

Kingdom of Olives and Ash

Writers Confront the Occupation

Edited by Michael Chabon and Ayelet Waldman
Harper Collins, Trade Paper Original, US\$ 16.99
ISBN 13: 970-0062431783

Reviewed by Leslie Cohen and Fida Jiryis



June 2017 marks the 50th anniversary of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories – a milestone brought into even sharper focus by the 2016 United Nations Security Council resolution that cites the presence of Israeli settlements as a hindrance to true peace with the Palestinians. Over the decades, the violence on both sides of the conflict has been horrific, the casualties catastrophic. In 2004, to speak out against the injustices committed there and to help end the occupation, a group of former Israeli soldiers who served in the occupied territories created a nonprofit organization, Breaking the Silence (BTS).

When members of BTS met novelist and essayist Ayelet Waldman at the

Jerusalem Writers' Festival in 2014, they invited her to tour Hebron, a city of more than 200,000 Palestinians with a settlement of a few hundred Israeli settlers – guarded by hundreds of Israeli soldiers – lodged at its core. What she witnessed disturbed her greatly, and as she later described the events to her husband, Michael Chabon, they both came to understand that they wanted to do something, anything, to change the situation. Then they realized: “Storytelling itself – bearing witness, in vivid and clear language, to things personally seen and incidents encountered – has the power to engage the attention of people, like us, who had long since given up paying attention, or who had simply given up.”

Working with BTS and other local Palestinian and Israeli activists, Chabon and Waldman invited two dozen acclaimed international writers to visit the West Bank and Gaza to share with the world what they saw. *Kingdom of Olives and Ash* is a collection of unflinching, often devastating testimonies of the ground-level human consequences of an occupation too often seen from afar as an intractable abstraction.

For many of the writers, it was their first visit to the area; others were returning to a place they knew well. The Palestinian and Israeli writers were writing about home. Over the course of 2016, the international writers came to Palestine-Israel in delegations organized by Breaking the Silence. They spent their time in the occupied territories, in the East Jerusalem neighborhoods of Silwan, Sheikh Jarrah, and Shuafat Refugee Camp; in the West Bank cities of Hebron, Ramallah, Nablus, Jericho, and Bethlehem; in West Bank villages, including Nabi Saleh, Susiya, Bili'in, Umm al-Khair, Jinba, al-Wallajeh, Kufr Qaddum; and in the Gaza Strip. The writers met with Palestinian community organizers and nonviolent protest leaders, among them Issa Amro of Youth Against Settlements, as well as with shop owners, artists, intellectuals, and laborers, women's rights advocates and journalists, businesspeople and farmers, and bereaved families. Some writers visited the military courts. They also met with Israeli settlers and Israeli and Palestinian anti-occupation activists, human rights lawyers, academics, and writers. The subjects chosen by the authors were diverse and varied – a breadth of experience, perspective, and narrative that is reflected in the pages of this book.

After nearly being turned away at the border gate, Dave Eggers spends a weekend in Gaza, talking with a young couple desperate to obtain visas to America where they might be able to

make new lives for themselves. Israeli novelist Assaf Gavron considers the plight of Palestinian soccer players, whose efforts to participate in international competitions are often frustrated at the border. Renowned Palestinian author Raja Shehadeh writes about his friend, a Palestinian taxi driver, and the obstacles placed in front of average Palestinians as they seek to navigate the Kafkaesque maze of the occupation. Madeleine Thien writes about life in the small villages of the south Hebron hills, including Susiya, where every house has been given a demolition order by the Israeli authorities. Palestinian writer Fida Jiryis writes about the occupation as a continuation of the *Nakba* and dispossession of Palestinians in 1948, and sheds light on the life of Palestinian citizens of Israel, who face institutionalized racism and discrimination. Other contributors to this anthology include Pulitzer Prize-winning writers Lorraine Adams and Geraldine Brooks, National Book Award winners Colum McCann and Jacqueline Woodson, and Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa.

Michael Chabon is a bestselling, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, *Wonder Boys*, *Werewolves in their Youth*, *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier & Clay*, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, *Manhood for Amateurs*, *Telegraph Avenue*, and *Moonglow*. Ayelet Waldman is the bestselling author of *Love and Treasure*, *Love and Other Impossible Pursuits*, *Bad Mother: A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes*, *Minor Calamities and Occasional Moments of Grace*, and *A Really Good Day: How Microdosing Made a Mega Difference in My Mood, My Marriage, and My Life*. They live in Berkeley, California, with their children.

All royalties from the sales of *Kingdom of Olives and Ash* will be divided between Breaking the Silence and Youth Against Settlements, a Palestinian NGO based in Hebron.