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Reviewing Political Controversy:

Book Reviewers Assess Children's Literature Set in Israel-Palestine

INTRODUCTION

Reviews of children's books play a crucial role in which books are sold in stores, added to library shelves, recommended and taught in schools. School and public libraries are a major source of books for young readers (Maynard, Mackay, and Smyth 242). Librarians rely on book reviews or on vendor approval plans, which factor in favourable reviews; they cannot possibly read each book before making purchase decisions. Teachers use reviews to select books for curricular use and to recommend books to students. Booksellers use favourable reviews and awards to boost sales (Rosen 20). Authors certainly recognise the importance of having their titles reviewed; some are willing to pay for the privilege (Ishizuka 18). By their very nature, reviews influence what readers, including teachers, are positioned to think about them. In the parlance of critical discourse analysis, it is clear that book reviews enjoy privileged status as the work of experts, exerting considerable influence on the reading, book-buying public.

Yet little scholarly attention has been paid to the attitudes, practices, or criteria used by reviewers to form their evaluations. In a brief article on reviewing scholarly books, David Shatz notes that because reviews are brief and not peer-reviewed, there is little incentive to adhere to high standards; personal and political biases may intrude (40). This article examines whether this is indeed the case in the US context. It examines how book reviewers evaluate children's books on politically controversial issues, using as a case study a representative selection of picturebooks and young adult literature set in present day Israel-Palestine, published or reissued between 2000 and 2012, available in English to a US audience, and

reviewed by at least three reviewers in US outlets such as *Kirkus Reviews*, *Booklist*, and *Children's Literature Comprehensive Database*. Reviewed titles are grouped by genre: picturebooks and young adult literature, and by point of view: Israeli or Palestinian perspective. Perspective is defined here simply by the identity of the book's protagonist or narrator, not by its political stance or impact.

In *Language and Power*, critical discourse theorist Norman Fairclough maintains that ideological objectivity in research is not possible, or even desirable, since one's use of language reveals and reflects, accepts, or resists prevailing ideology. He asserts that 'The scientific investigation of social matters is perfectly compatible with committed and "opinionated" investigators' and insists that 'there are no others!' (5). In Fairclough's view, even noncommittal commentators inevitably reveal their views through their choice of words, often using generic terms and concepts from the dominant discourse, which have been internalized and accepted as 'common sense' (2). Examples of generic terms in US discourse include such phrases as 'Middle East conflict' or 'Arab-Israeli conflict' (rather than Palestinian-Israeli conflict) and 'age-old cycle of violence' (an immutable historical force rather than a fairly recent tangle of human interests). Israel's right to a secure existence is the 'common sense', unmarked theme.

Madelyn Travis observes that on this topic 'many people seem unable to separate their own deeply held opinions on the conflict from the texts themselves' (515). I acknowledge that this analysis is inevitably influenced by my own perspective—that of an American academic librarian, drawing on the tradition of progressive librarianship, which seeks to promote free expression and social justice, and interested in interpretations of war and manifestations of power in children's literature. By analysing reviews to identify common themes, I will attempt to show how reviewers approach the controversy (never stating their politics outright). I will explore whether the political stance of politically controversial books influences reviewers' evaluations, overshadowing literary or artistic considerations. Do reviewers dispute the book's

facts or call for a more balanced approach? Or, given the highly charged political atmosphere surrounding this issue in the US, do reviewers rather ignore the book's politics, suppressing their own political views? A number of the books themselves focus more on the personal lives of their characters than on politics; does empathy for the characters or the quality of the literature itself lead reviewers to a more nuanced understanding of the political dynamics? While reviewers cannot help being influenced by the dominant political discourse, this study questions whether reviewers routinely base their judgements predominantly on whether or not they agree with authors' political positions. Many of the works considered here reflect the commonly accepted positive view of Israel found in US media, but others dispute that image. Thus they form an appropriate lab in which to ask these questions.

Historically in the US, the political discourse has strongly favoured Israel. Following the Holocaust, US citizens generally supported a permanent homeland for displaced European Jews. The US government has consistently supported Israel's right to exist, supplying massive amounts of aid and arms to bolster Israel's security in the region. US media generally portray Palestinians unfavourably, decrying Palestinian acts of resistance and terrorism while downplaying Israeli provocations. Criticism of Israeli actions and policies toward Palestinians is muted in US media, and sometimes countered with charges of anti-Semitism (Bourne 126; Drake 44-6). However, support for Israel and for US policy toward Israel is not monolithic (Bourne 135; Judt A31). If it were, there would be no controversy. There are calls for an end to Islamophobia and criticism of perceived anti-Arab bias in news coverage. Sympathy for Palestinians has grown, for example, in the wake of expanding Israeli settlements into Palestinian territories and the Gaza blockade. Growing empathy is also reflected in the recent publication of several young adult books told from a Palestinian perspective, which would not have found willing publishers in decades past (Lazim;

Marston 7). Even now, however, authors of such books are considered ‘daring’ (Roback 86). Author Elizabeth Laird has referred to the topic as ‘a bit of a snake pit’ (Travis 515).

Children in the US today are exposed to very little contemporary international literature. Good books on international topics could help young readers expand their intercultural understanding and critically examine their own cultural identity and worldview (Short 10). Book reviewers, by bringing such titles to the notice of book buyers and children, provide a valuable resource. Therefore, and particularly in the case of controversial topics, the bases for reviewers’ evaluations bear examination.

PICTUREBOOKS: ISRAELI PERSPECTIVE

Five representative picturebooks from an Israeli perspective were identified. Four of the five involve Israeli characters only. *First Rain* (Herman) is the story of the long-distance relationship between a young Jewish-American emigrant to Israel and her American grandmother. All ten reviewers are complimentary. They approve of its educational content; for example, it ‘provides much information about day to day life in Israel’ (*Children’s Bookwatch*). They endorse its ‘very positive picture of normal Israeli life’ (Silver), which ‘offers a good look at contemporary secular life in Israel’ (Weisman). Two reviewers (Smith; Tillman) comment positively on its depiction of Israel’s diversity, though this is suggested only in a few illustrations and never mentioned in the text. One praises the story’s comparison of ‘two cultures,’ referring not to Arab and Israeli culture, but to US and Israeli culture (Tillman). Reviews of this story are typical of reviewers’ treatment for this category. *Jodie’s Hanukkah Dig* (Levine), *Harvest of Light* (Ofanansky and Alpern), and *Zvuv’s Israel* (Lehman-Wilzig) are similar in that they depict the normal life of Jewish children in Israel. Reviewers approve of their educational value. One finds the absence of Yad Vashem from *Zvuv’s Israel* ‘oddly absent’ (*Kirkus*). Only one notes this book’s ‘decidedly Jewish bias’, citing the omission

of ‘non-Jewish people and places in Israel’ (Marcus). Palestinians and other ethnic groups are absent from both the books and the other reviews.

The last book in this category is *Snow in Jerusalem* (da Costa), about a Jewish boy in Jerusalem who cares for a stray cat but finds that a boy from the Muslim Quarter also claims her. The two argue over who owns the cat, resolving the conflict when they discover her kittens and agree to share. While the text tells us that Jerusalem is a divided city, the author emphasises similarities in the boys’ lives and makes no mention of ethnic, political or religious conflict. Reviews of this title are somewhat mixed. One calls it a ‘high-minded and good-hearted story’ (*Kirkus*). Another finds it ‘wondrously warm’, ‘an armchair trip into that exotic, fabled and troubled city’ (Chernak). Another finds it a ‘simple and effective tale’ about ‘overcoming prejudice’ (Spano). One praises the author for taking ‘great care not to politicize this book’ (Smith). Others relate the story specifically to ‘Middle East politics’ and consider it ‘simplistic’ (Lilien-Harper; Zvirin). Those who do not relate the story to the conflict praise its message of hope, several noting its sensitive portrayal of ethnic diversity, while omitting any mention of ethnic conflict (Roback; Smith). Thus reviewers who disregard the political conflict praise this book, while those who read it as a political statement resist what they consider its simplistic solution of peace through friendship and sharing.

PICTUREBOOKS: PALESTINIAN PERSPECTIVE

Sitti’s Secrets (Nye) is the story of Mona, a Palestinian-American girl visiting her grandmother in her West Bank village. It is, on the surface, apolitical except for a letter Mona writes to the US president after watching the news, telling him that she and her grandmother both ‘vote for peace’ (n.p.). The subtext is the untold story of why the family is separated and what Mona saw on the news that prompted her to write such a letter. All six reviews praise this story for its sensitive rendering of the cultural understanding and

warm family ties that develop between grandmother and granddaughter. All mention the letter, most acknowledging Mona's legitimate fears for her grandmother's security. None mentions the absence of Israeli characters. One, however, objects to the letter for politicizing the story since 'No hint of conflict has been presented up until now. And what is the President supposed to do?' (Robertson). While praising the story for demonstrating 'the beauty and rhythms of daily life in the Palestinian community', Robertson objects that when the author 'abandons story for political ends, she manipulates her readers in a way that feels contrived'. As in Smith's review of *Snow in Jerusalem*, which praises the author for not politicizing the book, this reviewer sees political context as an inappropriate, obtrusive element.

The other picturebook from a Palestinian perspective is *A Child's Garden: A Story of Hope* (Foreman). Illustrations in this allegorical story of cooperation between opposing sides strongly suggest a Middle Eastern setting, noted by several reviewers. A child in a rubble-strewn area (read Palestinian territories) nurtures a sprouting vine, but soldiers destroy it. It sprouts again beyond the barbed-wire fence, where it flourishes, tended by a girl from the opposite side. Four of the five reviews stress its message of hope. None questions why the soldiers (from the prosperous side of the fence) do not tear down the vine when it grows on their side. Literary evaluation is cursory, praising the book as 'charming' (White), a 'tribute to the human spirit' (Sloan). These reviewers avoid any reference to contemporary politics. As with *Sitti's Secrets* and *Snow in Jerusalem*, reviewers who focus on the story's oblique political references are more critical. *Publishers Weekly* finds its message 'overly literal and emotionally heavy-handed' and warns that 'even children with a strong political conscience may bridle at its preachiness'. Another finds the story sentimental, calling it a 'vision of persecution and rebirth', an 'effective starter for peacemongering discussions' (*Kirkus*). Use of such loaded terms as 'persecution' and 'peacemongering' suggest strong but unspecified views. Another notes its 'overt symbolism' and 'heavy messages', cynically describing the

story's ending as 'a long trail of happy kids winding into flower-strewn hills' to a 'joyful harmonious world' (Engberg). This reviewer also worries about exposing readers to 'disturbing images of wire, ruins, and armed men', revealing both skepticism about possibilities for peace and assumptions about the implied audience--secure Western children not exposed to violent conflict.

Reviews of these two picturebooks generally approve their messages of hope and their sensitive portrayals of Palestinian characters and culture. Those who do not perceive undercurrents of the current conflict find them heart-warming and unobjectionable. Others would be more comfortable without reminders of the present conflict. The book with the strongest message of hope, *A Child's Garden*, is also the most explicit in portraying the stark impacts of that conflict on Palestinians, and it evokes the most criticism. Some in effect argue that picturebooks are not an appropriate place for political content, despite the fact that political conflict is an integral part of these characters' lives. Some reviewers see this as politicisation, inappropriate and too disturbing (for young US readers). Reviewers of the picturebooks from the Israeli perspective uniformly approve their educational content, including portrayal of peaceful Israeli life as 'normal' and homogeneous. Only one calls for inclusion of non-Jewish characters. These books raise no political issues for reviewers. They demonstrate the US pro-Israeli discourse by objecting to the political aspects of Palestinian narratives while failing to recognise that the Israeli titles reflect a related political reality.

YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: ISRAELI PERSPECTIVE

Four titles were identified in this category. *Freefall* (Levine) and *When I Was a Soldier* (Zenatti) tell similar stories of girls beginning their compulsory Israeli military service. Both books devote more space to the girls' nervous anticipation, friendships and rivalries, love lives and boot camp, than to their actual

military service. Two reviewers of *Freefall* treat the absence of politics and Palestinians ('the enemy') as a harmless oversight: 'Oddly enough, even though this is about Israel, there is very little about the enemy or about the politics of the struggle' (Rosser), while Rochman notes 'There is no talk of politics or enemies or peace in this stirring novel'. Rochman advises paring it with one about 'Palestinian families in wartime' to provide balance. Another reviewer approves of its 'wholesome messages,' its portrayal of the 'normalcy' of Israeli life, and its inclusion of diversity: 'e.g., Ethiopian, Moroccan, and Kurdish Jews' (Berson).

When I was a Soldier evokes a wider range of viewpoints. Most note the protagonist, Valerie's growth from shallow teen to responsible citizen and soldier (Horning *et al.*; Isaacs; *Kirkus*), but differ in their assessment of literary merit, from 'merely light reading' (Stein) to 'compelling memoir' (Isaacs). Some note Valerie's ambivalence toward Palestinians and the army's role in the conflict (Isaacs; Rochman), but two reviewers imply that her concern for Palestinians amounts to mere lip-service (Glatt; *Kirkus*). Others skirt the politics of Valerie's situation, emphasising the book's educational uses, for example, for observing 'day-to-day occurrences on the army base', (Stein), or gaining 'insight into an experience foreign to most American teenagers' (Horning *et al.*). In short, while some reviewers fault the book for its focus on trivial teen concerns and lack of political substance, others admire Valerie's national pride and growing maturity. They recommend the book as an eye-opener for US readers, without faulting its exclusively Israeli perspective or calling for any elaboration on the actual military conflict for which Valerie trains so hard.

A Bottle in the Gaza Sea (Zenatti) unfolds as an email correspondence. Tal, an Israeli teenager, troubled by the violence between Palestinians and Israelis, sends a message in a bottle to Gaza. It is answered by Naim, a young Palestinian. A relationship of trust slowly develops as the two begin to understand and care for each other. Several reviewers are equivocal in their opinions on this book, calling

it, for example, both ‘well-written’ and ‘poetic’, but also ‘uneven’ and ‘slow’ (Cole). Another feels it will ‘draw teens’ but is ‘contrived’ and ‘messagey’ (Rochman). A few comment on its educational value (Ingram; *Kirkus*) though Ingram condemns it with faint praise as ‘useful in the classroom’ but interesting only to those ‘few’ who are ‘interested in international issues’. Several approve of its balanced characterization of Palestinian and Israeli characters and its message of hope or peace (Andronik; *Kirkus*; Rochman). For others it is too balanced; for example, Bush complains that it ‘oozes the good intention of offering equal voice to Israeli and Palestinian viewpoints’, while Cole finds Israeli Tal ‘immediately embraceable’ but Palestinian Naim ‘atypical of his population’ and ‘worrisome in his bona fides.’ Cole also contrasts the book’s ‘Middle Eastern despair’ with Tal’s ‘pervasive hope’ and objects to its ‘graphic violence’. Thus the overt political nature of this book provokes these reviewers’ resistance (evident in stereotyping and value-laden words such as ‘atypical’, ‘Middle Eastern despair’, ‘worrisome’, ‘embraceable’, and ‘oozes’); their unspoken pro-Israeli position hinders suspension of disbelief in the Palestinian character.

Real Time (Kass) uses a multi-perspective technique to follow events surrounding a suicide bomber’s attack on a packed bus. As both Israeli and Palestinian characters recount their stories, readers learn how their past and present lives intersect. Many reviewers praise this book, all mentioning its multi-perspective technique as a positive element ensuring a balanced approach, though several remark on the degree of overall balance. One finds the Israeli characters ‘drawn with complexity’, ‘if somewhat idealized’ whereas the Palestinians are ‘flat and distant’ (Rochman). Another finds the ‘underlying message [. . .] strongly political (pro Israeli)’ though the author ‘strives to remain objective’ (*Publishers Weekly*). Silver finds the two sides balanced, ‘allowing the readers to draw their own conclusion’, then points out appreciatively that the novel shows ‘how Israelis have adapted to terrorism, perfecting emergency procedures while

clinging to a semblance of normalcy'. Silver says nothing of its Palestinian characters except that 'remarkably' the novel has 'no villains, not even the Palestinian boy who aspires to martyrdom'. Wilson notes the book's pro-Israeli bias, but objects to its stereotypical portrayal of Jews as victims. Reviewers agree this is a gripping novel that attempts a balanced approach. Some feel it favours Israel and fails to develop Palestinian characters and thus fails to achieve that balance. Those who approve its pro-Israeli slant praise the book. Reviewers' estimations of the worth of the novel mirror the political divisions; their notions of balance reflect political leanings.

As in the case of the Israeli-perspective picturebooks, reviewers of books in this category who reflect the dominant discourse find little fault with young adult books told from a purely Israeli political perspective. In the case of books that explicitly portray both sides empathetically, such as *Real Time* or *A Bottle in the Gaza Sea*, some reviewers find fault with titles they feel tip toward one side or the other.

YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: PALESTINIAN PERSPECTIVE

Five representative titles from a Palestinian perspective were identified. *Samir and Yonatan* by Israeli author Daniella Carmi explores the developing trust between Palestinian protagonist, Samir, awaiting surgery in an Israeli hospital and his Israeli roommate Yonatan. The author explores Samir's anxieties and the harsh realities of his life (including his brother's death at the hands of Israeli soldiers). Responding to Yonatan's overtures, Samir's fear and distrust give way to friendship as Yonatan shows Samir how to escape into his imagination. Reaction to this title is similar to that of *A Child's Garden*. Most reviewers (seven out of eight) heartily approve its message of peace and hope through cross-cultural friendships. One finds the Israeli character, Yonatan, 'too saintly' (Rochman), but finds the journey of discovering common ground

inspiring. Another, however, finds its political message ‘forced and heavy-handed’ (Bush). As in reactions to picturebooks about similar friendships, this reviewer resists simplistic solutions.

Tasting the Sky (Barakat) is a memoir of the author’s early childhood, during and after the Six Day War, when her family was forced to flee their home in Ramallah as refugees. The many reviews are unanimous in praising its rich evocation of childhood memories. Most express sympathy for the protagonist and a few explore its literary excellence (Mathis; Talbott; Rochman). Several stress the author’s balanced approach in seamlessly blending the ‘ordinary and the extraordinary’ (Horning *et al.*; Rochman), that is, everyday life and the perils and privations of military occupation. Berson praises balance of another sort, equating the author’s ‘harsh descriptions of Israeli soldiers’ with the ‘hardships imposed by fellow Palestinians such as abusive teachers’; she recommends it, but only ‘to the extent that young Jewish readers should be familiar with stories of life in the West Bank from 1967 to 1981’, and with the admission that it is ‘hard to argue with the honest recollections of a single individual’, and the caveat that it ‘impacts upon the Jewish experience but does not reflect it’. Another praises the author for refraining from ‘political analyses’ while warning that it is not a book for readers who think ‘Israel is always in the right’ (Steffen). Several note the book’s educational value, providing US readers with an unfamiliar viewpoint (Isaacs; Mathis; Steffen). One recommends it for studying ‘Middle Eastern history and culture’, but worries young readers may find some scenes ‘disturbing’ and Palestinian culture ‘vastly different from their own’ (Smith). These various comments reveal an assumption that the implied audience is Jewish and/or American, not Palestinian or Palestinian-American and that a non-Israeli perspective requires explaining. Many find in the book a message of hope (Smith; Mathis), although it envisions no resolution of the conflict. For these reviewers, the author’s enduring hope makes the story acceptable and inspiring, despite dim prospects for peaceful settlement.

A Little Piece of Ground (Laird) recounts young Karim's attempt to claim space for a soccer field with his friends, despite the restrictions and incursions of Israeli occupation. Curfews and humiliations at the hands of Israeli soldiers drive the boys to daring confrontations. This title was controversial enough to merit a National Public Radio interview with its British author to discuss charges of one-sidedness and propaganda (Brand), but published reviews are less critical. One characterizes as 'chilling' the scene in which the wounded boys are celebrated publicly as heroes (Renner). Another calls the book 'largely a docu-novel' and recommends pairing it with books from an Israeli perspective (Rochman). However, others find it 'stunning, sobering' (Sutorius), 'tense, forthright' (Horning *et al.*), 'well-written and compelling' (MacGregor). None finds in it or insists on a message of hope. Rather, one reviewer notes the older teens' 'growing sense of anger' and a growing 'hopelessness' among the adults (Horning *et al.*). Sutorius notes that Laird 'minces no words' and commends her refusal to make this a 'story of two enemies becoming friends'. Notably, none of these reviewers calls for more balanced presentation. They do not mistake the characters' determined endurance or resistance for a hopeful, happy ending but rather respond to the author's convincing story-telling and accept as valid the novel's imbalance and lack of hope for peace.

The Shepherd's Granddaughter (Carter) also sparked controversy when released. The protagonist, Amani, a Palestinian girl, is passionate about becoming a shepherd like her grandfather. But Israelis continually encroach, eventually destroying their ancestral home, olive grove, and livelihood to build Israeli settlements and roads. Two reviewers object to its purely Palestinian perspective. One refers to those ancestral family lands as 'disputed territories' (Kamin); she calls the book 'compelling, beautifully written' but 'unbalanced, biased, and distorted', not 'evenhanded' enough for this 'complicated' issue. The other terms it 'an artfully written . . . political tract in the guise of a children's novel' that portrays Israelis as 'evil' and 'lacks subtlety', the author presenting the 'Arab-Israeli' conflict from 'her own viewpoint'

(Rapp). The expectation that YA books should end in hope is seen in one review that asserts that this book ‘allows readers to ponder how hope can exist within conflict, and how people working together can create peace and safety where sometimes governments fail’ (Johnson), despite the fact this novel hardly ends in peace or safety or any hope of restitution for Amani’s family. Seven others praise the book, finding it ‘informed, compassionate’ (Brown), ‘well-told, highly engaging’ (Bryan), ‘information-packed but never didactic’, a ‘moving narrative’ (*Kirkus*). Many commend its balanced presentation in that it includes the varied political views of both Palestinian and Israeli characters (Horning *et al.*; Johnson; *Kirkus*; Nightingale): ‘Carter clearly conveys a particular point of view, but she neither demonizes all Israelis nor exalts all Palestinians’ (*Kirkus*). Proponents of this form of balance do not insist on a particular political slant as long as authors include sympathetic characters from both sides. Others value the book’s Palestinian perspective as educational, since it is rare (Nightingale; Johnson; Bryan), though Bryan warns the book ‘presents just one side’ and twice calls it ‘troublesome’. Thus those who find some measure of hope, balance in its characters, or educational potential praise this book, whereas those who find it entirely pro-Palestinian are highly critical.

Finally, *Where the Streets Had a Name* (Abdel-Fattah) follows Hayaat, a Palestinian girl living in Bethlehem, on her journey into Jerusalem to bring back soil for her ailing grandmother from her lost Jerusalem home. Restrictions imposed by Israeli occupation make the six-mile trip long, illegal and dangerous. Reviews of this title are mixed. They range from completely negative: ‘The unrelenting portrayal of the Palestinians as innocent victims makes this coming-of-age novel inappropriate for libraries’ (Bloch) to completely positive: ‘beautifully written book that puts a very human face on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict’ (Gross). Positive reviews place a premium on hope, humour, and balance. One calls it ‘a story that illuminates the importance of laughter, love, and above all, hope’ (Horning *et al.*). Many

commend the author for providing balance by including helpful Israeli characters (Horning *et al.*; Gross; McKellar; Rochman), noting, for example, that Abdel-Fattah has walked ‘the line of truth-telling’ and ‘avoided vilifying Israelis’ (McKellar) who are ‘not one-dimensional. There are kind soldiers, but also martinets’ (Gross). Several note its educational potential for teaching about Palestinians and the conflict (Kirkus; Snyder).

A textual comparison of two extremes, one negative and one positive review of this title, highlights how reviewers’ political stance colours their reviews. A reviewer for the *Association of Jewish Libraries Reviews* (Bloch) emphasises security (Israel’s), referring to curfews as ‘security curfews’ and to the checkpoints as ‘security measures’ which she feels the author exploits unfairly to show that ‘Israelis are oppressing the Palestinians’, who are inaccurately portrayed as ‘innocent victims.’ Bloch minimizes the gravity of the scene in which Hayaat’s face is disfigured and her best friend is killed by referring to it as merely a ‘scuffle’ between ‘Palestinian and Israeli soldiers’. She uses passive voice in referring to the injury, and omits any reference to the killing. She finds the book ‘inappropriate’ and lacking the ‘balanced approach’ needed for such a ‘complicated subject.’ On the other hand, the *Kirkus* reviewer uses emotive words showing sympathy for the Palestinian family’s current situation and past losses; for example, ‘Israelis confiscate and demolish their home’; they ‘endure curfews, checkpoints, and concrete walls, exiled in a cramped apartment’ while Hayaat’s father ‘silently mourns his lost olive groves’; Hayaat sets out on a ‘harrowing mission into forbidden territory’. This reviewer concludes that the book provides ‘an intimate glimpse into the life of her warm, eccentric Muslim family’ and a ‘refreshing and hopeful teen perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian dilemma’. The negative review denounces the book’s entirely one-sided perspective, while the positive review accepts the imbalance as a ‘glimpse into the life’ of Palestinians, valuable because it is rare in the literature. The latter does not insist on balance within a single title.

CONCLUSIONS

In the reviews examined here, opinions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict range widely. Books told from a Palestinian perspective are now being published in the US and are often favorably reviewed. Yet it is clear from this survey that the US pro-Israeli discourse remains quite strong, and does strongly influence many reviewers' evaluations. There are many negative reviews of books reflecting a perceived Palestinian bias, despite the fact that in general, in children's literature in the US, negative reviews are uncommon and even excluded by some publications (Dublin 7). There are also many positive reviews of such books, particularly where balanced treatment makes them politically acceptable.

Several recurring themes emerge in these reviews, namely, balance, hope, avoidance, and educational value. Insistence on balance is the strongest of these, though the principle is selectively applied and seldom invoked when the perspective is deemed apolitical or sufficiently pro-Israeli. Perhaps the ideal of balanced, objective coverage in academic writing and in US news media contributes to this expectation of a balanced approach to controversial, real-world topics in literature. However, this ideal is inherently problematic when applied to literature. One person's balance is another's bias; the same book may elicit both charges of bias and praise for evenhandedness. Yet while many reviews cited above show sympathy for one side or the other, with few exceptions reviewers assume that justice must lie somewhere in the middle, wherever that middle might be. Books that do include both perspectives are often carefully judged on whether they exhibit the proper degree of balance. The argument is that fairness requires that both sides be given a hearing: both sides have good arguments and both suffer. Yet the extreme disparity in the political power of the two sides in this case is a reality that cannot be ignored in any discussion of balance.

Furthermore, authors create characters based on their own political perspective, to which they are entitled,

and on the imperatives of their narratives, rather than invent characters to serve as emblematic representations of all points of view. In literature, as in reality, the social, economic, and political milieu impacts people's lives and so cannot be edited out. These factors make balance an unreasonable criterion for judging a literary work in which the characters live on one or the other side of a great political divide.

A related theme to emerge here is the expectation that hope ought to predominate. Many reviewers emphasise the redeeming value of hope, and substitute the beauty of hope for political or literary judgement, some finding hope even when the books themselves are bleak in outlook. As with balance, the endorsement and expectation of hope is selectively applied, more often to Palestinian characters. Reviews of Palestinian-perspective stories sometimes conflate hope with the endurance of Palestinian characters, whose will to survive provides the semblance of a happy ending that actual events can't. Some reviewers revert to hopeful platitudes such as 'triumph of the human spirit' or 'global understanding', thereby concluding on a positive, yet neutral note. Others stress the 'complexity' of the situation, implying that children are too young to understand it, or that the 'dilemma' can never be resolved, often invoking this term when the story does not reflect a sufficiently Israeli perspective. Therefore they doubt 'simplistic' solutions and are skeptical of stories in which characters from opposite sides become friends, showing adults a path to hope and peace. They object to politics' intrusion into children's literature, with its uncomfortable reminders of conflict and violence, but seem unable to resist reading politics into stories of cross-cultural friendships. Thus belief in hope, or lack of it, is another non-literary quality, based on political viewpoint, often used to evaluate these books.

Avoidance of the political controversy is also common in many reviews, and shows the strength of the US discourse on Israel in several ways. It is evident, for example, in favorable reviews of books about the privations of Palestinian life that avoid partisanship by including sympathetic Israeli characters. It is also

seen in reviews of books that do not explicitly refer to the conflict. Reviewers approve, for example, of picturebooks about Israeli children whose lives (in the books at least) are unaffected by the political conflict and expect books about Palestinian children to be equally oblivious to it. Some find political conflict inappropriate for young readers and object to its intrusion, for example, in books about cross-cultural friendships or about Palestinian life under Israeli occupation. They object to exposing young US children to the harsh realities of violent conflict; some even object to exposing them to very different (Palestinian) cultures. While it may be argued that protectionism has always been a strong element in Western children's literature, in fact, violence and danger have always been integral to its plots, and in recent decades few taboos remain. Books on the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and slavery, for example, abound. It is rather reviewers, parents, or teachers (never children) who object to strong doses of reality in their literature (Hearne 458). When it comes to current conflicts, children themselves want to know more: Ellen Seiter, in her study of US children's reactions to media coverage during the first Iraq War, found that children resented adults' 'reticence' to discuss the war with them, and found the adults' focus on easing their fears "patronizing" (40). As Peter Hunt notes, protectionists' objections have 'generally hinged on the reluctance of adults to acknowledge the way in which childhood and the world were developing' (16).

Many reviewers conclude with potential educational uses for these books, a major criterion in many reviews. They view them as tools for teaching about foreign countries (e.g., the 'Middle East'), or exposing readers to unfamiliar places and people. Stressing the historic complexity of the situation, they approve of books that may be used to stimulate classroom discussion. Some stress the value of showing diversity to teach tolerance, though the diversity (and tolerance) in many of these books is quite limited. Finally, while some reviewers approve of individual one-sided books, they recommend pairing them in the classroom with books from the opposing side. Their message is, in effect, that these are political tracts, incomplete on their

own. There is little emphasis on simply promoting good literature in which the rich insights into the characters' experience, as conveyed by a gifted author, form the basis for literary judgements and enhance readers' appreciation for others' realities.

Analysis of these reviews shows politics' pervasiveness as an overriding consideration in evaluating books on this controversial topic. Given the impossibility of suppressing one's political views, particularly those based on deeply held beliefs about nationhood and justice, recognizing one's viewpoint becomes all the more important to prevent its overshadowing all other considerations: 'Interculturalism does not begin with the ability to consider other points of view, but with the realization that you have a point of view' (Short 3). This includes recognizing the pervasiveness of the dominant discourse. For many adults, children's literature is the realm of nostalgia. It has been for them protected territory: a world without politics. Children's books set in explicit contemporary conflict situations take such readers out of their comfort zone, disturbing their notions of childhood and confronting them with questions of partisanship and injustice. Reviewers must accept that political conflicts have deep impacts on children's lives, which are bound to be reflected in the literature for and about them. The usefulness of a book as an educational tool is a narrow conception of its value. Balance is a slippery concept, inappropriate as a measure of the worth of a literary work in a society that champions free expression. Hope is a wonderful and vital quality, but as a requirement for children's fiction it is unreasonable when many real children suffer the same dire situations as the fictional children.

Insisting on favorable portrayal of the politics of one side or another, insisting on balanced treatment that does not tilt toward one side or the other, or insisting on hopeful endings would mean limiting the range of situations authors may explore and contradict the goals of promoting cultural understanding, tolerance, and appreciation for good literature. As criteria for evaluating a literary work,

these factors cannot do justice to the work. If we expect young readers to open themselves to experiencing new cultures and new worldviews through books, we should ask no less of book reviewers.

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