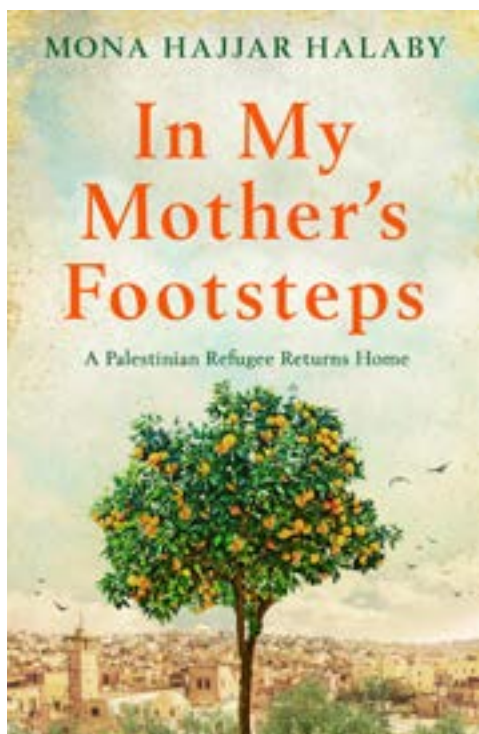


Returning to my Mother's Baq'a

In My Mother's Footsteps: A Palestinian Refugee Returns Home, by Mona Hajjar Halaby (Thread, 2021) 290 pages. Paperback, \$10.99.

Review by Nadim Bawalsa



Abstract

Mona Hajjar Halaby's memoir takes readers on a journey to Palestine, past and present. The daughter of exiled Palestinians from Jerusalem, Halaby, like many Palestinians, spent her life in the diaspora hearing stories from her mother, Zakia, of her parents' childhood and their home. Unlike most Palestinians in the diaspora, however, Halaby was able to return to Palestine to teach in Ramallah for a year in 2007. Halaby devoted herself to the children of Ramallah, on the one hand teaching them patience and introspection, and on the other, learning from their resilience and wisdom. Halaby describes in detail the impressive march she organized of a group of Palestinians and their supporters through West Jerusalem streets on the sixtieth anniversary of the Nakba in 2008. She also tells how she entered her mother's home in Jerusalem – albeit with the help of an Israeli Jew and by not revealing her true identity – and conversed with the Israeli Jewish occupants in it. A sorrowful and painful account of return that offers a moving reflection on longing and loss, Halaby's memoir is also an empowering and inspiring must read for Palestinians in exile, and for anyone interested in the historical and ongoing plight of the Palestinians.

Keywords

Palestine; Jerusalem; Ramallah; exile; Nakba; Return; Talbiyya; Baq'a; Ramallah Friends School.

Halaby's moving memoir is at once a tribute to her mother, to Jerusalem, to Ramallah, and to historic Palestine. It is an account of the Nakba recounted from the experiences of her mother and her maternal family who suffered tremendous loss and subsequent dispossession starting in 1948. It is an account of Halaby's own returns to Palestine, whether by herself over the course of an academic year in which she taught at the Ramallah Friends School, or with her mother, her sister, and her husband, to rediscover Jerusalem and their family home in Baq'a. It is an account all too familiar to Palestinians around the world.

Yet Halaby does something altogether unique: in recounting her time in Ramallah and Jerusalem during 2007 and 2008, Halaby offers a tribute to teachers, and to the Ramallah Friends School, a historic institution that has given generations of Palestinians a voice, and a safe space in which to learn how to grapple with the absurdities and indignities of life under occupation. In different chapters, Halaby takes us into her classrooms in Ramallah. She introduces us to troubled first- and sixth-graders whose development is stunted by ongoing trauma at the hands of Israeli soldiers, whether at military checkpoints, or throughout the forty-day siege and enforced closures of Palestinians in Ramallah during Israel's 2002 invasion. She invites us into conversations she has with devoted colleagues, with concerned parents, and with rowdy pre-teens. She shares her wisdom and offers invaluable insights, based on her expansive career as an educator, into the most beneficial techniques and approaches teachers and parents can adopt in caring for their students and children, and in encouraging new generations of leaders and doers.

These thoughtful interventions into educating under occupation are punctuated by gripping memories and photos of Palestinian life in Jerusalem before 1948, as recounted in letters her mother Zakia wrote to her. As a story of return to Palestine, *In My Mother's Footsteps* thus stands out. Not only are Halaby and her family members allowed entry by the Israelis, she also manages to organize a peaceful march through Talbiyya – an affluent neighborhood in western Jerusalem that was depopulated of its Palestinian residents in 1948 – on the sixtieth anniversary of the Nakba in 2008, and even to enter her family home in Baq'a, albeit with the help of Israeli Jews.

As an exiled Palestinian educator who holds U.S. citizenship, I was also able to return to Jerusalem with my mother in 2011, and to reconnect her with her father's home in Talbiyya. Yet we were not allowed in, and we certainly did not march through the occupied streets of West Jerusalem wearing T-shirts with "Nakba Survivor" printed on them. Halaby's memoir thus keeps you on the edge of your seat. On the one hand, it transports you to a Jerusalem only known through photos and memories; on the other, it injects you into a social and political scene in which Palestinian Jerusalemites, exiled and occupied, raise their voices and assert their right of return, in the heart of their ancestral city. Certainly, no other account of return to Palestine combines these elements and achieves this depth.

Beyond the pain of dispossession and exile, Halaby's memoir is a gripping reflection on loss and tragedy. Interspersed throughout the chapters are narratives of

how Halaby and her family dealt with sudden death, whether in ritualistic funerals or philosophical conversations about life and death. In a memoir of return to Palestine, these interventions seem all the more relevant and meaningful. Halaby's memoir is a testament to the profound humanity and introspective stoicism of what it means to be a Palestinian, however privileged, to which Halaby herself admits in the final section of the memoir entitled "A Letter from Mona." While a humble confession, it is nonetheless critical, for it is her privilege that ultimately allowed her to return to Palestine several times on a Western passport; it is her privilege knowing and working with progressive Israeli Jews that allowed her to enter her family home, and to march in the streets of Talbiyya; and it is her privilege that allowed her to bring new and inventive teaching methods to Ramallah's traumatized students.

As for her writing style, Halaby can be overly descriptive, at times offering metaphors and analogies that muddle rather than elucidate the intended meaning. In describing Ramallah's cacophonous streets and the "ancient" alleys of Jerusalem's Old City, Halaby at times veers towards romanticizing and exoticizing Palestine, in a way reminiscent of Orientalist depictions. While arguably suitable for a memoir of return to a beloved homeland known for its mesmerizing hills and sunsets, and for its aromatic foods and trees, the more cynical reader may find this style of writing to be overwrought and distracting. That said, the book is replete with stylistic variations, from historical overviews and detailed dialogue, to introspective queries on profound moments and memorable letters and speeches. The reader will have much to experience literarily in *In My Mother's Footsteps*.

Halaby's moving tribute to her mother and to Palestine is critical reading for anyone interested in the literary genre, and in the historical and contemporary lived experiences of exiled peoples. It is a human account of what it means to be Palestinian, and to have the fortune of returning to Palestine, however temporary.

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