



The Depiction of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Contemporary Children's Fiction: Part 1

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Professor Fouad Moughrabi discusses Lynne Reid Banks' **Broken Bridge**.

What picture of the Israeli-Palestinian question do children gain from reading contemporary fiction? Do such titles help young readers to understand the complexities of the situation and identify empathically with the protagonists, whether Palestinian or Israeli? In this first part of his article, **Professor Fouad Moughrabi** focuses on Lynne Reid Banks'

Broken Bridge .

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My son Raja, who is now twelve, attends a good magnet school* in Chattanooga, Tennessee. As a Palestinian child who lived for three years in Ramallah during Israel's most recent reinvasion of Palestinian cities, he has seen his share of tanks, helicopter gun ships and F-16 aircraft sending missiles into populated urban areas of the West Bank. Back in Tennessee, he is asked to sing songs in Hebrew to celebrate Yom Kippur; he is given assignments dealing with the holocaust; and he was told by one teacher that his impressions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are simply in his head. One day he came home with a book his teacher had given the class to read, Lynne Reid Banks' novel **Broken Bridge** (1996) about the Israeli-Palestinian question, a sequel to an earlier book, **One More River** (1973) about life on an Israeli kibbutz.

To her credit, my son's social science teacher, a well intentioned and excellent teacher, told me that she had been looking for a 'balanced' novel on this topic. It seems she had a vague notion that she was delving into a rather controversial area. At the same time, like most American school teachers, she lacked any historical knowledge that would enable her to talk about the context of the novel. Thus the notion of balance became perverted, as we shall see in a moment, despite the honest and good intentions of a well meaning teacher.

I read the novel carefully and decided to write this article in which I argue that although **Broken Bridge** is superbly written, it is not a 'balanced' way to introduce Israeli-Palestine issues to a seventh grade class. I discuss some better alternatives in the second part of my article.

Stereotyped Arabs

[image:Broken Bridge cover.jpg:left] **Broken Bridge** relates the aftermath of the stabbing in Jerusalem of a Jewish teenager visiting from Canada, by two Palestinians. The teenager's cousin, who is walking with him, is inexplicably spared and has to contend with conflicting emotions, at one point refusing to identify one of the assailants in a police lineup.

The core of the book and its starting point is this shocking act of violence perpetrated against a teenager with whom most Western readers will immediately identify. However, while the Israeli Jewish characters are well developed to the point where we can even empathize with them, the Arab characters are nebulous, distant and threatening.

The first Arab character to appear at the beginning of the book is a taxi driver: 'If it's an Arab driver, don't get in! Why? Dangerous.' Soon thereafter another Arab character appears who is a murderer: news comes on the radio: 'A child's been stabbed in the street? It just happened. It was in Gilo, right near here. Right out in the street in broad daylight! Can you imagine? Some dirty Arab murderer? How old was the child? A teenager. That's all they said. Some teenage kid right here in our district! Lesley, what are we coming to, they're killing our children in the street!'

The idea that Arabs represent a pervasive danger is immediately followed by the scene in which an Arab stabs a Jewish teenager and the tone for the entire story is set. Furthermore, the event happens in Gilo, a suburb of Jerusalem, referred to by the Israeli characters in the story as 'our district'. Just how many American school teachers would know that Gilo is, in fact, a Jewish settlement, illegal according to international law, because it is built on confiscated Palestinian land in full view of the Arab village whose inhabitants still carry the deeds to their stolen land?

We are shown Mustapha, one of the main Arab characters in the story, talking his nephew into becoming a 'fighter'. They both embark on the operation during which Feisal, the nephew, kills the Jewish teenager from Canada. Mustapha, however, mysteriously ends up sparing the life of the boy's cousin, a girl who was walking with him. Other Arab characters are presented as untrustworthy informers - they include Ali who tries to save his job at a Jewish restaurant in Jerusalem by reporting to the Israelis about his neighbours in the nearby village and Mustapha's brother-in-law who becomes a collaborator and finally betrays him to the authorities.

The author informs us of the training that Mustapha received in order to become a terrorist: 'When Mustapha had been sent abroad for training, he was made, among other things, to bite the heads off live chickens to toughen him up. Not that he'd needed it - not after what he'd been through. Each time he had told himself that the chicken was the Jew who had interrogated him? But Feisal was not so strong and tough as Mustapha thought he needed to be.' We don't know if most Israelis truly believe this blatant piece of propaganda about how Palestinians allegedly train to become 'terrorists'. However, such stories appear over and over again in the Israeli media and in popular literature.

A people without a history

In a rather odd twist, the author informs us that Mustapha is said to be originally from a small village in Jordan, just across the border, and therefore not a native Palestinian. We are told that his father had brought him to the West Bank after the June 1967 war, leaving his mother and sisters behind, in order to help fight the Jews. This gives credence to an Israeli generated myth, now believed by most Jews, that the native Palestinians are not unhappy with their lot and would prefer to live under Israeli control if it weren't for the troublemakers who sneak in from the neighbouring Arab countries and who are determined to drive the Jews into the sea.

In contrast to the Jewish characters in the story who are playful, cultured and normal human beings, the Arabs appear as nondescript, without a history and a normal existence. The author does describe the anxiety that Feisal undergoes before he commits his violent act. Yet there is nothing in any of the Arab characters that would make the reader empathise with them. They remain dark and shadowy figures, always lurking in alleyways, waiting to pounce on some unsuspecting Jew.

An attempt at balance

To her credit, the author does make an attempt at balance. But this balance is rather odd because it is not a balance between Israeli and Palestinian narratives. There is very little here about the Palestinian narrative. We are offered scattered tidbits about how bad the occupation is. We are told what fanatical religious Jewish settlers do to terrorize Arab villagers (Banks fails to mention that they do so while the Israeli army often simply looks on). She provides a passing reference to the 300 plus Palestinian villages razed to the ground by the Israelis in 1948 in order to make sure the Arab refugees will never be able to return. The reader thus learns very little about the Palestinians, who they are and why they sometimes behave the way they do.

What appears to be 'balance' in the book is in fact the presentation of the debate within Israel itself between Israelis who hold the Palestinian Arabs with racist contempt and Israelis who argue that the Israeli occupation of Arab lands and

the harsh treatment of Palestinians by their Israeli occupiers may account for Palestinian acts of violence against the Jews. The author captures this debate rather well. However, most American readers lack the necessary historical knowledge that would provide the Palestinian context for the story Banks is telling and therefore assume that this is a book that tries to promote peace. And herein lies the key problem with choosing a book like this as an introduction to this conflict. Without some knowledge of the context, of the history and of the nuances of the place, one ends up simply adding insult to injury and reinforcing pre-existing stereotypes that dehumanize Arabs. In the end, the media stereotype of the Arab as 'terrorist' is given a substantial boost by this book and will be reinforced in the minds of American children.

Broken Bridge frames the Israeli-Palestinian conflict almost solely in terms of conflict and violence ? in this case, Palestinian violence against Israelis thereby making the Arabs the perpetrators and the Israelis the victims. There is nothing about the richness of the Palestinian narrative and its complexity. After reading the book, the reader understands why Israelis engage in acts of violence against Arabs and may even sympathise with them but the reader does not understand the circumstances that drive some Palestinians to engage in violence. More importantly, one does not see any glimmer of hope that this cycle of violence will ever come to an end, as if it really were an immemorial kind of conflict.

A moral debate?

All this is troubling enough. But there are issues that are even more troubling. **Broken Bridge** is fundamentally the chronicle of a moral debate. But, because only Israeli Jews are presented as human beings, the debate occurs amongst them. In principle, this is fine except that it rests on an artificial premise: what the author does not tell us is that those who hold Arabs with racist contempt are in fact the majority among Israeli Jews, as confirmed over and over again by Israeli public opinion surveys. By contrast, those who argue for a humane approach to dealing with the Palestinian Arabs are in reality a very tiny minority whose voice is marginalized in Israeli society. The impression that there is a vigorous and healthy moral debate in Israel is simply fraudulent or an example of wishful thinking among well meaning writers and intellectuals that serves to present Israel as a normal, civilized, and democratic society where such debates are said to occur.

I write this on the day that my family and I attended the bar mitzvah of my son's classmate and friend Aaron Steinberg. I was deeply touched when Aaron spoke so eloquently about the need for Israeli-Palestinian peace and proudly announced that he will donate half of the money he will receive as a gift to the Seeds of Peace Program which brings young Palestinian and Israeli youth together in order to promote coexistence.

My son Raja lived in Ramallah for three years and witnessed the Israeli reinvasion of Palestinian towns and villages in 2000. Some of his friends, less than twelve years old, were killed by Israeli soldiers because they dared to throw rocks at them. Raja saw helicopters shoot missiles into homes and American-made F-16 airplanes pulverize buildings and kill innocent people.

Obviously, my son and his seventh grade classmates are beginning to think about these complex issues and some of them do so with deep emotion for their own individual reasons. The question is: do we have our young people read books that reinforce prevailing stereotypes and nasty media frames or do we try to present them with alternatives? There is far too much stereotyping and dehumanizing in the public discourse about the Middle East through the media and popular culture that goes unchallenged. Our task is not to reinforce it but to challenge it. Luckily, there are other books and other ways that can be used to promote peace and coexistence. I will discuss these in my next article.

* A magnet school is a school designed to attract students based on their interest, ability or need for a 'theme' subject area such as Maths/Science, Arts etc.

Lynne Reid Banks? **Broken Bridge** is published by Puffin (OP).

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In the second part of this article, to be published in **BfK** No 165, Professor Moughrabi discusses the depiction of Israeli-Palestine issues in Deborah Ellis's **Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak** (Groundwood Books) and in Elizabeth Laird's **A Little Piece of Ground** (Macmillan).

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