so, of what? And if they are not representative, then how shall we read a committed Communist who seemingly eschews figures of collectivity? Similar questions might be asked of Ibrahim’s anti-heroes. What sort of self-recoil is involved here? Are these portraits intended as critiques of Egyptian masculinity, of intellectuals as a class, or even of individual agency? And how shall we understand Ibrahim’s use of news clippings—in Zaat, for example? Are these to be read simply as truthful narratives? (But when did Egyptian newspapers ever tell the truth?) If so, why bother with fiction? On these matters, as on many others, Starkey raises questions while offering few answers.

One missed opportunity is worth noting. More than most contemporaries, Ibrahim was well versed in literary experiments happening elsewhere in the world. The reading notes he took while a prisoner in the sixties testify to his deep interest in the varieties of European realism, as well as the tradition of Marxist literary criticism (Ibrahim’s textual montages and didactic rants clearly owe much to Brecht). Viewing Ibrahim through a comparative lens, rather than merely in the company of his Egyptian peers as Starkey tends to do, therefore seems especially worthwhile. It might also help, in some small way, to deprovincialize discussions of Arabic literature.

Despite these reservations, Starkey’s study is a valuable one. He is admirably well read in the critical literature on Ibrahim in English, Arabic, and German—all of which he cites judiciously—and his bibliography will be of help to specialists as well as beginners. Monograph studies devoted to a single modern Arab author are rare. An important virtue of Rebel with a Pen is to show the consistency of Ibrahim’s endeavor, allowing him to become, in Starkey’s words, “a beacon of integrity in the sometimes muddy waters of recent Egyptian history” (216).

Robyn Creswell
Yale University
robyn.creswell@yale.edu
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Journalist, screenwriter, and novelist Sayed Kashua is known outside Israel for his Hebrew novels in translation (Dancing Arabs, 2004; Let it be Morning, 2006; and Second Person Singular, 2010), all of which explore the paradoxes of Palestinian life in Israel through a mix of realism and fantasy. Now, with his 2016 Native: Dispatches from an Israeli-Palestinian Life (Hebrew, Ben ha-arets, 2014), Kashua’s English readership will come to know the author through the wry and witty short columns that have earned him a dedicated following in Israel. A selection of Kashua’s weekly “dispatches” for the Haaretz newspaper from 2006 to 2014, the collection begins and ends with his family’s departure from Jerusalem for the University of Illinois in summer 2014. This was amid the upsurge in violence set off by the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli hitchhikers and inflamed by a horrific revenge killing, which culminated in yet another Hamas–Israel war and full-blown assault on Gaza. Initially planned as a yearlong sojourn, the Illinois trip morphs into emigration when Kashua, fearing for the safety of his children, arrives at a self-declared breaking-point: “When Jewish
youth parade through the city shouting ‘Death to Arabs’ and attack Arabs only because they are Arabs, I understood that I lost my little war” (p. 288). Before arriving at this heartbreaking admission of defeat, however, we are treated to a carousel of vignettes written from a deeply antiheroic perspective in which ordinary daily events are laced with enduring significance: a spin through eight years of doggedly real professional and family life in which the minor, human catastrophes of ripped pant seams, hangovers, sick children and do-it-yourself home failures commingle with the small-scale racism and unrelenting indignities of second-class citizenship. This is a writer who locates himself in the comic mode, with the result that his momentary flights from humor register as deadly serious. Ruminating on the source of his so-called “identity crisis,” Kashua recalls how it was taken for granted in his childhood that one could not use the unsanitary toilets in Arab schools.

I remembered how when I was sent to my [Jewish] Jerusalem boarding school it took me months to grasp that I could use the toilets. When that thought crossed my mind just then, I realized that that was where my identity crisis had begun. There, in those extraordinarily clean bathrooms, where I began to doubt everything my parents had taught me. (p. 166)

In many of the columns, Kashua reflects on his writing difficulties as well as the impact of his weekly columns on his family members. His wife makes frequent appearances, usually in order to cut him down to size. Throughout Kashua’s schlemiel-like poetics of failure, the moments we might identify as political are offered at times with understated irony and at other times presented starkly. Kashua narrates everyday situations of universal (un)appeal: falling victim to slick customer service ploys, enduring bureaucratic dysfunction or suffering the anxieties of parenthood. He also relates situations that strike with unexpected poignancy. Along with Kashua, we readers bear witness to a policeman harassing a young Arab boy, insisting that his new bicycle must be stolen; to an initially friendly Jewish child at the pool who says “eww, yuck” to Kashua’s small son when discovering that those incomprehensible words were spoken in Arabic; to the security check that ensues when his daughter ventures a single Arabic word at the entrance to the mall. We also learn that after moving to West Jerusalem, Kashua’s home and car are egged; that the Jewish children in an afterschool program refuse to play with his daughter. These instances of quotidian racism are complemented by illustrations of the racism of the elite. Again and again, in Israel and abroad, the literary establishment offers Kashua up as the token Arab (or Israeli Arab) writer at its festivals and book events, insisting on reducing his latest novel to variations on the hackneyed “rare glimpse” into the “Arab-Israeli soul” or bypassing discussions of his writing altogether to treat him as an anthropological specimen. “It is not good to be labeled an Arab [writer], not good, not good at all,” he muses; “An Arab isn’t recognized, an Arab is good for a clearance sale, not for a special deal at [the bookstore chain] Steimatzky” (p. 150). True to his insecure, “model minority” posture, the Kashua of these tales usually responds either with silence or by fleeing the scene. Yet toward the end of the book, he begins to take a stronger stand, if only toward his readers.

The chronologically ordered vignettes are grouped into four sections: “Warning Signs, 2006–2007”, “Foreign Passports, 2008–2010,” “AntiHero, 2010–2012,” and “The Stories That I Don’t Tell, 2012–2014.” Moving through these sections, the reader senses a gradual progression as Kashua becomes increasingly torn between fealty to his parents’ principled attachment to the homeland and his growing concerns about his children’s future, paired with contemplation of better alternatives. The small slights add up and take their toll. The tone struck by our self-deprecating anti-hero becomes somewhat angrier, markedly more self-critical and less hopeful, eventually leading to 2014’s denouement of despair. He begins to call out
hypocrisy more directly. Responding to Israeli media pundits’ insistence that women played no part in the 2011 Egyptian revolution, for example, he muses:

I used to think one of the troubles with this place, where people are always buzzing about humanism and accepting others, was the lack of knowledge of Arabic. After listening to our Arab affairs analysts, I reached the conclusion that it would be better not to teach Arabic here at all. (pp. 177–178)

This is a very Israeli book that survives in translation. The English translation is quite readable, although it leaves some Arabic terms and Hebrew concepts unglossed. Occasionally, translation choices are unidiomatic (e.g. “bypass a line” rather than “cut in line”). The translation succeeds, however, in capturing Kashua’s humor and popular appeal. The book’s title itself is a translmongic wordplay. In the original Hebrew, it is Ben ha-arets: literally “son of ha-arets [the land of Israel],” or idiomatically, “native son.” Of course, since the book is a compilation of Kashua’s columns for the Haaretz newspaper, it’s a clever pun. Yet ben ha-arets is also a Hebrewization of the Arabic idiom ibn al-balad, succinctly rendered in English as “native.” And indeed, taken as a whole, this rewarding book becomes a humorous excursion on what it takes to be a native, a citizen, a husband and a father under ultimately untenable circumstances.

Lital Levy
Princeton University
lital@princeton.edu

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Palestinian literature and film in a postcolonial feminist perspective, by Anna Ball, Abingdon, Routledge, 2012, 224pp., Cloth £110, ISBN 9780415888622


Anna Ball’s Palestinian Literature and Film in a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective (2012; pbk 2017) and Anna Bernard’s Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration, and Israel/Palestine (2013) appear at a time when the study of Palestinian literature is slowly but steadily breaking through the disciplinary boundaries of Arabic/Middle East studies in which it has historically been confined to being increasingly incorporated into the field of postcolonial studies. In this regard, Ball’s and Bernard’s works are both a reflection of this as-yet nascent shift, as well as welcome contributions to it. Although the fact that they deal exclusively with texts in translation raises some issues that should not be too hastily dismissed, both works are important contributions to the study and teaching of Palestinian literature in an Anglophone setting.

Both Palestinian Literature and Film and Rhetorics of Belonging quite self-consciously seek to situate themselves firmly within the field of postcolonial rather than specialist Arabic literary studies. In Ball’s case, postcolonialism is directly invoked in the work’s title, besides its being published in the “Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures” series. Bernard’s book, meanwhile, is published in Liverpool University Press’s “Postcolonialism cross the Disciplines” series. This constitutes an important gesture. For as both works note, the study of