

BOOKS

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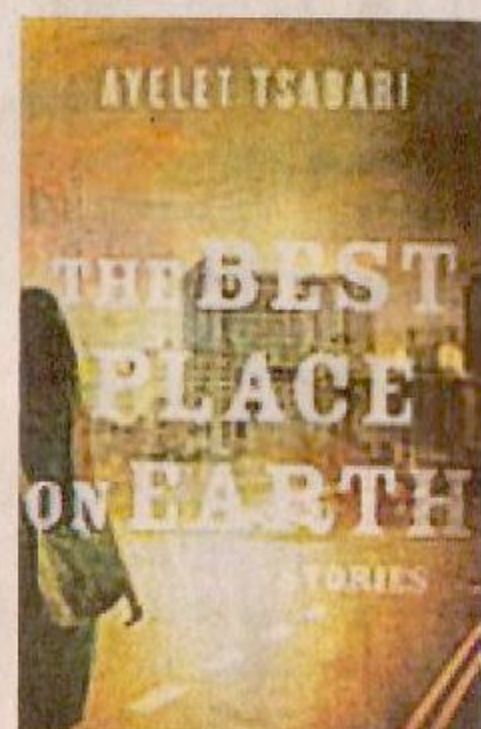
MIDWIFE OF VENICE GETS SEQUEL

Join bestselling author Roberta Rich as she reads from the sequel to her smash hit *The Midwife of Venice*. This new book follows Hannah and Isaac and many villains in the city of Constantinople. The free event is Wednesday, May 15, 7 to 8:30 p.m. in the Peter Kaye Room on the lower level of the Central Library, 350 West Georgia St.

SHORT STORIES

Journeys of self-discovery

Author sends characters on a quest for understanding amid a background of violence and sex



THE BEST PLACE ON EARTH

Ayelet Tsabari
(HarperCollins)

DENNIS E. BOLEN

SPECIAL TO THE SUN

War warps personal relationships in dramatic ways. Ernest Hemingway earned his pay on the principle for years. Hollywood capitalizes on it to this day. Ayelet Tsabari's debut short story collection, ironically titled *The Best Place on Earth*, further explores this hallowed ground. The book is a highly readable here-and-now take on interpersonal entanglements amid the war weary miasma of the Middle East.

Most of the stories are set amid the religio-political torsion of Israel. Relationships are commensurately strained; a typical date might involve meeting in a place not likely to be shelled or bombed that particular day. Deciding to have another espresso, or not, can result in death.

In *Casualties* we are flung into the literal world of clubbers astride the war zone, complete with sweaty bathroom sex, cocaine and discarded phone numbers. A partying Israeli Defence Force medical clerk ponders providing her soldier boyfriend a forged pass so that he might be assigned away from a dangerous sector. Her self-debate presents a life-death discussion and a profit-survival dichotomy, all of it steeped in the cynicism of those youth who must fight the wars of their incomprehensible elders.

Self-identity is a recurring theme. In perhaps the best of the collection, *A Sign of Harmony*, ex-IDF soldier Maya wanders the world and finds deepest solace in New Delhi, where her Yemeni colouring and quick assimilation of the language allow access to the streets as a virtual indigene. Having ably settled into the cracks and crannies of the crammed city, she is quietly dismayed when Ian, her London-raised Indian boyfriend, arrives for a visit and recoils at the earthiness of the place.

The story is a penetrating consideration of priorities and allegiances — the Shakespearean idiom “To thine own self be true ...” might hum in one's ears reading it — and also takes time to fully consider place. Walking the urban scene with her boyfriend, Maya observes:

“A barefoot child wheels a man with no limbs on a plywood board past them. A blind woman, her eyes excavated, waves flies away from her



Ayelet Tsabari, who has lived in Vancouver, Toronto and Tel Aviv, has written a collection of short stories that offer a different way of looking at the world.

listless baby. Another woman's nose seems to be eaten away from leprosy. A little girl with an amputated arm tugs on Ian's sleeve ...”

After an encounter with others of her orientation, Maya struggles with the choice that must be made between the truth of herself or some version of an accepted western archetype.

Occasionally slowed by the weight of back-story and internal monologue, the book shines brightest when existential angst, ethnicity and geo-political turmoil is mixed together with that most humanity-revealing of traits, sex. Perfunctory against-the-wall couplings — and the inevitable regrets — serve as possible indicators of the debilitating aspect of skipping the important

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progression between adolescent abandon and adult responsibility.

Indeed, the best stories explore the dangers of receiving altogether too grave life lessons at too early an age, hampering the serious business of maintaining mental-emotional

equilibrium over the span of a normal life.

Though loyal to family and nationality, Tsabari's characters are attractive in their determination to strive for understanding and question their respective fates. Reminiscent of the inner-wounded, circumstantially doomed protagonists of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, their general manner is a combination of modern western navel-gazing and coldly survivalist obsessive-compulsion. Such conditions compress relationships into tight emotional corners and this author excels in examining these pressures, defining these forced moments.

The *Best Place on Earth* is a book to

begin an informed discussion of the social differences between middle east and modern west, a well-crafted literary snapshot of love relationships amid shellfire and suicide bomb, and a frequent challenge to one's moral sense of what is and what should be. Having made a home in such disparate locales as Toronto, Tel Aviv and Vancouver — the title refers to the B.C. licence plate motto — Tsabari emerges as a writer to show a new way to look at the world amid the confluence of love and death, sex and survival.

Dennis E. Bolen's debut poetry collection, *Black Liquor*, will be published by Caitlin Press this September. deb@dennisbolen.com