
GUY MANNES-ABBOTT TALKS WITH SHUMON BASAR

Think about the archetypal writer. Where do you imagine them? Hunched over a desk, fingertips clattering at a keyboard. Posture problems? Inevitable. Isolation? A given. Guy Mannes-Abbott prefers running to sitting. The London-based writer's new book is an exhaustive, breathless account of circumnavigating Ramallah, the unofficial de facto capital of Palestine's West Bank. His prose excursion is joined by notable artists' responses dealing with the occupation. He has in the past collaborated with the Bombay collective CAMP and written for the *New Statesman*, *Bidoun* and the *Independent*. Editor-at-large Shumon Basar talks to him about visible and invisible borders and the politics in writing.

SHUMON BASAR: How did you end up spending time in Ramallah, and why Ramallah in the first place?

GUY MANNES-ABBOTT: I had an invitation to visit Ramallah at the end of 2008 when mass slaughter in Gaza intervened. Then I was offered a residency at al Qattan Foundation – where Paul Noble, an old friend, had recently been – and spent June 2010 there. I don't want to over-theorise, but one of the compulsions in attempting to write Ramallah is that its exception reveals much about the world we live in today. Plus "Ramallah", the prison-camp pseudo-capital, can't exist for much longer. We'll look back at it with fascinated horror soon.

SB: What kind of preconceptions or images did you have in your mind about the West Bank? Were they reinforced or fundamentally undermined when you spent time there?

GM-A: I had 25-30 years of watching, reading, listening in my head; all the images of occupation, street protests here and there as well as in visual art that anyone who has paid attention to Palestine shares. The issue, to put it neutrally, is about place, no? Where are the words and images of that place? It's impossible to grasp without being there now and that was much worse and better than it's possible to know. Better in the sense that smart, sweetly sophisticated people manage to exist there. Worse because the brutality and overt presence of occupation is shocking and the camp that is the Palestinian hills is tiny. Refugees from 1948 can't help but see what's been built over their villages on the plains below, especially at night when it glows.

SB: The title of your book is *In Ramallah, Running*, and features this long, dense account of your daily excursions through the territory – running. Can you explain this mode of running, and was it a specific reaction to Ramallah's conditions?

GM-A: Running itself did many things; habituating me quickly to Ramallah, allowing me the privilege of noting everyday life in some sense beyond occupation. Dawns in the clouds, early morning work habits, school runs, families on the stoop at dusk. It generated glancing relationships with the place and earned a special degree of compressed familiarity.

SB: There have been various books about writers walking (I can think of Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust*, and the perambulations of Sebald) – but writers running? Other than Murakami's obsession with jogging, none come to mind. Are there literary or artistic precedents to your running as a cultural act of measurement?

GM-A: Not that I'm aware of. Which is appropriate for the uniqueness of 21st-century Palestine. I refer to Murakami's words about the relativity of suffering and endurance, as well as to an image of breathing while holding your breath which, I write, is a powerful-enough paradox for existence in Ramallah. Murakami was doubling running with writing, of course. I guess I've doubled it again with resistance. There's an art to that, too...

SB: I recall you sending me daily descriptions



image **NICK SEATON**

of topological borders you were encroaching. And that, if I had done this with my darker skin, the results may have been grave. Did your skin colour allow you to be less of a recognisable threat when you traversed two- and three-dimensional borders?

GM-A: Well, my first response is to agree but I wouldn't want to grant the gun-wielding settlers who kill with impunity, and the state, which does the same, more discretion than they possess. However, what may have counted is my somewhat ambiguous physical appearance; I could pass for the nephew of a mad settler aunt from Brooklyn, at least through the hairs of a gun or from an APC [Armoured Personnel Carrier], in ways you could not. And yet in Ramallah and elsewhere people assert that I look exactly like so and so from Rafat, or half-Palestinian. I'm not sure what any of it means. I do know that if an extremist settler had seen me clambering over sniper positions on their hill – days after the Mavi

Marmara slaughter – he might well have blown my head off.

SB: You are friends with a number of significant Palestinian writers such as Mourid Barghouti and Adania Shibli. Can you say something about the history and relationship between literature and the Palestinian political struggle?

GM-A: First, poetry plays a particular public role in a wider Arabic culture but, yes, that relationship is a vital element in Palestinian steadfastness. Israel understood that well enough to assassinate Palestinian writers and intellectuals systematically, including Ghassan Kanafani, author of *Men in the Sun*. You see, these writers made it impossible not to have known or know what is happening. Also, Kanafani, Darwish, the great poet of Palestinian dispossession, and Barghouti, the great poet and memoirist of

by combining very large things; philosophy, histories and crimes, with very immediate things; danger, thirst and pleasures. As you suggest, a breaching of forms is required to get at this resistant quality of urgent exactitude.

SB: The second half of the book features visual artists' projects. Why are they included, and what do they bring to the reader of the book that exceeds your personal account of the place?

GM-A: The visual art projects are responses to my texts made with each person's experience of Palestine to work with. Half of all the contributions are Palestinian – which is elemental for me. One thing they bring is a facility to say things I can or must not say. Emily Jacir's piece starts by damning the way the world presumes to speak for or define Palestinian experience. Its presence in my book brings an element of collaborative trust and tension. Mourid described the "cunning simplicity" of my texts; a strategic indirection which also concretises the place in itself. Similarly, the artists respond to my texts with a deepening ambiguity that can be provocative or confusing.

SB: In the past, you have written extensively in and about London (where you have lived most of your life) and also India, where parts of your family originate. Is the tradition of place-writing healthy or unhealthy today, when so many other forms of experience-testimony compete for our crowded attention?

GM-A: I think place writing is profoundly radically on the cusp we inhabit, with its multiple times and locations. We negotiate this dynamic realm of let's say 21st-century global space with sophistication and agility, pleasure and protest, but we do it *in* place. So place is the "new radical" amid the abstracted spaces of globalised capital. Question: is a tweet from Tahrir potent for being on my iPhone wherever I am, or for having been sent from the Square? A focus on place can bolster attention to differences or otherness in a global space of hedged micro-distinctions or vertiginous sameness.

SB: You've run Ramallah, walked London, scootered through India. What and where would you like to do and go one day?

GM-A: Ah well, the fantasy answer is to spend a significant amount of time in Iran, including Khorasan in pursuit of Chishti Sufism and its networks. Meanwhile, I have work to see through in India and a bottomless fascination with port cities and cultures. I've been working on a novel set precisely between a port in the Arabian Sea and an archipelago in the Baltic, for example. But my next major project looks within to draw many years of working at and rethinking London – another port city of sorts – into a suitably singular work.

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