novelist from Israel, finds himself at the centre of a similarly absurd labyrinth. As the story begins, Dekel is sent out to New York by his newspaper to cover an Israeli-Palestinian peace conference. While there he meets Didi Schaffer, a young American Jew, who politely informs Dekel that he is his 'silencer'. Didi represents a rightwing organisation named the Anti-Slander League, whose agenda includes keeping pro-Palestinian literature from being published in the United States. This includes Dekel's only novel, an espionage thriller based around the 1982 war in Lebanon and which supported the Palestinian resistance movement.

Led by Didi Schaffer to a secret rendezvous, Dekel finds only an old Jewish man with a bludgeoned head who, in his last breath, accuses Dekel of being a traitor and 'hater' of his 'people'. To quote Dekel: "...after that, it gets a bit strange". In fact, pure craziness. The novel tracks Dekel's path from New York to Jerusalem, from the West Bank to The Church of the Living Christ in Utah, as he attempts to make sense of a very twisted mess of clues, in the process uncovering an extremist plot to blow up a mosque in Jerusalem. To say much more than this will be to give away the incredible conspiracy—one so weird I can believe it actually could happen.

Joe Dekel is, even at the most dire moments, a shit-hanger. He inflicts insult upon just about every political and religious group within the confines of his expansive story: peacemakers, rightwing Israeli warmongers, the PLO, the Israeli secret service, fundamentalist evangelical Christians, the CIA, the FBI, and so on. He presents a picture of Israel as a schizoid land torn apart by its many different groups, a country whose fragmentation is even more apparent in the face of a seemingly unified and constant Palestinian resistance against occupation. But towards the end of the book, Dekel cannot refrain from making the rest of the world a target for his loathing:

The people, my people, are just a microcosm of the squabbling heap of humanity...Our arrogance, our terror, our insecurity, our boycotts and excommunications, are not, at the end of the say, an ethnic inheritance. The global state. La Condition Humaine. We are fucked up, therefor we exist. There is nothing inherently Jewish about this. It is a bipedal problem.

Despite such damning monologues—which, one might think, offer humanity very little chance—the narrator of The Silencer somehow remains hopeful. Having witnessed a very disturbing world of spy-scandals, power games, fear and hate, Dekel and his wife still choose to have a child. Life must go on, even in the face of so many problems; even when the world seems on the brink of ending. At the end of the book, Dekel is brave enough to sing: "Come out, come out whoever you are! The more of us malcontents the better."

This book manages the inspired: to remain very funny while, at the same time, cramming in many intelligent, insightful and cynical views of the Israeli-Palestinian feud. I left the novel with a somehow clearer perception of the complexity and enormity of this very current and often debated problem. A shit-stained view perhaps—murky and chaotic—but what else would one expect?

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Language Landscape


It seems a bit misleading to describe Bernard Cohen's first book as a 'novel'; for while it is certainly novel in its form, it isn't exactly a novel. It is divided into 149 sections, each less than a page long. Each bears the name of an Australian town. This at least is reassuring, but on reading the text underneath these headings disorientation sets in.

The section headed 'Darwin', for instance, beginning: "If only we received visitors, we too would eat. This is the land of possibility." At Adelaide, it says, "There is a battle for stasis, and we are its objects. Decisions are made here but never enacted. The truth is different. Everything else seems the same. This is because we have not learned to differentiate sound."

These places, then, are more like Calvino's invisible cities than the Australian landscape we know. The seemingly interminable series of 'landscape novels' that passes for Australian literature. Cohen is having his little joke here. The landscape of language can be more interesting than the landscape of rustic rural towns which populates Australian TV drama and travelogues.

This is a very contemporary sort of fiction; one might even call it avant garde. Yet it is engrossing, funny, amusing, saturated with wit and Cohen's unique style. Breaking with the tedium of Australian fiction need not be a leap into the high seriousness of 'experimental' (i.e. unreadable) prose. But then, as Cohen would say, "In Yass, one always overtakes on the inside."

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