

BETHLEHEM ROAD MURDER

By Bayta Gur

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ABOUT THE BOOK:

Bethlehem Road Murder takes place in Jerusalem's Baka neighborhood, where the body of a beautiful young woman is discovered in the attic of a house undergoing renovation. The murder victim is identified as Zahara Bashari, the daughter of Yemenite immigrants who had been probing one of the worst scandals in Israeli history. Chief Superintendent Michael Ohayon of the Special Crimes Unit finds himself embroiled in the complex relationships in a neighborhood known for its impenetrability to outsiders, where racial tensions between Yemenites and Ashkenazim is even more intense than anti-Arab prejudice. Soon, a young girl who lived across the street from Zahara disappears with her dog; and Ohayon finds himself caught up in an unfinished romance with an old flame. Set against the backdrop of the Al Aqsa Intifada, this novel brings to life the conflicts and passions that lie at the heart of Israeli society today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Batya Gur was born in 1947 in Tel Aviv. The child of Holocaust survivors, Gur studied Hebrew Literature and History at the Hebrew University and completed her MA in Comparative Literature. She taught literature and writing to high school students before moving to the United States for several years. At the age of 39, she wrote her first detective novel, *A Saturday Morning Murder*, which was later televised. Gur wrote a total of nine books, including a collection of essays and a novel for young adults, but she is most famous for her mysteries featuring detective Michael Ohayon. Gur was also a literary critic for *Haaretz* and an outspoken opponent of the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. She spent her final years living in Jerusalem's German Colony, and died in 2005 after a long illness.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. This novel takes place during the Al Aqsa Intifada, the wave of violence between Palestinians and Israelis that began in September 2000. How does this historical backdrop influence the novel and its characters?
2. Consider the many streets names that are mentioned in this book, all of which correspond to real places in Baka: Mordechai Hayehudi, Shimshon, Yiftach, Queen Esther, Gideon, Yael, Boaz, Naphtali . . . Like many of the streets in Israel, they are named for Biblical characters. What are your associations with each of these names? Some people say that even just walking the streets of Jerusalem can be a religious experience. Does this novel help you understand why?
3. This novel takes place during Sukkot, the seven-day festival in which Jews live in temporary huts that serve as a reminder of the impermanence and transience of life. Why do you think that Batya Gur chose to set her novel during this holiday? How does the fact that it is Sukkot affect the unfolding of events?
4. How does this novel hint at the rift between the religious and the secular in Israeli society? Consider, for instance, Einat's lament that "There are no secular neighborhoods in Jerusalem. How can anyone be secular when the religious have so much power?" (p. 216). Can you think of other evidence of these tensions in the novel? Which side do you tend to agree with, and why?
5. This novel explores the tensions between Jews of Ashkenazi (German, Hungarian, etc.) and Mizrahi (Yemenite, Moroccan) background. Which families belong to which ethnic groups? What are the stereotypes, resentments, and prejudices that each group harbors towards the other? How does Michael fit into the ethnic picture? Is Israel a "melting pot" in the way that we think of America?
6. In Batya Gur's *New York Times* obituary, Margalit Fox wrote, "Ms. Gur's settings were always closed societies -- a psychoanalytic institute, a kibbutz, the world of classical musicians -- whose tensions, factionalism and prejudices, critics observed, mirrored Israel's own. To crack each case, the Moroccan-born Ohayon, himself an outsider in Israel, had to immerse himself in these tightknit worlds with the patient dedication of a scholar. His solutions grew out of his gradual understanding of the deep philosophical issues at the heart of each community." What is the closed society in this novel? What are the "deep philosophical issues" that Michael Ohayon gradually comes to understand?



7. How does this novel deal with the impact of the Holocaust on Israeli society? Consider Shorer's memories about growing up in a family of survivors, as conveyed to Michael and Ada (p. 267-8). How is the young Shorer's understanding of what happened "over there" filtered through his childhood imagination?
8. The Talmud speaks of the difference between the heavenly and earthly Jerusalem. How is this distinction captured in the following statement by Ada: "If you want a bit of beauty around here, you have to look upward, toward the sky, and not at the streets" (p. 187). Are your own visual images of Jerusalem more similar to the heavenly or the earthly city?
9. Ada complains to Michael about the poor sanitary conditions in Jerusalem: "What's disgusting is this city, with all its filth. It's all coming out now, and not just the garbage" (p. 186). What sort of filth is she referring to? How does it "all come out" in this novel? What sort of "dirty laundry" does Batya Gur air in this book, and do you think she is justified in doing so?
10. What do you think Michael means when he tells Ada that they must live "despite the dead" (p. 187)? How has living "despite the dead" become a historical necessity in Israel today?
11. Sergeant Balility expresses negative feelings towards the Arab contractor from Beit Jalla, the Palestinian worker Jalal ibn Mansar, and other characters in this novel. Would you consider him prejudiced? Does his attitude seem problematic to you?
12. How did Rosenstein and his wife get their daughter Tali? What does this novel teach you about the kidnapping of Yemenite children in the 1950s, one of the unresolved scandals in Israel's history?
13. What do you think of Ada's final request at the end of the novel? Why do you think Gur chose to end the book on this note?
14. Batya Gur, who also worked as a literary critic, frequently claimed that her detective novels were not "literature" [sifrut] in the canonical sense, but rather "entertainment" [bidur]. What do you think she meant by this distinction? Do you agree with her, based on your reading of this novel?

