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Palestine

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Editorial Choice:

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Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Saccho, an American journalist and cartoonist, spent two months in Palestine in the winter of 1991-2, at the time when the first intifada, the mass palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation, was gradually coming to an end. He spent those two months on buses and taxis in the west Bank and Gaza Strip moving constantly between refugee camps, towns and villages, living with the Palestinians and talking to them about their lives and political struggle. On his return to America, he distilled his experience into a series of nine comic books, now brought together in one volume. This is documentary reportage in a venerable American tradition, in which the reporter's own motives and reactions are as much a matter of scrutiny and comment as the witnesses whose experiences he records. It is also an enterprise of great artistic courage and stamina, which shows perhaps both the versatility and the limits of the comic form. There can rarely have been a subject that seems less suited to its medium than this, not only in the complex context that needs to be conveyed but also in the repetitive nature of the content, as Saccho sits in room after room, listening to 'tales of woe': 'The cold, the men, the tea... That's the essence of the Palestinian Room... These rooms... not even the talk changes... The soldiers closed down the school, the soldiers imposed a curfew... The soldiers clubbed me on the head, the soldiers took me away... Over and over, the same stories, maybe with some bruises shuffled.' It's deliberately uncomfortable reading, particularly for those of us in the western democracies, and Saccho makes sure that the reader shares his physical, cultural and moral discomfort. In monochrome, here are the squalid conditions in which many of the Palestinians live, the contorted faces of Israeli soldiers, settlers and Palestinians as they confront one another, the casual indignities and entrenched injustice of Palestinian life, and, above all, the best and worst of the human struggle against oppression: sacrifice, courage and resilience alongside hatred, brutality and despair. It's a claustrophobic and relentless experience, so that when Saccho find himself in Tel Aviv, on the other side of the fences and road blocks, he feels a relief that is shared by the reader as he sits chatting with two Israeli girls, 'their day-to-day concerns remind me of the stuff that makes up the lives of people I know in Europe, the States.' The book makes no attempt to be balanced in terms of the politics of the Middle East; it is a report from one side only. But is not a propaganda piece with an axe to grind, except the basic point that Palestinians have grievances which must be addressed. Young people won't find it easy reading. To see the full picture, it shouldn't be the only thing they read about the Palestinian situation. But they should read it, particularly as, even as I write this, we engage in a war whose repercussions for the region can only be guessed at.

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