

## Unholy Land

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Lavie Tidhar. *Unholy Land*. Tachyon, 2018. Paperback. 264 pp. \$15.95. ISBN 9781616963040.

THE protagonist of Lavie Tidhar's *Unholy Land*, Lior Tirosh, is a science fiction/detective fiction pulp writer who leaves his home in Berlin to visit his sick father in Palestine, the Jewish state nestled between Uganda and Kenya, before getting involved in an increasingly complex plot of parallel universes. The story's narrator, gradually revealed to be Special Investigator Bloom, addresses a mysterious second-person character named Nur, who turns out to be an agent trained to move in between the worlds. Bloom follows both Tirosh and Nur from afar, although at times the narrator takes on omniscient powers, as it becomes clear that in travelling from Europe Tirosh has crossed more than international borders, but the border to another world.

The novel's mirror frame—an author-surrogate protagonist to whom Tidhar attributes his own novels, including *Osama* (2011) and *Unholy Land* itself—invites the reader to lose herself into its composite worldbuilding, in which walls and borders and identities both possess the same meaning they do in the real world, and at the same time don't. Tidhar bases his what-if thought experiment in a real historical moment, the early 20th century Uganda Program, which proposed to create a Jewish nation in East Africa (a land “unholy” but a land all the same), but in his novel, like in the best sf stories, it is our own world's reality that suddenly appears strange. Like Tirosh, the reader must follow along without ever being securely anchored in either reality or fantasy, history or alternate history, the past or the present. In this country, too, Palestinians (a noun Tidhar no doubt uses ironically) erect a wall to keep out the indigenous people that were forcibly removed from the land; in this story, too, the PDF (Palestinian Defense Force) brutally harasses refugees and uses surveillance against young revolutionaries. But this is also a story in which ‘only’ a “Small Holocaust” happened (since European Jews moved to Palestine before the rise of the Third Reich) and in which Hitler was assassinated in 1948. Tidhar's incredibly vivid worldbuilding unveils a wealth of intriguing details: Palestinians

speak Judean (at the end a character calls modern Hebrew “archaic” by comparison); old European Jewish families have become diamantaires; children read the story of the Judean Tarzan.

This is also a novel that, at least when it focuses on Tirosh, develops complex and piercing emotional realities. Throughout the story, Tirosh is haunted by the (never quite described) death of his young son Isaac. His constantly resurfacing grief through memories of simple moments with the toddler showcases the talent of Tidhar’s prose. This is not the only thing that haunts Tirosh. His brother Gideon was killed in the war; his father is ailing and Tirosh is so reluctant to visit it only happens at the end of the novel; his niece Deborah is missing and her mysterious disappearance drives the action; and Tirosh’s memories are also increasingly conflicted as the story progresses.

Tidhar’s novel is a powerful, labyrinthine story reminiscent of China Miéville *The City and The City* (2009) and, in a much more subtle and controlled way, some of the best of Philip K. Dick. With its careful and intelligent treatment of some of the most difficult questions arising from the Israel-Palestine conflict, it will undoubtedly become a staple of postcolonial science fiction courses. Its straightforward prose and short format will provide for a productive introduction to discussions about border conflicts, nationality, nationalism, and imperialism while also allowing teachers to outline some of the key features of the best of sf. As Tirosh himself explains during a reading at a bookstore: “What we do [when writing stories of alternative realities] is literalise the metaphor...We construct a world of make-believe in order to consider how our own world is constructed, is told.” (113-4).

Some of the novel’s shortcomings could come from Tirosh’s own pulp detective stories. When Bloom ceases to be the narrator in the background and acts as a character especially, the plot turns cartoonish and awkward. To give an example, when Bloom and fellow soldiers storm a refugee camp and harass a family, Bloom reflects to himself: “I did not enjoy humiliating [the woman]. I was merely carrying my duties. I was a *professional*” (148). The missing-girl plotline of Deborah, with its stereotypical mobster characters, ends up leading nowhere. It is actually quite hard to pinpoint, even by the end of the novel, why certain scenes took place (like the different assassination attempts on Tirosh or his search for the theodolite) or why some characters are introduced (like Melody, a woman who seems to be here simply for Tirosh to sleep with). Overall, Tidhar’s beautiful, almost poetic prose and the

fascinating worldbuilding propel the reader to keep reading on in spite of some of the story's somewhat vulgar plot points, and some of the transition scenes between the worlds have a *Ubik*-esque quality that I will not forget any time soon.