

Middle Eastern Books

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

My summer reading included some fascinating contrasts. It started with Amos Oz. I have to confess I am so far removed from secular Jewish angst that I have tended to steer clear of secular Israeli literature. Besides, I get so many anti-Israel and anti-Jewish opinions, and articles, and programs bombarding me, particularly whilst I'm in Europe, that frankly I just did not want any more Left Wing soul-baring and self-castigation with heavy doses of anti Judaism that often make anti Semites look tame. I know what's wrong with Israel and Israelis. I know what's wrong with Jews and yes I know what's wrong with me too. I don't have to go on hearing the same mantras without any nuance, alternative, or proportionality. The fact is that I can only bear American secular novelists when they do not write about anything Jewish. But friends in Israel kept on about how good [*A Tale of Love and Darkness*](#) was, so that in the end I capitulated and I was delighted that I did.

It is beautifully and sensitively written. I found it particularly interesting because Oz describes a Jerusalem of the 1950's that I well recall from my youth, including some of the characters he mentions. It made me very nostalgic for the small, insular Jerusalem of my youth that actually was incredibly beautiful and hospitable and warm. But it was a town with a scar down its middle—of barriers, walls, and “no-man's land”. We would struggle to find any vantage point to look into the Old City, and how we feared being the victims of Arab Legion sniper fire if we ventured too close.

One bus line was all you needed to go from west to east, and one from north to south; hardly anyone had cars except for ministers and United Nations officials (you couldn't call them “peacekeepers” because they didn't keep any peace). The Knesset was on Rehov King George and you could watch the open-shirted members of the Knesset walk up and go inside carrying their bundles of papers in their hands. Almost everyone who was anyone lived in Rehavia; you could stand there and see Ben Gurion walk in and out of his Jerusalem residence. On the other hand, you could walk from the cramped, decrepit Hassidic hot spot of Ger in Machane Yehudah (before they rebuilt and relocated) to Mea Shearim in twenty minutes and pass the modest homes of nearly all the greatest rabbis of the generation (except for the handful who lived in the terrifyingly strict and holy town of Benei Brak).

Then in 1967 the walls came down and you could go into the Old City and up to the Kotel and drink coffee in exotic Arab caverns by the Damascus Gate. Jerusalem expanded and spread out like a ravenous amoeba; institutions mushroomed, American students proliferated, and there was more than the one kosher Yemenite restaurant in town. Yes, novels are great at peddling nostalgia, and Oz does it masterfully in a clean and simple style that, frankly, should have won him the Nobel Prize for Literature, had he not been Israeli.

But as I spoke about his book, other friends said that his was too one-sided

a view and I ought to read Sari Nusseibeh's book, [Once Upon A Country](#), as an antidote. So I did, and I'm glad I did. Nusseibeh is a philosopher, not a writer, and he and his co-writer have produced a turgidly written sort of apologia "pro vita sua" with little literary merit, just too clumsy a polemic to for it to be seen as a work of literature like Oz's, which Nusseibeh himself says inspired him to write his book. There are errors and distortions and Nusseibeh claims that Israelis took pot shots into the Old City rather than the other way round.

But the humanity of Nusseibeh and his obvious pain comes through, and I believe everyone who cares about the Middle East ought to read it. If he were representative of the Palestinian masses, I'd have qualms about the future of two states living side by side in peace. He tries to be fair (and that's no small feat in itself nowadays). He does not shrink from describing the errors and lost opportunities, not to mention the cruelties that both sides have been guilty of.

But, of course, he is a Palestinian, and this book gives us a Palestinian's perspective. I strongly believe in hearing another point of view; my education and my father's training impressed on me the importance of doing so. And never ever has it been more necessary than it is today. So I am grateful to Nusseibeh for his book. As painful a read as it may be to the uninitiated, I recommend it highly, precisely because it makes an attempt at evenhandedness. Incidentally, when I was in Israel during the summer, I had no luck getting hold of the book in Jerusalem. A few bookshops claimed never to have heard of it. But [Amazon](#) came to the rescue.

And, finally, I read two books by the Turkish Nobel Prize winning novelist, Orhan Pamuk. I do recommend them. But they are not, I think, Nobel Prize winning material, other than for the same politically correct reasons that have denied Oz. Both the Orhan books I read give a fascinating insight into Turkish Muslim culture. [My Name Is Red](#) (another recommendation by a good friend) is a murder mystery set against the background of rivalry between Muslim miniaturists loyal to tradition and those who wanted to introduce more modern Flemish styles. The clash between tradition and modernity, even if it takes place four hundred years ago, is the very one seen in both Jewish and Muslim fundamentalist circles today.

Even more so is this true of [Snow](#), which takes place in a remote town on the Kurdish border. It concentrates more specifically on the clash between traditional Muslim values and the secular values of Ataturk in a changing and increasingly religious Turkish society. It is all so familiar, almost identical to what is going on in Orthodox Judaism today.

But all of this goes to show how fine the line is that divides so many of us, and how tantalizing close, and yet so far, we are from each other. It is not, I think, a matter of culture. It is all about politics. Perhaps we should ask the writers to see if they can sort things out!