

Life on the West Bank

WELCOME TO HEAVENLY HEIGHTS, by Risa Miller. St. Martin's Press, 230 pp., \$23.95.

BY SARAH COLEMAN

In the cauldron of boiling tensions that is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, what can a novelist bring to the mix? A calm head, perhaps, and a new perspective on what has become a tired, stale discussion. After all, one of the reasons we read fiction is to see familiar scenarios presented with a fresh twist, in language that deepens our understanding or opens up new avenues of thought.

Risa Miller's first novel, "Welcome to Heavenly Heights," is set in the very heart of the Middle East conflict. It concerns a group of Jews who live in a settlement on the disputed West Bank ground of the Judean ridge, a low mountain range poised midway between Jerusalem and Jordan. Miller's characters are mostly Orthodox Jews who've emigrated from the United States — making "aliyah," or, literally, "going up" — who are drawn to the settlement of Heavenly Heights by a mixture of faith and defiance.

For those outside the strictures of Orthodox Judaism, Israeli settlers are usually considered tenacious adherents to their faith at best and, at worst, willful saboteurs of a peace process that began with the 1993 Oslo Accords. They're rarely portrayed with a lot of empathy, but Miller makes a concerted effort to show her characters as ordinary people caught in a troubled period of history.

We're led through the story by Tova, who has recently arrived from Baltimore with her husband, Mike, and their three children. Unlike her husband, who can't wait to offer his skills to the YESHA council (the political body that lobbies for settlements in the West Bank and Gaza), Tova is a reluctant immigrant. "Couldn't the YESHA council live and breathe without [us]?" she wonders before the move, and later, when she's

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teaching a class and a student mentions rocket attacks in northern Israel, we learn that "Tova's stomach danced."

Making Tova an ambivalent partner in the aliyah project is a clever gambit on Miller's part: It shows us that settlers aren't always the crusading zealots that the media portray. Likewise, the other residents of Building Four of Heavenly Heights are characterized with subtlety. There's Kentucky-born Debra, an enthusiastic convert to Judaism; Mr. Stanetsky, an elderly widower and Holocaust survivor who made his fortune as a building developer in New York, and the perennially unsatisfied Nathan and Sandy, whose 12-year-old son, Yossi, is the settlement's juvenile-delinquent-in-training.

Miller presents these characters without undue judgment, a tactic that rings with good intentions but sometimes seems like a dodge. How, for example, are we to view Mr. Stanetsky, who, in his work with the YESHA council, has been underwriting settlers' mortgages and buying up disputed tracts of land? In real life, the YESHA council is a powerful political lobby that routinely calls for the deportation of Palestinians and the razing of their villages. But to make her settlers sympathetic, Miller glosses over this inconvenient detail; instead, her characters' love for the land is presented in romantic terms that ignore the larger context.

Another curiosity is the novel's mixture of magical and dirty realism. Miller's writing is full of specific, believable detail, from the way Israeli floors are cleaned (with a squeegee-like device called a *spongia*) to the military helicopters that interrupt Sabbath dinners with their checkups.



Risa Miller

Photo by Nancy Crampton

But there's also a recurring supernatural motif, as songs sung by one character materialize in the form of sticky, silver-black notes that hug the floors and stick to residents' shoes.

Are the notes a symbol of the settlers' stubborn faith? Of the messiness of day-to-day life in a war zone? It's not clear. Throughout the novel, Miller reaches for a poetic brevity that sometimes resonates with nuance and at other times is frustratingly opaque.

"Welcome to Heavenly Heights" couldn't be more different from another recent debut novel about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, "Martyrs' Crossing," by former New Yorker Jerusalem correspondent Amy Wilentz.

Wilentz's novel, which was eerily prophetic when it came out in early 2001, used a fictional event — the death of a Palestinian infant at an Israeli checkpoint and the media circus that ensued — to show the corruption, confusion and desperation on both sides of the Middle East debate. It was a journalist's novel through and through: worthy, packed with research, but with characters that often seemed like mouthpieces for different political points of view.

Miller has tried to do something very different, and to some extent she succeeds. "Welcome to Heavenly Heights" is strong on atmosphere, and its depiction of life in a settlement is creative and original. But its oblique, "literary" style means that Miller can sidestep inconvenient questions — this is a work about contemporary Israel that never once mentions the word "Palestinian." The result is a strange animal: a novel whose avoidance of politics makes it into an instrument of propaganda. ■