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Gaza *Writes Back*: Experiencing "Operation Cast Lead" Through Gazans' Eyes

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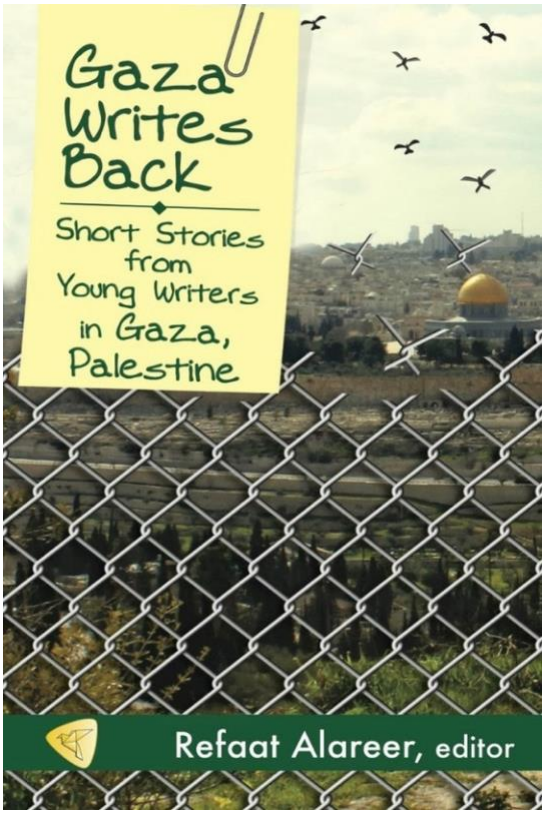
I am an undergraduate student majoring in Horticulture and Conservation Ecology at New Mexico State University in the College of Agriculture, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences. I reviewed this book as my final project for the Borderlands and Ethnic Studies Department course: Introduction to Palestine Studies.



Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza, Palestine is a collection of short stories by young Palestinian writers in Gaza and compiled to commemorate the genocide enacted by Israel's military campaign "Operation Cast Lead" (December 27, 2008, to January 8, 2009). The late professor, author, mentor, and poet, Dr. Refaat Alareer (editor) coauthored this book with Wafaa Abu Al-Qomboz, Jehan Alfarra, Sarah Ali, Yousef Aljamal, Nour Al-Sousi, Shahd Awadallah, Sameeha Elwan, Hanan Habashi, Tasnim Hammouda, Elham Hilles, Aya Rabah, Mohammad Suliman, and Rawan Yaghi. To contextualize this writing, the reader needs to know that Operation Cast Lead spanned 23 days in which Israel continually bombed and targeted Gaza, killing over 1,400 Palestinians, causing over 5,000 injuries, and destroying over 11,000 buildings and industries. This was one of Israel's most overreaching bombardments up to 2014. Still, it never broke the "allegiance, hope, or memories" of Palestinians, nor of people around the world, as young writers both worked through the trauma brought on by the violence enacted upon them and spread the word and their experiences of the current situation in Gaza to the rest of the world in the emerging technological era.

The first thing I read in this book was the "About the Writers" section, because I feel like this is the most important part of the book. We must focus on the Palestinians, as people, rather than only as

a collective, to make a more profound and layered human connection, understand, care, and hence continue to learn Palestine and the Palestinians intentionally. Reading about all the authors of these short stories was very grounding. I learned about their worries and lived experiences, from the everyday reality of seeking basic healthcare, to the Israeli Occupation's abuses of Palestinian children playing on the street, to the direct threats Palestinians face, being murdered by an Israeli "soldier" for merely being Palestinian in Palestine.

I was having trouble starting this book. I was stressed and frozen. But when I opened to a random page, "Spared" by Rawan Yaghi popped out. It is a 3-page story about a boy who watched his close friends' murder as Israeli forces dropped a bomb on them while they were playing in the street. The story was so short and abrupt that I felt as if I had been abruptly awakened from an ignorant sleep. The shock that I felt after I read the short story reminded me of the privileges that I have as I learn about Palestine—although I am doing my best to learn from Palestinians themselves and understand from the inside, I have the physical escape of looking away.

I didn't stop reading after I was shocked awake again by "Spared." The next story, "Canary" by Nour Al-Sousi, is a collection of vignettes of a Palestinian man's life, who himself is never named. The only character with a name in Al-Sousi's story is the little brother, Ghassan, who the Israeli Occupation Force kills for simply chasing a canary near an Israeli settlement. We see vignettes of the main character's life as memories intercut with the present scene, where the main character is a rebel soldier being watched by an IOF "soldier," as she wonders who he is. The story ends just as the canary's call of Ghassan's death warns: "Their eyes met. Fear and frustration flowed. Her finger was on the trigger. His finger was on the trigger. Death carried them both to the unknown."

I decided to read the rest of the short stories after these two, and one that has stuck with me is "Toothache in Gaza" by Sameeha Elwhan, a first-person narrative about a little Palestinian girl with a toothache. After reading everything we have about the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and the "healthcare" that is "graciously provided to Palestinians" and the general inaction of the United Nations, I felt like I understood the main character's inner monologue. I, myself felt angry for most of the story, as I was connecting the information I knew about the UNRWA with the personal experiences and the individual experiences of Palestinians, who were just as scared to go to the doctor's office as I was when I was kid, but adding on the layers that I never had to.

The glorification and idolization of Israel's Occupation of Palestine has been pushed on me my whole life in the United States; the truth of U.S. imperialism was hidden from me in several ways. The number of people and public figures that I learned about growing up—while I did not learn about Palestine and what these Zionist movements were and are actually doing—highlights the "marketing" or "public relations" of the colonizer and their desire to be supported be the majority of the non-educated, especially in the United States and United Kingdom. I only learned the version of history that they wanted me to learn. The reason I enrolled in this course was because I wanted to take a class that taught me what they didn't want me to know, and through the process of this course, one of the central pillars of the genocide that has been enacted upon Palestinians for decades is the dehumanization of Palestinians. The way to combat this is to engage with Palestinians as individuals, and to learn Palestine on the individual level as well as the global level. Reflecting on *Gaza Writes Back*, I realize that every story that stuck with me is about children. This collection instilled in me the necessity of remembering that children are targeted here—children

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who are targeted because they are where resilience comes from. Children are the future of revolution and make up over 75% of the martyrs in Gaza, Palestine who have been killed by the Israeli Occupying Regime.

Endnote

The authors reviewed:

Refaat Alareer was assassinated/murdered, along with his brother, sister, and four of his nephews, by an Israeli Occupation/Offensive Forces (IOF) airstrike, in Northern Gaza on December 7, 2023.

Rawan Yaghi has recently received a Fulbright Scholarship to study journalism in New York as of 2023. She has written for *Mondoweiss*, *The New York Times*, and *The Link*.

Sameeha Elwan, 26, is an English literature graduate from the Islamic University, whose campus was destroyed in the Israeli genocidal war on Gaza, 2023–2025. She has a master's degree in Culture and Difference from Durham University, UK, and is currently a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature and Creative Writing at Murdoch University, Perth, Australia.

Nour Al-Sousi is an English teacher in Gaza.