

THIS STORY HAS NO ENDING

Selma Dabbagh. *Out of It*. London: Bloomsbury, 2011. ISBN 978 1 4088 21305. 311 pages.

Selma Dabbagh's first novel is like a tapestry. The principal characters comprise the sinewy weft, each person in a personal jihad to making meaning and value of his or her life. The warp that frames the novel is Gaza during the second Intifada (2000-2005), and follows the fate of the family aptly named Mujahed, one who conducts jihad.

Rashid is a pothead, almost always stoned. He wants nothing more than to flee Gaza, escape a family he feels disrespects him, and gain a fellowship in London. Iman, his twin sister, a teacher just back from Switzerland, is wild with fury when the Israelis bomb a hospital, killing a man she had a crush on, as well as one of her young pupils. She wants to act, now. Islamists seek to recruit her, to show that a young woman from a prominent, secular family could work on their side. The 'Authority' want to prevent this, and send a charismatic young leader, Ziyad Ayyoubis, to drag Iman away from a meeting with an Islamist contact. He saves her life when the man is killed by a helicopter-fired missile a few yards away. Critical to the plot, Ziyad resembles Rashid.

Rashid and Iman's elder brother Sabri lost his legs, his wife and infant son when, during the first Intifada (1987-1993), he turned his car's ignition key. Now, fifteen years later, from a wheel chair, he writes a history of the Palestinian resistance, and like a Greek chorus observes events unfolding from his window. Their father was once a member of the Outside Leadership of the PLO, but suddenly resigned, divorced his wife and fled to the Gulf, all without explanation. The mother is, hard, sharp, and her mysterious past knots the threads together.

Others characters enrich the verity of the novel: Khalil, the naïve do-good liberal heads an information centre documenting the violation of human rights committed by the occupiers. Lisa, a self-serving Englishwoman, funnels the centre's data to the British Foreign Office. She is Rashid's lover, but not in love, as if bringing home 'a particularly gaudy piece of jewelry from a junkshop....' Lisa prefers beautiful revolutionaries and victims. A supporting cast includes drug dealers, informers, collaborators, hangers-on; and then a preternaturally streetwise boy who, in the surprising ending, holds all their lives in his hands.

Dabbagh blends skilful storytelling with character development. A failing romance is shown by this image: 'He had tried to pull Lisa back on to the bed for a final fondle before she left but something sharp on her head scratched at the side of his eye, the under-wiring of her bra trapped the tips of his fingers and one of his toenails had snagged the leg of her tights.' Like any good mystery story clues drop throughout that herald something vital later on. For example, on page 31, the mother's face is described: 'Unlike the rest of the family, her nose was trim and tiny, as straight as her eyebrows were curved.... Her skin had an unblemished look about it that was unnaturally wax-like, as though an exploratory scalpel would find her flesh to be blood-free under its surface.' The detail is appreciated only many chapters on.

Dabbagh avoids polemic. The Occupation is a constant present, like the Furies; but through her characters' voices she also writes scathingly about Palestinian factionalism and corruption.: 'We amount to a bunch of men wanting their own piece of the pie.... It was one long history of betrayal.'

In the dramatic ending Ayyoubi is betrayed by members of his own faction who fear his incorruptibility. Rashid, in a selfless act, determines to become a *somebody*, a person with courage and meaning. On the last page, however, after another ignition key has been turned, Dabbagh makes the reader imagine the dénouement to come after the dénouement – showing how the story of Gaza is yet unfinished.

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