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Mischa Hiller

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A pacy debut thriller: harrowing, provocative and moving, this is a deeply felt account of the Sabra massacre in Beirut, 1982.

Sabra Zoo Details

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From Reader Review Sabra Zoo for online ebook

Garry says

Sabra Zoo was one of the best books that I have read in a very long time. It is the story of the Sabra massacre in Beirut, as told through the eyes of Ivan, an 18 year old with a Danish mother and Palestinian father. His parents were involved in an underground organisation before fleeing Lebanon, but Ivan has stayed on and tentatively follows in their footsteps. His real vocation though is as an interpreter at a hospital in the Sabra camp run by foreign medical volunteers - this is where the bulk of the story lies, and also most of its heart.

The strength of this novel is its characters, starting with Ivan himself. He's extremely popular with the ladies, and not just for his looks. He's sensitive and considerate and decent, but not cloyingly so. And all these traits that make him popular with the ladies also endear him to the reader. I liked Ivan, and enjoyed seeing the world (even THAT world) through his eyes.

But it's not just Ivan that is likeable. Every character feels real, and every character is sympathetic - I suppose this is possible when the 'villains' of the story are the faceless and unseen forces behind the butchery described. From European doctors and nurses who have left behind comfortable lives to try to make a difference in such an environment, to American journalists who take footage that they know can't be seen on mealtime news broadcasts, to locals who risk everything for the honorable causes they believe in: they are all well-drawn characters, and Hiller could have chosen any one of them as the focal point of his story. I kept thinking about the support cast, imagining the world from their eyes too. That's surely a sign of a great novel.

I'll finish with a short passage that I feel demonstrates both the horror and the heart of Sabra Zoo. Ivan is relaying the conversation at a gathering of the hospital volunteers, including this passage from the small Indian doctor with beautiful white teeth...

Asha's voice was measured and calm compared to Liv's. 'Do you remember that man in the field hospital who lost fourteen members of his family all at once?' There were nods around the table. He was a big man whose apartment took a direct hit from a rocket that killed everyone in it apart from him. He'd been impaled on the railing three floors down after being blown from his house.

'Every day', she continued, 'he would sit with anyone who had no visitors or was feeling depressed or just come out of surgery. He would talk to them, play cards with them, fetch them water or food.' She hesitated and refilled her glass with water. 'He would hold their hands.' She looked at us and smiled. 'That's love,' she said, 'the rest of it is just...' She waved her hands dismissively.

Patrick Schultheis says

Great novel about the horrific Sabra massacre. The characters are captivating, as is the language. The reader feels

like he is in Beirut in September 1982.

The editing could have been a little better. A city map of Beirut at that time would have helped.

Jenn says

Simply, wow. Hiller is such a talented author (am currently reading his new thriller, SHAKE OFF, and it is also stunning). This book is gut-wrenching, especially for the last 80 or so pages. I cannot wait to read more from this writer!!

Ayala Levinger says

Couldn't put this book down till the (bitter) end.

Jamil Hilal says

a novel about a war-stricken city with a teenager left to fend for himself in a situation of "amonie", to face a massacre in a camp where he was translating to volunteer doctors. He wakes up to the reality that living means taking a minute by minute decisions.... which is what growing up (and disappointment) is about. Worth reading

Ian says

I found Sabra Zoo a compelling and ultimately chilling read. It takes place against the historical backdrop of the 1982 massacres in the West Beirut refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila. The facts of what happened are not much in dispute. After a UN peace force had engineered the removal of the great majority of Palestinian fighters from Beirut (which had been under Israeli army siege), Israel took advantage of the departure of the UN force to occupy Beirut. Israel Sharon, the Israeli Defence Minister then agreed with the leader of the Phalangist Christian militia that his men could enter the camps to mop up the suspected remaining PLO fighters. The militias then undertook a brutal massacre of mostly innocents which the Israeli army facilitated and did nothing to stop. The Israeli Kahan judicial commission later declared Israel indirectly responsible and castigated Israel Sharon for his complicity. It is to Israel's shame that he was later elected Prime Minister in 2001. The back fictional story to the historical facts is centred around Ivan an 18 year old of Danish/Palestinian extraction whose father was a member of the PLO at a political level. His parents left in the evacuation, but Ivan stayed and works as an interpreter at Sabra camp hospital, assisting the mostly international medical volunteers, but also operating as a minor cog in the remaining Palestinian resistance. It is a coming of age story as Ivan tries to come to terms with his newly found independence and the dangerous realities of West Beirut in 1982, whilst also vigorously pursuing the more typical teenage boy/man's obsession...the loss of his virginity. I thought this novel really well written with a believable and very likeable cast of characters and can highly recommend it.

Khulud Khamis says

A painfully beautiful novel about a boy who will get under your skin. Ivan, half Danish half Palestinian 18 year-old boy, is caught growing up in a war-torn country, witnessing one of the most horrific massacres of

the 20th century; a massacre that was well-orchestrated while the world remained silent. Mischa's style is brilliant in its simplicity, painful honesty, and clarity of language. Ivan is definitely one of my most favorite fictional characters ever. The book filled me up as only a masterpiece can. Looking forward to reading his "Shake Off" next.

Merrikay says

The last book I read in 2013 was another by this author, [Shake Off]. I enjoyed it so much I decided to read all of Hiller's books. They are both thriller type of books, although [Shake Off] more so. In Sabra Zoo the main character is Ivan, the son of Palestinians who have escaped from the camps in Beirut. Ivan has chosen to stay behind and take over some of his parents' work as activists. The story has been described as a rite of passage novel as Ivan experiences this life and the consequences, evaluates the consequences, and determines if he wants to continue his parents' work or not. This is a GREAT book and has been recognized with awards for best first novel, etc. Highly recommended - couldn't put it down - I appreciate the combination of action and complicated characters. I enjoy the interaction between Palestinians, Israelis, Christians, Muslims and those who simply aren't interested.

Nasim says

Review written April, 2010:

It's 1982 and we see the Israeli siege of Beirut and the shocking events which followed through the eyes of 18-year-old Ivan, half Palestinian and half Danish, whose parents have already left. Ivan is in many ways a typical boy/man - getting drunk and stoned nightly, lusting after an older woman, desperate to lose his virginity - but in this novel, context is everything. Working as an interpreter in the Sabra camp hospital, and as a courier of fake documents for the PLO - his father a former cadre - his friends are not the usual teenager's friends, his flat is the hangout for a ragtag of international medical volunteers. I like the understated tone of the narrative, the lack of hyperbole, the small moments of humour. There is a lovely recurrent image of a candle in a Chianti bottle - so ordinary and everyday. As the camp massacre unfolds - as we know it must - and the horrors pile up sentence after sentence, you want to look away - like Ivan, uncomprehending and stunned - but you can't, you keep reading. A novel like Sabra Zoo is important, educating through fiction, fleshing out events which we as readers may not usually wish to 'revisit', but through Ivan we must. This is the power of fiction. And there is hope at the end. I was left with a lump in my throat, and wanting to know how the characters were doing, long after the last page.

Kati says

So much of the book hit close to home. It takes place thirty years ago, but in a world that was very familiar to me - the anything-goes world of youth who don't fit the conservative stereotype of the Middle East. The main character nurtures the wax formations on a wine bottle that has been converted into a candle-holder. Somehow this image captured the feel of the book. A feel where life is felt acutely, numbed by earthly pleasures because no one can live at such a level of intensity for long.

But history repeats itself, and that realisation is what made this book hard to read. The Middle East I know is

of the past decade. The wars I've seen are being fought in Syria and Iraq. Sabra Zoo takes place at one of the most difficult moments in the history of Lebanon-Palestine-Israel. It explores an important, but beyond-tragic, historical event from a unique point of view. It documents an awfulness that shouldn't be repeated. But it is being repeated now. A contemporary book, told through a much-needed drunken haze, about living life when it's hard to figure out why.

Rachelfm says

Damn. A sad book on several levels, but a fast read. The work focuses on a normal "coming of age" as Ivan becomes an adult just as the Israelis invade Lebanon and make way for the massacres at Sabra and Shatila. I'm usually really annoyed at the "western aid workers humping as plot point using tragedy as backdrop" and was happy to see that was not the case in this book. The international/intercultural interactions here seemed believable and I believed the characters as they tried to navigate this deeply effed up world.

Lebanon has always intrigued me and I felt like someone with no background on the Lebanese civil war would have really been adrift; on the one hand I appreciate an author who assumes I'm informed and have a brain but on the other I felt that the author missed a chance to convey how this particular civil war was more messed up than most. All in all, a good example of the "aloneness" of a third-culture kid contrasting with the in-demand skillset as a cultural broker that such a person possesses.

John says

I read this having enjoyed his more recent novel 'Shake Off' very much indeed. I enjoyed this one too, reading the whole book on one long plane journey. Apart from being a reminder of the mini-holocaust that occurred in the Sabra camp, it convincingly captures the curious relationships that emerge in such situations between politically active locals and sympathetic foreigners. The latter can, of course, always leave, as they do here. The protagonist straddles both camps, but eventually he leaves too. Nothing is straightforward in Hiller's writing, but then it isn't in life, is it?

Teresa says

Was tipped off to a new political thriller by this writer from the NY Times, so picked up his first one since it was available at the library. This is a historical fiction, of sorts, about the 1982 Sabra massacre in Beirut. I say "of sorts" because the story felt flat and I wondered if the author was literally re-creating an autobiographical experience through a fiction construct instead of memoir. Overall, appreciated the surprise journey into Middle East politics and I look forward to picking up his latest.

Benjamin Solah says

Originally published in Blood and Barricades

It is not often a debut novelist is able to take on weighty events such as wars and massacres. There are

exceptions, of course.

Mischa Hiller's debut novel, *Sabra Zoo* is one of those exceptions based on the events in 1982 inside the Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut where millions of Palestinians lived after they were expelled from their homeland during the formation of the Israeli state. Following the siege of Lebanon where Israeli forces bombed Beirut and forced the evacuation of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (the PLO), Hiller provides a deep and real description of the daily lives of Palestinians inside the camps but more importantly, the events at the end of the novel, where right-wing Lebanese forces backed by the Israeli state, committed the horrendous massacre inside the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

Ivan, a half-Danish, half-Palestinian son of PLO cadre stays behind in Lebanon after the PLO evacuates the country to live in exile in Tunisia. With most of the city recovering from the devastating siege, he spends his time moving secret messages for a PLO faction and translating for the doctors volunteering at the refugee camp's hospital. It's in the hospital that readers see the damage done by Israeli bombs, including to a cheeky teenage boy, Youssef, who Ivan befriends and helps to rehabilitate after his leg was blown apart from a cluster bomb.

Ivan spends a lot of time with a group of volunteers at the hospital as well as one of his father's associates, Samir. We get a cursory glimpse of a bit of the context in which the events happen such as through Liv, a Norwegian Trotskyist who surprises Faris, a Palestinian friend of Samir's with her knowledge of Lebanese politics when she explains who the new President, Bachir Gemayel is: "He's a Phalange, a right-wing Christian. He hates the Palestinians, wants to expel them from Lebanon. He cooperated with the Israelis during the invasion of his own country."

But it is only through the events at the end that you really see the true extent of what happened in 1982. After Gemayel is assassinated and the Israelis invade, Samir and Ivan with Bob, a Western cameraman, are denied access to the Sabra refugee camp by the Israelis who surround the camp. The next day, walking around with Bob, Ivan and Samir witness the after effects of the massacre in the Sabra refugee camp whilst looking for Faris, who's disappeared.

The result of the massacre is described graphically through the eyes of Ivan, describing bodies piled in the street, beside mass graves and in one instance, an unborn child torn from the womb lying dead on a table still connected to its mother lying dead underneath.

Whilst some details of the context of the novel are explained, the novel is mostly a description of the graphic events and doesn't go into a lot of the political issues between the different forces.

Sabra Zoo is a very different kind of 'coming-of-age' tale describing how a teenage boy grows up in a very different place to us living in Australia. It is worth reading to get a sense of the sheer brutality that is often described by Palestinians as 'everyday' life.

Dawn Bates says

This book has had me gripped from start to finish. It's not a thriller or suspense, just a well written book about life in Lebanon before, during and after the Sabra massacre. Written as a novel, it makes what happened more palatable for those who only like to think of these things happening in some distant land of make believe. For those that are prepared to acknowledge that these things do happen in the real world, you

will not be disappointed. Dispelling many myths about the people of Lebanon, as well as painting a picture of Lebanon, it had me chuckling and feeling deep empathy.

I know Lebanon, and I love it as a country. I love the people and their resilience. I understand the politics to the degree that those of us outside the political arena can do; and yet picturing the streets, the beaches and the sunsets mentioned in this book, had me back there in Lebanon with family in the various locations dotted across the country, seeing the bullet holes in the buildings - some patched up, others not; feeling that nervous feeling at the checkpoints simple because it was a checkpoint with soldiers and guns - big guns; seeing brand new roads and bridges which had only just been completed after the latest round of bombing, seeing the rubble of the bombings being used to make sea defences, and new hillsides to add to the varied landscape. The ability to paint a picture that Mishca has was intensified for me because of my knowledge of Lebanon, but don't think for a moment that my knowledge takes away from Mishca's ability. A very talented author, and a great first novel!

This book is well written and will have all audiences hooked. If it doesn't hook you, then I don't know what will.... Mills and Boon maybe? Enjoy it folks, I did.
