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Reja-e Busailah. *In the Land of My Birth: A Palestinian Boyhood.* Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2017. xx + 371 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-88728-000-9.

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Reja-e Busailah's memoir, ***In the Land of my Birth: A Palestinian Boyhood***, is a significant contribution to disability history and to the history of Palestine. It is the only book to my knowledge that simultaneously details the dynamics of both daily life in colonial Palestine (1920-48) and of disabled youth. Indeed, the memoir is a sensory invitation into the life of a Palestinian boy and his schooling during the Mandate period of Palestine, and it tracks an extraordinary boyhood amidst dramatic social, demographic, and political changes taking place in Palestine. It is currently a finalist for the 2018 Palestine Books Award.

What is most relevant to a disability history audience is that Busailah's exploration of social, educational, and political life in Palestine between 1929 and 1948 is told from the perspective of a boy who is blind. Now almost ninety, the author writes an impeccably documented story (his memory is exceptional) of his education, his love of poetry, his understanding of demographic and political transformations in Palestine, and ultimately of his forced exile from his beloved country. The book is organized around the schools that Busailah attended, thus foregrounding education as the key to his growth. This is an unsurprising structure for a boy who eventually became an English professor and who clearly savors intellectual pursuits.

What struck me most about this book is how Busailah relishes the quotidian. His description of the sounds, smells, and tactile sensations of his surroundings and of daily life in Palestine powerfully reorients readers in the act of reading, especially those readers who are used to predominantly visual representation in a written narrative. In essence, the book challenges these normative modes of description and offers a world of discovery, of vivid aural and tactile imagery, of cadence and rhythm, and ultimately of monumental national and personal loss.

My colleague Lila Abu-Lughod has recently written a compelling review of this book, focusing on its treatment of the British colonial and Zionist betrayal of Palestine and of the Palestinian people.[1] I will comment instead on the aspects of the memoir that may speak more directly to the interests of disability historians. I concentrate on three themes that capture Busailah's contemplation of what it means to be blind in 1930s-40s Palestine: the intersection of disability and family relationships, the building of disability community and identity, and the sobering encounters with disability prejudice and discrimination.

Busailah introduces his family by delineating the individual sounds his family members make and how those sounds helped him differentiate between them: "When she walks, my mother's

footsteps are many and fast and loud. When my father walks, his footsteps are not as many. They are slower and not as noisy.... When Father pees in the chamber pot, it makes a sound very different from the sound Mother makes..... The voice of my mother and the voice of my father and the sound of the clock ticking—they make it easier for me to find my direction and my way.... When there is no voice or ticking, I do not walk straight" (pp. 5-7). These introductions confirm disability as relational—evidenced here through sound.[2] These sensory identifications gave Reja-e a sense of space and place; they helped him navigate his world.

Busailah's status in his family is a question with which the boy struggled. He sought approval from his parents, particularly his father, and worried that he was unable to fulfill parental expectations due to his disability. He consistently wondered how to please his father, but also resented that his father forced him to learn how to recite the Qur'an when he was young: "What is the connection between blindness and memorizing the Qur'an?" he asked (p. 58). Little did he understand that his father's actions were based in fear and worry; he believed that reciting the Qur'an might be the only paying job Reja-e would eventually get. Such anxieties about limited opportunities for education and employment continued to shape some of the tense dynamics between Reja-e and his father. Yet, as a teacher himself, Reja-e's father made sure to educate his son. He encouraged the boy's penchant for reading literature and poetry, read a variety of stories and poetry to him. Later in Reja-e's youth, his father often asked him to share his increasingly sophisticated understanding of literary texts.

This parental commitment to education was not commonly shared by other parents of blind children. Busailah's father believed, however, that Palestinian society during the 1930s was beginning to recognize the necessity of secular education for both the sighted and the blind, even though the British government did not require school attendance for Arab children during the Mandate period. These beginnings set the backdrop for Busailah's journey.

Reja-e describes his treatment by other family members. Some felt a mixture of sadness and love for him while others felt pity. As a mischievous and astute boy, however, he used those feelings to his advantage: "I didn't like the sadness, but I liked the love. I suspected that my blindness had something to do with their special attitude, but I was too practical not to exploit the opportunity. Blind. Fine! But then why not capitalize on it?" (p. 30). By overturning the typical, patronizing power dynamics between people with and without disabilities, Reja-e turned being an object of pity into a source of empowerment and advantage.

Despite these moments of defiance throughout the book, Reja-e struggled with the impact his blindness had on his family and especially his parents, attesting again to the relational quality of disability. He writes that he lost his eyesight before he reached his first birthday. Through his telling, readers gain knowledge about the (often common) coexistence of biomedical and folk medicine in this colonial context. Indeed, his parents had different interpretations of his impairment's etiology. While his father cited the biomedical diagnosis of opthalmia (conjunctivitis; eye diseases were quite common in Mandate Palestine), his mother attributed it to the evil eye of a woman she had briefly encountered. Reja-e's grandmother "scolded my mother for not snatching something from her: 'a trace—a piece of cloth, a lock of hair, even a single hair—anything belonging to her in order to burn it and so cancel out the jinx'" (p. 94). But the belief in folk medicine did not stop Busailah's parents from seeking allopathic medical care. They took him to a hospital (most likely St. John's Eye Hospital in Jerusalem) and then, despite Arab-Jewish tensions, to Dr. Abraham Ticho, a well-known and established Jewish opthalmologist in Jerusalem who

received both Arab and Jewish patients at his clinic on Jaffa Road. But this was to no avail. Despite his stellar reputation, Ticho could not recover Reja-e's eyesight.

Friends and family responded in dramatically different ways to his permanent visual impairment. A Muslim, his mother prayed at al-Aqsa and Ibrahimi mosques and even the Holy Sepulchre (a church), while a friend even suggested that his parents commit infanticide by smothering Reja-e with a pillow. His father protested vehemently and vetoed that suggestion. But Reja-e describes how, because of his vision loss, his very early marital engagement (at infancy) to his cousin was broken: "all was lost with the loss of my eyes" (p. 95). This excerpt about the origin, treatment, and family responses to Reja's blindness reveals the complexity of navigating family life and disability in Mandate Palestine.

Disability is not only portrayed as deeply relational in this memoir, but Busailah also demonstrates that disability is a distinct, phenomenological phenomenon that challenges normative modes of understanding the world. He asks, for instance, "But what is shadow if you can't hear it, smell it, or touch it?" (p. 7). Similarly, what is a color? These ruminations make clear that our concepts are intimately related to our senses and are not uniformly understood. Indeed, disability resists that universalizing project and instead savors difference, both in meaning-making and experience.

Busailah found disability community and constructed a sense of disability identity through his schooling. Busailah's first school was the Islamic Industrial House for Orphans in Jerusalem where, in common practice during this time, all types of dependent children lived and learned. Essentially, it was a sheltered workshop where blind residents made brushes, chairs, and brooms, and sighted children did carpentry and other vocational activities. On his first day, Reja-e took delight in realizing that all the boys making brooms were blind: "So many blind boys together, talking and working happily!" (p. 62). This was his first encounter with a group of boys like him and he immediately felt an affinity toward them.

Busailah's identification with others who were blind deepened when he transferred to the 'Alaiyyah School (School for the Blind) in Hebron at age nine. It was at 'Alaiyyah that Busailah began to find his voice and his passion. It was here where he found the disability community. He did so with the help of his friends and instructors and with the dedication of the school's principal (who was blind). In particular, the principal served as a role model for Reja-e, embodying determination and devotion and the opposite of the negative messaging he had previously learned about being blind: "He was different than all the blind men and children I had known. He radiated energy and hope. He was feisty" (p. 112). He taught the children that people with disabilities should not be pitied, that they have valuable things to contribute to society.

Reja-e's teachers at 'Alaiyyah quickly identified his academic proclivities, and learning Braille opened a whole new world to him. Busailah became exposed to a trove of fiction and poetry, history and philosophy. He began to write poetry and plant the seed for his future professorial career.

Reja-e was clearly highly intelligent and his academic talents set him apart from other boys in the 'Alaiyyah School, but also among his high school peers, both blind and non-blind. It was when he studied in Ramleh at a mainstream high school, and then Al-'Amiriyyah High School in Jaffa, that Busailah was the happiest in his life. As he retells it, he re-entered the sighted world. He realized he amounted to more than his blindness. He became "so much more myself, so much less of what they thought I was. I was so much more of those with eyes than of those with no eyes" (p. 213). He acknowledged disability oppression and posited a structural corrective to the segregated status of the blind in Palestine: "The blind would

have a better chance to advance, I thought, if they were integrated within normal society instead of cut off from it" (p. 213). To be sure, this idea was a radical proposition for early 1940s Palestine.

Although his return to the sighted world in Ramleh expanded his range of experiences, his integration also forced him to realize limitations that he had to face, like a slower reading pace (using his hands) than his fellow students, limited access to Braille books, and the need to depend upon others to read printed books to him. Despite these disadvantages, his teachers supported him and Busailah excelled, surging to the top of his class in several subjects. At al-'Amiriyyah, he befriended very accomplished scholars-in-the-making and developed a more nuanced understanding of politics. He found non-disabled allies who expanded his intellectual and political horizons and shaped his commitment to academic pursuits and his plans to attend university. These plans, he hoped, would also offset any societal hesitations about his marital eligibility: "Would not my education offset my blindness?" (p. 268). Such moments and feelings of vulnerability about his disability are artfully narrated throughout the memoir.

These feelings are based in raw experiences. Although Reja-e's childhood was mostly joyful, he did encounter bullying and other children's trickery because of his blindness. This treatment is grounded in the disability tropes of inability, dependence, and inferiority. One such encounter, for instance, involved a child stating that Reja-e's blindness meant that he didn't have eyes and could not walk on his own. A young Reja-e recalls: "My hand touched my eyes. My eyes were there, both of them. My companions took off. I was shocked, but I knew the road very well.... I got home; therefore, I had eyes. I was not really blind. I was proud of myself, but I was confused and sad that my companions would leave me like that" (pp. 9-10). In another instance of bullying, Reja-e remembers older boys making fun of blind children at his first school in Jerusalem. In their tormenting, the boys merged terrifying world events, the impending threat of Zionist colonization in Palestine, and deep prejudice against disabled people: "'Come Wednesday next, all the blind shall be slaughtered. The blind are no better than the Jews whom Hitler will slaughter.' That terrified me and made me cry" (p. 40). Busailah and the older boys were certainly unaware of T4 and the fate of disabled people during the Third Reich; in their effective and chilling taunt, the boys drew from the immediate politics of Mandate Palestine, where Jews were seen as imperiling the Palestinian homeland, and where the mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, sided with Hitler because of it and against British colonialism.

Reja-e also openly, and often painfully, acknowledges how relatives, teachers, and friends invoked the typical religious trope of blindness as a curse, as the source of compensatory, blessed traits, or of blind people as bestowed with either wisdom or self-pity. In his youth, Reja-e internalized these stereotypes, felt awkward, guilty, and ashamed, yet also struggled to find meaning in his own boyhood. For example, as a young boy, during one Ramadan, he even asked Allah to "give me my eyes back," only to realize that there was no hope of cure and that his impairment was permanent (p. 39). But with that recognition came an identity shift; Reja-e grasped that he must harness his own ingenuity to create his own path as a person with a disability. As he aged, his educational experiences, the disability community he found there, and his continual emotional development, as portrayed in this memoir, allowed him to carve out that unique life trajectory.

Busailah's masterful narration of his boyhood is a must-read for disability historians interested in global contexts. As a memoir, it is a singular representation of a blind person's experiences in Mandate Palestine, but it meticulously and thoughtfully captures those experiences in ways that suggest Busailah's boyhood probably res-

onates with some others. Indeed, the memoir shows that there are shared disability experiences in Palestine that are fundamentally grounded, like elsewhere, in prejudice and segregation, but also determination and empowerment.

The disability historian unfamiliar with the history of Palestine will not only learn about the experiences of a boy with blindness navigating his way through his youth and his innocence, but also about the "unique olfactory chorus" of the Old City (p. 41), Ramleh or Jaffa, of olive trees and oranges, as well as the overall texture of Palestinian life and loss during the Mandate period. It is truly a historical account that seamlessly merges Palestinian and disability history and captures Busailah's strong relationship to the land.

Perhaps most powerfully, every historian will read a detailed account about Palestinian nationalism and, at the end of the book, will absorb the human tragedy that resulted from the horrific events of the 1948 war (***al-Nakba***, meaning "catastrophe" in Arabic). Busailah's writing is a textured telling of war, death, and its aftermath, masterfully captured through sound and touch. His description of the loss of his home town, Ramleh, the residents' exodus, and his miraculous survival is one of the most extensive personal and haunting testaments I ever recall reading.

Notes

[1]. Lila Abu-Lughod, "Moods of Betrayal in the Story of Palestine," ***Public Books***, July 18, 2018.

[2]. See Alison Kafer, ***Feminist, Queer, Crip*** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).