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Where the Streets Had a Name

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Reviewer:

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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This young Australian author of Palestinian origin already has two notable novels to her name which offer a wry look at teenage life and sharp observation of the cultural and political pressures that shape it. Here, she tells the story of a Palestinian family living in Bethlehem at the time that Israel was erecting the 'security' wall to isolate and divide the West Bank. The family has been removed twice from previous homes to make way for Israeli settlers and now make the best of daily life in a cramped apartment, harassed by intermittent curfews, and travel made near impossible by identification papers and road blocks. And 13-year-old Hayaat bears the scars of a more extreme confrontation with the Israeli state, which we learn about more fully only near the end of the book. The novel falls largely into two parts: a portrait of family life; and an account of Hayaat's attempt, with a friend and without her family's knowledge, to travel illegally to Jerusalem. She believes her beloved grandmother may be dying and her aim is to bring back soil from the ancestral home in East Jerusalem, long ago requisitioned by Israelis. As you would expect, Abdel-Fattah has a political axe to grind, but she grinds it without malice, and with humour, gentleness, and understanding even for the bored, impatient and fearful Israeli conscripts who man the road blocks and enforce the curfew. This could have been a bitter and angry book; there is plenty of material here for polemic, tragedy or satire. As it is, it offers an informed and restrained account of the political grievances and everyday frustrations of Palestinians; and it displays the dignity of the displaced, who can still get on with their lives, generously laugh at themselves and others, and meet suffering and persecution with irony and wit. It's the kind of humour that, in other circumstances, might be called Jewish.

Running Order:

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