Jerusalem: A Family Portrait

Carlie Smith

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Title: Jerusalem: A Family Portrait  
Author: Boaz Yakin  
Illustrator: Nick Bertozzi  
Reviewer: Carlie Smith  
Publisher: First Second  
Publication Year: 2013  
ISBN: 9781596435759  
Number of Pages: 381  
Interest Level: Young Adult  
Rating: Excellent

Review

The Halaby family is as dysfunctional as the city they live in – 1940s Jerusalem. Each brother fights in his own way against colonizers: Mozzi, the youngest, rebels against his European teachers; Ezra joins a radical Jewish nationalist group; David fights in World War II; and Avraham becomes a communist. When the UN approves two-states in Palestine, the tensions between Arabs, Jews, Europeans, radicals, and moderates explode. The family is divided along these factions as well, and Ezra and Avraham become enemies. Simmering beneath the political tension is family strife: David goes missing but his unborn child and wife come to live with the Halabys, and the clan is locked in an economic battle with their cousins. Violence, bloodshed, and anger become the norm. The despair is solidified when, even after he makes an attempt at reconciliation, Mozzi’s efforts result in tragedy.

Jerusalem: A Family Portrait is summarized by two adjectives: honest and shocking. The graphic novel is honest in the way that historical events can affect and traumatize common people; it is shocking to seen cartoonish-looking characters surrounded by battlefield gore. It is honest to see that conflicts often lack heroes; it is shocking to see family members use their noble ideals to harm one another. The story fits the graphic novel medium exceptionally well. The detailed illustrations are entirely in black and white, though the far most common color is, appropriately, gray. The story is presented through vignettes that are anchored into historical context that is only really explained in the short introduction. Consequently, readers are required to pay closer attention to plot. The horror, heartbreak, and narrative style produce a gripping and provocative novel.

*Contains moderate language, moderate sexual content, and severe violence.