

The Palestine literature festival was an enlightening experience - but not always for the right reasons

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By Lion's Gate I sat down and surveyed the Valley of Jehosophat. Well, actually, we Arabs call it Nutmeg Valley after the trees that used to grow here in abundance. Opposite me, across the valley, is the Mount of Olives where the pine trees favoured by Israelis to give a European look to the landscape are overtaking the indigenous olive. At the top of the hill to my right the UN has placed its offices - unwisely perhaps, for to the Biblically minded this is the Hill of Evil Counsel where Jesus' arrest was planned in the house of Caiaphas. Behind me are the walls of al-Haram al-Sharif, the great enclosure housing the al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

I have just walked away from the gate to the Haram because the Israeli soldiers would not allow my non-Muslim friends to go in with me. Signalling to me from behind the soldiers, the Palestinian caretaker apologised and said he would have welcomed us all in but these were "their" regulations.

We were in Jerusalem, Ramallah and Bethlehem for the Palestine festival of literature which I, Brigid Keenan, Eleanor O'Keeffe, Victoria Brittain and other friends had put together. It ran from May 7 to 11 and in every city our venues were filled to the rafters and our authors rode high on the enthusiasm of the audience. Roddy Doyle in Bethlehem got thunderous laughter and applause when he said he would be seeking reparations from the residents for the slaps he had received at his Irish school for saying baby Jesus was born in Nazareth. His books sold out in three days. A young man at Birzeit University was overwhelmed to meet Ian Jack; he had kept up his subscription to Granta since moving back from the US nine years ago. Schoolkids cried with joy when they met Khaled Abdalla; they had just seen *The Kite Runner*.

Every night we bedded down in a different hotel, and every morning we packed up and got on the bus and off at a checkpoint. At Qalandiya, we left our heavy luggage on the bus and learned to squeeze through the metal cages of the turnstiles without leaving a gap; the cages rotate a given number of times then stop. Once through, we were told we had to turn round and go through again - carrying our luggage. We saw a weeping woman, cradling her baby and propping up her husband, who was so ill he had tubes coming out of him and looked like her grandfather. The soldiers had turned them back. We could do nothing for her. At Bethlehem University the students were so taken by Jamal Mahjoub they asked for his novels to be put on the syllabus. The young women on Andy O'Hagan's and Pankaj Mishra's workshops asked if we couldn't run longer courses.

Now I'm standing in the Muslim cemetery and below me Christian and Jewish graves, too, cover large tracts of ground. Everyone wants to be buried here, in Nutmeg Valley, for it is here that the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall rise. Silwan, the Palestinian village nestled in the corner to the right, has for centuries found employment tending the graves. We walk round the mellow walls of the Old City till we are overlooking the village. An Israeli friend (call her "B") is showing us the excavations that burrow through the ground towards al-Aqsa. They are undertaken, she says, in an "ideological spirit". A guard at al-Aqsa once showed me the great well that used to store oil for the lamps: "This is where they plan to come in," he said. B tells us that 60% of Silwan has been taken over by settlers and the remaining villagers are fighting to stay on their land. She teaches us to read the landscape, to see the three small, fiercely antennaed hilltop settlements placed to cut off the main approaches to East Jerusalem, to trace the giant tunnel linking the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus to the (illegal) settlement of Ma'ale Adumim. We cluster around her maps and diagrams. Our group is dwarfed by tourists getting off giant coaches marked "Jewish National Fund".

Esther Freud and Hanan al-Shaykh decide to walk to the hotel. They take a short cut across some waste ground behind the building and are surrounded by a pack of growling dogs. Israeli soldiers appear and

question the two writers. The soldiers tell them they're in a military zone and they'd been watching them and could have shot them. By the entrance to Western Wall Plaza, a massive billboard from the Israeli ministry of tourism proclaims that Jews pray there to express their "faith in the rebuilding of the Temple", and in a slick shop nearby they sell drawings of the Haram cleansed of al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock. They show plans and raise funds for the Third Temple rising in their place.

In al-Khalil/Hebron, we walked through the emptied streets of the old town past the shuttered shops of what had been the beating commercial heart of Palestine. Groups of robust American settlers jogged by us in shorts with machine guns. We saw the houses where Palestinian families who refused to leave were not allowed to use their front doors but had to climb into their homes through the back windows. And the houses where they were forbidden to lock their doors because the Israeli soldiers came in to check on them every night between midnight and 3am.

We were very silent when we left. But in Bethlehem that night the al-Funoun Troupe danced and flew across the stage in their brilliant costumes, and the audience stomped and yelled and whistled and, next morning, the students jostled and laughed and argued. We're here, the Palestinians were saying, we read and question and blog and shop and play and dance. We live.

· This week Ahdaf read **The Last Life** by Claire Messud: "Wise, touching and fully imagined." She also read **Temptations of the West** by Pankaj Mishra: "It deals coolly with very hot topical issues."