

MAS
GAT
S
W
E
I
A
R
E
V
I
E
W

Stoned at Bab al-Amud

Damascus Gate,

by Robert Stone

500 pages. Houghton Mifflin Company,
1998.

In *Damascus Gate* Robert Stone evokes modern Jerusalem during the period of the intifada with detailed and precise descriptions of geography, buildings, and people. He spent a year living in the city in order to give his novel a realistic grounding, and he powerfully describes that uncertainty about identity and wariness of strangers that most Jerusalemites feel when they traverse its boundary zones and public spaces. At the same time, he transforms this modern city into an allegorical setting in which characters act out a perennial search for religious and metaphysical meanings. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict emerges as essentially a religious conflict, one characterized by

extremism on both sides, an extremism rooted in a human hunger for absolutes. Meanwhile, Jerusalem itself comes to embody the Old World, a twilight place far removed from the shallow hedonism and nihilism of American life where the idols of ancient religions live on, a place towards which the New World characters at the heart of the novel gravitate in the hope of overcoming the ontological insecurity that gnaws at them.

At the center of the novel is the character of Christopher Lucas, an American, freelance journalist who is, at a deeper level, a pilgrim coming to explore his own Old World roots. In a novel peopled by New Age believers, criminals, dreamers and fanatics of all types, Lucas is a perpetual outsider and spectator. As an American, he is also an ethnic and religious hybrid without a clear sense of identity. The son of a Jewish father and a Catholic mother, he has never felt at home anywhere, not least in Israel. His presence in Jerusalem as a magazine writer searching for a story symbolizes his yearning for deeper meanings, for a sense of metaphysical belonging. As the novel unfolds, he encounters various characters on their own pilgrimages for meaning. Fascinated by their search, he is slowly drawn into their circle, his curiosity overcoming his cynicism and ennui. Embarrassed, yet intrigued, by their visionary posturing, he finds a way to justify his association with them—as an opportunity to do research for a book about the "Jerusalem Syndrome."

Unwittingly, however, Lucas becomes entangled in a plot to blow up the Dome of the Rock in order to make way for the Third Temple and the coming of the Messiah. As the action unfolds, events come to reflect mythic patterns, the real

Jerusalem adumbrating the ideal one. The protagonists in the bomb plot, Raziël Melker and Adam de Kuff, suggest modern-day avatars of John the Baptist and Jesus. Raziël is a young hippie musician and recovering heroin addict who has been sent by his rich American Jewish parents to Israel for rehabilitation. Instead, Jerusalem brings out his messianic grandiosity and will-to-power. After spotting de Kuff in the office of a Dr. Obermann, a specialist in the "Jerusalem Syndrome," he convinces de Kuff that he is the messiah. Armed with the message that all religions are one, De Kuff starts preaching at street corners in the Old City and begins to gain a following. At one point, Raziël asks Lucas if he has ever read Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. "Yes," Lucas replies, "Didn't he say history always repeats itself twice? First as tragedy, wasn't it? Then as a farce? This is a Shakespearean foreshadowing. The participants in the bombing plot earnestly imagine they are the protagonists of a grand tragedy who are hastening the Second Coming. In reality, they are unwitting actors in a farce engineered from behind the scenes by an Israeli secret agent acting on behalf of a leading Israeli politician.

The novel relentlessly breaks down the opposition between the good guys and the bad guys. All the revolutionary idealists are exposed as the mirror image of the oppressors they want to overthrow, embracing equally pernicious stereotypes and black-and-white world views and using the same immoral means that they once deplored. Indeed the novel reduces all the various ideologies of its diverse characters to an underlying human tendency towards self-righteousness. Thus the fundamentalist Christians, the New Age dreamers, and the Palestinian communists

are all equally self-deluding and quixotic, drawn into situations beyond their control by their own idealism and naïveté. One such character is Sonia Barnes, a sufi devotee, ex-lover of Raziel, and child of an African-American father and Jewish mother, who passes as an Arab in the Old City. Lucas sees in her a kindred spirit, a similarly hybrid self living in the borderlands between various cultures, religions, and identities, and searching for meaning.

But his attraction for her leads to trouble. She draws him unawares into a plot to smuggle guns into the Gaza Strip (in exchange for drugs for financing the bomb plot). After spending a morning at Yad Vashem (the Israeli Holocaust memorial), Lucas suddenly finds himself in the hell of Gaza in the midst of the intifada. He observes that "Blind champions would forever turn the wheels in endless cycles of outrage and redress, and infinite round of guilt and grief. Instead of justice, a circular darkness." Trying to balance the two historical injustices represented by the two places against each other, he concludes that "the two were utterly unconnected, because history was moronically pure, consisting entirely of singularities. Things had no moral." In the world of the novel the Palestinian-Israeli conflict comes to symbolize the tragic consequences of the human demand for simplistic Manichaean oppositions between right and wrong, good and evil. In the face of the cycles of righteous retribution spawned by this demand, the novel affirms only a kind of wary detachment from ideological extremism. Lucas shares the religious impulse of the fanatics around him—their yearning for something more than the mundane satisfactions of getting and spending—but learns to resist the siren calls of religious certitude, returning to

America to find meaning on a less grand scale in his work and writing.

For this reader at least, *Damascus Gate* did not provide sufficient pleasures as literature to compensate for its banalities as ideology. Stone has skillfully conjured up a Jerusalem milieu through masterful descriptions and brilliant rhetorical evocations of religious ideas and traditions. But too much of the early part of the novel consists of scene setting and character introduction. Few readers will have the patience to wade through all these chapters until the action picks up in the middle. Even when it gets rolling, the plot is melodramatic and contrived. Nor is our interest sustained by the characters, who are flat and forgettable, more like mouthpieces for ideas than intriguing figures in themselves. Yet even on the level of ideas, the novel does not have much to offer. It rehearses the Orientalist stereotype of the Arab-Israeli conflict as an expression of timeless religious and ethnic hostilities in a region prone to fanaticism. In its message that each side is equally guilty and equally victimized and that the conflict is explicable in terms of a power-hungry human nature that cloaks itself in self-righteous justifications, the novel promulgates a convenient and familiar mythology of its own, one that spares the author the risk of serious political analysis. Particularly within the context of Western discourse on the Arab-Israeli conflict, this view of human nature is as ideological as the fanaticism that the book deflates. If there is a reason to read the book, it is not for its portrayal of the political conflict but for its narration of a very American quest for self-identity, for which Jerusalem is merely the backdrop.

J.D.