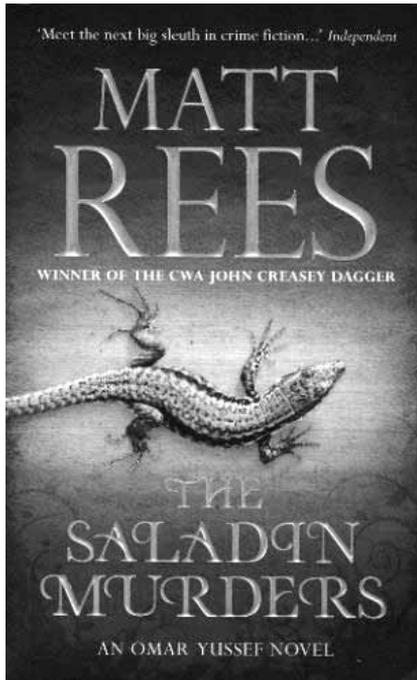


Morbid Symptoms: The Omar Yussef Mystery Series¹

Review Essay by Alex Pollock



The Bethlehem Murders by Matt Rees
Atlantic Books, 264 pp, 2006, ISBN 978 1
84354 603 0

The Saladin Murders by Matt Rees
Atlantic Books, 340 pp, 2008, ISBN 978 1
84354 648 1

The Samaritan's Secret by Matt Rees
Atlantic Books, 324 pp, 2009, ISBN 978 1
84354 650 4

The Fourth Assassin by Matt Rees
Atlantic Books, 264 pp, 2010, ISBN 978 1
84887 203 5

1

Frequently written off as an inferior literary form by traditional academic literary critics, for whom it is often seen as no more than popular “entertainment,” to use Graham Greene’s haughty self-putdown, detective fiction is often dismissed as a depthless and fleeting tale of imaginary adventure. More suited to consumption on the bus, train or beach, rather than as something to be savored in the reading room. Often seen as providing moments of escape from mundane life or dreary work, it is regularly viewed as a cultural artefact commensurate with a middle-brow life and not something for the serious reader or thinker to engage with.² Such condescension now seems an effete parochialism, as popular fiction and detective novels often effect a forum of social criticism and can raise critical commentary on contemporary issues in a manner which connects situations and events with the intentions, pathologies, desires and follies of the various protagonists, often in a way that is

reminiscent of the realism of the historical novel, where historical figures are juxtaposed with fictional characters to provide concrete context and location to the narrative.

In the contemporary era, no commentator moves further beyond the traditional academic boundaries of the critical analysis of culture and politics than Slavoj Žižek, who combines a unique Lacanian-Hegelian-Marxian analysis of the cultural field that embraces film, popular culture and detective novels (including those of Chester Himes, K. G. Chesterton, Henning Mankell and Patricia Highsmith). Like Walter Benjamin, Žižek recognizes the socially critical nature of much detective fiction, especially in the era of global capitalism. But he is drawn to the neurotic, psychotic and perverse core of characterization fantastically imagined and drawn by the author, which gives both psychic and political weight to the social criticism, whether this be pathological aspects of racism in the USA exemplified by Himes, the neuroses of Christian England in the works of Chesterton, the particular eccentricities of “eccentric locale” in cosmopolitan Sweden in the work of Mankell or the perversities of the bourgeois family and empire in the USA in the writing of Highsmith.³

A Žižekian analysis of the Palestinian cultural field might hypothesize that the pathological core of Palestinian cultural production resides in a classic Freudian case of neurosis formation. In the Palestinian case, a libidinal fixation linked to the collective trauma and loss brought about by the *nakba* that has splintered Palestinian lives across three generations.⁴ Almost without exception, the libidinal energy of Palestinian cultural production has been determined by the traumatic charge of this seismic event, which has colored the whole range of Palestinian tragic, heroic and comedic narrative in their various cultural forms, whether in poetry, prose, art, film, journalism or political discourse. For example, the great artistic sensibility of Mahmoud Darwish, whose collective work is receptive to the whole of western and classical Arabic poetry, has created a world-class national poetry that condenses this trauma and loss with an empathetic affect that at once memorializes the event, while continuing to embrace the plenitude of Palestinian lived experience: whether through depeasantisation and the loss of early modern Palestine, or the Guernican horror of war and the slaughter in Sabra and Shatilla,⁵ or the degeneration of Palestinian political culture under the weight of accommodation to new alienations in the name of democracy and state-building. Darwish’s achievement rarely slips from the sublime to the ideological, as his poetic sensibility is foremost with the political remaining merely a subliminal but profound undercurrent in his work.⁶

No one who has spent time in the company of Palestinians can fail to understand that this trauma is profoundly constitutive of their consciousness and subjectivity, their dreams, fantasies and desires, but not in any simple identitarian way. The trauma has its own subject specificity that is affected by how it has been interiorized and mirrored in the familial, life situations and personality of each individual. The trauma of Palestinian dispossession is a uniquely shared psychic event that has rarely been explored psychoanalytically.⁷ One entry point for such analysis is through Palestinian literary production, which imaginatively connects subjects’ desires and fantasies, in a way that is congruent with Žižek’s claim that:

The fundamental point of psychoanalysis is that desire is not given in advance, but something that has to be constructed – and it is precisely the role of fantasy to give the coordinates of the subject’s desire, to specify its object, to locate the position the subject assumes in it. It is only through fantasy that the subject is constituted as desiring: through fantasy, we learn how to desire.⁸

For Palestinians, and most certainly the older generation of leaders, much of their political life and internal power struggles through the Oslo and post-Oslo periods has been about the sublimation of their previous modes of political organization to the psychic accommodation of their desires and aspirations to the will and demands of the international community in the hope that such reorganization in mental and political life can bring into being an autonomous Palestinian state.

Yet despite multiform accommodation to new forms of alienation, estrangement and control, the objective realization of statehood remains dream-like: a Palestinian “objet petit a,” an unattainable object of desire. This fantasy is a perverse and scandalous desire that is symptomatic of a subject position (in both the political and psychoanalytic sense). The perversity lies in Palestinians conforming to a set of normative obligations to bow before the “big other” of the international community, which plays a fundamental role in the Palestinian symbolic order through “development assistance,” “humanitarian intervention” and “peacemaking polity.” The scandal lies in the nurturing of these desires, while masking the real symbolic order that withholds the potential for their realization.

It is interesting in this context to consider the repeated failure of peacemaking through the international community (primarily the USA and the EU). Despite constant breakdown, failure is never recognized. Apropos of Žižek’s use of a phrase often attributed to Groucho Marx, when Palestinians respond that the peace process has failed, Groucho’s question is posed to them: “Well, who you gonna believe, me [us] or your own eyes?”⁹ The Palestinian political elite are expected to believe the words of the international community, rather than their own experience. While in reality they are being asked to *stop being unrealistic by demanding the possible*.¹⁰

In this context, while Palestinians are not free to realize their object, they can only follow (since they can hardly escape from it) the Lacanian libidinal imperative to “enjoy their symptoms” as desiring subjects with all the potential explosive alienations, pathologies, psychoses and neuroses that underlie such a subject disposition.¹¹ The protagonists in the Matt Rees, Omar Yussef mysteries epitomize Palestinians attempting to navigate the internal political conflicts that are outcomes of such symptoms.

Like other literary forms and genres, detective fiction often connects with the imaginary and fantastic nature of such desires, grounding social criticism and understanding in the neurotic, psychotic and perverse ways in which various desiring subjects make moral choices and live out their lives in the circumstances in which they find themselves. Surprisingly, while there is a rich stream of Israeli detective fiction that brings to life various aspects of Israeli lives and society, the detective genre is a rare form of literary production among writers of the contemporary Arab and Palestinian novel.¹² Arab detective writers are relatively few, and Palestinian detective writers even rarer. The absence of a distinctly Arab detective tradition is somewhat strange as the best of the genre is capable of deploying rich imaginative tropes and characterization, which when combined with a critical narrative and a dramatic storyline can open up the heroic, tragic and comedic aspects of contemporary life.

The two best known voices of contemporary Arab detective fiction, or more correctly North African voices, are the Moroccan writer Abdelilah Hamdouchi and the Algerian writer Yasmina Khadra. Hamdouchi has written a number of police procedure novels that focus on human rights and democracy. These include *The Blind Whale* (2001), *Saint JanJah* (1999), *The White Fly* (2000) and *The Last Wager* (2001). Khadra is the pen name for Mohammed Moulessehouli, who was revealed as a man after his first two books written in French had been well received as an authentic voice of Arab women. This paradox was further heightened when it was found that Commandant Moulessehouli had been in the Algerian army for three decades and had been an important leader in the military campaign against the armed Islamic radicals. His books are set in Algeria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Israel, and they include, *Double Blank*, *Autumn of the Phantoms*, *Wolf Dreams*, *The Swallows of Kabul*, *Dead Man's Share*, *The Attack*, *The Sirens of Baghdad* and *What Day Owes the Night*. His novels, *The Swallows of Kabul*, *The Attack* and *The Sirens of Baghdad*, form part of a non-Algerian trilogy on Islamic fundamentalism and the futility of political violence. *The Attack* centers on an Arab surgeon, Dr. Amin Jaafari, whose comfortable middle-class life in Tel Aviv is blown apart when he discovers that his Nazarene wife has killed herself in a suicide bombing mission.

Apart from Matt Reese, the other proponent of Palestinian detective or thriller writing is Mischa Hiller, whose newly released second novel, *Shake Off*, is a classic spy novel involving the PLO. Matt Reese is among the first to use contemporary Palestine as a backdrop to detective fiction. While a number of first-rate international novelists have used the Palestinian issue as a setting for novels, such as Robert Stone in *Damascus Gate* and Amy Wilentz in *Martyrs' Crossing*, they often produce flawed works that are less than satisfactory because of a perceived need to maintain objectivity between dramatis personae. But fiction writers are not lawyers or historians, and while they may incorporate courtroom drama or historical events in the body of their work, straining to maintain a sense of moral or political objectivity

between Palestinian and Israeli protagonists often undermines the believability of characterization as such objectivity challenges the suspension of belief that is fundamental to fictional dramatization. One of the key narrative strategies adopted by Rees, which adds to the success of his creation, is that the setting and protagonists in his Omar Yussef novels are almost wholly Palestinian. He succeeds in telling uniquely Palestinian stories. While Israelis contribute to the backdrop, they function as narrative material to add contemporary realism in the form of soldiers, settlers or security operatives. They are introduced to provide context to the contemporary setting or create believability in the plot-lines, but there is no interaction between occupier and occupied seeking to show moral equivalence.

Rees's detective, Omar Yussef Sirhan (Abu Ramiz), is a delightfully imagined secular Arab nationalist on the cusp of sixty who works as a history teacher in the UNRWA Girls' School in Dheisheh Refugee Camp on the outskirts of Bethlehem.¹³ He is an accidental detective who typically ends up on the trail of wrongdoing because of events and situations that have affected his students, former students or colleagues. Yussef comes across as rather prissy and preening, usually well-dressed against the different elements that could affect his health, carrying his purple briefcase and his expensive Mont Blanc pen, fretting about his comb-over and forever removing the dust that gathers on his mauve loafers as he trudges through the dust-strewn streets and alleys of the refugee camp.

Deeply in love with and faithful to his wife, Maryam, he suffers guilt over his fleeting sexual desires for the other women he meets in the course of his adventures; women who often bear a striking resemblance to his wife. A former alcoholic, Omar Yussef is a rather soft-boiled detective with no ability to physically combat the powerful, ruthless and violent protagonists that he deals with in the course of his investigations. Relying on his superior wit, intelligence and moral imperative, he is often in greater need of protection than the people he tries to defend and care for. Protection is implicitly secured by the threat of reprisal from the large and powerful Sirhan clan, to which he belongs, with numerous extended family members in Fatah, Hamas and other Palestinian political factions. However, physical guardianship and rescue is most usually provided by his protective avatar, Khamis Zeydan (Abu Adel).

Abu Ramiz and Abu Adel are former drinking-buddies and old political adversaries who attended university in Damascus together, but who took different political roads. While Omar Yussef returned home to the West Bank, after being imprisoned by the Jordanians, to become a teacher, Zeydan joined the Palestinian revolution. Returning to the West Bank with other PLO cadres after the Oslo Agreement, Zeydan had risen through the ranks to become a Brigadier and is now the chief of police in Bethlehem. Maimed after losing his left arm to a grenade in Beirut, often living under a cloud of black despair, suffering from diabetes and self-destructive drunkenness, he is disillusioned with life under the new Palestinian Authority and misses his adrenalin-rushing life of mayhem and adventure in Beirut. He is an old PLO fighter who has been unable to psychologically negotiate the transformation in political mentality from liberation struggle to incipient state formation.

Another of Omar Yussef's protectors is Sami Jaffari, the bodyguard and agent of Khamis Zeydan, whom we meet in the second novel in Gaza. He is a refugee from Dheisheh camp who was a policeman in Bethlehem. He is a local hero who was exiled by the Israelis to Gaza for actions committed as a fighter. By the third novel Sami is back in the West Bank working as a policeman in Nablus. In both novels, he continues to provide life-saving protection to the often erring sleuth.

Also running through the narratives is a subplot concerning Omar Yussef's ongoing conflict with the United Nations and Palestinian educational bureaucracy, in particular with his *bête noire*, Haitham Abdel Hadi, who is a School Inspector from the Palestinian Ministry of Education. Abdel Hadi had Omar Yussef expelled from his previous post in the prestigious Frères School for his critical and dissenting approach to education. The school inspector is continually conspiring to get him out of the UN, and in one attempt tries to oust him by using complaints from parents for:

... criticizing the president and the government, lambasting the Aqsa Martyrs Brigades as gangsters, condemning suicide bombing and talking disrespectfully about the sheikhs in some of the local mosques... [telling students] that instead of throwing stones at soldiers... [they] should throw stones at their parents and their government for making such a mess of their lives. (*The Bethlehem Murders*, p.28)

Omar Yussef is a refugee, from a family of refugees, and his life and personality have not escaped the psychic trauma and internal conflict that blights the life of many refugees. This is brought out in a monologue by his father upon the death of Omar Yussef's mother when he was seventeen years old:

It was a cold day that threatened rain... Omar Yussef's father, who never criticised his wife, took his eldest son aside that day. My son, you're mourning your mother, and I acknowledge that she was a good mother to you and you are right to be sorry that she passed on. It's not easy for me to tell you, but I want you to understand: it is better that she should go, because there was no way for any of us to help her. You see after we left the village, when you were a newborn, she was never the same. You never saw her really happy. I wish you had. I don't want you to feel that your experience as a son was not a happy one, nor that you didn't give her the joy that a mother derives for a son. But she was different after we left the village. She couldn't stop thinking about what life was like there, or how much harder it was here. She never spoke about it very much. She thought it would make me ashamed that I was able to provide only a lesser life for her than the one we expected when we married... Don't let the way life is for us rob you of your happiness, my son. When you have children and grandchildren, I hope they will return to our village. But if they don't, then be sure that they leave it behind for good. Don't allow them to be pulled in

both directions as your mother was, between the village of the past and the camp of today. If so, they will surely live in neither place. (*The Bethlehem Murders*, pp.203-204)

Rees brings detailed understanding and empathy to his Palestinian characters, which are wrought in nuanced detail in various contemporary political contexts, with each novel set in different locations from Bethlehem, Gaza, Nablus to “little Palestine” in Brooklyn. These locations are described in knowledgeable forensic detail, which can be attributed to working as a journalist in Palestine and Israel from 1996 for *The Scotsman* and then *Newsweek*, before moving to *Time* magazine as bureau chief in Jerusalem from 2000 to 2006. For the novel set in Brooklyn, Rees clearly draws on his time as a financial journalist in New York.

One of the more satisfying narrative devices that Rees deploys is the use of Palestinian cuisine as a focal point and setting for interaction between various protagonists. He provides many relishing descriptions of cuisine and etiquette, e.g. “Maryam boiled... the green chicken broth of her mouloukhiyeh, thick with cilantro and garlic and mallow leaves, poured over rice and beans.” Many moments of anticipation in the novels do not concern the resolution of clues, but Omar Yussef’s eager expectation of nourishment, especially the dishes prepared by his wife. The focus on food also brings out the centrality of family life in Palestine, where the domestic setting is a place not just of love and nourishment, but a haven from the nasty and often brute reality of life in the world. While many detective stories portray their hero most authentically when he is on the case, dealing with crime or combating wrongdoing, Omar Yussef’s character is most himself at home, when basking in the love and company of his wife, children and grandchildren. Much of the tension in the novels is about him trying to get off the job and back home, a desire made all the more urgent by his rather queasy stomach, perhaps the result of an overindulgence in alcohol during his younger days, which can only be ministered to effectively by the herbs and spices Maryam uses in the recipes she prepares for him. This often makes his sleuthing travels more a source anxious trepidation than adventure.

Another device, which at first seems rather strange and affected to the ear in English, is the literal translation of the myriad Arabic salutations that punctuate polite interaction and formal ceremony, such as “peace be upon you,” “morning of joy,” morning of light,” “God bless your hands,” “Allah will be merciful on him, the deceased one” “a generous Ramadan,” “God lengthen your life,” “all the year, may you be well,” “may Allah accept from us and from you,” “consider yourself with your family and at home.” However, after a while, such phrasing takes on an easy narrative rhythm that brings the sound of genuine dialogue in the interactions of the protagonists.

The first novel in the series, *The Bethlehem Murders*, is set at the height of the second intifada when Bethlehem and the surrounding villages are blockaded by the Israeli army. Rees plots the story around the assassination of a young police sergeant from Irtas, Louai Abdel Rahman. Louai is also a wanted member of the Aqsa Martyrs Brigades who is living underground, on the run from the IDF for the murder of an Israeli settler. Late one night he is killed in ambush as he is on his way to a clandestine visit to his wife at the family home. Omar Yussef is drawn into the investigation because Louai's wife, Dima was one of his former students, while another of his best students, George Saba has been arrested as a collaborator who assisted Israeli agents in murdering the martyr.

The detainee was one of Omar Yussef's star pupils when he taught at the Frères of Saint John de la Salle academy. With the start of the peace process, Saba had returned to Palestine with his wife and children from Chile where he had emigrated. He lives with his father on the heights of Beit Jala, overlooking the settlement of Gilo and the settler-bypass road tunnelling through the mountain. This has become a favored spot of the Aqsa Martyrs Brigades gunmen who use the village houses on the outcrop to fire on Gilo and Israeli traffic on the by-pass road. As a result, many of the houses have been hit by Israeli tank and gunfire.

Rees uses this context to draw out the submerged sectarian tensions within Palestine between Muslim and Christian communities. Yussef articulates this as something that has become more pernicious and degenerate than in the past, as young, poorly educated men in armed militias become a political and violent force in Palestinian society, with violence often directed at other Palestinians rather than the enemy. Amid the violence and lawlessness, George Saba is vicariously singled out simply because he tried to protect his family when he confronted the leader of the Martyrs Brigades in Bethlehem, Hussein Tamari, and his henchman, Jihad Awdeh, who is also a Major in Preventive Security, trying to stop them from using his home to fire on Israelis. With no extended family protection, and the Christian community either too weak or too fearful to come to his defense, he becomes an easy victim to the trumped-up charges levelled against him.

As the plot develops, Omar Yussef connects Tamari to the murder of Louai Abdel Rahman and, as his investigation deepens, he discovers that the so-called heroes of the resistance are in league with elements of Preventive Security running an extortion and protection racket that includes the false imprisonment and torture of businessmen. In the midst of the investigation, the Abdel Rahman family lose their businesses to Hussein Tamari's brother, Dima Abdel Rahman is found raped and murdered outside her family home, and Omar Yussef's son Ramiz is threatened by Hussein Tamari over his mobile phone business, while a thinly veiled threat is made about his father's "detective" work.

When he asks his friend, Khamis Zeydan, to intervene to save George, the police chief informs him that he has no authority to do so as this case is with Preventive

Security. When Omar Yussef goes to Tamari to plead the case of George Saba, he is taken aback by his traditional Bedouin hospitality, deferential propriety and sincere friendliness, but it quickly becomes clear that his right-hand man, Jihad Awdeh, is altogether a different character: when Omar Yussef asks him if he kills for money, he replies, “I kill for money when it is strictly a matter of business between strangers... But you’re my brother, so I’d have to kill *you* for free.”

As the novel moves to its denouement, the narrative quickens. An attack is made on Omar Yussef’s classroom, killing the US director of the school, and a bomb explodes in Mahaneh Yehuda market in West Jerusalem. The Aqsa Martyrs Brigades distribute a leaflet congratulating the family of the martyr, Yunis Abdel Rahman. Shortly thereafter, Hussein Tamari is annihilated when his jeep is struck by a missile fired from a helicopter. After the Martyrs Brigades bury their dead leader, they storm the jail in Manger Square, beat up Khamis Zeydan, drag George Saba onto the street and lynch him outside the Church of the Nativity. They then go to Beit Jala, where they trap the Saba family inside their home and start firing indiscriminately on Israelis from the roof and sides of the building, which unleashes Israeli tank fire that flattens the walls of the house, killing George’s wife and father and injuring his two children.

Despite all his detective work, Omar Yussef has followed a series of false trails that are only unveiled at the end of the novel in a lacework that connects crime, cruel patriarchy, incest rape, murder and suicide bombing within one family; identifies criminality, extortion and duplicity within the forces created to protect the Palestinian community; and spotlights the marginalization and alienation of the Christian community as Palestine struggles to survive. George Saba and Dima Abdel Rahman represent the innocents that are destroyed by these events despite the best efforts of the school teacher-sleuth.

4

The Saladin Murders, the second novel in the series, is set in the period before the coming to power of Hamas, when the Palestinian Authority was still in control of Gaza. The novel begins in the midst of a *sub rosa* war between the Military Intelligence forces of General Hussein and the Preventive Security forces of his rival, Colonel al-Fara, who is favored by the CIA in his bid to become the future President of Palestine. But religious sentiments are rising, with Islamists gaining in popularity as corruption and nepotism is widespread throughout the government in Gaza. As part of its increasing reaction to immoral behavior, the Islamists recently burned down the Windmill Hotel and the UN Club. There is an underlying atmosphere of menace and turmoil lying beneath the surface of Gaza in the heavy and humid *khamisin* air. While the Fatah Revolutionary Council meets in the Sands Hotel, strange things are afoot, people are being murdered and a hundred year old skeleton is found dumped in a field in Khan Yunis.

Omar Yussef, who was promoted to school principal at the end of the previous novel, is in Gaza with his Swedish Director of Education, Magnus Wallender, to

conduct an inspection of UN schools. But almost immediately after passing through the labyrinthine cage network at Erez Crossing, he is drawn into a new investigation when a colleague, Eyad Masharawi, who works as an UNRWA teacher in *Shati* refugee camp and as a part-time lecturer in al-Azhar University, is arrested. Masharawi has been openly challenging the corruption of the head of the university, Professor Adnan Maki, and the ruthless Head of Preventive Security, Colonel al-Fara. Both are members in the Revolutionary Council of Fatah and senior PLO figures. Maki is a narcissist and effete snob with a *pied à terre* in Paris, an extensive collection of beautiful Bohemian crystal and a Sri Lankan maid whose extra-domestic services he offers to his guests.

Masharawi has reported the university to human rights organizations for selling degrees for money to officers in Preventive Security, who then use these qualifications in law and related subjects to secure promotion and higher salaries. He infuriated the head of the university even further when he set an exam question for his students to: “Write an essay on corruption in the university.” He is subsequently arrested and beaten by Colonel al-Fara’s forces and accused of being a collaborator and spy for the CIA. Under torture, he signs a forced confession.

A further dimension to Omar Yussef’s investigation opens when the UN Director of Education is kidnapped by the Saladin Brigades, who run the smuggling tunnels between Egypt and Rafah. They are demanding the release of one of their own, Bassam Odwan, in return for the release of the UN official. Odwan has been accused of the murder of Lieutenant Fathi Salah, a Military Intelligence officer from Rafah. On meeting the accused in prison, Odwan informs the sleuth and UN Security Officer James Cree that he had met with Salah to pay him off and recover a long-range prototype rocket that had been developed in North Korea and smuggled into Gaza through Iranian connections. He claims that Salah stole the missile, the *Saladin 1*, from the Brigades. Odwan asserts that he did not kill the officer, claiming that he was shot from ambush during their meeting. Before he died the lieutenant kept repeating in English, “high-noon price, high-noon price”.

While attending the fractious meeting of the Fatah Revolutionary Council in Gaza, where the sadistic General Husseini accuses his rival Colonel al-Fara of corruption, Khamis Zeydan informs Omar Yussef that James Cree had fallen victim to a roadside bomb and had been taken to Shifa Hospital. By the time they reach the hospital the UN Security Officer is dead. Omar Yussef wonders if his colleague can be buried beside his great-grandfather in the British War Cemetery in Khan Yunis, created as the British Army advanced on the Ottoman forces toward the end of the First World War. In the morgue, they also chance upon the corpse of Bassam Odwan, who had been sexually tortured and brutalized in the most offensive way, including having his fingernails pulled out and his fingertips chopped off in a “Husseini manicure.” The pathologist tells Omar Yussef that the most likely cause of death was asphyxiation, but that he would report it as a heart attack. Omar Yussef says: “No one will believe it.” The doctor replies: “No one is asked to believe it. They’re asked only to be quiet.” Next day the pathologist confirms that Odwan died of asphyxiation and that he found

an unusual glass bottle-top lodged in his throat.

In apparent response to the murder of their colleague, the Saladin Brigades attack the home of General Husseini, blowing up the house, killing his guards and assassinating the General in front of the Sands Hotel, where the members of the Fatah Revolutionary Council are staying. At a meeting of the Council, Colonel al-Fara vows to bring the perpetrators to justice. As he pursues the trail of the kidnapped Magnus Wallender, Omar Yussef witnesses the murder of a man who is dumped from a jeep outside the hotel and shot three times as he staggers down the road. The victim is his colleague, Eyad Masharawi.

Khamis Zeydan is increasingly concerned about the safety of the friend he is unable to deflect from his pursuit, so he assigns his bodyguard, Sami Jaffari to protect him. As Omar Yussef follows the clues, the connection between the seeming disparate incidents and killings becomes clearer and much more dangerous for him. He meets with the Gaza City section of the Saladin Brigades, who inform him that they were paid by Preventive Security to bomb the car in which James Cree was killed.

The novel reaches its climax in Rafah and the British War Cemetery in Khan Yunis as the dead bodies continue to mount. Omar Yussef has lost two colleagues, but rescues Magnus Wallender from a smuggling tunnel in Rafah, while Sami Jaffari is shot protecting the sleuth. Corruption and fratricide are revealed within the Salah family, who are murdered by the Saladin Brigades in bloody revenge. The bones of Private Eynon Price are re-interred in his war grave, while the malevolent and crooked Professor Maki is eliminated by another member of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, revealing the deadly power of corruption and the abuse of power in high places. The *Saladin I* is “lost” and a potential war with Israel is averted, while Colonel al-Fara assumes virtual control of Gaza.

5

At the beginning of the third novel, *The Samaritan's Secret*, set just after the death of the President, Omar Yussef is visiting Nablus with his family to attend the wedding of Sami Jaffari, who has been allowed by the Israelis to return to the West Bank to become a lieutenant in the Palestine Police. The mystery is set on the heights of holy Mount Jerzim and in the depths of the Nablus *casbah*, which is full of gunmen. Like Omar Yussef's younger son Zuheir, who has just returned from studying in Britain wearing beard, white cotton smock and imbued with a new fundamentalism, Nablus has taken on a distinctly religious hue, and Omar Yussef disapproves of both. He tells Sami:

Many years ago, when I was still a drinker, I once told a particularly self-important Sheikh to go screw himself. Evidently he took my advice, because he has given birth to many others like him and now we're inundated with arrogant, self-righteous religious leaders. (*The Samaritan's Secret*, p.4)

Knowing Omar Yussef's interest in history, Sami invites him to accompany him to the Samaritan Synagogue on Mount Jerzim where he is investigating the theft of an ancient scroll. On the way, Yussef informs Sami that the Samaritan community moved out of the casbah where they had lived for centuries to Mount Jerzim in the 1980s because of the violence of the first intifada:

The Samaritans ... [have] been here longer than we have, Sami. They claim to be descended from some biblical Israelites who remained in this area when their brethren were exiled to Babylon. In a way they are Palestinians and Jews and neither, all at the same time. (*The Samaritan's Secret*, p.57)

As they examine the ancient Hebrew writing on two stone tablets, an old Samaritan priest enters and informs them that the Mosaic law of the Jews is similar to Samaritan law, but the Jewish books contain seven thousand errors, while there are none in the Samaritan code. The priest, Jibril Ben-Tabia, informs Sami that the ancient Abisha scroll had been returned undamaged. On the sheepskin scroll, which was written almost 4,000 years ago, are the five books of Moses written by Abisha, whose great-grandfather was Aaron, the brother of Moses. Without the scroll the Samaritans would not be able to practice their annual Passover sacrifice, and, if this sacred fundament was lost or destroyed, the Samaritan cultic tradition would collapse and their religion would be brought to a final tragic end.

As they leave the synagogue, Sami is informed that a body has been found in the tree-line on the Eternal Hill where the former Samaritan temple once stood. When they reach the spot, they find the beaten and tortured body of a young Samaritan in his mid-twenties, who is the adopted son of the priest. Ishaq is a lapsed Samaritan, having missed a number of feasts he had to pay a fine to be accepted back into the community. He was murdered on the spot where the Samaritans believe Abraham bound Isaac to offer him to the Lord. Thus, begins Yussef's next investigation, as he tries unsuccessfully to find time to take his favorite granddaughter out to taste the famous Nablus *knafeh*.

The mystery revolves around the battle for the legacy of the dead President. In Nablus, Hamas elements are ascendant, becoming increasingly strident around the leadership of Sheikh Bader, with some calling for a revolt against the corrupt Palestinian Authority. They are spreading rumors about the immorality and shameful acts of the President which caused his death. Meanwhile, a World Bank investigator, Jamie King, is trying to track down USD 300 million that are missing from the Palestinian treasury, stashed around the world in undisclosed accounts. If these accounts are not consolidated, the international community will pull its budget support from the Authority, leading to its boycott and collapse.

Omar Yussef has determined that uncovering the fate of the dead Samaritan, Ishaq, who worked directly as the financial adviser to the dead President, will unravel the mystery of the Abisha scroll and the lost millions. A young Hamas militant, Nouri Awwadi, is killed after telling Omar Yussef that he stole the Abisha scroll to blackmail

Ishaq into providing private files on Fatah officials implicating them in corruption. As fighting breaks out between the Islamic forces of Sheikh Bader and forces of the wealthy Fatah businessman Amin Kanaan, Omar Yussef is waylaid and about to be killed by a Fatah militiaman when Khamis Zeydan shoots the assailant and finishes him off while he is lying on the ground.

As the investigation is resolved around the connection between the Abisha scroll, Amin Kanaan's secret files and the missing Palestinian funds, these events are underpinned by a deeper layer of connection that links past events in war-torn Beirut to the birth and adoption of a bastard child in Nablus, forbidden homosexual relations and murder within the Samaritan community. By sharp political strategy and the mobilization of false information, the wealthy Amin Kanaan outsmarts Sheikh Bader, whose political overreach marginalizes Hamas in Nablus, while enhancing Kanaan's power over his colleagues and rivals in Fatah with the restoration of his secret dossiers on the Palestinian leadership, which had been traded to Hamas by Ishaq to protect his people's legacy. Omar Yussef and Khamis Zeydan track down the missing Palestinian accounts in the Samaritan synagogue and hand them over to the World Bank, preventing the international boycott of the Authority. In the process, Omar Yussef destroys the secret file on his friend, but keeps from him the truth that the birth of Ishaq Ben-Tabia was the result of his great love affair with Liana, now the wife of Amin Kanaan. And as peace is restored in Nablus, the remaining protagonists meet each other again at the wedding of Sami and Meysoon in the *casbah* of Nablus.

6

The setting of the fourth novel, *The Fourth Assassin*, is a wintry post 9/11 New York, where anti-Arab sentiment has become institutionalized. Omar Yussef has arrived to attend a UN conference at which he will speak in the presence of the new Palestinian President. Unprepared for the cold and inclement weather, Omar Yussef shivers, sniffs and freezes his way through his latest adventure. Rees captures the colors, scents, sounds and rhythms of the "little Palestine" quarter of Brooklyn where the mystery begins.

When Omar Yussef arrives at the apartment of his son, Ala, which he shares with two old school-friends, Rashid and Nizar, he finds the door ajar and a decapitated body inside, which he takes to be his son's, but which is apparently that of his friend Nizar. Ironically, many years ago, Nizar's father, a writer and PLO ideologue, had also been assassinated in New York while engaging in talks with left-wing Israelis. Evidence had pointed to either the Mossad or Arafat ordering the hit, possibly at the hands of Khamis Zeydan.

The American detective assigned to the current case is Sergeant Hamza Abayat, formerly from Bethlehem and the nephew of the Aqsa Brigades martyr Hussein Tamari. Ala is arrested when he refuses to furnish an alibi. Khamis Zeydan, who is with the President's delegation, accompanies the sleuth to the Brooklyn Detention Center, where the guard asks Omar Yussef if he is any relation to Sirhan Sirhan, the Palestinian killer of Bobby Kennedy. There Ala tells his father that he was with

Rania Hammiya when Nizar was killed, and that both he and Nizar were romantically pursuing her. He claims he had met Rania to break off their engagement, to leave her free to be with Nizar whom she loved. When Rania is visited by Omar Yussef, she confirms Ala's alibi.

Thus, as he starts out to prove the innocence of his son, Omar Yussef is lead down another complex trail of blood and mayhem, exposing a plot by Islamic Jihad to assassinate the Palestinian President while he delivers a speech before the UN. A subplot detours through the Beka Valley to a hashish-smuggling ring in New York involving Nizar and Rania's father. But the core storyline involves the previous recruitment of Omar Yussef's former students to the cause of Jihadism while under Israeli detention during the intifada. Thus unwinds a tale of collaboration with Israel, the seduction of a group of young comrades to a new political cause, the use of motifs and symbols from the Shiite cult of the assassins to encipher actions, a fatal amorous rivalry that ends in amacicide and parricide. In the end, while Omar Yussef has helped prevent the elimination of the President and proven the innocence of his son, the sleuth is unable to prevent the killing of his former pupils.

7

With four Omar Yussef mysteries now published, Matt Rees has attracted a wide following for the series, with the first book winning the prestigious Crime Writers Association's John Creasey Dagger. Rees's achievement has been favorably compared to the much longer running series of Morse and Rebus novels. For the reader, the Omar Yussef series creates a repetitive frame that allows for increasing character maturity as new knowledge of the key protagonist evolves progressively in each novel. This is a standard stratagem of much modern detective fiction which creates a growing familiarity with the characters.

In the Omar Yussef series this has been used to bring out increasing psychological and historical depth to the Omar Yussef and Khamis Zeydan characters, who evolve from novel to novel. This enables unfinished parts of previous stories to be included in subsequent ones to provide new information, e.g. we only find out in later novels in the series that Omar Yussef and his wife have adopted the children of George Saba, who was killed in the first novel. In the fourth novel we find out that Omar Yussef was a rising Baathist leader whose star waned when he was falsely accused of murder during the time when Jordan controlled the West Bank. Similarly, Khamis Zeydan develops as an increasingly complex character, who is revealed as a more important actor in the Palestine liberation movement than we are initially told in the earlier novels. While Omar Yussef is clearly the amateur sleuth, Abu Adel is shown to have played a significant role in special missions for the PLO and Arafat while in Beirut, including the revenge assassination of a Syrian agent in New York who had murdered a prominent Palestinian writer and PLO ideologue.

While such serialization enables Rees to build increasingly complex layers onto his characters and deepen the reader's understanding of Palestinian history, there is always

the danger that the virtues of realism will not trump stereotype and caricature. One is left wondering if Rees has the determination and desire to continue to develop the complexity of the series by, for example, taking on more fundamental issues than PLO and Palestinian Authority corruption and ineptitude (or at least giving them a more solid foundation and explanatory context) in a manner reminiscent of Ian Rankin, with the Edinburgh-based detective John Rebus, or James Lee Burke's New Iberia, Louisiana-based detective, Dave Robicheaux.

Despite their appeal and fast-paced storytelling, there remains something of an undemanding and naive, somewhat unreflexive, populist viewpoint underlying the historical context of the Omar Yussef novels, which are all set in the Oslo and post-Oslo periods.¹⁴ Those were and are times of dense political drama played out among Palestinians over the future of the nation, encapsulating fundamental changes in subjectivities, political mentalities and life situations. Nowhere more so than within the institutions of the Palestinian Authority, the PLO, Fatah and Hamas, whose actors are operating in a political arena and symbolic order that is significantly dependent on international players. This history finds very little real narrative purchase or materialization within the Rees novels, and is highly caricatured, e.g. the World Bank investigations into the lost millions from the Palestine Authority budget in *The Samaritan's Secret*, or the presentation of the Fatah leadership in Gaza who are delineated with very limited character and psychological depth.

By focusing primarily on power and corruption, juxtaposed with murder and mayhem, there is insufficient contextualization of Palestinian society and its symbolic order. This absence undermines narrative realism, especially when dealing with power and corruption, and the novels often have the feel of melodrama represented by a binary opposition and simple ethical antithesis between good and evil, with Omar Yussef representing goodness and virtue, while the various PLO/PA/Fatah (Jihad Awdeh, Professor Adnan Maki, General Hussein, Colonel al-Fara, and Amin Kanaan) and Hamas (Sheikh Bader) protagonists representing evil and villainy, with the struggles between and within such institutions being depicted in terms of the perversity of power rather in terms of the ideological, strategic and subjective dimensions that normally underpin political and institutional rivalries. Moreover, while recent Palestinian history has been punctuated by violent incidents and destabilizing rivalries, the Omar Yussef series tends to give the impression that murder and mayhem are perennial aspects of this society, rather than rare local episodes. While Palestinians do face perpetual violence, it is not self-inflicted but rather the more ordinary, everyday and banal brutality of prolonged military occupation and settler-colonialism.

It is now three years since the publication of the last Omar Yussef mystery, and Rees has already published a fifth novel, *Mozart's Last Aria* (2011), a historical novel set in eighteenth-century Vienna centred around Mozart's music and murder. Moreover, he has already completed a new historical novel, as yet unpublished, on the great Italian Baroque artist Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. With such a drastic change in direction, we are left wondering whether the Omar Yussef mysteries have reached

their end, or are just in a short hiatus before they begin again. It would certainly be a loss if the Omar Yussef character was to end so suddenly. But if so, Rees should be praised for giving Palestine its first exemplary detective, one who has delved into areas of Palestinian life and politics that are rarely dealt with imaginatively. Hopefully, this will inspire others to develop an original Palestinian detective genre that can explore the various sides of Palestinian society and its symbolic order that are insufficiently told in other forms of writing.

Alex Pollock is a sociologist who lives in Jerusalem and is a reader of detective fiction with an obsessive interest in psychoanalysis.

Endnotes

- 1 In this review I have used the book titles as they appeared in the UK. In the USA, the first two books were titled *The Collaborator of Bethlehem* and *A Grave in Gaza*. Moreover, the author's name in the UK titles is Matt Rees, whereas in the American editions it is Matt Benyon Rees.
- 2 Such condescension does not help us understand why two of the previous century's most masterly writers spent an unabashed part of their readerly life devouring thrillers and detective fiction. Both Jean-Paul Sartre and Walter Benjamin spent a great deal of time reading popular fiction, including the works of Georges Simenon, Pierre Véry and Edgar Allan Poe. Both found great value in such popular entertainments. Writing on Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, Walter Benjamin claims that:

The detective novel which in its early day did much to advance psychology (in Dostoevsky), has now, at the height of its development, become an instrument of social criticism.

 Moreover, on reviewing Phillip Macdonald's *Death in the Desert*, he writes: "There are adventure novels that could easily compete with highbrow literature."
- 3 Zizek's most sustained approach to reading fiction (and cinema) through the psychoanalytic gaze is in *Looking Awry: an Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1991).
- 4 On the notion of neurosis and libidinal fixation, see, J. Laplanche and J. B Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1973), 162-164, 235-240 and 266-270.
- 5 Interestingly, Mischa Hiller's *Sabra Zoo* is one of the first novels by a Palestinian to use the tragedy of Sabra and Shatilla as a focal point. He uses it as the backdrop in his coming-of-age adventure of an 18 year old Palestinian, of mixed parentage, who works as a translator for a team of international medical volunteers, while occasionally couriering for the rump of the PLO as he is pursued by the Phalangist militias across war-torn Beirut. Hiller, which is his pen name, writes in English. He was raised in Beirut and is the son of an English mother and former senior Palestinian cadre in the DFLP. While his father was forced to flee Beirut to Tunisia with the PLO leadership after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Hiller remained behind for some time before moving to England.
- 6 Similarly, without this traumatic charge, it is doubtful if Saidian critical theory would have moved beyond the US academy to affect the profound paradigmatic shifts it brought in the analysis of Orientalism, or colonial and post-colonial studies, nor become the most resounding basso voice of the public intellectual on Palestinian polity and rights. The humanist writing of Raja Shehadeh reflect how this has affected the lives and relationships of his own family after it fled Jaffa to Ramallah and after 1967 lived through the continuing occupation in the West Bank, where this inveterate walker perceives the disturbance affecting not just psychic, but also geological time in the degeneration of the Palestinian landscape through urban blight by a colonization that shreds the geographic fabric

- with no regard to its natural beauty: destroying the very thing that it seeks to possess. While the comic and ironic writing of Suad Amiry reflect the trembling and heroic efforts of family, friends and workers to surmount the Quixotic and surreal aspects of life under occupation, where the seeming pathological is most often the most normal path to tread.
- 7 In various books and articles, Jacqueline Rose uses psychoanalysis to interpret Israeli and Jewish society and its relationship to Palestine and Palestinians. See, *The Question of Zion*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), and, *The Last Resistance* (London and New York: Verso, 2007).
 - 8 Slavoj Žižek, 6.
 - 9 Žižek wrongly attributes this phrase to Groucho. In the film *Duck Soup*, it is Chico Marx who asks Margaret Dumont: “Well, who you gonna believe, me or your own your eyes?”
 - 10 Nowhere is this contradiction more clearly played out than in the circumlocutions and evasiveness of the international community’s response to the Palestinian plan to take the issue of statehood to the United Nations General Assembly.
 - 11 This situation is comparable to the parable of a mean father and a good son. The father promises his son the earth if he will only work hard to succeed in his final school exams. But when the son achieves outstanding results, the father rewards him with a miserly gift that is inappropriate for the occasion. In the Palestinian case, the scene is complicated by the fact that the examiner is also the father, and all the while there is a devious relative lurking in the background who knowingly designs and gloats at his cousin’s failure. This parable underscores a real situation, where the masked symbolic order — which is financed by billions of US dollars, supported by scores of diplomats and peacemakers, hundreds of specialist consultants, thousands of humanitarian and development workers and legions of reliant public sector workers — is increasingly seen as illusory, unsustainable and riven with bad faith, self-delusion and duplicity.
 - 12 For a country with a relatively small population, Israel has produced a slew of popular crime and mystery writers, most of whom write in Hebrew, with some of the best translated into English. Batya Gur is among the most widely known, but since her death a number of new writers have arisen, including Shulamit Lapid (set in Beer Sheva), Robert Rosenberg (Jerusalem), Ora Shamor (Tel Aviv). More recently, the established Israeli writer, Yoram Kaniuk has branched into mystery writing with *Tigerhill*. Other detective-oriented writers include Ruth Almog and Esther Ettinger, Aryah Shiva, Yoav Levitas Halevy, Amnon Jacont and Limor Nachmais.
 - 13 For those who know the UN and UNRWA, there are a number of errors regarding continuity, but these do not undermine the narrative, e.g. there has never been a tradition on international staff being directors of UNRWA schools. Also, while most other UN logos painted on installations and transport are black, those of UNRWA are light blue.
 - 14 During the earlier Oslo period there was a quite pronounced populist public backlash against PA and PLO nepotism, corruption and ineptitude that has been somewhat ameliorated by the financial management of the PA treasury under Salam Fayyad. While the perception of generalized corruption is no longer prominent among the international community, perception of favoritism, insider collusion and nepotism still remain, and have in fact risen in Gaza with the assumption of power of Hamas, which is seen to be infected with the same corruptions of power as the early PA.