

BOOKS ABOUT Contemporary Palestine for Children

BY KATHARINE DAVIES SAMWAY

It was a beautiful fall day for the Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) festival and I was volunteering at a booth devoted to Palestine and the impact of the Israeli occupation. Crowds of people passed by the booth and many of them stopped to look at the posters and pick up handouts. But what really captured my attention were the children, 9 or 10 years of age, who were riveted by one particular image—a photo of an Israeli soldier pointing his gun at a Palestinian child of about 5.

“Mami, Mami! Come and look!” Children pulled their parents and older siblings into the booth to look more carefully at the photo and talk with me about it. They were horrified that such a young child had such a frightening experience.

Talking with the children and their families, I learned that they didn’t know much, if anything, about that part of the Middle East. As I tried to explain some of the key events that led to the photo, and why it is important for Americans to be informed, I realized that we had no information written for children. I should

have brought some books and an annotated booklist to hand out, I acknowledged to myself. But I could think of less than a handful of possibilities.

Maybe, I thought, there are good books out there for K-8 learners that I’m not familiar with, and so I began to scour my local libraries. I ordered books through interlibrary loan, read books recommended by friends, and reread books that I already owned. What did I learn?

I discovered that there are several nonfiction books about life in ancient Palestine. There are also many nonfiction books about modern-day Israel that serve as propaganda for Israel and do not treat the plight of Palestinians honestly and comprehensively. These books tend to be dense, with a lot of complex historical information jammed into a few pages and a sprinkling of photos.

There aren’t many books available for K-8 learners about life in Palestine since 1948. There are, however, a few. Although the quality of the writing varies, they are quite good overall and raise important questions about the Israeli occupation.

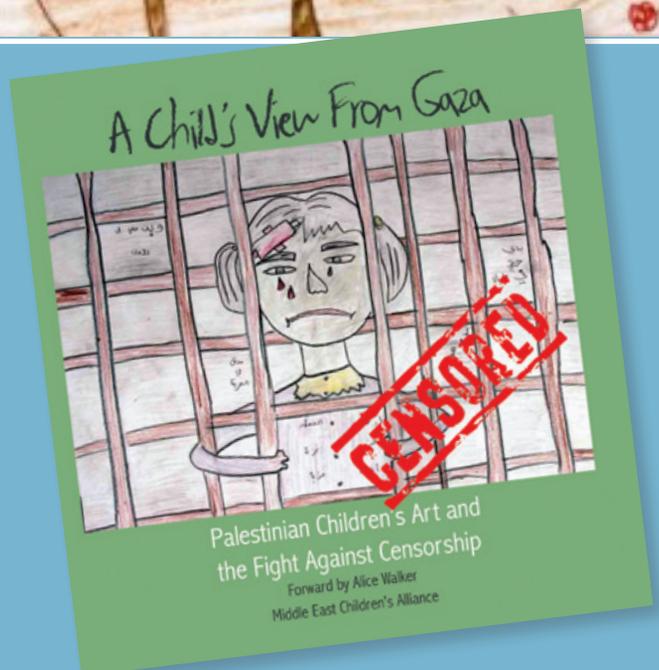
Nonfiction

A Child’s View of Gaza: Palestinian Children’s Art and the Fight Against Censorship is equally compelling for children, older students, and adults. The captioned illustrations were created by Palestinian children who lived through the Israeli bombardment of Gaza in 2008–09. The pictures were drawn as part of an effort to help children deal with the horrors they had experienced. A Bay Area nonprofit, Middle East Children’s Alliance (MECA), arranged to display a collection of these pictures at the Museum of Children’s Art in Oakland, California. However, under pressure from the Jewish Federation of the East Bay and other organizations, the museum backed out of the agreement at the last minute. MECA held an “art exhibit as demonstration” in front of the museum and then moved the exhibit to a nearby storefront. *A Child’s View of Gaza* includes a foreword by Alice Walker. The children’s pictures are detailed,

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Illustration from *A Child's View from Gaza* by Mona Atif Hamdan, 11 years old





Collage from *The Boy and the Wall* by the children of the Lajee Center.

colorful, and provide a matter-of-fact yet powerful window into the reality of being a child under attack by planes, bombs, and soldiers.

Another nonfiction book that relies on firsthand experience of the occupation is the picture book *Outside the Ark: An Artist's Journey in Occupied Palestine*, by Ellen O'Grady, an artist-activist who worked for six years in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. O'Grady tells the stories of Palestinians she knew, including 8-year-old Mahmoud, who was killed by Israeli bullets, and 69-year-old Salwa, who is unable to see her daughter, who lives in Jordan and is prohibited by Israel from returning to her village. Although this is a picture book, teachers may find that it is most appropriate for older elementary students. I sometimes

found the handwritten cursive text distracting, but the content and illustrations are powerful—each double page merits its own intensive discussion.

Picture Books

Naomi Shihab Nye is an award-winning poet whose father was a Palestinian refugee—as a teenager her life was divided between Jerusalem and San Antonio, Texas. In *Sitti's Secrets*, Mona, who lives in America, goes to visit her grandmother in a Palestinian village in the occupied West Bank. Although Mona does not speak a shared language with her grandmother (*Sitti* in Arabic), they are able to communicate through gestures, music, and actions. It is a beautifully written and illustrated book about a lov-

ing relationship between a child and her grandmother.

Amahl Bishara's *The Boy and the Wall*, written in English and Arabic, is about life in Aida, a Palestinian refugee camp near Bethlehem, where the lives of Palestinians were turned upside down when Israel built a huge concrete separation wall (called an *apartheid* wall by former President Jimmy Carter and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, among others). In a rhythmic speak-and-respond structure modeled on Margaret Wise Brown's *The Runaway Bunny*, a Palestinian child talks with his mother about what he can do to help his community overcome the impact of the wall and all that it brings, including soldiers with guns and tear gas canisters. His mother's responses underscore her love for him and Palestinian

traditions and culture, and the resilience of Palestinians under occupation. For example, when the boy says, “Or maybe I will become a mountain so that I can be bigger than the wall, and see over it,” his mother replies, “If you become a mountain and become bigger than the wall . . . I will become a farmer and plant olive trees and tend to you and live from the olives you bear.”

An introduction provides information about the Aida Refugee Camp and life under occupation, including the impact on Palestinians of the apartheid wall (e.g., separating Palestinians from their family members and friends, their land, their work, medical care, religious sites, and open land where children can play). The illustrations are by children from Aida.

Novels

Elizabeth Laird’s *A Little Piece of Ground* is particularly good. It is set in Ramallah, just north of Jerusalem in the occupied West Bank. After a bombing in Israel, Ramallah is under a strict Israeli curfew and people are prevented from leaving their homes for days at a time. The main character, Karim, is a 12-year-old boy from a Muslim family who lives in town and is crazy about soccer. His best friend, Joni, is from a Christian family and is also crazy about soccer. While kicking a soccer ball against his apartment building during one of the few breaks in the curfew, Karim meets Hopper, who lives close to a refugee camp across town. Hopper takes Karim to a vacant piece of ground near the refugee camp. It is filled with the rubble of demolished buildings, but they think they can convert it into a soccer field. The three boys do exactly that by hauling rocks and rusty machinery to one side of the plot of land. They discover a car buried under the rubble and convert it into a den. One day, while the three boys are playing soccer with boys from the refugee camp, Israeli tanks roll into their soccer field and the

boys take off for safety. However, Karim sprains his ankle and is unable to escape; he ends up hiding inside the abandoned car, where he is trapped for several days. The author, a well-known British writer of books for young adults who lived in Ramallah while doing research for this book, does a particularly good job of conveying the friendship and shared interests of the boys and the tension that is created for Palestinians by life under the Israeli occupation.

Canadian author Anne Laurel Carter wrote *The Shepherd’s Granddaughter* after living in both Israel and Palestine. Amani is a young girl who lives with her extended family in a West Bank village and wants to follow in the footsteps of her grandfather and become a shepherd. She and her family experience terrifying situations when a group of illegal Jewish settlers occupy a hill overlooking the village. Under the protective eyes of Israeli soldiers, the settlers poison Amani’s sheep; destroy her family’s ancient olive, fig, and lemon trees; appropriate their land and water sources; and threaten

be allowed to use. When Amani’s mother returns to Palestine from visiting her dying mother in Canada, she is repeatedly denied re-entry at the Jordanian border. It is only after several days of this intimidation that she is allowed back to her home and family.

A subplot focuses on Jonathan, a 16-year-old Jewish American who lives with his father on the illegal settlement, hates what his people are doing to Palestinians, and returns to New York City to become an anti-occupation activist.

This book does a good job of portraying life under occupation from the perspective of a plucky young Palestinian girl. Amani witnesses disagreements within her extended family around whether to trust Israelis who oppose the occupation and whether to engage in peaceful or armed struggle, which creates an additional context for critical thinking and discussion among students.

Where the Streets Had a Name, by Randa Abdel-Fattah, an Australian of Palestinian and Egyptian heritage, tells the story of 13-year-old Hayaat, who

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villagers with death if they do not leave their land. Amani observes the demolition of her house by an armored Caterpillar bulldozer and the arrests of two close family members: her father, when he returns home to find his house being demolished, and her uncle, when he and other villagers are demonstrating peacefully against the building of a settler road on their land that only Jewish Israelis will

lives with her family in a cramped apartment in Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank. Hayaat’s elderly grandmother is from Jerusalem, but was forced out in 1948 when the state of Israel was declared, and has not been allowed to return. When she becomes sick, Hayaat is convinced that bringing a handful of earth from their ancestral home will help her grandmother get well. This sets



in place a dramatic journey for Hayaat and her best friend, Samy, a free-spirited young Palestinian boy. Although their journey is short in distance, it is intermi-

nable because of checkpoints and a curfew. The story, told through Hayaat's eyes, provides readers with a clear window into a young teen's life under the Israeli occupation.

Memoir

Ibtisam Barakat's memoir, *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood*, evocatively conveys what it is like to be forced by war out of one's home and familiar life into life as a refugee. Barakat was 3 when her family became refugees during the 1967 war. They joined about 200,000 other Palestinians who fled Israeli forces that invaded East Jerusalem, the West Bank,

and Gaza. Barakat and her family lived for several months in Jordan before being able to return to their home in the West Bank, which was then occupied by Israel.

The first part of the book is set in 1981. The author is 17, traveling on a bus in the West Bank from Birzeit, where she has gone to check on mail from international pen pals, to her home in Ramallah. Her bus is stopped at a checkpoint and all the passengers are taken to a military detention center, where they are kept in custody for no reason and harassed for hours by Israeli police before being allowed to continue on their journey.

The second section of the book focuses on Barakat's memories of life as a refugee and then under occupation from the age of 3 to 7. Presumably she drew on family members' recollections to aug-

ment her own early childhood memories because the descriptions are very detailed. She describes how frightening the war is and what it was like to flee from her home and be separated from her family for a while. She describes her family's life in a refugee camp in Jordan and their return to their home on a hill near Ramallah in the West Bank. Because it is in the center of an Israeli training ground, they are not allowed to leave the house during the day. Afraid for her children's safety, Barakat's mother takes her children to live in an orphanage, where she finds work.

Poetry

Nye has written or edited several anthologies of poetry focused on the Middle East. In her collection *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*, she writes about being Arab American, about being Palestinian American, about her family, and about living in the West Bank. The poems are beautifully crafted and evocative. For example, towards the end of the poem "Going to the Spring," about women collecting water in a traditional way, she writes:

*These feet write history on the
dirt road
and no one reads it, unless you
are here
to read it, unless you are thirsty
and cup your hands where the
women
tell you to hold them,
throwing your head back
for the long sweet draft.*

Nye edited *Flag of Childhood: Poems from the Middle East*. The poems in this volume, written by poets from 14 countries, including Palestinians and Jewish Israelis, explore and honor daily life in the Middle East, and life for Middle Eastern immigrants and their children in North America. The collection offers readers a beautifully worked window



Illustration from *A Child's View of Gaza* by Salih Ayman Safi, 12 years old.

into what Nye refers to in the introduction as “a complicated center of dramatic cultural and religious history.”

The revered Palestinian writer and prolific poet Mahmoud Darwish wrote primarily for adults. However, his compelling poetry captures life for Palestinians, from their forced dislocation when the state of Israel was formed, through exile and occupation, and many of his poems can be shared with intermediate grade readers. One example is “Identity Card”; the penultimate stanza captures the losses that Palestinians have experienced:

*Write down!
I am an Arab
You have stolen the orchards of
my ancestors
And the land which I cultivated
Along with my children
And you left nothing for us
Except for these rocks.
So will the State take them
As it has been said?!*

Some Final Thoughts

U.S. media coverage of the Middle East is frequently Israel-centric and does not

explore the enormous financial support that the United States provides each year to Israel and its occupation of Palestine. When this is coupled with a sometimes virulent anti-Muslim and anti-Arab feeling in many parts of the country, it is incumbent on educators to take a role in unpeeling these biases and encouraging students to think critically about human rights in Palestine/Israel. There is no question that reading books about contemporary Palestine and the Israeli occupation may raise conflicting points of view, but that is part of supporting students to become critical readers, thinkers, and, hopefully, activists in support of justice and peace. ■

RESOURCES

Books

Abdel-Fattah, Randa. *Where the Streets Had a Name*. New York City: Scholastic Press, 2010.

Barakat, Ibtisam. *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood*. New York City: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

Bishara, Amahl. *The Boy and the Wall*. Illustrations by youth from the Lajee Centre.

Ramallah, Palestine: Lajee Centre. Available in North America from Nidal Al-Azraq at nd_alazraq@yahoo.com, 2005.

Carter, Anne Laurel. *The Shepherd's Granddaughter*. Toronto, Canada: Groundwood Books/House of Anansi Press, 2008.

Laird, Elizabeth. *A Little Piece of Ground*. Chicago, Ill.: Haymarket Books, 2006.

Middle East Children's Alliance. *A Child's View from Gaza: Palestinian Children's Art and the Fight Against Censorship*. Berkeley, Calif.: Pacific View Press, 2012.

Nye, Naomi Shihab, ed. *The Flag of Childhood: Poems from the Middle East*. New York City: Aladdin Paperbacks, 2002.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*. New York City: Greenwillow Books, 2002.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. *Sitti's Secrets*. Illustrations by Nancy Carpenter. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

O'Grady, Ellen. *Outside the Ark: An Artist's Journey in Occupied Palestine*. Durham, N.C.: 55 Books. Available from P.O. Box 542, 305E Chapel Hill Street, Durham, N.C. 27702, 2005.

Internet Resources

The Electronic Intifada (electronicintifada.net) is an online news source that focuses on Palestine.

Mondoweiss (mondoweiss.net) is a news website that covers U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East from a progressive Jewish perspective.

Jewish Voice for Peace's website (jewishvoiceforpeace.org) includes an FAQ format to answer questions about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Videos

Alatar, Mohammed, dir. *Jerusalem: East Side Story: Dispossession, Occupation, and the Challenge to Survive*. Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees, 2007 (eastsidestory.ps).

Omeish, Sufyan, and Omeish, Abdallah, dirs. *Occupation 101: Voices of the Silenced Majority*. Trip'ol'ii Productions, 2007 (occupation101.com).

Shamir, Yoav, dir. *Checkpoint*. Amit Breuer Amythos Films, 2003.