



# A Little Piece of Ground

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**Michael Rosen** on **Elizabeth Laird's** latest novel.

Ever since the publication in 1934 of Geoffrey Trease's **Bows Against the Barons**, children's fiction has dealt from time to time with political and social issues of a 'controversial' nature. In setting her new novel, **A Little Piece of Ground**, in occupied Palestine, Elizabeth Laird tackles issues that are being hotly contested in real life. Does her book work? **Michael Rosen** explores.<!--break-->

Your reviewer is an anti-Zionist Jew. This is something that has to be said as this book is an intervention into a matter that calls on powerful allegiances. To sense the scale of the problem that Elizabeth Laird has taken on, you only have to think of the children's books written from within, say, the worst moments of the slavery of Africans, World War 2 or Northern Ireland. If it's children's fiction dealing with these matters, we are usually called on to find strong feelings of sympathy for a young person (or several) as they try to get something done in the midst of the conflicts going on around them. Sometimes this is a matter of struggling to survive, sometimes it's lending assistance to the 'side' they find themselves on. Usually the author tries to suggest that the young hero(es) are trying to make things better, get through the present situation to something better on the other side. Occasionally (think of Joan Lingard or Robert Westall), the author tries to create a situation whereby young people in the book come to see the perspective of the other side.

Elizabeth Laird follows some of these lines but not all. Our sympathies are for Karim and his fellow Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories as they try to go to school, see their aged relatives, play computer games, fancy each other, and create a space in which they can play football. We see, in particular, three boys from different levels in society: 'Hopper' from a refugee camp, Joni from a wealthy family, and Karim himself whose father is a shopkeeper. As a consequence their outlooks are subtly different though all drawn to the same position of loathing the Israeli occupation.

Though newsflashes remind us of the ever-present level of slaughter going on, none of the lead characters die, nor indeed do any of their near relatives. This is not a book that is going to affect how we think about these matters on the grounds that we see and feel the face of death. It is much more focused on the daily non-fatal brutalities.

## Neither a revelation nor an offence

As I've implied, I come to this book laden with partisan baggage. I realise that for many other people reading the book, their partisanship may well be very different, or indeed the perpetual news from the Middle East may have numbed their feelings. I won't pretend to speak for such readers. In my case, reading the book is neither a revelation nor an offence. In some ways, I was struck by how un-violent, un-savage the book is. The deepest and worst levels of terror and carnage go on off-stage. Unlike some other Jews, I am not offended by the book in any way whatsoever. For many people used to seeing the Jews of fiction as humane, wise-cracking or angst-ridden Americans or terrorised Germans and Poles, this book might be shocking. For those of us, horrified and appalled by the Zionist project and the terrible price it has forced the Palestinian people to pay, the book is something of a relief. Someone with no cultural or tribal axe to grind has written a book that clearly sides with the young people suffering under the weight of what is an unjust and immoral

occupation.

## Boys trying to be boys?

But is it a good book? I have a few misgivings. Several political and cultural entities appear in the book as unexplained and therefore motiveless, whilst others are strangely absent. No time here to deal with all of these, but, for example, we see some of the actions by and against 'settlers'. It never becomes clear who 'settlers' are, where they're from, why they've come or why they do what they do. Similarly, there's an unfortunate irony in the way in which there's a conflict between how the book asks us to wish that the Israeli forces aren't there, whilst it asks us to 'accept' their presence without ever knowing why they are there. Meanwhile, the Palestinians, as shown, have virtually no political organisation, and the politico-religious aspect is absent too.

On a more technical point, the book seems to be a deliberate attempt to avoid being a 'war' book, or an 'adventure' book, as invented in the nineteenth century. That's to say, the motor of the story is most definitely not, bang-bang, say-goodbye-to-your-dying-comrade, save-the-day-with-an-act-of-heroism. It is clearly about boys trying to be boys in an intolerable situation, one that is diverting their boyishness into acts of resistance. As a statement about the human condition in the Occupied Territories, this is fine. As a peg on which to hang a story, I wonder if for some readers it might create the kind of response that feels disappointed that the big bang, the big trauma that felt as if it would happen never did happen. I, for one, was certain (but wrong) that one or other of Karim's friends, family or relatives was going to be killed or seized. This led me to feel strangely shielded from the real-life disaster that is the Middle East.

## Consequences not causes

I found myself anticipating the criticism that demands 'fairness' of a book like this. In this situation, it might ask of Laird to show us the effects of a suicide bomb, the rights of Jews to live in peace in their 'homeland', so-called, or the anxiety of Jewish parents as their children climb into tanks and head east. I would defend Laird's right to write a book that is really a domestic family drama from within one community. To that extent, it's a book about the consequences of the politics in question, not the causes. This makes it as partisan as say, **The Children of the New Forest** or, as it happens, any number of children's books I've read about people suffering under the heel of the Nazis. This probably makes **A Little Piece of Ground** a book written from within a sense of urgency. The sad experience of Palestinians is that very few non-Arab, non-Muslim people want to hear about the tragedy of their situation. This book must go down as a brave, serious and successful attempt to reach out and have this story heard.

**Michael Rosen** is a poet and broadcaster.

**A Little Piece of Ground** by Elizabeth Laird is published by Macmillan (0 330 43679 1, £8.99 pbk).

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