



Once upon a Time in Jerusalem: "Once Upon a Time in Jerusalem" tells the saga of a Palestinian family living in Jerusalem during the British mandate, and ... story is told by two voices: a mother, who

Sahar Hamouda

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"Once Upon a Time in Jerusalem" tells the saga of a Palestinian family living in Jerusalem during the British mandate, and its fate in the diaspora following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. The story is told by two voices: a mother, who was a child in Jerusalem in the 1930s, and her daughter, who comments on her mother's narrative. The real hero of the narrative, however, is the family home in Old Jerusalem, which was built in the 15th century and which still stands today. Within its walls lived the various members of the extended family whose stories the narrative reveals: parents, children, stepmothers, stepsisters, aunts and uncles, nieces and cousins. This is no idealized, nostalgic narrative of perfect characters or an idyllic past, but a truthful rendition of family life under occupation, in a holy city that was conservative to the extreme. Against a backdrop of violence, much social history is revealed as an authoritarian father, a submissive mother, brothers who were resistance fighters, and an imaginative child struggled to lead a normal life among enemies. That became impossible in 1948, when the narrator, by then a young girl studying in Beirut, realized she could not go home. She traveled to Cairo, where she had to start a new life under difficult conditions, and reconcile herself to the idea of exile. Narrated in a terse, matter-of-fact tone, "Once Upon a Time in Jerusalem" is a bildungsroman in which the child is initiated into loss and despair, and a life about which little is known. The book shows a city of the 1930s from a new perspective: a cosmopolitan Jerusalem where people from all nations and faiths worshiped, married and lived together, until such co-existence came to an end and a new order was enforced.

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