



Martyr's Crossing

by Amy Wilentz
Simon & Schuster, N.Y., 2001
\$35.50, cloth

Reviewed by James Christie

In the first paragraph of journalist Amy Wilentz' first novel, *Martyr's Crossing*, Marina, a young Palestinian mother, American born, married to a *Hamas* member jailed by the Israelis, observes that "she was sharing (the Palestinians') predicament. She had always thought she wanted to."

Readers who want to understand the deadly predicament of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, will, like Marina, find that they are sharing more than they bargained for in this rich and terrible story.

Wilentz' elegant and intricate plot, woven tightly as a *challah* loaf or the braid of a *kheffiyeh*, develops as remorselessly as Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, and with the same compelling moral integrity. From the first tragedy of many, at the *Shuhada* - Arabic for "martyr" - checkpoint into Jerusalem, to the final, eerily symmetrical sorrow, Wilentz creates characters to care about. Their interconnected struggles are poignantly but never sentimentally portrayed.

Marina; her author, heart-surgeon, Boston-based and disillusioned Palestinian ex-pat father, George; Mahmoud the lawyer; Amr, cynical exploiter of grief are among the Palestinians. The Israelis include Ari Doron, soldier and man of conscience; Rose Horowitz, drawn to the Palestinians; and Yizhar, the Israeli spin doctor, equally cynical counterpart to Amr.

Martyr's Crossing is about these people, their families, friends, hopes and fears. It is not about ideas; nor about symbols, though the book is redolent with both. It is about all those people who, from ancient days, have been the martyrs whose paths have crossed in this beautiful and beleaguered and holy land.

Wilentz has written a novel which could make a difference. Were they to read it, both Israeli and Palestinian alike might come to see each other as real human beings capable of building the new Jerusalem. Herein lies the hope amidst the heartbreak.