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## An Israeli Novelist Writes of Pain, Private and Public

Ethan Bronner

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MEVASSERET ZION, Israel ? In the middle of David Grossman?s latest novel, ?To the End of the Land,? now out in English, the main character, a middle-aged Israeli Everywoman named Ora whose son has gone off to battle with the Israeli Army, stands with her ex-lover atop Mount Meron in northern Israel and looks out at the Hula Valley.

She realizes, she says, that every encounter she has with this land ?is also a bit of a farewell.? Then: ?And in those moments I always think: This is my country, and I really don?t have anywhere else to go. Where would I go? Tell me, where else could I get so annoyed about everything, and who would want me anyway? But at the same time I also know that it doesn?t really have a chance, this country. It just doesn?t.?

Sitting in his inviting and unassuming living room ? rattan furniture, stuffed bookcases, an upright piano ? in this quiet Jerusalem suburb, Mr. Grossman, who at 56 has emerged as the pre-eminent Israeli literary voice of his generation, said the tension between home and exile had long been a central concern of his.

That tension took on an acutely personal coloration when his younger son, Uri, was killed in combat in the final hours of the 2006 Lebanon War. It was an agony eerily foretold by this novel that he had nearly finished at the time ? an uncanny and unbearable confluence of art and life.

?You have to understand,? he said, a photo of Uri ? uniformed, eyes laughing behind glasses ? on a shelf to his right, ?that when something like this happens to you, you feel exiled from

every part of your life. Nothing is home again, not even your body.?

Home is a major Grossman theme, so his alienation is not trivial. The whole point of Israel, Mr. Grossman said, is to be a homeland for a people that have never felt at home. Yet after 62 years there are numerous external threats, an internal failure to come to grips with what needs to be done to secure the future, and no fixed borders.

?If we don?t have peace, then we really are in existential danger,? he said.

His character Ora, he notes, tries to avoid the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, considering herself apolitical.

?And yet,? Mr. Grossman said as the sun descended on the Judean hills outside, ?politics chases her and crushes her. Politics is like acid here. No matter how many protective coatings you put on yourself, it eats through them.?

His novel has won high praise here and abroad. In a cover-page review in The New York Times Book Review, Colm Toibin called it ?a panorama of breathtaking emotional force, a masterpiece of pacing, of dedicated storytelling, with characters whose lives are etched with extraordinary, vivid detail.? But it has been impossible for critics and other readers not to view the book as an embodiment of Mr. Grossman?s own story.

Mr. Grossman never tried to avoid politics; he has embraced it from the left for three decades. But it has chased him and crushed him, too. Uri served as a tank gunner in the war between Israel and Hezbollah; he and three others in the tank died in action as Mr. Grossman was nearly through with the novel.

In a bout of magical thinking, the novel?s Ora tries to protect her son in uniform by leaving home and hiking the length of the country. The idea is that the military cannot carry out the ritual of delivering news of her son?s death if she is not there to receive it. Mr. Grossman, who began the novel when his older son, Yonatan, was in the army and before Uri started, said he too entertained the illusion that by writing in this way, he was somehow protecting his children.

Ora?s son Ofer tells her as he heads to battle that if he is killed she should leave Israel. Mr. Grossman said this was something told to a friend of his by the friend?s son. It has raised the question of whether Mr. Grossman would himself consider leaving his home.

?Of course the thought of leaving crossed my mind,? he said. ?But it never got to the point of buying tickets. The whole motivation for my struggle for peace over 30 years is so that our country, which is meant to be a home, will actually be one.?

The role of home for Mr. Grossman is not simply related to comfort. He believes that the real drama of life takes place not on battlefields but in kitchens and bedrooms.

Mr. Grossman referred to the importance of home again later in the conversation. The day after the official seven-day mourning period for Uri, he went back to writing. Why? ?Writing is my home. It was a place where I again recognized myself.?

Even without the personal loss associated with ?To the End of the Land,? it is painful to read the novel, its tenderness and lust for the fullness of life overtaken by foreboding and horror.

The book is also an unusually tactile piece of writing, filled with physical description,

characteristic of much of Mr. Grossman's work, including seven other novels (?See Under: Love? and ?The Smile of the Lamb? among them) and four works of nonfiction (?The Yellow Wind,? about the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, being the best known).

?When I start to write a character, I always start from the physical,? he explained. ?I need to know how a character moves and looks, what the sound of her voice is like, how she makes love. I need to walk the way she walks.?

Not only are the characters described in close physical detail, but so is the landscape. Ora's walk in the Galilee is filled with strange-sounding flora ? spiny broom, viper's bugloss and spurge. Such references are part of Mr. Grossman's fight against the reduction of language to what he calls media cliché and kitsch.

?I wanted to describe everything with the most nuanced language I could,? he said.

His father, born in Poland with an intellectual bent, arrived impoverished in Palestine with a sister and mother, and he quit school at 14 to support them, becoming a bus driver and real estate agent. David Grossman showed artistic promise early. He was a child radio actor and journalist before he was a full-time author. A case in his living room contains translations of his books into some 30 languages.

Mr. Grossman also writes children's books and has written a children's opera. And he is at work on something he is not sure how to characterize. It is a mix of drama, poetry and prose, and he said he imagined it being both read and performed. It deals with what it means to go on after losing a son.

?It's about the major fact of my life now,? he offered, cautiously. ?In other countries you can create distractions. Not here.?

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