

Gather the Olives: On Food and Hope and the Holy Land

Bret Lott

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Awing over Jerusalem as “the place of all places,” Bret Lott’s memoir *Gather the Olives* relishes in time spent among Israelis and Palestinians.

Lott, who loves Hebrew Bible “stories for their action, their mystery, their terror and redemption,” writes about the Holy Land as a starry-eyed outsider at first. He recalls the juxtaposition of biblical memories with the sight of burnt-out cars along the road—the latter stark reminders of 1948 and of peace processes stymied. He fast recognized that the land that he had always loved was always under siege; he had to reconcile the Israel of his heart with the sobering everyday realities of those who lived there.

Essay by essay, the book is a reminder of the shared humanity of those who move in and out of Israel and Palestine—a testament to hope eternal, despite regular flare-ups of violence. Lott delights in good meals shared with fast friends: “Somehow, in this tablespoonful of green and bitter herbs mixed with other spices and seeds, I am partaking in the history of my faith, tasting time and place and salvation.” Memories of baseball games trade with observations at the site of a bombing; the implied danger of a trek to Ramallah vies with warm friendships formed with expats. The wonder of visiting Bethlehem wavers because of an accidental encounter with a Hamas rally. And the perpetual desire for peace thrums beneath it all, even in moments when peace feels quite far away. “I’m safe,” Lott writes, “because of words, and what they can do when aligned with hope, and vision, and love, and exchanged with good will between us.”

Gather the Olives is an achingly lovely essay collection that celebrates the multiculturalism of Israel and Palestine, lifting up those whose generosity and kindness lights the way to lasting peace.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (July / August 2024)

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