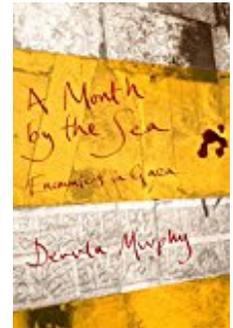


Up and Down the Gaza Strip with Dervla Murphy

There have been many great female travel writers -- Margery Kempe (c. 1373-1438) wrote about her extensive pilgrimages to holy sites in Europe and Asia; Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), the wife of the British ambassador at Constantinople, described life among the privileged in the Ottoman Empire; botanist Mary Kingsley (1862-1900) chronicled her travels through West Africa accompanied only by native guides; Alexandra David-Neel (1868-1969) told of her journey on foot disguised as a beggar from China to Tibet where she was the first Western woman to enter Lhasa, the forbidden city; journalist Nellie Bly (1864-1922) set off around world in the footsteps of Phileas Fogg, fictional protagonist of Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*; Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) described the plight of women throughout her native India; Ella Maillart (1903-1997) photographed and wrote about the oriental republics of the USSR and much of Asia; Sybille Bedford (1911-2006) explicated the hell out of travel and the Eden of arrival in post-war Mexico; and Martha Gellhorn (1908-1998) was one of the great war correspondents of the twentieth century -- to name only several.



An established member of this tradition, Dervla Murphy has bicycled from Ireland to India, ridden a donkey over the Semien Mountains in Ethiopia, and documented the spread of AIDS along Africa's trucking routes. Murphy has authored over twenty books about her travels. Now in her eighties, she spent three months in Gaza in 2011, resulting in *A Month by the Sea: Encounters in Gaza*, a remarkable book that paints a vivid picture of the daily lives of a wide range of Gaza's inhabitants and provides a succinct history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. A keenly observant, sharp-witted Irishwoman who is as sympathetic as she is skeptical, Murphy, a self-declared "irreligious humanist" puts her moral stance front and center. She's outraged at the mistreatment of the Palestinian people by the Israeli, and by extension the US, government, and bitterly disappointed by the international community's tepid condemnation of the persistent violations of Gazans' human rights. Murphy has a fresh perspective from her experienced standpoint nearer to the end of life and, aware of the odd figure she cuts in pursuing her story, she provides a running commentary on how she is perceived by her many interlocutors. Indeed, though the people she meets are intriguing, their stories horrifying, inspiring, and informative, Dervla Murphy is the most compelling character of all.

From the Rafah Gate on the Egyptian border to the Erez crossing, flanked by Israel and the Mediterranean Sea, the Gaza strip measures a mere 140 square miles. Renowned for its rich soil and deep-water harbor, Gaza city flourished from at least 1500 BC and ranked for centuries among the Near East's most cosmopolitan cities. By the time Alexander conquered

the Strip in 332 BC, Gaza's port had long served as one of Persia's most important harbors. Seventeenth-century visitors compared Gaza's cultural life and economic importance to that of Paris.

The twentieth century was the Strip's undoing. Bombed by the British in 1917, it's been heading steeply downhill ever since. In 2005, after a thirty-eight-year occupation, including two devastating periods of intifada, Israel finally pulled out the last settlers and soldiers, and the Strip became self-governing. However, the democratically elected Hamas party is regarded by Israel, the US, and the EU as a terrorist group, and thus not recognized as legitimate. Consequently, the Gaza Strip has been under permanent blockade, with only seventy-three approved products officially allowed into the territory. Therefore, businesses and industry are virtually impossible to maintain, much less develop, leaving seventy-five percent of the Gazan population wholly or partly dependent on food aid. A vast black market economy has flourished, fueled by products being brought in from Egypt through approximately a thousand tunnels -- described by Murphy as "Tunnelopolis." (Since the election and subsequent ousting of Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi, eighty percent of the tunnels have been closed or destroyed, further worsening conditions on the Gaza Strip.)

The Strip is subject to indiscriminate bombing by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in response to rockets launched from Gaza or due to the perceived threat of terrorist action. Effectively, the 1.7 million inhabitants are living in an open-air prison, constantly threatened with death-by-drone or death-by-bleeding post-drone due to delayed negotiations between the IDF and the International Committee of the Red Cross for authorization permitting ambulance access. A defenseless Gazan population, Murphy states, is forced to endure an all-out collective punishment of "curfews, closures, sieges, house demolitions, olive-grove bulldozings, well poisonings, shootings, bombings, torture and indefinite imprisonment without trial."

Traveling all over Gaza, Murphy interviews Hamas supporters about Palestinian unity as "a first step without which nobody could get anywhere" and Fatah supporters (the party founded by Yassar Arafat) about the viability of a two-state solution; she describes internal political struggles crippling the many political factions. She chats with doctors about medicine shortages; farmers about the resurgence of sustainable farming, given their limited resources; fisherman about being shot or worse by Israel's navy if they venture over the six-mile offshore limit into international waters (the limit itself an Israeli violation of the Geneva Convention); politicians about international law. "Since 1972," Murphy notes, "the US has vetoed 41 Security Council resolutions condemning Israeli violations of International law. Until the US is willing to play the international law game the concept is meaningless." She talks to taxi drivers about the "misery tours" of foreign politicians, human rights teams, NGO delegations, and journalists that serve their own agendas rather than address the victims' needs. She visits many families who have lost loved ones to bombings. She argues with housewives and professional women about wearing the *jilbab* (an ankle-length, long-sleeved overgarment) and the *niqb* (full-face veil). She describes the considerable successes of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement, a non-violent strategy that reaches out for global support by concentrating "on the essential colonizer-colonized relationship at the root of Palestine's tragedy."

Reading about these individual Palestinians whose lives have been so grievously affected by geopolitics, I became painfully aware that Murphy's book is written for people like me. For much of my adult life, whenever I hear or read about the Palestinian plight, my heart sinks and my eyes glaze over as I become overwhelmed by the apparent impossibility of the situation. I then retreat into the worst kind of indifference -- a kind of sympathetic shrugging off of moral responsibility for the suffering of fellow humans -- and their situation almost becomes "normalized" in my conscience. This common attitude is further promoted by an "Israel compliant" international press along with a Palestinian disregard for the power of public relations. Murphy's book reminded me that there is no such thing as benign apathy.

As Martin Luther King famously said about the struggle for civil rights in the US: "History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people."

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