

**Sayed Kashua, native: dispatches from an Israeli-Palestinian life**, Translated from the Hebrew by Ralph Mandel, New York, Grove Press, 2016, 289 pp., Hbk \$24.00, ISBN 978-0-8021-2455-5

Journalist, screenwriter, and novelist Sayed Kashua is known outside Israel for his Hebrew novels in translation (*Dancing Arabs*, 2004; *Let it be Morning*, 2006; and *Second Person Singular*, 2010), all of which explore the paradoxes of Palestinian life in Israel through a mix of realism and fantasy. Now, with his 2016 *Native: Dispatches from an Israeli-Palestinian Life* (Hebrew, *Ben ha-arets*, 2014), Kashua's English readership will come to know the author through the wry and witty short columns that have earned him a dedicated following in Israel. A selection of Kashua's weekly "dispatches" for the *Haaretz* newspaper from 2006 to 2014, the collection begins and ends with his family's departure from Jerusalem for the University of Illinois in summer 2014. This was amid the upsurge in violence set off by the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli hitchhikers and inflamed by a horrific revenge killing, which culminated in yet another Hamas-Israel war and full-blown assault on Gaza. Initially planned as a yearlong sojourn, the Illinois trip morphs into emigration when Kashua, fearing for the safety of his children, arrives at a self-declared breaking-point: "When Jewish

youth parade through the city shouting ‘Death to Arabs’ and attack Arabs only because they are Arabs, I understood that I lost my little war” (p. 288). Before arriving at this heartbreaking admission of defeat, however, we are treated to a carousel of vignettes written from a deeply antiheroic perspective in which ordinary daily events are laced with enduring significance: a spin through eight years of doggedly real professional and family life in which the minor, human catastrophes of ripped pant seams, hangovers, sick children and do-it-yourself home failures commingle with the small-scale racism and unrelenting indignities of second-class citizenship. This is a writer who locates himself in the comic mode, with the result that his momentary flights from humor register as deadly serious. Ruminating on the source of his so-called “identity crisis,” Kashua recalls how it was taken for granted in his childhood that one could not use the unsanitary toilets in Arab schools.

I remembered how when I was sent to my [Jewish] Jerusalem boarding school it took me months to grasp that I could use the toilets. When that thought crossed my mind just then, I realized that that was where my identity crisis had begun. There, in those extraordinarily clean bathrooms, where I began to doubt everything my parents had taught me. (p. 166)

In many of the columns, Kashua reflects on his writing difficulties as well as the impact of his weekly columns on his family members. His wife makes frequent appearances, usually in order to cut him down to size. Throughout Kashua’s schlemiel-like poetics of failure, the moments we might identify as political are offered at times with understated irony and at other times presented starkly. Kashua narrates everyday situations of universal (un)appeal: falling victim to slick customer service ploys, enduring bureaucratic dysfunction or suffering the anxieties of parenthood. He also relates situations that strike with unexpected poignancy. Along with Kashua, we readers bear witness to a policeman harassing a young Arab boy, insisting that his new bicycle must be stolen; to an initially friendly Jewish child at the pool who says “eww, yuck” to Kashua’s small son when discovering that those incomprehensible words were spoken in Arabic; to the security check that ensues when his daughter ventures a single Arabic word at the entrance to the mall. We also learn that after moving to West Jerusalem, Kashua’s home and car are egged; that the Jewish children in an afterschool program refuse to play with his daughter. These instances of quotidian racism are complemented by illustrations of the racism of the elite. Again and again, in Israel and abroad, the literary establishment offers Kashua up as the token Arab (or Israeli Arab) writer at its festivals and book events, insisting on reducing his latest novel to variations on the hackneyed “rare glimpse” into the “Arab-Israeli soul” or bypassing discussions of his writing altogether to treat him as an anthropological specimen. “It is not good to be labeled an Arab [writer], not good, not good at all,” he muses; “An Arab isn’t recognized, an Arab is good for a clearance sale, not for a special deal at [the bookstore chain] Steimatzky” (p. 150). True to his insecure, “model minority” posture, the Kashua of these tales usually responds either with silence or by fleeing the scene. Yet toward the end of the book, he begins to take a stronger stand, if only toward his readers.

The chronologically ordered vignettes are grouped into four sections: “Warning Signs, 2006–2007”; “Foreign Passports, 2008–2010,” “AntiHero, 2010–2012,” and “The Stories That I Don’t Tell, 2012–2014.” Moving through these sections, the reader senses a gradual progression as Kashua becomes increasingly torn between fealty to his parents’ principled attachment to the homeland and his growing concerns about his children’s future, paired with contemplation of better alternatives. The small slights add up and take their toll. The tone struck by our self-deprecating anti-hero becomes somewhat angrier, markedly more self-critical and less hopeful, eventually leading to 2014’s denouement of despair. He begins to call out

hypocrisy more directly. Responding to Israeli media pundits' insistence that women played no part in the 2011 Egyptian revolution, for example, he muses:

I used to think one of the troubles with this place, where people are always buzzing about humanism and accepting others, was the lack of knowledge of Arabic. After listening to our Arab affairs analysts, I reached the conclusion that it would be better not to teach Arabic here at all. (pp. 177–178)

This is a very Israeli book that survives in translation. The English translation is quite readable, although it leaves some Arabic terms and Hebrew concepts un glossed. Occasionally, translation choices are unidiomatic (e.g. “bypass a line” rather than “cut in line”). The translation succeeds, however, in capturing Kashua’s humor and popular appeal. The book’s title itself is a translingual wordplay. In the original Hebrew, it is *Ben ha-arets*: literally “son of *ha-arets* [the land of Israel],” or idiomatically, “native son.” Of course, since the book is a compilation of Kashua’s columns for the *Haaretz* newspaper, it’s a clever pun. Yet *ben ha-arets* is also a Hebrew-raization of the Arabic idiom *ibn al-balad*, succinctly rendered in English as “native.” And indeed, taken as a whole, this rewarding book becomes a humorous excursus on what it takes to be a native, a citizen, a husband and a father under ultimately untenable circumstances.

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