

## Book Review

### A Year in Jerusalem

*Jerusalem: Chronicles from the Holy City.* Guy Delisle. Translated from the French by Helge Dascher. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2012, 320 pages.

*Pastoral in Palestine.* Neil Hertz. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2013, 122 pages.

Reviewed by Penny Johnson

“A year here will be a nice change from our usual Third World destinations,” muses cartoonist and graphic travel writer Guy Delisle, as he and his family land in Ben-Gurion Airport in August 2008 (p. 8). Delisle’s previous graphic travelogues observed daily life in Pyongyang, Shezuan, and Burma, all destinations where he accompanied his wife, an administrator with Médecins sans Frontières. This time, his wife is in Gaza and Guy finds himself in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Beit Hanina with two kids to get to school and entertain; he quickly abandons the travel guide version of Jerusalem as he takes his first neighborhood walk searching for disposable diapers. Indeed, he gets a sense of déjà vu from the “non-existent sidewalks, cratered roads, random parking, stifling heat,” as well as the high-rent properties rented to NGOs, and the “palatial homes in the midst of garbage and debris” (p. 28). Plagued by the “logistics of daily life,” he finds a supermarket in the nearby settlement of Pisgat Ze’ev that has all his favorite products (“These cans are just beautiful”) before he remembers he shouldn’t shop in settlements. Woebegone, he says, “It’s only September, I can hold out a little longer,” only to step outside to see three Palestinian women with loaded shopping bags (pp. 56–57).

Delisle’s low-key tone and clear and economical drawing focus on everyday life, which includes grocery stores and checkpoints, cafes and the Wall (lots of Wall), and encounters with a range of characters, from the Lutheran priest at Augusta Victoria who loans him horror movies to armed settlers at the Jerusalem zoo (he muses that they must be worried that they will be attacked by a “ Hamas kangaroo”). Visiting the Holy Sepulchre, a priest allows “two minutes” for the crowd to descend to the crypt where Christians (except for some Protestants)

believe Jesus was buried. A confused Delisle fails to see anything: “Rats, what’s there to see? I don’t get it.” Watching a television report of priests from different orders in one of the perennial clashes at the holy site, he sighs, “Thanks, God, for making me an atheist” (p. 114).

He seems the classic naïve observer (until one notes his keen sense of absurdity), wondering at everything, puzzling over contradictions, and, generally, hoping for the best and rarely finding it. One of the delights of his *Chronicles* is the politics of the everyday: ordering a shawarma sandwich on Saladin Street, his “Salamalekum” receives the reply “Hello, young man” from the middle-aged Palestinian shopkeeper who asks him what he is doing in East Jerusalem. Guy says his wife is with Doctors without Borders. For two frames, the man carefully carves and wraps the sandwich and then, without turning, says, “There will always be borders” (p. 31).

## Garbage Irritation

Delisle’s account of a year in Jerusalem shares an obsession with garbage with Neil Hertz’s tales of his year teaching at the Abu Dis campus of al-Quds University in an honors program run jointly by Bard College and al-Quds. Wondering to his co-teacher Omar Yusuf why the upscale villas in Shu‘fat were surrounded by “stony lots laced with litter,” Yusuf explains the discriminatory lack of municipal services in East Jerusalem, but then Hertz thinks, “what of Ramallah where the Palestinian Authority picks up the trash?” And again: “But the question is not so much why isn’t trash picked up as why is it where it is in the first place: who put it there?” (p. 22) Hertz’s garbage distress is, with Yusuf’s cooperation, turned into a student discussion where culturalist explanations (Arab sense of public versus private space) contend with political analysis (it’s the occupation, stupid).

Spending a year in Jerusalem irritated by garbage, for both Delisle and Hertz, has uneasy resonance with the countless numbers of Western travellers who find the “dirt” of the Orient both repellant and characteristic. But, in different ways, both use their immediate reactions to judge themselves in their surroundings and also as an impulse to understand more. This is also the case when Hertz confronts another orientalist trope – Arabs and clan conflict – outside and (sometimes) inside the gates of the Abu Dis campus. Always inquisitive, Hertz keeps asking – the University guard succinctly replies “Arabs,” an answer that Hertz in turn interrogates. But after a “who did what to who” account of the conflict between Sawahira and Abu Dis families over a property inside the campus, he has a moment of illumination, provided by the indefatigable Amira Hass who explains how Israeli restrictions on Palestinian policing has turned Abu Dis into a “lawless enclave.” Chastened, he notes the interest of the Israeli government in promoting the “piquant but vicious illusion” of the tribal and irredeemably violent Arab and reflects “how easy it is to buy into this bit of pop ethnography” (pp. 110–11).

## Ambiguities of the Pastoral

An almost daily drive from Ramallah to Abu Dis through the winding, congested, and dangerous Wadi Nar/Tariq Abu George road that bypasses Jerusalem gives Hertz ample time to think about Israeli aesthetic and material practices towards Palestinians and the Palestinian landscape. Hertz, a literary scholar, usefully employs William Empson's notion of the pastoral as he considers "Pastoral in Palestine," the title of his reflections published in a diverting pamphlet series edited by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins. Driving by the towering Ma'ale Adumim settlement dominating Palestinian shepherds below, Hertz is interested in the pastoral as an "ambivalent hierarchical juxtaposition of two ways of life." He reflects on a text from the architect of that highly-planned and regulated settlement, Thomas Leitersdorf. Leitersdorf offers ambivalent praise for the morphology of the Arab village whose beauty "lies in its accumulative and somewhat irrational nature," then notes the lack of infrastructure, services and planning, but exclaims, "in terms of beauty they are way ahead of us!" (pp. 8–9). Another version of the pastoral cited by Hertz is the ubiquitous signs posted by realtors in upscale West Jerusalem neighborhoods announcing a beautiful "Arab style" house for sale (p. 71). Ambivalent celebrations of the pastoral indeed.

Hertz is also conscious of the ambiguities of the pastoral marking his own account: his notion can be usefully extended to reflect not only on contemporary travellers' accounts of Palestine, but also the changing dynamics in the encounters between "foreigners" (*ajaneb*) and Palestinians in the post-Oslo landscape. While internationals – from early missionaries to foreign wives to teachers and travellers – have been part of the scene in Palestine for centuries, the post-Oslo influx, particularly to Ramallah and to a lesser extent East Jerusalem, of "foreigners" working in international NGOs, a slew of government representative offices in Ramallah, the European Union, "peace-making" consortia (like the Quartet), and ever-expanding United Nations institutions, as well as unceasing waves of political tourists, might well lead to charged encounters with more than a tinge of an "ambivalent hierarchical juxtaposition of two ways of life." And if "foreigners" have changed from the period of direct military occupation where most either worked in Palestinian institutions or were part of Palestinian families, the other side of the encounter – resident Palestinians – has of course also been transformed in the complex post-Oslo landscape of new wealth, conspicuous consumption, political rivalry, and deepening social divisions. A recent example of "writing back" was *Ramallah al-Shaqra* (Blonde Ramallah), a widely read novel by Abad Yahya (Dar al-Fil, 2013) which describes the fractured Ramallah landscape and where the influx of foreigners – particularly women – serves as a trope for a range of post-Oslo dissatisfactions from social and economic divisions to failures in resistance and solidarities.

## Workshops in Ramallah and Nablus

While Hertz has the more traditional role of a university teacher in a Palestinian institution, albeit in a Jerusalem institution that is not in Jerusalem, Delisle, through the Alliance Française, is drawn into the ubiquitous post-Oslo culture of workshops, the seemingly unavoidable experience for a foreign “expert” in anything. He gives talks and workshops about his cartoons to students at al-Najah University in Nablus and to a more eclectic group of aspiring cartoonists and artists in Ramallah. In both he shows a wordless cartoon strip of his work – titled *Aline and the Others* – where the rebellious heroine Aline strips herself of her clothing. In Nablus, a third of the room, mostly young women, walk out, although the rest want to continue; in Ramallah, the audience responds simply “Ha, ha, ha.” After a boozy evening with a Nablus NGO crowd he gives a workshop to art students the next day. The students valiantly attempt to do a group exercise, despite their unfamiliarity with comics. One young man tells Delisle that he has not been out of Nablus for three years – “Nablus, the big prison, that’s what we call it here.” When Delisle responds that “you could do a comic about that,” the young man, bent over his desk, simply says (in two frames) “Nah ... who’d want to read it?” (p. 219)

## Dark Pastoral

Delisle’s generally good-natured (Canadian?) take on the city and its people is sometimes trumped by teargas at the Wall, which he visits on several occasions with the women of Machsom (Checkpoint) Watch, and sometimes by his own reflections on the bitter present and the bloody past. Standing in the Romanesque church of Saint Anne in the Old City, he thinks about the Crusader massacre of the city’s Muslim and Jewish inhabitants in 1099 and concludes: “there are no untainted spots in this city or this land” (p. 80).

Hertz, of a more ironic disposition, finds his own “dark pastoral” when he visits the Old City of Hebron and, around the corner from the Cave of the Patriarchs, comes upon a “striking piece of conceptual art”: a toy stuffed gorilla in an ironwork enclosure. With nobody around for the ever-inquisitive Hertz to ask, he says, “how you read it depends on who you believe is responsible for it.” Noting it could be a racist taunt by an Old City settler, Hertz nonetheless hopes that the “Hebron gorilla” ... “was installed in its cage by an ironical Palestinian. Take it as a sardonic comment on the racism of The Situation...” (p. 115). Or, he says, take it as a “dark pastoral,” perhaps a fitting trope for both of these accounts of a year in Jerusalem.

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