



Bethlehem Road Murder

Batya Gur , Vivian Eden (Translator)

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The body of a young Yemeni woman is discovered in the attic of a Bethlehem Road house, in a Jerusalem neighborhood famous for its impenetrability to outsiders. The victim, once a beauty, is no longer lovely -- her face has been brutally smashed.

More than the usual horror greets Chief Superintendent Michael Ohayon in the closed and inscrutable Baka, for an old love and an unfinished romance await him there as well. But much more is concealed beneath the surface of this gruesome homicide -- as tensions between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, hostility between Arabs and Jews, the half-century-old business of kidnapped Yemenite children, and the al Aqsa Intifada of 2000 add fuel to a terrible fire that might never be contained.

Bethlehem Road Murder Details

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Ann says

I tried to slog through this because it touched on some interesting topics, but gave up halfway through. The writing was difficult to follow, and the relationship between the main character and his old flame seemed unconvincing. Other reviewers have suggested that this is a translating problem - not sure, but it felt like too much work.

pdxmaven says

Had read another Michael Ohayon mystery a while back, the one about the psychoanalysts (Saturday Morning Murder), and then just finished Murder on a Kibbutz, so was happy to find this one as well. Front cover calls Batya Gur's work "psychologically astute mysteries" and that's what I like, especially when they're also set in another country. This one is set in Jerusalem, and you get (besides the great distraction of the mystery itself) a window into life there -- tensions between various branches of Judaism, between Jews and Araba, the situation with Yemeni immigrants and stolen children, and just life there in Jerusalem. I think now I've read all she's written -- sad for me.

A couple of quotes I liked:

Obayon and the woman he is dating are talking about their relationship, and if it doesn't contain "falling in love" (because they have this long history as friends), then does it 'count'? She talks about her fantasy being re-enacted, of a scene from a Humphrey Bogart movie in which a man spots a woman on the street, decides she is one he wants, and they end up having mad passionate and not slutty sex. And then fall in love. Michael says dismissively, "Them?...They're looking for the kind of excitement that... Technicolor excitement. They don't have any real interest at all in each other. They are falling in love with the story, with what is happening to them. With the reflection of themselves in the other. They have no real interest except in that excitement, in the war, in the winning, in keeping the other person in their pocket." As opposed to what he is looking for, which is: "We really see each other. We've found, both you and I, something else, form the beautiful side of ourselves. The side that hasn't been spoiled yet. I've found it in you and you've found it in me." (pages 176-77)

Here the lawyer is explaining to Michael about how they ended up with the adopted baby, and chose not to ask questions about its origins:

"I also wanted children but my wife, she...she would cry at night, and I saw that if I didn't get her a baby then...And nowadays you can get babies from Brazil or from...But then you couldn't buy a child like that, and I had connections." page 279. So the Israelis were still getting babies form Brazil in 2004 (when this was written?), or maybe it isn't set in 2004?

Tina says

I'm not sure the book deserves 3 stars ... the plot was interesting, but like a lot of other readers I wonder about the translation. Many parts were almost unreadable, which I only slogged through because it was a book club book. However, as I've finished after the discussion, I have no one to ask, why did he do it??

Laurie says

Everything of Batya Gur's is superb.

Jeannette M. Hartman says

A beautiful, talented Yemenite singer is found brutally murdered in the culturally diverse neighborhood of Baka. Its residents include Arabs, Holocaust survivors, Yemenite Jews placed there from transit camps and newly arriving Russians. As Chief Superintendent Michael Ohayon and his team begin their investigation, no secret, no bad blood or tension goes unexplored. Ohayon himself, a Cambridge-educated immigrant from Morocco who has just bought an apartment in the neighborhood, finds himself facing the residents' prejudices and suspicions.

Author Batya Gur has taken a big picture look at Israeli society and history, yet she never loses sight of the individual and the personal.

Michelle says

It's weird. Most series mysteries act almost as if the past doesn't exist and the characters remain pretty much as is. In these, time passes by years between books and you are left in the dark about much of what happens in between - you just find the characters' lives changed and only know that some of the other characters have details, but you never do. As to the mystery itself, I picked the murderer in the first few seconds after he was mentioned. Not sure I liked that the murderer turned out to be a psychopath -- rather than just carried away in the heat of the moment(torturing cats as a child etc.) There's only one more in the series.

Laura Boudreau says

Love this series!

Joanne says

This book was excellent and I do plan to read the other books by this author (as I can find them). I learned a lot about Israel and Jewish relations between different groups of Jews as well as enjoying the mystery of the murder. A few years back I had an opportunity to go to Israel but the trip was cancelled as the US deemed travel to the region unsafe at the time. The more I read this book, the sorrier I was that I was not able to make that trip - and the more I realized how much I still want to go there. The descriptions of daily life as well as how holidays are celebrated gave a glimpse into the culture and people that leaves you wanting more...

[illegible]

Von Buch zu Buch gefällt mir besser, wie und was Batya Gur schreibt: Diesmal geht es um Rassismus in Israel und zwar nicht nur zwischen Palästinensern und Israelis, sondern auch zwischen der jüdischen Bevölkerung. Zwischen den Aschkenasim (aus Europa) und den aus Afrika (Äthiopien, Marokko, Yemen u.a.) immigrierten Juden ist man sich offenbar auch nicht besonders wohlgesonnen. Batya Gur hat das in einen tollen Krimi verarbeitet, finde ich.

I think I enjoyed the book, though sometimes it felt like I was working too hard to keep track of everyone to really enjoy it. This is a thinking book without a lot of suspense and with a few plot developments that feel like they came out of nowhere. Probably a far more realistic portrayal of how a crime is solved than the usual thrillers, but this made it less brain candy and more intellectual stimulation. The upside is that the characters are believable and flawed, the dialogue feels realistic (if occasionally exhausting), and even the less likable characters draw you in thanks to their realistic humanity. I think I would have enjoyed the book more if I had started at the beginning of the series; I am likely to pick the first book up at some point, but not immediately.

By no means is this a fast read, but it is a very rewarding one. Gur really makes you feel like you're in Ohayon's shoes--you feel his frustration, confusion, compassion--yet, in many ways, he remains a stranger. The social and cultural atmosphere--the violence, the ethnic and religious tensions, socioeconomic differences--is very real.

I look forward to reading the other books in the series.

Esther says

I gave this 3 stars for the story though the translation deserves a maximum of one star.

The book starts with a lot of dialogue which I found choppy and difficult to get into.

I'm not sure whether it was the quality of the translation or simply the fact that the Israeli way of talking is so different from English.

I did enjoy the interaction between the members of the police team but the postmortem scene was just too gory for me.

The whole story was rather slow-paced and the rather introspective love scenes were heavy going and unsatisfying. I wasn't quite sure what our hero saw in Ada.

But the conclusion of the mystery was logical and quite tense.

For me the story became most engrossing and interesting when it delved into the history of the stolen Yemenite children. I remember the events with Rabbi Meshulam and the committee investigating the affair. The story accurately portrayed the anguish and uncertainty felt by the parents as well as the nebulous nature of both the accusations and the conclusions. (Even when children were found to have been adopted most DNA tests disproved a genetic connection with the people they had become convinced were their parents) My father's family in from North Africa and several of his siblings spent many months in the immigrant camps and although Israel is a different place now there are still members of an older generation who express sentiments not dissimilar from those of Clara Beinish.

This is a slow paced mystery that also makes a reasonable attempt at literary fiction with several well developed characters and other familiar Israeli 'characters' brought to life in quick sketches.

Possibly in the original the writing style is also quite appealing. From the translation you can have no idea.

Ah the translation. It was pretty much what you would expect if you stuck the whole text into Babelfish or Google translate and then corrected grammar and spelling. Maybe that is an exaggeration but there were many phrases translated literally from the Hebrew with no thought as to how an English speaker might understand them.

A few examples.

The darkness of Egypt – this is a metaphor used frequently in Hebrew and references the 9th Biblical plague of Egypt from Exodus. I have never heard it used in English and as a result it just sounded awkward.

"The wicked man, what does he say?" – for a start the quote is incorrect, it should be 'the wicked son'. As it is a direct quote from the Hagada of Passover I doubt that any non-Jew not familiar with the liturgy of Passover would have any idea what he was talking about.

Also "the revenge of a woman scorned is the worst" is just lazy translation when there is such a well-known translation as 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.'

And my favourite, mainly because it is also a favourite with Israeli Tourists, - 'go know'. This is a direct translation from Hebrew but in English 'go figure' would have been more appropriate.

Susan says

Like the others in Batya Gur's Michael Ohayon series (this is the 5th of 6), this is a pleasant read for those who enjoy mysteries. In addition, there's a focus on the tensions among various groups in Israel: between Jews and Arabs, highlighted by the stereotypes and assumptions of some members of Ohayon's team; but also among Jews who arrived in Israel from different countries and different backgrounds.

Alice says

Again, a very subtle portrait of a hackneyed topic: eastern and european jewish relations. It is interesting to read about the 2nd intifada and the various fear and views, especially living here now....and seeing what, if any of those fears etc. have changed. I admire the way in which Gur is able to so completely get into the 'voice' of different people seamlessly - the 10 year old girl, for example. Well written and enjoyable.
