

IN THE
LIMELIGHT

BOOK OF THE MONTH

The Book of Gaza



A City in Short Fiction

By Atef Abu Seif, Editor

Comma Press, 2014, 224 pages, \$15.99

Reviewed by Mahmoud Muna, The Educational Bookshop, Jerusalem

It is refreshing to see more literature coming from Gaza, the most devastated piece of land in the Middle East. This inspiring, well-written, and well-translated collection of ten stories offers the best possible view of life in Gaza, far beyond the usual headlines.

This anthology is written by some of the pioneers of the Gazan short story writing of the 1970s and 1980s. Back then, Gaza was famous for bringing out the best of Palestinian short stories. This writing form was rapidly developing and getting popular day by day. Writers found this as a way to overcome printing and publishing restrictions imposed by the Israeli Occupation forces.

The authors range from highly acclaimed writers to exciting new voices. Contributors include the "Father of the Palestinian" short story, Zaki Al Ela, as well as a new generation of young women bloggers and activists, such as Mona Abu Sharekh and Najla Attalah.

The stories themselves range in topics, although it is clear how the writers intended to avoid writing about the Occupation. Instead, they turned to themes like self-realization, critical reflections on the past, the desire to travel, social conflict, love and relationships, and past social constraints that have now disappeared. These writings, and through their critical lens on society, are crucial for understanding the different layers of society in Gaza, daily life, social constraints, and political hardships.

The stories are strikingly vivid, detailed and emotionally expressive. The voices are eloquent, and the personalities are engaging. Overall the stories are pleasurable to read and impossible to detach from.

Furthermore, *The Book of Gaza* contains some of the bravest women's writings about their lives in Gaza and the wider Arab world. Issues of sex, lust, and self-admiration are just a few examples of what has been considered taboo for a long time, but have finally and fearlessly been explored in this book.

"What if I could decide what I wanted? At thirty-three, what do I fear? In five or ten years time I will have used up any wealth I've accumulated, without ever having tried to save anything, or without ever wondering how I might make the most of all those people who practice love, in their own way, on me... Love? That's something we practice without responsibility here, with unrivalled heedlessness.

At this moment, when the world's eyes are turning to yet another humanitarian crisis in Gaza, I am very happy to review an anthology of stories by writers from the world's most concentrated urban city. Published by Comma Press in the UK last month, this book shows how in such cities people continue to love and hate, how they are filled with desires and wracked with concerns. Just like any other city in the world, the city of Gaza is fighting for normalcy.

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