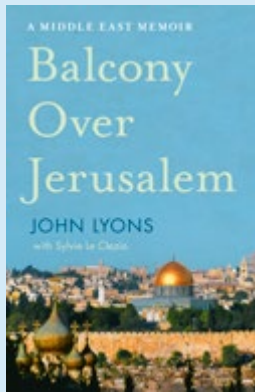


Balcony Over Jerusalem A Middle East Memoir

By John Lyons, with Sylvie Le Clezio
Harper Collins Publishers, Australia, 2017
384 pages, US\$30



Balcony over Jerusalem is a Middle East memoir from one of Australia's leading journalists. It spans the six years of John Lyons' tenure as Middle East correspondent for *The Australian*, during which he was based in Jerusalem with his wife Sylvie and their son Jack.

The book takes the reader on a captivating 20-chapter journey across tense Middle Eastern borders, from Jordan and Egypt to Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq; from Iran to Libya and South Africa. The stories chronicle the journalist's meetings with

influential figures from all across the political spectrum, including former Israeli prime ministers Shimon Peres and Ehud Olmert, and spokesmen from Hamas and Hezbollah.

Perhaps the most illuminating chapters, however, are those that address the pressure exerted on journalists working on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This pressure can come in the form of manipulative "charm" at the beginning of an assignment, and later in the form of "attacks" once journalists refuse to cave in to the pre-written script.

Lyons writes with authority as he documents how intimidation is frequently orchestrated by groups affiliated with the various national pro-Israeli lobbies in respective countries; in his case, it was by AJJAC (Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council) in Australia. He explains with examples how these organizations can be more royal than the king, objecting to and complaining about issues that were accepted in Israeli circles and reported by the Israeli media. He writes with disbelief about AJJAC's hypocrisy: "When I covered human rights abuses in Iran or Lebanon or Syria, I was a leading Australian journalist; when I reported what I had seen done by the Israeli Army, I was an unreliable reporter."

Lyons doesn't mince his words when criticizing what he calls "the greater Israel project" – the settlement expansion project championed by the current Israeli prime minister, which is essentially eradicating any possibility for peace. His pessimism toward the developments of the last six years is clear. However, he sees hope in the changing tides of international public opinion, as people around the world are exposed to objective news written without any bias or pre-judgment.

Lyons' book is an essential read; it is an excruciatingly honest account from a journalist who tries to see past the obvious headlines; it is an example of what journalistic ethics means, with fastidious documentation and verification, when working in a highly monitored area.

Lyons tells his story from where it is unraveling, rather than filing it from a fancy, foreign hotel room. And in these bleak times, when nothing charming can be written about Jerusalem, John, Sylvie, and Jack share with us a vivid account from their Balcony Over Jerusalem. They let us in on their observations of the daily contradictions that consume us and the oppression that is getting uglier by the day.

