



## Imprisoned by the Stereotypes of a Struggle

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### *Martyr's Crossing*

by Amy Wilentz. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Price

Unwittingly, Amy Wilentz achieved a journalist's dream with the publication of her new book - getting the first scoop on a major historical event. Published in May 2001, *Martyr's Crossing* revolves around the events sparked by the death of a Palestinian baby at a checkpoint, after he is refused access to medical care during a tight closure imposed by the Israeli army. Only four months later, fiction became reality and suddenly the international press was filled with stories about martyrs, closures, and dead babies at checkpoints.

As a resident of the West Bank, the book was painful to start and bitter to read. I found my own experiences of the current

conflict captured in her descriptions, which my mind fleshed out into vivid reality with details from my life. At first, this shock of recognition made it difficult to view the book objectively: I found myself bristling at descriptions or resenting conclusions that sat ill with my beliefs about the Palestinian-Israeli relationship.

But, as I read on and adjusted to the eeriness of art imitating life, I found my unease had objective grounds. Wilentz does a thought-provoking job of evoking the hopes, ideals, and delusions of both the Israeli and the Palestinian peoples, clearly drawing upon her years as *The New Yorker* correspondent in Jerusalem. However, she too often achieves this by resorting to shallow characters, whose purpose is only to bring the story to its tragic and expected conclusion.

The problem lies in the book's setting. By choosing a still volatile political landscape as her backdrop, Wilentz gave herself a challenging task of bringing something fresh to a much-rehearsed history. How does one personalize the Palestinian-Israeli conflict while painting the grand picture for a presumably novice audience? The result is alternately distracting and refreshing.

Just as I had a visceral reaction to seeing a fictionalized version of my experience during the ongoing *intifada*, the attention of most readers will be snagged by the loosely veiled appearance of historical figures in the Palestinian and Israeli establishment. The grandfather of the "martyred" infant is George Raad, a secular Christian intellect who lives in self-imposed exile in America from where he writes scathing criticisms of the Palestinian Authority: from his birth to an aristocratic Jerusalem family to his international acclamation, Raad is a clear

echo of Edward Said. Then there is Ahmed Amr, a Machiavellian politico who thrives on the new glamour of the returning PLO cadre and manipulates the story's events for maximum PR: with his diplomatic skills, old-school revolutionary ties, and hunger for control, Amr could be any one of the existing leadership. Perhaps the author used allusions to conveniently well-known figures as shortcuts to characterization, but, along with the references to "the Chairman," the desire to spot the difference between fact and fiction tempts the reader's mind away from the novel.

The other characters also fall prey to an externally imposed characterization: the Hamas militant; the hawkish Zionist bureaucrat; and the bumbling, amateur kidnapers. Again, by writing about current events, Wilentz gives herself an almost impossible task of rising above the intense reality of her carefully done research to pen a living and personal story. On a cultural and political battlefield in which negative stereotypes are thrown like grenades at the opposing side, Wilentz's broadly drawn characters, with their one-sided passions and blind dedication, are a disappointment: the Palestinian leader who views the death of a little boy as benefiting the struggle; the devious Israeli security official who sees the Palestinians as base criminals; and the Muslim onlookers who congratulate a bereaved mother on the martyrdom of her son.

In fact, only two characters emerge as fully rounded individuals with personalities that escape easy definition: Marina, the child's mother, and Ari Doron, the Israeli soldier who vainly battled his superiors to let the mother and child through the checkpoint. Significantly, and to Wilentz's credit, Marina

and Doron are the two main characters in the story. Their lives are so shattered by the child's death that they are forced to rebel against the confining roles forced on them by their opposing cultures. By the end of the story, both Marina and Doron break away from their set places in a painful, transforming process, with each, in the end, stumbling into a lonely vacuum.

As he watches the Israeli military establishment spin the child's death into a virtue, Doron begins to doubt the Zionist beliefs that had permeated his life and rationalized his career in the army - an uncertainty that leaves him bereft:

*But was protecting [his country] worth the pain of that poor little boy and his mother? Was it? Was a country worth that loss? Probably it was, this country was, anyway. "Civilians die when wars are fought," his father used to say. "A war is not just about soldiers." But now, after Ibrahim's death, Doron wasn't so sure. He wasn't sure of anything.*

Similarly, Marina finds her uncomprehending grief over her son's death dislocates from her adopted homeland; and even the return of her long-imprisoned husband fails to stop her alienation from her politicized life:

*Everything was over, every possible thing. She would go back to America: where she belonged. She held back her tears. There was too much emptiness for her here. She would go home with her father and see him through his illness, and then start over.*

Ironically, it is only by embracing their alienation that Marina and Doron have a chance to rebuild their lives, free of the limiting demands of their cultures. Similarly, George Raad divorces himself from what he comes to believe is only empty posturing with a terrible cost: "How long could we go on squabbling while the rest of the Palestinian people sacrificed endlessly for our mistakes? And Ibrahim was dead."

Ultimately, it is her ability to capture the absurd tragedy of the conflict that makes Wilentz's book powerful. Drawn together by their shared experiences at the checkpoint, Doron and Marina - and vicariously Raad - are able to recognize that their common humanity overshadows their cultural differences. But the other characters do not have a similar nexus with the opposing side and are only able to live the life dictated to them: as Marina reflects ruefully, "What stereotypes people agree to live by..."

In the end, Marina chooses to step out of the role she is asked to play, which has already cost her the life of her son. But in letting Marina go beyond the limits of the conflict, Wilentz highlights the confinement of everyone else by the stereotypes accumulated through the struggle's history. As Raad says in memory of his dead grandson:

*Our little Ibrahim was not a brave Palestinian freedom fighter. This was my Palestinian grandson, my boy who was going to have the life in Palestine that history did not permit me to have. The life that history stole from me, and stole from you.... stole from all of us.*

Although this book was written well before the start of the second *intifada*, Wilentz recognized that these stereotypes, crafted in the heat of war, are both a vital support and an unbreakable bondage. For the last 14 months, local televisions have been filled with stirring pictures of daily funerals and eulogies to those fallen for their nation. Behind each flag-draped body is a weeping family, who doubtlessly fling themselves back and forth between desperate patriotism and mind-numbing regret. In a similar scene from the book, Amr organizes a rally in the dead child's name in order to put pressure on the Israelis. Placed on the podium next to her father, Marina stands frozen, caught between the crowd's expectations of her as a mother of a martyr, beautiful in her patriotic sacrifice, and her own need to mourn her grief on her own terms.

*She heard the name of her son, her husband, her father. She looked down at the plain plywood planks of the stage. Humble, she thought, composed, grief-stricken. They were all looking at her.... I just want to go home and be alone in Ibrahim's room.*

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