



THE WAR WITHIN

JOURNALIST MATT BEYNON REES EXPLORES
THE CONFLICTS WITHIN PALESTINIAN SOCIETY
IN *THE COLLABORATOR OF BETHLEHEM*

by Barbara Fister

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This month, readers will have a chance to meet Omar Yussef, the first Palestinian mystery protagonist, in Matt Beynon Rees's *The Collaborator of Bethlehem*. Based on real events, this novel introduces readers to the inner reality of a decades-old conflict that is known to most Americans only through oversimplified headlines and overheated thrillers.

The rich authenticity of the setting and plot is no fluke. Born in Wales in 1967, Rees studied at Oxford University and the University of Maryland, then worked as a reporter in London, Washington D.C., and New York before becoming the first Middle East correspondent for *The Scotsman* in 1996.

In moving to the Middle East, Rees was following the path of his great-uncles who, during their British army service, rode into Jerusalem on camelback in 1917. One of them had earlier sent home a postcard that had the pyramids on one side, and on the other the message, "Dear Sis, there's nothing here but camels, sand and shit." Rees' decade of reporting on the lives of Palestinians and Israelis for *The Scotsman*, *Newsweek*, and *Time Magazine* has given

him a chance to develop a more nuanced understanding of the region than his great-uncle's first impression.

"I'm a natural anthropologist who loves to hear the stories and observe the lives of another people," he said in an email interview from his home in Jerusalem, where he can see Omar Yussef's Bethlehem from the room where he writes. "But I'd also say it was because I felt a stake in this place, due to my great-uncles having been here in World War I. The graves of the British men who fought at their side are still here, and I visit them often." Rees even had the time-collapsing experience of being on the edge of a gunfight in exactly the same place where one of his great-uncles was shot.

"I remember what it was like as a little boy to feel my ninety-year-old great-uncle's unshaven cheek when he'd give me a kiss, and I've always thought of that as a reminder that the people who fight and die here are flesh and blood, and they should be listened to and understood as people who touch each other and love each other, not as the kinds of stereotypes into which they are pummeled by the formulaic writing of journalists."

Rees's belief in the humanity behind the issues is shared by his unconventional hero, the crotchety, middle-aged schoolteacher Omar Yussef, who wants to impart to his young students in the Dehaisha refugee camp that behind simplistic categories of "martyr" and "occupier" there are real people whose lives and losses are more than mere symbols.

Where did this compelling but unlikely hero come from? "Omar is largely based on a Palestinian man I know and admire," Rees said. "The core of my admiration for him is that he's an honorable man who questions the way society deteriorates around him and maintains his intelligence and decency even when others around him descend into hatred. In a place as violent as Bethlehem, that would be enough to make a man heroic. But I also noticed that it's hugely frustrating to live in a lawless, radicalized society and at the same time to see through its slogans and conventional wisdom. For that reason, Omar has to have a short fuse and a wicked tongue: he holds everyone else, including his students, to his own high ethical standards and lets them know when they've let him down."

Though most news coverage focuses on the conflict between Israelis and Palestini-



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ans, Rees is more interested in the internecine struggles within Palestinian society, a neglected aspect of the decades-long fighting that he first explored with a novelist's keen eye for detail and characterization in a non-fiction book, *Cain's Field: Faith, Fratricide, and Fear in the Middle East* (Free Press, 2004).

"Dissatisfaction with the way their society is run is very much how ordinary Palestinians feel," Rees pointed out. "They don't always express it to foreign correspondents, because they're eager to vent their frustrations about Israel and the journalists are usually keener to hear that (because their stories are usually about Israel versus the Palestinians, rather than looking at what goes on within the society)." But in fiction, Rees is able to dig deeper.

The setting of *The Collaborator of Bethlehem* is claustrophobic, a place under siege from outside and torn with self-destructive violence within. Though the story opens with the Israeli shelling of a Christian Palestinian's house, the real conflict erupts when the homeowner tries to chase away the men who are using his rooftop as a position of attack. It is his challenge to a local warlord on behalf of his family's safety that lights the fuse of the plot. "For much of the last few years, most Palestinians haven't been able to move around the West Bank from town to town, because of Israeli checkpoints," Rees explained. "So they stay in their hometowns and it's the local gunmen or police who have the biggest impact on their lives. The lawlessness and corruption of their society, particularly its absolute disintegration since 2000, is the most depressing thing for the Palestinians I know best."

In addition to the storyline, ripped from headlines that have never been written, the cultural life of Palestine is vividly portrayed, including the graciousness of social customs in the face of violence and corruption. A fluent Arabic speaker, Rees has included direct translations of the greetings used in daily life which he finds "quite poetic compared to the way we speak." Because he has been able to spend time in the homes of ordinary Palestinians, speaking with them in their own language, he is able to translate that life effectively. "Above all, I listened to ordinary people even when they expressed shocking opinions and I didn't judge them; I let them talk and I wrote it all down"—all of which adds to the dramatic yet authentic conflict that drives the story.

The violence portrayed in the novel is equally informed by experience and has a graphic accuracy that goes well beyond CSI-style clinical gore. "I'd only been here a few weeks when I went to cover a suicide bombing in Jerusalem," Rees said. "I was standing by a lumpy tarpaulin at the curb taking notes, when an Israeli policeman walked up to one of the members of the recovery team (these are religious Jews employed to pick up even the tiniest scraps of flesh at the scene). 'The terrorist is under there,' the policeman said. The recovery worker lifted the blue tarp and had a long look. So did I. It was the top half of a bearded man's body, separated from his midriff and legs by the force of the blast he'd unleashed," an explosion that also killed four Israelis.

But more distressing to Rees than viewing dismembered bodies is seeing the long-term effects of violence on the living. "I think

Opposite: Matt Beynon Rees on a street in Bethlehem's old souk in December 2006.

in particular of a Palestinian from Hebron who I first met when he was hospitalized with part of his skull blown away. The wound had healed but there was a deep gouge in the side of his head. I couldn't see the gouge because his hair had grown back in, but his doctor said, 'Look, it's right here,' grabbed my finger and put it inside the long, boneless trench on the side of the man's skull. The man looked at me with such horror in his eyes that even now I can feel my temperature going up a degree or two when I remember that moment."

The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics tells reporters to "give voice to the voiceless" and "tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so." Rees has applied these rules to his fiction, which he finds a more effective medium than the sound-bite culture of the newsroom. Crime fiction, in particular, is a potent vehicle for exploring Palestinian society. "First, there's lots of real crime and a screaming need for a decent honorable man to put it right. Second, the form lends itself to the very nuanced way in which Palestinian gunmen and corrupt politicians work: it takes a lot of knowledge about the place to know who's lying or who's really a killer."

Mystery fiction also offers an opportunity to develop characters with integrity. "I wanted to express through the character of Omar Yussef all that I had learned about the Palestinians and to develop that over a series of novels. When I read so-called literary fiction, I end up thinking that it's full of linguistic pyrotechnics but has very little insight into real characters, the human situation in which the book's characters are supposed to live. Crime fiction reverses this by making the depth of the detective's character the real focus of the book. Yes, there has to be a mystery for him to solve and the writing should be of a Chandler-level wit and style, but I'm always interested in why that particular detective should be the one to solve it; what is it about his character which drives him to find the truth in a situation where it'd be safer to go home and ignore the bad guys? That's the heart of Omar Yussef's dilemma, and I believe it rings true in the book because it's a dilemma facing decent Palestinians I've known well."

But it isn't just heroes who can be developed in crime fiction. "Sometimes I find mysteries have a great detective character, but the villains are either empty vessels or simply psychopaths." You won't find them in *The Collaborator of Bethlehem*. "Unfortunately for the Palestinian people, there are

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Matt Beynon Rees overlooking old Bethlehem, with the Church of the Nativity (traditionally held to be the birthplace of Jesus) in the background.

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large numbers of gunmen and corrupt politicians among them who have real reasons for killing. That, for me, is the important flip-side of the depth I was able to bring to the central character by writing a crime novel."

He added, "I've always wanted to write fiction, since I was nine years old and my schoolteacher pinned a story I wrote on the classroom wall. I became a journalist because I was a good writer, and then realized that it could take me to places and meet people I'd never otherwise have encountered. But writing was always the heart of it for me."

That's led him to follow a fork in his career path. "I've taken a step away from journalism, a step deeper into the lives of ordinary Palestinians, and of course a step deeper into myself—because what I'm doing, like any good novelist, is to examine my own responses to the things I've seen over the last decade in the Middle East."

What's next for Omar Yussef? "I just delivered the second book in the series to my publisher," Rees said. "It's set in Gaza, where Omar finds himself involved in the deadly matrix of a missile-smuggling ring. I'm shortly going to get rolling on book three, which is set in Nablus. My long-term intention is for Omar to examine the full scope of the way Palestinians live today, as well as for some of his mysteries to delve into the bloody past of the Palestinians and their political infighting. I want people to be able to 'get' these parts of the story who might know very little about the Middle East and at the same time to be sure it doesn't sound like a primer on the region."

And for Matt Beynon Rees? Though he rose through the ranks to become *Time's* Jerusalem Bureau Chief in 2000, he recently left that position to become an occasional contributor to *Time* and a full-time novelist. He has always been more interested in exploring the long-term truth of human experiences than reporting the latest news. "Journalism is an immensely flawed way of depicting reality. I've found that fiction gives you a much clearer picture, because it isn't constrained by the formulas. In journalism, you end up including quotes which aren't true, simply because you're supposed to give the 'other side' of a story and have to quote some spokesman issuing a blatantly false denial. In a novel, characters lie, but in the end the reader will know it, whereas a newspaper reader ends up confused."

He's not worried that he will run out of material. "My intention is to write each of the Omar Yussef novels in such a way that, no matter what changes on the ground, they'll still be valid. In other words, nothing in the novels is tied to political conditions which might make the novels seem dated." He added, ruefully, "I don't think that would change even if there was peace here. But that's a hypothesis that isn't about to be tested, sadly." ✦

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