

On finding kinship in difference

Amy Abdelnoor

I can hear it: the backlash as my novel *Ever Land* reaches readers.

Why? Because I have had the temerity to write from the perspectives of two young women, neither of whom occupies what can be definitively categorised as 'my lane'.

Palestinian Safa, killed in 1967, is unable to pass on fully until she discovers what happened to the sole surviving member of her family. Safa and I share heritage in the *Bilad al-Sham*. Dinah is a Jewish north Londoner who relocates to a gated community in Israel at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Since publication, I've been asked whether I have the right to write a Jewish girl. But this surely misses the point.

Stories come to me like the pieces of a jigsaw, fragmented and oblique, drawn together by a clarifying keystone piece.

For *Ever Land*, this was an email I sent to friends while I was living in Ramallah in 2001. Writing about the occupation, I appealed to acquaintances to look beyond the headlines presented in mainstream media. One responded: *There are two sides to every story; you're becoming very entrenched in one of them.*

This encapsulated the attitudes too often seen in those used to privilege in the racial hierarchy of the so-called developed world. When a nation's history books are full of the glories of empire, alternative narratives are silenced swiftly.

'If I could just bring you here for a week or a day,' I replied, 'you would understand.'

Embers smouldered in the pit of my stomach. We have a word for this in Arabic: *qahr* – the slow-burning pain of deep injustice. Two decades later, *Ever Land* is my way of bringing readers who may never visit in person to this much maligned diamond-shaped piece of land whose truth is plain to see – if only people would open their eyes to look.

Was I worried – and if so, should I have been – about a potential backlash against my choosing to write a Jewish voice?

Early readers' reviews of the novel attest that Dinah is a whole, well-rounded, empathic character on a journey of growth and awakening in this modern, broken world. While I may not be Jewish, I have confidence in my character.

I am less concerned, however, by possible umbrage than by the question itself. Surely as creative writers, we imagine? Writers are invariably voracious readers and studies show that immersive reading of fiction fosters empathy: there is biological evidence that literature 'simulates conscious experience' and psychological research showing it improves 'our understanding of ourselves, the world and others'.

It stands to reason that empathetic writers have an ability to translate that into writing, fostering empathy in readers to create a virtuous circle of the possibility of nurturing understanding of each other through the written word.

Early on, Dinah surfaced in my mind's eye, discombobulated, blinking into sunlight reflecting off the pristine walls of her new house. She was watched, unbeknownst to her, by a spirit-soul, an ageless girl trapped in the limbo of the In-Between. I immersed

myself in creating believable characters: the deep research invariably underpinning good writing. This was as true for Dinah, and those who come into her life – including a young Israeli soldier with whom she thinks she is falling in love – as it was for Safa, albeit that the latter arrived to me almost fully formed, a response, almost, to the absorption of Palestine from my own experiences living and working in refugee camps and in occupied Palestine.

From my reading of Jewish philosophers such as Hannah Arendt, who resisted Zionism, and encounters with people in occupied Palestine such as Jeff Halper of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions and the women of Machsom Watch, I was never in doubt that a character like Dinah could exist. Alongside wide reading of Palestinian fiction and non-fiction, I returned to classics by Amos Oz, and Linda Grant's *When I Lived in Modern Times*, and found new work such as Shani Boianjiu's novel *The People of Forever are Not Afraid* – a discombobulating and disturbing exploration of the psychological effects of compulsory military service on teenage girls.

A trip to occupied Palestine and time spent in Tel Aviv and West Jerusalem in summer 2023 was instructive in my understanding of the make-up of Israeli society, from encounters with everyone from beach-goers to employees at Yad Vashem and women who had recently relocated to Israel from north London.

The final novel, as the cliché goes, is but the tip of the iceberg, existing only because of all the research you do not see.

How should I respond then to those who may claim that I have strayed, reprehensibly, from my lane in writing Dinah, Lavi and Eban?

Dinah is Jewish, from north London, and a newcomer to Israel. But she's also a teenager, trying to acclimatise to this strange new environment, an older sister grieving for her dad and rejecting her stepfather, a daughter disentangling from her mother. Dinah feels love and frustration, anger and annoyance, tenderness and longing; she is challenged by what she sees but oscillates between injustice and selfishness. She is as unique, individual and particular as you and I are, and she also shares the emotions and challenges of the universal human experience. Like all convincing characters, we respond to her because she is multi-faceted, as we all are. We respond to universality even as we recognise difference.

The writer's lane is the universal lane of humanity. We also straddle adjacent lanes, both familiar and unfamiliar, grappling with the questions that concern us all: how to live, love and survive in this beautiful but harsh world.

Those questions have never felt more pertinent. Dinah's relationship with the girl she is told is her enemy is one which should give us all pause, questioning our role in the brutal modernity of the twenty-first century. By immersing readers in the lives of both Safa and of Dinah, I counter the imposition of lanes based on difference and assert the humanity which saves us: our ability to empathise with each other as kin.

Amy Abdelnoor

Amy Abdelnoor is a British Arab writer and English teacher. She studied English and Arabic at the University of Cambridge. She lived and worked in the West Bank and in refugee camps in Lebanon in her early twenties. These experiences inspired *Ever Land*, her debut novel, an early iteration of which was shortlisted for the 2023 Lucy Cavendish Fiction Prize.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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