



My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness

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Beautifully written, and composed with a novelist's eye for detail, this book tells the story of an exceptional man and the culture from which he emerged.

Taha Muhammad Ali was born in 1931 in the Galilee village of Saffuriyya and was forced to flee during the war in 1948. He traveled on foot to Lebanon and returned a year later to find his village destroyed. An autodidact, he has since run a souvenir shop in Nazareth, at the same time evolving into what National Book Critics Circle Award–winner Eliot Weinberger has dubbed “perhaps the most accessible and delightful poet alive today.”

As it places Muhammad Ali's life in the context of the lives of his predecessors and peers, *My Happiness* offers a sweeping depiction of a charged and fateful epoch. It is a work that Arabic scholar Michael Sells describes as “among the five ‘must read’ books on the Israel-Palestine tragedy.” In an era when talk of the “Clash of Civilizations” dominates, this biography offers something else entirely: a view of the people and culture of the Middle East that is rich, nuanced, and, above all else, deeply human.

My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness Details

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From Reader Review My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness for online ebook

Inna says

Gently dialogical biography of a unique Palestinian poet. The author managed to beautifully combine between the history of a person living as a Palestinian during the post-WWII times and a highly individual story of how her protagonist developed as a poet. The author's voice is part of her narrative and adds to it another dimension - of somebody watching both from inside and from outside, but always with sympathy.

Sarah says

It's not really a biography of the poet, he's present, but he's in the background. There's more history, which I actually found a lot more interesting than the details of the poet's life that Hoffman included. I think I'd rather not know the facts of some poet's life if they're going to be presented so impersonally and with such boring use of language.

Since I was ignorant about much of Palestine's history, this turned out to be a good introduction to it. Still, I'd like a more detailed, more thoughtful history. Technically, there's no overt political stance (except for a little harmless Zionist-bashing), but it's definitely pro-peace and very sympathetic towards Palestine (I don't know how you couldn't be after reading this.) And I guess it uses the poet's personal experience to give us a better, up-close picture of the nakba and its aftermath. It seems like a very difficult thing to do.

Inasirimavo says

This just might be one of my favourite books ever. I read it some time ago, when it finally found its way through the jungle of air mail, and I am finally writing this review.

I needed time, I guess. The book tore me apart. Hoffman tells the story of Taha Muhammad Ali, great Palestinian poet, writing about his life, poetry, and the culture he emerged from.

I already loved Taha's poetry so my expectations before reading this book were high. All of the doubts I might have had disappeared after reading the prelude pages. I think there was no better person to write Taha's biography than Adina Hoffman. Her writing is so delicate, so rich in detail and encompassing at the same time, and simply – captivating. Taking in consideration the trust and the relationship Taha and Adina had developed over time (before this book was to be made), this was just a perfect combination.

Hoffman also writes about her perspective when taking on this project, her views as a Jewish woman, as an Israeli citizen, her experience of life in Jerusalem and differences in relation to Palestinian lives. She writes: "An American-born Jew who has lived in Jerusalem for much of her adult life – assuming a sort of bifocal nationality in the process – I carry two passports, American and Israeli, and am someone who arrived in the Middle East knowing not a word of Arabic and bearing no particular affinity for Palestinian culture."

Around two decades later, she took on a hard role – to write a biography of a poet Taha Ali, to submerge herself in Arab culture, but also – inevitably – to tell a political story, a story of a Palestinian life in twentieth

century.

That fact itself is a big sign of hope for the Israeli-Palestinian story. Because, more than politics, poetry, historical insights (all very important and present in this book), above all of that, Hoffman's approach to Taha's story is emphatic, human.

Taha's story is the story of melancholy and exuberance, the land and the memory, so individual and eeply personal and so universal (particularly for all Palestinians) at the same time.

I am not keen on bombastic statements, but if you read one book this/next year – let it be this wonderful book.

/If you wish - You can read more of my reviews on my blog Middle East Revised/

Victoria says

It's impossible to separate the presentation and subject of the book for a review, but five stars for the subject matter, which I found consistently revelatory and fascinating (largely due to my ignorance about the establishment of Israel and its impact of those living there) and because it has information that should be more widely known. And it's great fun to read despite some very lengthy excursions into history as well as the subject Taha Mohamaad Ali's poet friends and colleagues, whose stories are wirth knowing but one feels distracted, a problem the author Adina Hoffman seems to have been well aware of. I was deeply moved to see, while leaving through it after finishing reading, that it is dedicated to the poet's wife, simply "For Yusra" whose life also is well worth contemplating. The subtitle is enigmatic.

Leif says

A book without equal: born of curiosity and bourne by what can only be described as a growing care and love for another human being expressed through unstinting conversations, capacious and delicate research, and thoughtful craft. What is advertised as a biography of a Palestinian poet by an American Israeli Jewish writer is more accurately read as a focused description of a family's life through the latter half of the twentieth century. Two maps uneasily align here: the geographic space of a Palestinian village, Saffuriyya, and the narrative history of Taha Muhammad Ali's family before and after the disaster of 1948 that drove them to Lebanon and then, eventually, to Nazareth. But these details are cold without Adina Hoffman's warmth for her subject and its contexts, and also without Taha Muhammad Ali's own poetic interventions and inventive responses to the many small opportunities opened by his life.

Effectively, many readers could come to this book: readers interested in what the life of a Palestinian poet, of course, but also readers interested in the context of Palestinian / Israeli relations (or Israeli Arab and Israeli Jewish relations, to use the terminology of the state) or readers interested in a good primer to one particularly vigorous branch of Arabic and world poetry. It's a warm book, keenly written, and with remarkable depth: Hoffman interviews family members and Israeli ex-soldiers (not just any ex-soldiers, of course; none other than Dov Yermiya), conducts research in Israeli army archives, listens to Imm Nizar, Taha's wife, describe recipes, and travels with her husband and Taha in the United States on poetry tours with others such as Israeli Jewish poet Aharon Shabtai. A full book, then, with much to offer anyone.

More personally, I'd say that if I had finished this yesterday I would have said it one of my favourite books of 2015. As it is, it sets the standard high indeed for all future books of 2016.

Lando says

Really good book. Nice introductory study of Palestinian culture.

Arnoldo Garcia says

I have read the Ibis publication of this wonderful Palestinian poet and now just started reading his biography by Adina Hoffman. The most interesting element of his story is that this poet is like all poets: we write, we're not consulted by any big organizations or political powers, we're the nobodies of the world but we write as if the future of humanity depended on it. We are the corner poet that works everyday and writes with pleasure in obscurity.

However, in poetry and in the poet's life and struggles, there is no such thing as obscurity. Obscurity is the result of corporate political power over the printed and living word of poets-in-community.

Joyce Thompson says

Of necessity, this is as much or more a political than a literary biography. Taha's poetic gift was always secondary to surviving the systematic efforts of the Israeli government to marginalize the Palestinian population within Israel. That he made room for art in a life of struggle is an amazing story that Hoffman tells with great heart. Though she is an Israeli citizen, her research and her recounting of Israeli military activity is unsparing--a bold achievement. I learned much history I'd never known and got a taste of the role of poetry in the Arab world. My only argument with a brave and intelligent work is that it fades away more than concludes, and I would have liked more of Taha's work interspersed with his story.

Miriam says

"He was, in the words of one who knew him during those years, "not a daring person" and is also remembered as having been a churchgoing christian whose house was filled with crucifixes and pictures of the virgin mary, a fact that would have put him at serious odds with the local Arabic-speaking Communists--most of whom were also Christians but loudly lapsed ones, men whose prophet of preference was Karl Marx."

Alan says

10 stars, 100 stars! One of the best books I've ever read: a beautiful and continually insightful synthesis of biography, history, and literary analysis. It is not just a book about Taha Muhammad Ali but about his lost village of Saffuriyya, his eventual home of Nazareth, the generations of his family, the other stars of

Palestinian literature, and the culture and politics of the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel as seen through the eyes of Taha.

Jared Krauss says

Stop reading other books about Israel and Palestine, and read this book instead.

American-Israeli Poet writing the biography of a Palestinian poet, citizen of Israel, whom was born under Ottoman rule, lived through British rule, al Nakba, up to now, where has become something of a international celebrity (albeit esoterically famous).

Catherine says

This is an astonishing biography, one in which the process of recovering narrative is as transparent as the goal of recording one person's life. Hoffman, an American-born, Israeli Jew, writes deftly, expressing incredibly complicated moments of history, emotional landscapes, and political debates as if they were the simplest things in the world. Her gift is quite astounding, as is her commitment to this book - the hours she spent cross-referencing documents of all kinds with the oral history of scattered communities of people throughout the Middle East is awe-inspiring. I deeply appreciated her respect for the ways in which stories are living things, and history no more and no less than a collection of those stories.

This book - and the life of Taha, at the very center of it - provides a serious, measured critique of process of Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands during and after 1948. There is no escaping the loss and heartache at the center of the text - but Hoffman writes that story while also recovering others; talking to the leader of the division of the Israeli army, for example, that attacked Taha's village in 1948, a man who would later be kicked out of the army for condemning Israel's actions toward Lebanon in 1982. She talks to Jewish poets, Arab intellectuals, quotes from newspapers, letters, and military records. Her work is painstaking, and the result is a beautiful rumination on the power of art, of poetry, and of simple compassion amid so much loss. I loved this book a great deal.

Trish says

The title of this book comes from a poem by Taha Muhammed Ali, a Palestinian poet with a style so direct and immediate that the reader grasps that they are hearing something new and yet undeniably ancient at the same time: a viewpoint that eclipses the worn, the bombed-out, the broken. We are given fragments of, and context to, Taha's poetry in this work, all showcased by Adina Hoffman's careful, patient, gentle, and ferociously intelligent excavation and reconstruction of a meaningful life. It is an extraordinary work of witness.

What can poetry do that bombs, bullets, and knives cannot? Adina Hoffman shows us in this biography of Taha, former resident of Saffuriyya, a Palestinian village with a long history of resistance against authority. Saffuriyya was bombed in 1948 by Israeli aircraft, and ever since the mere mention of the town carries the whiff of resistance.

"Even before he could see the village, he has said, the scent of it was overpowering—the thyme

and the mint and the lemon trees, the broom and the wheat and the olives. The thorns themselves seemed to smell sweetly there, and though he couldn't say which perfume belonged to what plant—or explain how he knew the difference between the fragrance of a Nazareth sage bush and a sage bush with its roots in the soil of Saffuriyya—the boy was convinced that he could tell in his nose when he'd crossed the border, and as he made his way toward home through the *basatin*, as the orchards and vegetable gardens were known, the scents grew stronger and more complicated, more human. The fruit trees were everywhere, and at the Qasral spring he got a clean, cold whiff of the abundant water that made the village lands so rich (and, according to local lore, its people so strong-headed), then, getting closer, the smoky perfume of the cabbage, parsley, cauliflower, scallion, cucumber, and his favorite, *mlukhiyyeh*, the dark green mallow that his mother would chop fine or spread out to dry and that they would eat as a stew. Thinking of it would make him hungry and eager for the other scents to come: the way the garlic she fried before adding the leaves would blend and merge with the piercing aroma of the basil planted in clay pots before the nearby houses."

Hoffman's biography of Taha Muhammed Ali is resistance literature also: the quiet, unsensational accretion of fact and personal testimony, newspaper accounts, and the patient unpicking of tangled threads of disputed reports or repressive memory. What Hoffman has done indirectly is raise serious questions about race, identity, and belongingness, about nationality, statehood, and the nature of resistance. She places the poet Taha squarely in the events that influenced his creative consciousness: the creation of the state of Israel in 1948.

Saffuriyya was always a "turbulent community," police records filled with mention of locals talking with their fists amongst themselves. Hoffman suggests

"Saffuriyya was, let us say then, a 'village of murderers' in the sense it was a village with murderers in it. Saffuriyya was, however, also a village of tinsmiths—and shoemakers, shepherds, teachers, teething babies, laborers, shopkeepers, new brides, barbers, folk poets, gravediggers, carpenters, landowners, teenaged boys, builders, dyers, musicians, butchers, tailors, traveling salesmen, knife-sharpeners, old women, and a wandering ice-cream vendor who would appear on holidays and sell the children melting half-piaster scoops of their favorite flavor—chocolate, vanilla, or mint. It was a village of brilliant talkers, blubbering idiots, fat grocers, thin imams, of a kind Italian nun named Georgina, a fez-wearing Egyptian male nurse known as Sheikh 'Umar, and Abu Qasim the peripatetic ritual circumciser, who never went anywhere without his black doctor's bag and noisy motorcycle."

So you see how Hoffman agrees with the official line and undercuts it in the same breath, how she forces us to acknowledge that we cannot paint a people with a broad brush. When the Israelis came, after they bombed the village in 1948, they found Stone Age olive jugs and oil jars in the ramshackle houses—could this be the same population they believed had no culture? A difference of perception combined with a will of steel might break what bombs cannot, and while many have fallen, the Palestinian consciousness remains.

"That many of the Jewish state's new and future immigrants had just suffered the torments of the Holocaust at the hands of European Christians did not, to Palestinian minds, explain why they themselves were being asked to forfeit their hold on vast tracts of citrus groves and fields of grain, to give up direct access to the Red Sea and to the port at Jaffa, or to become—as 40 percent of the Palestinians suddenly would—members of a minority in a Jewish state."

Now Saffuriyya is forested and has been designated a National Park in the Israeli state. Displaced Palestinians have never given up agitation to return to those lands, that village. "The most important thing

was that there were no leaders, no intellectual leaders to explain what was happening and what we had to do." This has ever been, to my mind, the "problem of Palestine" but also Israel's problem. Lack of enlightened leadership is the region's greatest failing.

Saffuriyya has become a symbol. Hoffman traces the movement of Taha's family (first to a refugee camp in Lebanon and then back to Nazareth) along with the intellectual development of the boy he was, then the teen, then the adult. Taha's interest in words that could explain and express his sense of dislocation, dignity, and love of life were what propelled him. "His obscurity won him the freedom to write whatever he pleased." Hoffman carefully picks apart the relationships and political leanings and urge to create among Taha's friends and acquaintances, and in the process, we *see* Palestine, that country with a flag and a people but no land and no rights.

Hoffman herself is an outsider, something she argues is what makes writers able to see the environment they write about. "I think it might actually make me anxious to feel too much of an insider. That's not good for a writer -- and, I might argue, I don't really think it's so good for the Jews." (interview with Mya Guarnieri @ *Bookslut*)

When we finally see Taha's poetry reprinted, the effect of it is magnified by the quiet industriousness and skill with which Hoffman prepared us. Hoffman's work is so hushed and intimate we have the sense that we are sharing a conversation with a deeply humane independent thinker of enormous gifts and fine discrimination. And that is how I view what I have read of her work: that it is a gift to all of us, even those whose policies do not align with her view. Her careful scholarship and unblinking gaze quietly points the way to living well in the world...with others.

The exquisite care Adina Hoffman and her husband, the poet and translator Peter Cole, took in both translating and publishing the work of Palestinian peasant and poet Taha Muhammed Ali, and then in picking apart the knotty strands of his life to show the creation of Taha's particular genius, is everywhere evident in this unique work of biography.

"Warning"

Lovers of hunting,
and beginners seeking your prey:
Don't aim your rifles
at my happiness,
which isn't worth
the price of the bullet
(you'd waste on it).
What seems to you
so nimble and fine,
like a fawn,
and flees
every which way,
like a partridge,
isn't happiness.
Trust me:
my happiness bears
no relation to happiness.

--Taha Muhammed Ali, from *Fooling the Killers*, (1989)

Steve Cran says

Taha Muhammad Ali a poet from Nazareth, perhaps you have never heard of him or his story. Had it not been for this wonderful book by Adina Hoffman, an American Jew who made Aliya to Israel, I would not have known about him either. When one thinks of Palestinian poets one thinks of Mahmoud Darwish, Samih Quassim or even Rashid Hussein.

Taha started out in the small largely unheard of village called Suffuria. A Palestinian village built on the biblical village Sefhoris. It has been inhabited since Canaanite times and the people who dwelt there may well have been related to ancient Canaanites. Before Taha was born his mother and father had several children die during child birth. Most were males and the mother and father had named or at least tried to name them Taha. Finally this one survived. Taha always had good business skills. He would convince a merchant to give him some eggs, usually on credit and at the end of the day after Taha had sold them he would pay back the farmer. He was in a way the bread winner of the family. He later expanded into selling candies and sodas. Village life was rather nice until world political winds finally blew in on his town.

Once while tending the families sheep four Israeli war planes flew over his village and bombed it. The whole village pretty much fled and Taha's family went to Lebanon. It was there that they lived in tents but even their Taha's business acumen came in handy. He ended up selling rations and was profitable up to the point that while they were in Qarone they were able to rent an apartment. Later on the family would return to what is now called Israel.

The Israeli never did allow the residents of Saffuria to return to their village. Instead many chose to live in Reina and other surrounding villages. For a long time they were not permitted to own land and technically were not allowed inside of Israel. Those caught without IDs would be expelled to Jordan. This happened to Taha one time and he just snuck back in. Eventually they were given IDs but the Palestinians in the North were subject to constant curfew and travel restrictions. Up until 1966 they were living under Martial Law. The Shin Bet would often harass poets and other intellectual members of the poetic resistance. Mahmoud Darwish later left as a result.

For most of his life Taha ran a souvenir shop in Nazareth. Writing poetry and publishing his works did not come until; later let us say he started getting big at around 57 years old. As he got bigger he started traveling and people enjoyed his poetry. He was neither bitter about his past and his poetry was not the poetry of resistance. Rather it was down to Earth and human. The 1947 Nakba caused untold pain to many people. Amira Taha's intended had to remain in Lebanon. They never got married. The residents of Saffuria got a fraction of the land they used to own.

Adina is one of many American/ Israeli Jews who are informing the public about the plight of the Palestinians.

M Wieggers says

Urgently recommended. Adina Hoffman has not only captured the life of a quirky individual poet, but she's

managed to humanize the nakba. Particularly necessary reading against the backdrop of what's happening in Gaza.
