

Q+A



CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

RJ: When did you first think about becoming a writer?

Margot Singer: I didn't start writing seriously until I was in my early 30s. For many years I'd worked at a management consulting firm in New York City—a high-powered, consuming job that kept me from pursuing a writing career. I'd always wanted to write, and was told I was a good writer; it was sort of what I thought of myself as doing. After taking night classes at the Gotham Writer's Workshop, my desire and need to write got stronger and stronger, until finally I got brave enough to quit my job and see if I could really become a writer. In 1997 I went back to school, to the University of Utah, to get a Ph.D. in English/Creative Writing. That's when I wrote many of the stories that became a part of this book.

RJ: What writers influenced you?

MS: In the context of this book I was most influenced by the Israeli writer Amos Oz. I distinctly remember picking up Oz's novel *The Same Sea* at a JCC Book Fair and being blown away by its unconventional style—it is written in short sections and incorporates poems and prose poems. Later, as a writing exercise, I decided to compose something in that form. The story that emerged, "Deir Yassin," is in this collection.

RJ: The title "Deir Yassin" took me by surprise, because as you know, the name dredges up that perennial accusation of Israelis behaving brutally against Palestinians during the fight to break the siege of Jerusalem in April 1948, when, in fact, what really happened in the village of Deir Yassin is much in dispute. I was therefore relieved to see another story, "Body Count," taking a pro-Israel perspective, about how Palestinian propagandists clumsily tried

to convince the world that the Israelis had committed another massacre in Jenin in April 2002, when nothing of the sort happened.

MS: It was a challenge to write about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a balanced way. I think one of the powerful things about fiction writing is the ability to show how different points of view can simultaneously exist. "Deir Yassin," for example, juxtaposes the perspective of Susan, an American journalist who has no idea

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of the history of the neighborhood now known as Givat Shaul, with that of her uncle Avraham, an Israeli archaeologist whose brother Zalman fought at Deir Yassin as a member of the Irgun. The story isn't about "taking sides" or about the impossible question of "what really happened." I'm much more interested instead in exposing the layers—the archaeological strata, if you will—of memory and history and propaganda and myth. Today, on the site of the Deir Yassin village, amidst the rubble, sits an Israeli mental hospital which once cared for Holocaust survivors. In a short story, you can present an image like this in all its incredible complexity and let it resonate.

RJ: Are the stories in *The Pale of Settlement* autobiographical?

MS: My paternal grandparents, like those of my main character Susan, immigrated to Palestine from

Czechoslovakia and lived in Haifa. The grandmother of "Lila's Story," in particular, is very closely modeled on my grandmother. At the same time, there are important differences between the characters and my family; my mother, for example, is American, whereas Susan's is Israeli, and I don't have any uncles who are archaeologists.

Essentially, the book grew out of my experience of being an American Jew with a very strong relationship to Israel, the home of my grandparents and cousins, whom we visited every other summer. But because I never became fluent in Hebrew, I didn't blend in or feel "Israeli"; I wasn't a tourist, but I was still an outsider, "in between." I remember living in Jerusalem the summer of my sophomore year in college, which was the summer of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

My Israeli friends and cousins, who were in the army then, were grappling with what it meant to be our age—19 or 20—and to be fighting a controversial war. Everyone would say to me, "So, when are you going to make *aliyah*?" And I thought, *maybe I will*. Back at Harvard, I realized that I was fundamentally an American. At the same time, my relationship to and knowledge of Israel was very different from that of my American Jewish peers. This, I came to see, was an important vantage point for a writer.

RJ: The book's title refers to a geographical area in the late 18th- and 19th-century Russia within which Jews were forcibly concentrated. The focal point of your stories, however, is Israel, where Jews supposedly are free of such constraints. Are you suggesting that Israelis are

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