

Nathan Thrall's Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama: Anatomy of a Jerusalem Tragedy*—A case study in dehumanization

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A Day in the Life of Abed Salama: Anatomy of a Jerusalem Tragedy (Metropolitan Books, 2023), by Jerusalem-based American journalist Nathan Thrall, is the 2024 Pulitzer Prize winner for general nonfiction.

A Day in the Life opens on the night before a school field trip—kindergartners are to be bused to Kids Land, which lies on the road from Jerusalem to Ramallah in the West Bank. Five-year-old Milad Salama is excited for the day he will have with his friends from his private elementary school, Nour al-Houda. The school, and Milad's home, are in the Palestinian town of Anata, a town enclosed, we learn on the first page, by a 26-foot-high wall.

The next morning, to his horror, Milad's father, Abed, learns that the bus with the children has been involved in an accident. When he arrives on the scene, after being denied a ride by unsympathetic Israeli soldiers, Abed sees a crowd of people, including other parents of children who had been on the bus, standing around the burned out shell of the bus, which is lying on its side. There are no children, no teachers and no ambulances. Rumors ricochet among the crowd about where the children, the living and the dead, have been taken. Names of hospitals are circulated. Some are in Jerusalem, where Abed cannot go with his green West Bank ID.

That is the prologue. Thrall then travels back in time, depicting Abed's youth, his Montague and Capulet love for Ghazl, from a rival Palestinian family. His involvement with the Palestinian resistance organization Fatah and his imprisonment. His other loves and marriages. These incidents are interesting and well told, and we are willing to delay learning Milad's fate for a time.

A Day in the Life then takes up the stories of numerous people involved, directly or indirectly, with the bus accident. Salem, an onlooker who becomes heroic in his efforts to rescue adults and children from the burning bus. Huda, an endocrinologist who works for the United Nations Relief

and Works Agency for Palestine (UNRWA) and who also proves fearless in the rescue operation. Radwan, the bus driver. Eventually we learn that the 27-year-old bus rented by Milad's school was struck by a careening 18-wheeler driven by Ashraf, an inexperienced driver who had been speeding in a downpour.

The bus accident proves to be a major news event with political implications. Nearby Israeli soldiers failed to offer help, Israeli emergency vehicles were slow to arrive, and Palestinian ambulances with burned and injured children were not allowed to cross into Jerusalem. The accident has exposed the fundamental injustices blighting Palestinian life in Israel. Thrall weaves into his story accounts of Israeli officials and Palestinian Authority collaborators, whose paths cross at the accident scene and through their efforts at damage control. Even Abed is called upon to defuse a small mob threatening the school building in the book's denouement.

We also meet Dany, an Israeli bureaucrat put in charge of planning "the wall." The wall around Anata is part of the 440-mile-long, gerrymandered barrier around the West Bank begun under Israel's Ariel Sharon government in 2002, during the Second Intifada. In the course of *A Day in the Life*, we learn that the contours of this barrier were painstakingly drawn to maximize a land grab for Israel and minimize the inclusion of Palestinians.

The wall is also our introduction to the relentless theme of Thrall's book, the sinister methods employed by the state of Israel to maintain its Zionist apartheid regime. These methods include such tools of exclusion as armed checkpoints, color-coded identification cards, "apartheid roads," denial of municipal services and second-class schools and hospitals. And, of course, illegal detention and torture by the police and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

Thrall effectively translates his meticulous journalistic

research into novelistic form. The various threads he takes up collectively form a comprehensive picture, not only of an incident but of a tragically despotic nation. His prose is direct and crystal clear.

A Day in the Life of Abed Salama is equally clear-eyed in its treatment of the dynamics in a number of Palestinian families as it is in detailing political developments and the careers of resistance fighters. Near the end of the book, the story of Nansy, the mother of another child burned to death in the accident and whose husband and his family cruelly blame her for the boy's death, is doubly heartbreaking.

A reader could reasonably take issue, however, with the deferment of Milad's fate until the end of the book. On the one hand, it lends *A Day in the Life* a novelistic suspense. But *A Day in the Life* is not a novel. Milad Salama was a real boy who died a horrible death, and there is something manipulative in Thrall's using that death as a literary device. And unnecessary. The book's material is strong, often compelling, and no such suspense is needed to lead a reader through its entirety.

This is not to doubt Thrall's powers of compassion or his commitment to the dignity of the victims and their families. *A Day in the Life* is driven on every page by a fierce yet understated feeling for its subjects and for the plight of the Palestinian people. With material that might lead other writers to exploit the grisly details and to lapse into maudlin sentimentality, Thrall strikes an admirably honest yet compassionate tone. Here he narrates the moments after Nansy learns her son Salaah has died:

In the salon, the neighbors said there was a glow around Nansy's face. They swore they had never seen anything like it. The light in the room did seem to have a different quality, just after sunset. But Nansy's mother saw no glow in her daughter's eyes, only anguish.

Thrall, born in California to a family of Soviet Jewish emigrés, also holds up to the light social and domestic injustices insinuated into Palestinian life by vestigial tribal customs, such as men reserving the right to take on second wives and the lingering suspicions of family rivalries.

Thrall's scorn, though, is reserved above all for the maintenance of Zionist apartheid and its ubiquitous harms:

For all the blame that was cast, no one—not the investigators, not the lawyers, not the judges—named the true origins of the calamity. No one mentioned

the chronic lack of classrooms in East Jerusalem, a shortage that led parents to send their children to poorly supervised West Bank schools. No one pointed to the separation wall and the permit system that forced a kindergarten class to take a long, dangerous detour to the edge of Ramallah rather than driving to the playgrounds of Pisgat Ze'ev [an Israeli settlement], a stone's throw away.

As might be expected in the current climate of pro-Israel reaction in the face of genocide in Gaza, and despite his official endorsement in the form of the Pulitzer Prize, Thrall has paid a price for his unapologetic criticism of Israel. According to the author, about "a quarter" of the publicity events for his book

were canceled for different reasons. In one case, U.K. police shut down what was to be the largest event of our tour, a 400-seat venue in London called Conway Hall. In the week after Oct. 7, they were shutting down virtually anything with Palestinian in the title.

In the U.S., there was an event in Los Angeles where the host organization, called Writers Bloc, said they just didn't feel that they could put this on at this time. Even the places that didn't cancel, it was clear, they were quite frightened. I spoke at a synagogue where the leaders let me know they really felt quite uneasy, but they didn't want to be among those groups that were canceling. (Religion News Service)

In October, the University of Arkansas canceled a speaking engagement when Thrall refused to sign a pledge of loyalty to Israel. Ads for *A Day in the Life* have been pulled from National Public Radio (NPR) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). In response to those actions, Thrall tweeted, "I'm quite sure that a book advocating for Israel would not have had its advertisements pulled ... There's an atmosphere that is wholly intolerant of any expression of sympathy for Palestinians under occupation."



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