *Rosie's Song*, Daniella Carmi's *Samir and Yonatan* brings Arab and Jewish children together, a common trope in Israeli children's books. The setting is a children's ward in a Jerusalem hospital during the Second Intifada.

Samir, a boy from Bethlehem or nearby [check this out] arrives with a badly broken leg. Samir's brother was shot in the chaos of the intifada so Samir hates the Jews and, isolated from his community, is terrified of being in "the Jews' hospital." But he is well treated there by friendly nurses and by Felix, a clown-social worker with a special gift for communicating with withdrawn children.

As the only Arab child in Room Six, Samir is the Outsider. And though he is bullied mercilessly by one of the children in the room (Tzahi, a boy suffering from a urinary block, whose adored big brother serves in the IDF, a fact Tzahi remorselessly flings in Samir's face)—Samir is slowly drawn out of himself by his interest in the other children's predicaments—especially by Yonatan. To Yonatan, there are no Arabs and no Jews. He inhabits a higher plane—outer space, where he takes Samir by hacking the hospital's computer late one night, when the adults are out of the picture. This is where, together, they design the topography of a new planet, as Samir explains:

I stand here on the shore of the blue lake that we've made, Yonatan
and me, my friend from the Jewish hospital. We're improving a new

world, free from troubles. Nothing looks impossible to us, now that we're together. (p. 172)

Unlike Tzahi, Yonatan cannot see Samir as “the Other.” When Tzahi lets all the children but Samir touch his catheter bag, Yonatan whispers to him:

“Samir hasn't touched it yet.”

Tzahi says, “So what?”

Yonatan whispers, “It's his turn now.”

But Tzahi doesn't answer. He just climbs up on his bed and jumps up and down, making the springs creak.

Yonatan insists, “Why not?” but Tzahi goes on jumping.²⁶ (p. 40)

Like Verete Zehavi, Carmi does not propose a solution to the conflict. Indeed, the metaphor she employs-- Samir and Yonatan's nocturnal voyage to Mars—implies that Jew and Arab will only get along if they voyage to another planet, where they can build a new universe together.

Her more limited aim is to paint life through Arab eyes for her Hebrew-speaking readers. With exquisite tenderness, she draws a poignant picture of the trauma that has broken Samir's

²⁶ Carmi, p. 40.

family. From the moment of his younger brother Fadi's death at the hands of the IDF, Samir's father stops talking to him:

“Why isn't Daddy talking anymore?” I ask Mom in the kitchen. .

“When a man has had his life stolen from him,” she says, “He has nothing left to say.”²⁷ (p. 66)

In none of the anti-Israel books I have encountered is Israeli pain—from the trauma of the Holocaust, from terrorist attacks, from the death of husbands or children in Israel's endless wars—conveyed with similar tenderness, or with such literary skill.

Children's Books as Politics – or as Literature?

Historians of children's literature conventionally date the liberation of children's books from didacticism from 1865, with the publication of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Carroll's masterpiece heralded the golden age of children's books – not just of fantasy, but of adventure, animal stories and family stories. The tradition of writing gripping and entertaining stories exclusively for young readers persisted for more than a century.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, when I was still teaching the middle grades, a new type of children's book began to cross my desk. Increasingly, I saw books that brought children face-to-face with the world's problems -- race, multiculturalism, divorce, sexual abuse, gender identity, drugs, global warming, child labor, labor unions, and (at least in my country, Canada) aboriginal residential schools. It was as if kids were sausages to be stuffed

²⁷ Carmi, p. 66

with our agendas. Although these books were breaking boundaries rather than reinforcing them, their didacticism resembled nothing so much as the pious moralizing of the Puritans and Evangelists who wrote the earliest books for children.

Most of the books about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict fall into this camp. The goal of their authors is not to tell a good tale; it's to convert young readers to a cause. But do we really have the right to use fiction to indoctrinate children? What if we're wrong about the problem or its solution?

I'm not arguing for *apolitical* children's literature, but for *literary* children's literature. Like the Arab-Israeli conflict, the sordid history of African-American slavery has attracted countless children's authors, and there are some really fine titles. I think of Paula Fox's *Slave Dancer*, which paints a chilling picture of the slave ship onto which young Jessie Bollier is kidnapped to play his pipe and "dance" the captive slaves. But *Slave Dancer* doesn't read like a textbook lesson on the transatlantic slave trade. It reads like a *bildungsroman* – the story of the moral maturation of a young man. Fox didn't have an ax to grind; she had a story to tell.

What makes *Samir and Yonatan* stand out from the rest of the books I've discussed here is Carmi's focus. It's not, really, on the Arab-Israeli conflict; it's on a group of children stuck in a hospital room together, on how they learn to empathize with and support each other through their illnesses and their family struggles. Like any good story for kids, it's about psychology, not ideology.

What Makes Israeli Writers Different?

We've looked at three categories of children's books about the Arab-Israeli conflict: books by Palestinians, books by outsiders, and books by Israelis. Only the Israelis make a

genuine effort to show both sides of the conflict, including the suffering on both sides. What makes them different?

The Jewish tradition is self-critical to its core: our prophets blame our long exile from our land on *our* sins, not on Babylonian aggression. As Rabbi Joseph Telushkin explains:

As serious as are the sins committed by the ancient Israelites, one thing must be said to the Israelites' credit: they canonized their critics. They took writings that other people would have burned and turned them into holy books to be studied by Jews throughout their history. This is something that no other nation or religion did. The New Testament and Koran do not have a large body of statements denouncing evil behavior by early Christians and Muslims.²⁸

The Hebrew Bible also enjoins us repeatedly to avoid oppressing the Other: “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”²⁹ The Israeli authors who voice Palestinian grievances have internalized those core Jewish values.

I detected no signs of similar self-criticism or empathy for the Other in the anti-Israel books I’ve examined – no criticisms of Palestinian leaders for corruption or incitement, or of Palestinian educators for teaching hatred in their schools, and no empathy for Jews who fled European anti-Semitic attacks in the early twentieth century, for Holocaust survivors who exited the camps in 1945, or for Mizrahi refugees, all desperate for a place to live where they could

²⁸Telushkin, Joseph, *Jewish Literacy*, New York: William Morris/Harper Collins, p. 91

²⁹ Exodus 22:20, JPS, 1962. According to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, this admonition is repeated thirty-six times in the Torah.

rebuild their lives without persecution. Occasionally, in an attempt to appear fair-minded and balanced, a terror attack on Jews is mentioned in passing, but these references are pro forma.³⁰

Why are so many children's writers – Arabs, non-Jews, and even the occasional Jew – impervious to Jewish suffering? Blindness to the Jew is, of course, a staple of human history, but we like to think that we live in more enlightened times. What the ill-informed and mean-spirited anti-Israel tracts we've looked at teach us is that many children's writers have learned nothing from history about where antipathy to Jews leads.

A Uniquely Israeli Fable: *Room for Rent*

According to Yael Dar, reviewing Israeli children's books for the English edition of *Haaretz*, "Israeli children's books love to talk about enemies who ultimately become friends and they incessantly refer to others who initially inspire fear or repulsion but eventually are transformed into our friends."³¹

A case in point is Leah Goldberg's classic *Room for Rent* (*Dira Le'Haskir*), a story in verse that every Israeli child grows up with. It's a gorgeously-illustrated fable about a rooming house inhabited by animals, with a sign outside advertising a vacancy. One by one, prospective tenants arrive – an ant, a rabbit, a pig, a nightingale. Just as quickly, one by one they leave, huffily proclaiming their objections to the tenants: the hen is too lazy, the cuckoo abandons her young, the cat's fur is too black, the squirrel is too noisy. Only the dove (the classic bird of peace, as the adult reader will recognize) has a different take: the hen is a good friend, the cuckoo is true to her word, the cat is pristine, the squirrel shares her nuts.

³⁰ The exception is Deborah Ellis's interviews with Israeli children about their experiences of the terror of the Second Intifada.

³¹ Yael Dar, "Regardless of whether It Is a Hebrew or Arabic Tale" | *Haaretz*, May 25, 2007.

Writing at a time of tension in Israeli society between newcomers and sabras (1959), Goldberg had a lesson to teach: Look for the good in those who appear different, and you'll find it. Was she also thinking of the new state's Arabs? Hard to say.

But children's books transmit the ideals, if not the realities, of their cultures. If Israeli parents and teachers raise their children on Leah Goldberg's *Room for Rent*, this tells us something about the kind of people Israelis want their children to be: tolerant and accepting.

Does this mean there is no anti-Arab racism in Israel? Of course not, but it does tell us that the message the culture transmits in its kindergartens is one of acceptance of the other. And maybe that explains why the authors of books for older children – the Carmis, the Moed Casses, the Verete Zehavis, even the Omers – espouse openness to Israel's enemies in their stories as well. Too bad Israel's enemies, and their abettors outside the region, don't do the same.

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