



Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape

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Raja Shehadeh is a passionate hill walker. He enjoys nothing more than heading out into the countryside that surrounds his home. But in recent years, his hikes have become less than bucolic and sometimes downright dangerous. That is because his home is Ramallah, on the Palestinian West Bank, and the landscape he traverses is now the site of a tense standoff between his fellow Palestinians and settlers newly arrived from Israel.

In this original and evocative book, we accompany Raja on six walks taken between 1978 and 2006. The earlier forays are peaceful affairs, allowing our guide to meditate at length on the character of his native land, a terrain of olive trees on terraced hillsides, luxuriant valleys carved by sacred springs, carpets of wild iris and hyacinth and ancient monasteries built more than a thousand years ago. Shehadeh's love for this magical place saturates his renderings of its history and topography. But latterly, as seemingly endless concrete is poured to build settlements and their surrounding walls, he finds the old trails are now impassable and the countryside he once traversed freely has become contested ground. He is harassed by Israeli border patrols, watches in terror as a young hiking companion picks up an unexploded missile and even, on one occasion when accompanied by his wife, comes under prolonged gunfire.

Amid the many and varied tragedies of the Middle East, the loss of a simple pleasure such as the ability to roam the countryside at will may seem a minor matter. But in *Palestinian Walks*, Raja Shehadeh's elegy for his lost footpaths becomes a heartbreakingly powerful metaphor for the deprivations of an entire people estranged from their land.

Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape Details

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Bridget says

Admittedly a bit of a dry book as the author focuses on land law in Palestine. However, the details revealed through his experiences in Israeli courts and from his walks in Palestine were fascinating to me. Nowhere else have I read such a clear analysis of what actually is happening on the ground in the West Bank in terms of settlements and the fight over the land.

Without going into the nitty gritty of land use law, the following sums it up fairly well:

"We were aware that the main argument the Israeli military was using was that non-registered land in the West Bank was public land. This could be used to settle Israeli Jews. The implications were calamitous. According to this interpretation of the land law, the only non-registered land that truly belonged to Palestinians was that over which they could prove use either by living on it or continuously cultivating it for a period of not less than ten years [this was in about 1979]. All the rest was public land. This would render Palestinians living in the West Bank squatters, not rightful owners. The only rightful owners, according to the Israeli government's version of law and history, were the Jews, who could trace their entitlement to the land from time immemorial, just after the dinosaurs became extinct. Legally, this position was unsustainable. And yet it was not being challenged. Most Palestinians boycotted Israeli courts, where these challenges could be presented. The settlers could comfort themselves that they were not taking anyone's private land to establish their settlements." Land in Palestine (including that which is now considered Israel) began a formal registration process in the late 1930's, according to the author. It became a protracted process which included legal documents being filed in Amman, Jordan as well as in the village where the land was being registered. After the six-day war in 1967, Israel suspended all land registration. As a result, many landowners were unable to produce documents showing registered ownership under the new system. The author goes on to explain that, although Jordanian land law continued to be in force in the West Bank, long-term lease registrations were done with the Israeli Land Authority in Tel Aviv. In effect, "the ideological position that the West Bank belonged by divine edict to Israel was given full force in secular legal terms and through elaborate administrative arrangements that ensured that the land was annexed to Israel in every aspect except by name."

Many people seem to believe that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is about religion. It is not and never has been. It has always been about the land and this book goes a long way in explaining why the land is so important to both sides of the equation.

The author also touches on how the continuous obstacles Palestinians encounter has caused those who could leave to do so. He describes a talented young couple with the means to start outsourcing IT companies "similar to those which helped Ireland and India jumpstart their economies". But the corruption of the new Palestinian leadership in place after the Oslo accords made it impossible for them to succeed and so they emigrated to Australia.

He ends the book with a conversation he has with an Israeli settler he encounters on one of his later walks in Palestine. It was impossible to take the walks he had in the past because of the settlements, security wall, and "Area C" in the West Bank, which is forbidden to all Palestinians. Yet he took a chance and walked through a little populated part of "Area C". The conversation does an exemplary job of illuminating the viewpoints of each side: the Israeli who believes the land is given to him by God and the Palestinian who does not want to give up his right to the same land.

Michael Gilbride says

Through a series of what Palestinians call “sarhat”, or hill walks, Raja Shehadeh tells the tale of how his native Ramallah in the West Bank has changed over time. In his youth, before the 1967 occupation, he wrote of the “drug-free high, Palestinian style” that he got from walking in the hills. Over time, that high slowly descended into a nightmare. From my outsider’s perspective, it seems that the Israeli state is hell-bent on ethnic cleansing, a term that Ilan Pappe has used to describe the actions of Israel. Shehadeh’s father was forcibly removed from his home in Jaffa in 1948, despite still having to pay rent on the land, in an example of how Nakba effected an individual family. One of Shehadeh’s regrets was not listening to the advice of his elders, who warned him and his generation that the Israelis were intent on eventually ridding both the West Bank and Gaza of Palestinians. He is scathing of the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993 and the heralding on both sides of how this was a peaceful way forward, whereas in reality all he saw was increased settlement.

Shehadeh sought refuge in his house in Ramallah, which he carefully purchased in accordance with the land rules, only for Israel to forcibly remove him from it. Ultimately, he began to record what was happening as a therapeutic way to come to terms with losing the land that he grew up on: “Writing was helping me overcome the anger that burns in the heart of most Palestinians”. Shehadeh writes how Israel had created a situation where it was easier to get to China from Ramallah than it was to get to Gaza. He watched half a million Jewish people settle in Israel in three decades. In 1979, the Israeli government forbade access to the land registrar which the Palestinians used to settle land disputes and began to control all land disputes in the Israeli judicial system – one which was completely dishonest. The original map of Palestine, drawn up from 1882 until 1888 by the Palestine Exploration Fund, had sent cartographers to survey the land before they noticed that British people were doing the same thing. This definitive 1888 map created the land registration system that was used under the British mandate until 1955 and subsequently under Jordan until Israel suspended it in 1967. Under British and Jordanian control, Palestinian people could still view the specific plots of land. It was only when the Israelis took control that they were denied access to records. This allowed the Israelis to obfuscate who owned what and use it to “legally”, expand their settlements. Palestinians had no recourse to dispute land ownership. Shehadeh tells the moving tale of Abu Ameen, his mother’s uncle, who was utterly devoted to the land. He was uneducated and built his own qasr in the desert. He is a prime example of the people that the Israelis dismiss as barely existing when they began to emigrate there in huge numbers from the 1860s onwards. Israel frequently portrays the land as having being barren with the occasional dwelling, when in reality it was full of indigenous people whose existence is denied because they had not built enormous cities like the Israelis did. Shehadeh trained as a lawyer and tried to highlight the illegality of the Israeli position as much as he could. He chronicled the case of Francois Albina, who had his land expropriated from the Israeli state, and his attempt to block it. Initially, the Israeli court said that Albina was absentee from the land, which Shehadeh was easily able to disprove. After this, they said that Albina had no permit. Albina produced a permit but the Israeli state stated that it did not match up to the land. This was a lie but, because the Israelis controlled the land registrar, it could not be disproved. Shehadeh then asked for an injunction and was told he would have to stump up a quarter of a million US dollars because work had begun on his land. In short, the court was merely a mouthpiece for Israeli political aims. Israeli settlers who were given possession of myriad parcels of land like Albina’s were “full of their own sense of purpose”. So much so, that Shehadeh remarked that “their enthusiasm was contagious. Had I not have been on the other side, I could have fallen for it”. Naturally, this zealousness about settling on land that was not theirs resulted in the settlers believing that “to them the end seemed to justify the use of any means. This was how those who believed they were serving a higher purpose behaved”. How else could they justify a 1976 Israeli court order deposing a Bedouin tribe that had been on its land for twenty years to a rubbish dump, to make way for Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem? How else could they justify invading Ramallah, installing checkpoints

on every other road and turning Palestinian land into a giant prison??By the end of “Palestinian Walks”, Shehadeh cannot even walk in his own land without being stopped by either militant Israeli or Palestinians. The tragic and inevitable result of the imprisonment and ethnic cleansing of an entire country is that they turned to violence to defend themselves. Who in this situation would not? It is easy to philosophise about being a pacifist, yet faced with the situation the Palestinians were in, what other option is there? Shehadeh’s nephew had a narrow escape when he picked up an unexploded missile whilst out walking. During the 1988 Palestinian intifada, Shehadeh was shot at by Palestinians after the PLO had taken control of the West Bank. This is not to mention the hassle that Shehadeh had with Jewish civilians, who are permitted by law to make citizens arrests and carry firearms in the occupied territories. Of course, the Palestinians are not afforded the same rights. This then led to numerous incidents of violence perpetrated by settlers, which the Israeli courts routinely dismissed. Both Israeli and Palestinian human rights groups have urged the Israeli government to take action against the countless examples of these incidents that have escalated since 1982.?The crucial issue that underpins the racist and colonial attitude of the settlers is, as Shehadeh noted, that “Europe, and later Zionism, has endeavoured to rescue the historical significance of the region in its search for ancient Israel: a search for its own cultural roots which in the process has silenced Palestinian history and relegated it to prehistory”. This is not to say that the blame can be solely laid at the door of the religious Rabbis. For example, Ramallah is not even mentioned in the bible and was clearly demarcated as Palestinian territory, yet this did not stop it being invaded by the Israelis. The underlying mentality needs to be challenged. If not, the mass terrorisation of an entire populace will continue. In Shehadeh’s case, the Israeli ethnic cleansing led to him having mental health problems, “I was too captured by the fear of the future to have children” he wrote, which reminded me of Toni Morrison’s description of how African Americans were treated whilst they were slaves in “Beloved”. The effects on people are the same. The US, which funds the Israeli ethnic cleansing, has to change this attitude. This dates back Herman Melville’s oft-quoted 1855 to 1857 writing about Palestine, which Shehadeh refers to as “vilification by western travellers”. This perception about pre-1948 Palestine being an ugly empty desert needs to change. Only through listening to the stories of Palestinians such as Shehadeh and honest historians like Pappe will we change this attitude. The stakes are too high to let Israeli state propaganda control the narrative.?

Andrea says

They would take a few provisions and go to the open hills, disappear for the whole day, sometimes for weeks and months. They often didn't have a particular destination. To go on a *sarha* was to roam freely, at will, without, restraint. The verb form of the word means to let the cattle out to pasture early in the morning, leaving them to wander and graze at liberty...a man [my only sadness that this was mostly men] going on a *sarha* wanders aimlessly, not restricted by time and place, going where his spirit takes him to nourish his soul and rejuvenate himself. But not any excursion would qualify as a *sarha*. Going on a *sarha* implies letting go (2).

This is wonderful. Heartbreaking. Some of the same themes, of course, as the talk Raja Shehadeh gave some months ago, but the writing voice was a little unexpected somehow.

We share desert, though not the same one, loss and struggle, though not to the same degree, a refuge and retreat from struggle in writing, though mine mostly unproved. So many thoughts in this book echoed so exactly with mine, but born of out such a different reality. I love this invitation to walk with him, wish I could have known these hills before their fencing and their destruction.

I find the Arizona desert impossibly beautiful, full of life even if harsh. You know what bites scratches stings. Always what has scared me more are people, they are never this simple in their stinging. I understand Shehadeh's incomprehension when people from outside call his land barren and violent and ugly, and know his anger when they ascribe these perceptions of the land to the people who live in it. This is what I hate most about Westerns and this particular gaze--it is not my land that created the terrifying levels of brutality, but the conquest of it. The genocide of Native Americans that took place there. The conquest of Palestine is clothed in a different language of manifest destiny, but that is still where the violence comes from.

It is also carried out through a different form of land occupation -- occupation by luxury villa, though still defended by guns. Routes through the landscape go from this:

Built many years ago by the owners of the land, the path was a few metres wide and bordered by stone walls. It sloped gently along the side of the hill then turned down and headed downhill. It had been carefully designed. Had it followed a straight line down it would be washed out in winter, unusable, more a canal for water than a footpath (44).

To mazes of concrete, straight roads blasted across hill tops, their refuse filling the wadis and causing flooding and erosion. Developments destroying the hills. I watch this in my desert and there too it breaks my heart. Why can't people sit easily on the land? Instead they conquer it. It was the same in L.A. It is the same here in London where investors build skyscrapers of luxury apartments to sit empty as investments at immense environmental and social cost while people sleep in the streets. I was at the Bishopsgate Institute this evening listening to the inaugural C.R. Ashbee lecture on the Seven Dark Arts of Developers (a play on Ruskin's Seven Lamps of Architecture) given by Oliver Wainwright -- it was very good so I am still quite furious.

On the hillside outside my old house, there was always time and space to think and always my capacity for thought was deeper there, the superficial more easily stilled:

The further down I went the deeper the silence became. As always the distance and quiet made me attentive to those troublesome thoughts that had been buried deep in my mind. As I walked, many of them were surfacing. I sifted through them. The mind only admits what it can handle and here on these hills the threshold was higher.

The other day I had to plead with a soldier to be allowed to return home (50).

In my desert it is immigration, it is unmanned planes flying overhead seeking families fleeing to a better life, it is checkpoints and motion detectors, prowling four by fours. They churn up the roads, destroy the fragile plants, ensure you never feel secure, never feel safe. There is no space for thinking, they close down the horizons. When I was little we did not need to own the land to feel safe there, to open yourself to the world there, but now in so many hills you do. You have to have a reason to be there. Papers. There is almost as much loss in losing this as there is in losing home and land. We would not need to own things or have borders at all if justice and this need for space and freedom could be respected.

This does not compare to an occupied Palestine, the suffering of their people being steadily forced further and further from the lands they love, their old and sustainable forms of farming made impossible, water and the peace simply to exist both stolen, treasured generosity to strangers unable to survive. The cynicism of Israeli property development is also far ahead of our borderlands, for all that we now have the same horror of a wall. This book illuminates the lived experience of the development and planning strategies so well laid out

by Eyal Weizman in *Hollow Land*.

I realized that the beautiful Dome of the Rock, for many centuries the symbol of ancient Jerusalem, was no longer visible. It was concealed by new construction. This was by design. Not only had Israeli city planners obstructed the view of this familiar landmark -- they had also constructed a wide highway along the western periphery of Arab East Jerusalem, restricting its growth and separating it from the rest of the highway. Highways are more effective geographic barriers than walls in keeping neighbourhoods apart. Walls can always be demolished. But once built, roads become a cruel reality that it is more difficult to change. No visitor would now sigh, let alone fall to their knees as many a conqueror and pilgrim in the past had done... (105)

God I hate highways. Huge roads impassable to pedestrians. Los Angeles pioneered this and Los Angeles broke my heart too. Every American city drove highways right through African American and Latino neighbourhoods, destroying communities and cutting off those that were left from white people and the resources they kept. To add insult to injury freeways allow commuters to fly right over the inner cities as though they don't even exist. Seems that Israelis have perfected the system, creating massive roads that Palestinians aren't allowed to use, blocking entrances to villages, destroying more of the mountains. A symbol of power.

Roads have so much to answer for. I too like them best when they are humble, two lanes, and wind along the curve of the hills.

I don't understand how this is the world we have inherited.

And so there must be struggle -- I learned a whole lot here about the particularities of Israels expansion into the West Bank and just what the Oslo Accords meant. I didn't learn nothing about how law facilitates the rich and powerful taking what they want, know too much this feeling that what you are up against is just too big, this questioning of why it is you fight.

For many years I managed to hold on to the hope that the settlements would not be permanent. I had meticulously documented the illegal process by which they came to be established, every step of the way. I felt that as long as I understood, as long as the process by which all this had come about was not mysterious and the legal tricks used were exposed, I could not be defeated and confused and Israel could not get away with it. Knowledge is power....I had perceived my life as an ongoing narrative organically linked to the forward march of the Palestinian people towards liberation and freedom...But now I knew this was nothing but a grand delusion. ..It was only my way of feeling I was part of the rest of struggling society, a way of enduring hardships by claiming and holding on to the belief that there was a higher meaning to the suffering--that it wasn't in vain...

But the Oslo Agreements buried my truth... (123)

Writing saves me too.

There is so much more here, natural and archeological history, stories of family and friends, walks through country I have heard so much of. This is a deeply personal meditation of little romanticisation, aware of its flaws, with no hiding of discomfort or conflicted feelings and ideas. No hiding at all. This is absolutely the

book I would give someone who wanted to understand why in the face of all news propaganda I hate the occupation, why I think it has to end, why I support the Palestinian cause. Maybe even if they didn't want to understand.

Shelley says

This is a beautiful and heartbreakng story. Mr. Shehadeh walks through areas of Palestine that he used to walk as a younger man and describes changes in the land, his life, and the country's politics. It's amazing how he smoothly weaves together so many aspects of the complicated situation. He makes it easy to understand why the people who were living there for generations before Israel was created have been frustrated and struggling since 1948.

This book gives you an education in the history of Palestine, the beauty of nature there, and the suffering of its people who are out of power and feel helpless to control their fate.

Sue says

Under the general plan of a book describing walks with family and friends on the West Bank in the general area of his home in Ramallah, Shehadeh presents a story of land, religion, geography, nature, peoples, politics, betrayals. As the laws governing the lives and land on which the Palestinians live change over the course of these walks, (from 1978 to 2006) rights and walks become more circumscribed, nature is trampled, the future looks dimmer. Somehow, through writing, the author finds a way through his anger and we are given this book.

The last chapters in particular have several sections that I found myself copying out to remember as I think they have some universal application beyond Palestine, but I was so overwhelmed to find that sense of...I'm not sure what to name it...acceptance of self/situation/time. He will not ever agree with what has or is happening but he will not allow himself to be destroyed by it. Beautifully written and sad.

Recommended for anyone interested in a literary approach to Palestinian history through its landscape.

Kate says

The author takes us on seven walks through the landscape of the West Bank while telling us stories of the land, the history, the politics, the people. Shehadeh is a Palestinian lawyer and author who has hiked the Palestinian hills for decades. He describes a rapidly changing land that most of us will never see as these hills are leveled and the landscape re-shaped. By the end of the book, as he describes the unrelenting destruction to the landscape, I wondered how he could possibly not give up on the dream and join others who have left.

The book made me want to see this place before what he described is gone forever. But even the author doesn't feel safe walking there because of the intensity of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. I

could almost feel the fear that the author describes while walking through areas that have been made off-limits to Palestinians by Israeli laws. I can't help but feel furious with what is going on there.

I found this author via a recommendation by an American who had commented about the book and praised the author's work. I highly recommend it to everyone who is interested in reading about the natural history of a high desert landscape in the Middle East as well as those wanting to understand the conflict from a Palestinian's point of view.

Mariel says

There is a heaping, sun-blotting eyesore on the interstate in Florida. Whenever I drive by it I inevitably ask myself "What the hell is that big ass eyesore?" I say it out loud and gesticulate for dramatic self righteous effect (I'm in a car. I'm an asshole too). It's beyond tacky. It flirted with hideous and dated butt ugly before settling down with bad taste. Some kind of white and gold building thing with signage that becomes impossible to miss once you've noticed it because it says "The Holy Land". Can't argue with that logic. I remember there's some lion in all the holy bombasticity. It's a kind of crusades mystique that I wasn't really digging. I'd leave out the lion, for starters. I had long assumed it was a theme restaurant like Midevil Times. Wikipedia said it is a theme park with biblical types of attractions. They have a few reenactments a day of Jesus dragged and nailed to the cross (and that's not all!). I wish that people who wanted to fuel themselves on cans of messianic fury would do one of those reenactment deals in The Holy Land theme park and leave everyone else who wants to live with each other and the land alone. Crucifixions for anyone who wants them. There's a ten percent discount on martyrdom. I couldn't help but think of this place when reading about the hills bulldozed and the earth scorched with cement in the Israeli "territories". Walls as far as the eye can see. They'd probably turn Florida into a divine land of theme parks and my own home would be demolished to make room for rides about some other biblical thing. An immaculate conception whore house? That seems fitting for my place. My vegetables would be gone and my dogs would have no where to run. I would be so sad. John Sayles made a good movie called Sunshine State about the land and people losing to court orders and money and loopholes so unfair you could feel the tears of angry frustration if you couldn't make yourself think about something else (and don't forget the alligators who woke up one day to sun bathe on a golf course that belonged by rights to fat old men who can't dress themselves). I have never been to Palestine. I read the dismissive words from travel writers past that Shehadeh mourned. They had a place in the past that they couldn't let it feed them. I don't know what they were expecting. The sky and the earth wasn't majestic enough? They could argue with that? I have never been to a holy land. I only try to heed the sky. I sometimes long for the earth to take me when I can't do that. I mourn what is lost to shopping malls, parking lots and paper to wipe my ass with. I'm not at all sure that I'm worth that (definitely not). I don't know if I should call it art imitates and destroys life. Rapper Immortal Technique said that God wasn't a religion but a spiritual bond. Not art, then. I wish I had a spiritual bond with people and with the land. This other stuff makes it hard for me to do that.

Shehadeh's home is Ramallah. Ramallah is not mentioned anywhere in the bible so the people are allowed to stay there. Then progress walls them in. The roads belong to Israel after the Oslo accords. Walls built to avoid seeing their Arab neighbors and to avoid seeing the land. I kind of think that belief in a God probably has nothing to do with it's legal because we say it is asshole moves.

I wasn't looking forward to reviewing this book on goodreads. I'm worried that after I've done my thing I'm going to have one of my guilt episodes about adding another drop to the (already kicked) bucket in an exhausting and never-ending blight. Who am I to weigh down on anyone's shoulders? It's the don't tread on

me butterfly effect of living in the world with other people and disrupting the business of trying to live with the same small voice in the crowd that everyone has. "Hey, wait! But what about-" and "I'm trying to live here". Everything you wish wasn't another wire in a fortress stronger than Sting could build around your heart. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been at the back of my mind for as long as I can remember. I think at least since the fifth grade in elementary school. I would sit in the room with the adults in my family watching the news about the first Iraq war. I'd ask questions and then they'd remember to tell me to shut up and go to bed (this was also when we first had cable television so that may have also been a factor in my news watching beginnings). Israel is unavoidable, really. If you think about it or not the foreign policy in my country still considers them first. I guess it was in middle school sometime when I first heard the excuse that the West Bank people were oppressed because they "had their chance" in 1948 and didn't want it. I've read since then many times that the settlements aren't illegal, or some kind of pussy foot way to deny that they are building more settlements. International law says it is illegal and what not.

What I really want to know is why all the lying about it? Why not just admit that they are continuing to conquer the land out from underneath the Palestinians to this day? If it is just then why say you are not breaking the law when that law is it is the law because we say so. Shehadeh discovers that all of the land is registered to the Israeli government, not just what is officially Israel. The only difference is in name. Why lie? Doesn't everyone know they are, anyway?

It's too late to stop it just like it's far too late to change the atrocities committed on the Native Americans back in the day. It turns out we are going to need that land too. Horrible. I wouldn't be alive if that hadn't happened. Side note that's not really a side note because it's connected to all this jumbled mess of people shit. Anyone else get a headache thinking about that who is or isn't responsible for what shit? The internet seems to be a happy place for people who like to point the finger for history bullshit. I'm a Yank and slavery was all the South's fault! (I guess if they want to pretend that the sellers weren't yanks that's their deal.) My family heritage is Cherokee and post WWI immigrants from Wales and France. Going by their rules I could start blaming myself for civil rights (I wasn't alive) but not the other stuff. It's ridiculous, right, to live your life by foot notes? You're born and if you're lucky you get to live enough of your own life outside the dark shadows of the past. I don't get the divine right because of the bible. I think it would be silly if it weren't so frightening that "It says in the bible the land belongs to us because this is proof we were here first". I don't see how you can deny that the Arabs were already there too. The cruel "If you've left in the last ten years the land automatically belongs to us" boggles my mind (coupled with equally restrictive and cruel time bounds on Jordanian immigration). I don't get how all Jews own the land because of the bible but property rights to Arabs have to be proven within the last ten years (corruption to fuck them over anyway notwithstanding). I don't get how it is different to march Arabs from their homes, to say "Why doesn't the rest of the Arab world just take them?" Why pretend it isn't the same as what they wouldn't forget about historical bad shit for Jewish peoples.

Raja Shehadeh had a good point about PLO hopeful after the Oslo accords not understanding why the settlers were even there. They want ALL of greater Israel. That also includes lands in Jordan and Syria. I have a theory that public opinion is the reason behind the lies about going with the law. Lie enough, change the language to say what is not true, and maybe people will sleep enough and by the time they wake up it will be too late. If you're taking land from someone else that is what you are doing. Why pretend you are doing anything else? I don't understand why it is such a huge taboo to talk about something that is happening anyway. If it isn't bad then why do you need to lie? No doubt it is to shut up Israelis and Americans (the bank rollers) who wouldn't and don't agree with what they are doing. It is only their dead children in the armies to protect those settlements that were deliberately placed to antagonize ("We won!") Arab villages. Why else pretend they weren't building settlements when that is exactly what they were doing, and undeniably so? I also suspect that it is the fall out when they take the land from Jordan and Syria. I wish people DID face up

to that and the story sold wasn't "We are protecting ourselves" and not the imprisonment of Palestinians (just like I wish that wars weren't raged in the middle east for oil profits or because Israel didn't like their neighbor. My theory is that people wouldn't sacrifice their lives if the line given resembled the truth). Two billion in foreign aid every year isn't to fight terrorists (in fact, the first two billion was to build settlements, and the money continues to magically direct towards that now). Foreign aid has to be spent on American corporations. Money that in theory belongs to tax payers who in theory pay taxes for their own country (it's called "entitlements" in the states and "foreign aid" elsewhere). The money goes to the corporations and not to help a country help itself. Two billion a year for how long? Since I've been on this Earth, at least. Why all the cloak and dagger bullshit about this, anyway?

A man going on a sarha wanders aimlessly, not restricted by time and place, going where his spirit takes him to nourish his soul and rejuvenate himself. But not any excursion would qualify as a sarha. Going on a sarha implies letting go. It is a drug-free high, Palestinian-style.

It isn't my life, or my home. I wish I could have an out of body experience and travel over the lands in a way that would be like a sarha. (Reading at the best of times is like this. I long for writing to be that way.) I fell in love with sarhas after reading Palestinian Walks. None of isolating walls to keep out. I had an ache when I read about sarhas. I pine for what they lost. It is hard to blink back the frustrated tears in the face of the injustice (in the best case that he had, a civil case for plaintiff Albina [he only found out by chance!] who had never left and could be proven, they brought in a mystery "witness" with his face wrapped in traditional Arabic headgear that covers all but the eyes. His identity they refuse to reveal. He is too young to have been alive to say if Albina had left to fight in the Jordanian army. The sham proceedings... Why call this law?). It must have been so hard to fight in a fraudulent legal system. Shehadeh built his life around fighting for human rights for his people. The Oslo accords made his legal accomplishments and career redundant. Did they ever stop taking? Yet he still writes about them as people, not monsters, albeit people who sleep in centuries ago. The unreachable minds of those who believe they are in the right and will do anything to get what they feel that they alone deserve. Palestinian Walks may sound like another stone in the shoe on a path that's too hard to keep walking. It's not, it's a wonderful book. I'm dreading the remorse I'm going to feel for not getting this right! It's so frustrating. The hills around Ramallah where Shehadeh took his walks as a young man in the seventies before they were lost to him forever. Shehadeh is himself a Christian. I didn't know that until I looked up his biography after reading his book. I don't connect me to any domination in name. If it is about life, and his I did connect to, I can. Would I belong to anything? I really just want the sarha. It hurts so much that he can't go outside and sleep under the sky. My favorite walk is the first one he takes when he returns home after studying law in the United States. He discovers a chair that his grandfather's cousin, a stonemason, had made for himself in the rocks. It is the perfect fit for himself. Shehadeh marvels that he had ever had the free time to make them for himself. It later gets destroyed when he takes his nephew to find his discovery. Why do they have to lose that for some more ugly condominiums?

Shehadeh writes not so much bitterly or in overwhelming anger. If you are familiar with Glenn Greenwald that would be a great shorthand for me to describe his sarcastic humor (this is highest compliment from me. I admire Glenn Greenwald so much). I would take their cue to write about people shit and feel less helpless to it that way. This is right and the hell mouth inside doesn't open wider to talk incomprehensible dentist talk. Maybe it's just something that people wrote down but it's less lonely if it applies to you and them equally. The rug isn't pulled out from underneath you. I feel too emotional and standing on nothing myself. How can a man of law take seriously that the Israeli big men feel "torn" if they don't have all of greater Israel as the only justification that they need to do whatever they can to get it. Putting it that way, though, only reminds me how cruel it was to try and fight their lies with law. It didn't exist! It doesn't exist.

Thank you from my heart if you read this. It means a lot to me. I don't feel right as a stone if it doesn't ever

matter that I think about this stuff. I get so sick and tired of taboos. If someone isn't interested, fine, but in my life it is like one isn't ALLOWED to address that the law is set up to screw the defenseless. Why does the big asshole get to pretend he's in the right? Just be an asshole and admit it, at least.

I felt so bad these past days in a silence that I couldn't talk about not wanting to sleep all of the time. A friend of mine gave me a hard time because I cared about what they didn't care about. No one has to care, lives have to be lived. But does that mean that I can't care? Why does that mean that I can't care? It was the worst feeling.

I know it won't change anything. I wrote in my review of David Grossman's The Yellow Wind that you can't live for other people. That is still what I feel most strongly about past bleeding into the present and stealing the future. It is living for someone else to do it. I feel guilty talking about this stuff because I don't want to do that (I feel guilty if I don't because that's denying to me that they mark me). I want to remember because I find it so hard to live with people being lied to so that you can live for them.

Speaking of (and sorry for another sidetrack), I read in a DG interview that Shehadeh criticized Grossman and other Israelis who felt they had to be strong to be able to live beside Arabs out of their fear of antisemitism. I feel that a lot in the states when I read that us Southern states have to be controlled by law to not be racist. I can't deny that people who were not me, who lived long before me, affect my relationship with people. It's inherited guilt that I want nothing to do with and have no choice about. (What I think makes no difference but I hope for a two-state solution just like DG.)

Anyway, this is a really good book. It's trying to live when your life is stolen from all around you. I thought it was beautiful. I would have loved it for the description of how the sea rolling hills were formed in the West Bank (I have an inner sarha just reading about geology. How could those old farts ever claim that Palestine had to be scripture perfect to be spiritual?). I would have loved it for the footing in the law and the land.

In my summing up I had anticipated the possibility that they might invoke this article and had written: "If Article 5 is not interpreted strictly and the Custodian then believes that whatever action he takes (even if based on improper legal considerations) would be retroactively validated by imputing to it good faith, without using strict criteria to ascertain whether or not it in fact existed, the Custodian would in effect be given a free hand to act arbitrarily... If this happens, a mockery would have been made of the law."

Zanna says

Well, you see, Aborigines don't own the land. They belong to it. It's like their mother. See those rocks? Been standing there for 600 million years. Still be there when you and I are gone. So arguing over who owns them is like two fleas arguing over who owns the dog they live on.

-Crocodile Dundee

I see this as a book about land and the felt relationship to land. Raja Shehadeh spent much of his professional life fighting legal battles for Palestinian landowners, strongly motivated by patriotism. But the folks on the other side, Israeli settlers, not only have the legal upper hand, but the same passionate motivation: deep belief in their entitlement to the land. Shehadeh is reminded again and again, by everything: the attitudes of settlers he encounters, the orientation of settlements, the walls built to segregate them from neighbouring Palestinian villages, that the project of settling the occupied West Bank is ideologically invested in erasing the Palestinians and their history.

Shehadeh feels the same way. He would love to forget the occupation and just enjoy the beauty and tranquility of the hills. But over the 39 years this book spans, his ideal of *sarha*, which means most precisely *walkabout*, wandering without constraint, becomes ever more distant around Ramallah as the landscapes of lush spring-watered valleys, arid hilltops 'embraced' by villages is fragmented by big, busy roads that cut through the landscape to make journeys as swift and convenient as possible for settlers, as areas of open and supposedly public land become illegal for Palestinians to enter, and as the fear of being arrested or shot increasingly haunt the walker's mind. Metaphors of invasion and occupation crop up constantly, cutting up the text as its referent is cut up, as a poem often takes the form or sound of what it echoes.

Much of his purpose in writing, I feel, is to counter the Israeli narrative that Palestine was ugly, neglected and unappreciated by its inhabitants before they took possession of it and began to develop it. He quotes the orientalist writings of famous western visitors and contrasts their dismal assessments of the landscape with his own loving impressions. He repeats that he was at first happy when Israel designated areas of the Palestinian territories as nature reserves, only to be dismayed to see them being built on and Palestinians legally shut out. He turns a popular mantra cynically on its head; the settlement project makes 'the desert bloom with neon signs and concrete'.

Israeli architects Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman perceptively uncover 'a cruel paradox': 'the very thing that renders the landscape "biblical", its traditional inhabitation and cultivation in terraces, olive orchards, stone building and the presence of livestock, is produced by the Palestinians, whom the Jewish settlers came to replace. And yet the very people who cultivate the 'green olive orchards' and render the landscape biblical are themselves excluded from the panorama. The Palestinians are there to produce the scenery and then disappear'

This is a book of love, anger and despair. It is an ode shading into a requiem. Both Israeli settlers who can shoot Palestinians with impunity and Palestinian militias and bullies threaten and thwart Shehadeh and his walking companions at different times. This memoir elucidated to me more clearly than anything I have ever read the psychological toll taken by living under occupation. Shehadeh, a relatively privileged middle class man records the loss of something he senses, as I sense, is a human right. As a lover of walks myself and an itchy-footed introvert, the fantasy and reality of *sarha* sustains me; great swathes of the country I live in are open, public and free to wander; I walk in them fearlessly carrying no documents to validate my right to do so. But this privilege is raced; the document I carry is the whiteness of my skin. The logic and violence of settler colonialism is at work all over the world, only in the occupied territories of the West Bank it proceeds with especially murderous urgency.

When Mick Dundee says 'the Aborigines don't own the land, they belong to it' I see this as an invitation to rethink the relationship to land outside of the logic of colonial capitalism. If 'the Aborigines do not own the land', settler logic allows it to be claimed by them. If indigenous people are to remain free to use and live on the land where they are, they are forced to accept the colonial position that *land can be owned*, and take ownership of it. To me, the colonial view is a kind of madness. Shehadeh began to write to restore his sanity after being crushed by despair, rage and defeat. Though the settlers see the world through lies, he recognises and relates to their love for the land. The challenge his words shape for Israelis is to enact this love while rejecting the colonial logic of the genocide of the natives. He writes calmly, honestly, critically, towards sanity and towards peace.

Wendy says

For anyone wanting to gain a better understanding of the on-the-ground facts in the Palestinian Territories,

this book is an excellent resource. The author does a really beautiful job of sharing how the landscape has changed over the past 40-50 years. His dedication and perseverance is really impressive, though also heartbreaking since he knew he was fighting a losing battle, yet still he continued to try. He ultimately chose to channel his energies into his writing and his passion and love for the land and the Palestinian people really shines through. You can feel his heartache and his sadness come through on the page.

I wish he would consider publishing a companion book to this one in which the places that he talks about could be shown in photographs so that the reader can see for themselves how these places looked before and after the results of the Occupation. It really made me curious to want to see all of this, and it makes me sad to think that even if I went there to visit today, all I would be able to see is how it looks today, I would not know how things used to look.

For the generation growing up under the Occupation, who know nothing different, it is very sad that this new landscape will be all that they know.

Lauren says

This is an incredible and heartbreaking book, beautifully written and devastating in its effect. I now feel totally pessimistic about the situation in the West Bank.

Ghada Arafat says

I really enjoyed reading this book. It is full of emotions and facts that would help the reader how it feels to live in Palestine. Looking forward reading other books by the author

Andy Oram says

Awe-inspiring as a feat of writing, as a political statement, and as a paean to lost Nature. The writer's insights into human character are also impressive, and the book even takes on spiritual depth as it proceeds. The indictment of Israeli human rights violations--backed by American supporters--is powerful. But aside from the nationalist, racist element, the book also chronicles a trend in modernization and despoilation happening all over the world, from the Amazon rainforest to the watersheds of China. The author shows amazing compassion, allowing himself anger at the Israelis but no hatred.

Catherine says

By recalling the walks he's taken and been prevented from taking in the hills around Ramallah, Raja Shehadeh provides a unique perspective on the fortunes of Palestine and the meaning of Jewish settlement in

the West Bank. Shehadeh is an uncompromising nationalist - much of the book deals with his disgust with the PLO, an organization he believes betrayed the Palestinian cause in the Oslo accords and which is far too concerned with the trappings of power rather than the health and well-being of ordinary people. The people of Jewish faith who figure in the book are all government officials, members of the armed forces, or settlers - and unsurprisingly (as these are the people of Jewish faith with whom he has day-to-day contact) his perspective on Israel is therefore wholly negative and wholly rejectionist. Yet viewed from his position, standing on the hillsides around Ramallah, watching them be destroyed by the building of roads and the Wall and settlements that cut through private Palestinian land, it's hard to do anything but sympathize with his sense of betrayal and outrage.

As the most uncompromising articulation of Palestinian nationalism I've yet read, this was immensely valuable - discomfiting, troubling, heart-breaking in places, and deeply thought-provoking. As a text to address where things go next, and how to bring peace to the region, it has almost nothing to say - perhaps because Shehadeh himself is so disillusioned, and so convinced that another 1948 expulsion is on the cards. It's deeply telling that the book ends with a moment of peace between he and a settler, sitting companionably together in Ramallah's hills - but doing so only because they are sharing a smoke of hashish laced with opiates. This, he suggests, is the only peace that can be had.

Catherine Mustread says

Loved this book for it's combination of history and personal insights on the complex situation of the Palestinians and Israel, geology, topography and description of the terrain, and walking -- the last of which ties all the rest together. Raja Shehadeh's love for his native land is well described but several far less complimentary quotes are included from writers who visited Palestine: William Makepeace Thackeray in Notes On A Journey From Cornhill To Grand Cairo and Mark Twain in The Innocents Abroad: or, The New Pilgrims' Progress. All show a different perspective. The changes in the area during the past 40 years are bitterly documented but Raja's reconciliation with reality and willingness to soldier on are well told. Liked the maps, too.

POSSIBLE SPOILER!

The author tells briefly of his family's history in the area, his education as a lawyer and career fighting for Palestinian land rights, his depression about the hopelessness of his efforts, and finally his adjustment to his new life as a writer. Here's a quote from page 155: 'I knew I would be able to find ways of dealing with the trauma of defeat. Somehow despite the problems and fears I would continue to walk and to write. At my age my father had successfully survived two catastrophic defeats. I was more fortunate, So far, I have had to deal with only one.'

In a totally unrelated book which I'm also reading now, Isabel Dalhousie in Alexander McCall Smith's The Lost Art of Gratitude, reflects on the big lottery of life being the "very first one, the one that determined what we were: French, American, Sudanese...." and expresses her happiness with where she lives (Edinburgh) which reminded me of Raja's love for his native land.

Susan says

This book is excellent writing about personal feelings and experiences. While each chapter focuses on a

particular walk the author took and describes what he saw and did, in each case the particular time and place called up thought and feeling primarily about the increasing isolation and powerlessness of Palestinians in their own land. Sometimes one wants to remind Shehadah, as did the Israeli settler he encountered on his last walk, that change happens, modernization intrudes into pristine landscapes and that happens all over the world. But Shehadeh experiences a diminishing of his world in Ramallah as modernization is for Israeli settlers only, while Palestinians are not allowed to use the new roads or live in the new houses. Eventually they are walled off and Ramallah is surrounded so it has little room to grow.

Shehadeh, a lawyer and a peaceful man who dislikes the PLO almost as much as the Israelis do, patiently attempts to get justice for his clients, but even when the client's ownership of land is proved, it gets taken by some overarching new directive. At first he's convinced if he proceeds through the law and completely without violence or malice, he will get justice, and when that never happens that does happen he reaches a point where he even fears he'll become suicidal until he devotes himself exclusively to his writing.

I like him, the man who wrote this book, and think he deserves more. But with the Oslo Accords he believes Palestinians gave up all hope of legal redress. It's sad and it's complex and it's why the Palestinian question is so hard to resolve. That conversation with the Israeli settler at the end of the book sets up the stalemate pretty clearly, though I loved it that they sat down to share a pipe at the end of their encounter
