

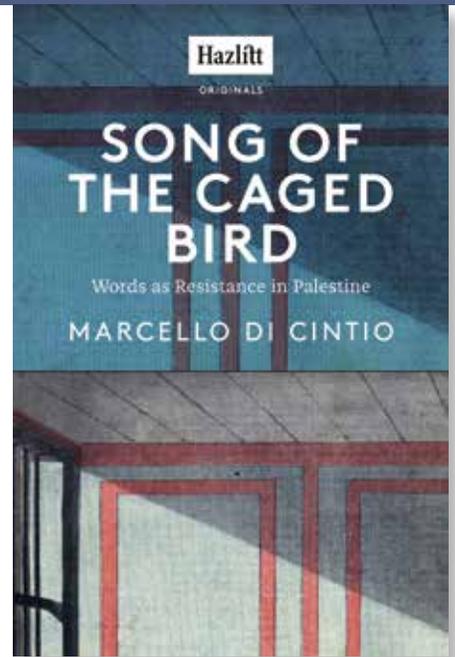
BOOK EXCERPT

NO SINGLE STORY

MARCELLO DI CINTIO

Canadian writer Marcello Di Cintio didn't know what to expect from his students when he arrived in Ramallah to teach a creative writing course. But as he describes in *Song of the Caged Bird*, he discovered the Palestinian story is more than a narrative of occupation and exile.

En débarquant à Ramallah pour y donner des cours de création littéraire, l'écrivain canadien Marcello Di Cintio ne savait trop comment ses étudiants allaient réagir. Il a bientôt découvert qu'on ne peut réduire l'histoire de la Palestine à un récit d'occupation et d'exil, comme le décrit son livre *Song of the Caged Bird*.



The Palestine Writing Workshop encompasses a library filled with books in both English and Arabic, a few small offices and a sunny conference room with bare, whitewashed walls and old windows with swinging shutters. Workshop staff and visitors use the kettle on a hallway shelf to soak Lipton tea bags or dissolve spoonfuls of Nescafé. The powdered coffee tastes like chemicals. Morgan, the PWW coordinator, was a fellow coffee snob who mercifully shared her French press and precious stash of fresh ground beans.

Only one of the ten writers registered for my creative nonfiction workshop, which I titled "Telling the Truth," was a man. He never showed up. Of the nine remaining students, three were Americans married to Palestinian men. (Although Bettye's husband had recently passed away.) The rest were young Palestinian women. I suspect all were in

their early to mid-twenties, but I have a hard time judging the age of women who wear headscarves. At first, only one, Yara, was not a *hijabi*. The Palestinians had studied English at one time or another — a prerequisite for the class since I cannot speak Arabic.

The Americans showed up on time for my first class; the Palestinians all arrived late. We gathered around a table in the conference room and introduced ourselves. I lectured about writing creative nonfiction for a little while and watched as they scribbled in their notebooks. We did a couple of rudimentary writing exercises, then I gave them an assignment for the following week. "Write a scene from your life," I instructed, telling them they could write about whatever interested them. I deliberately avoided mentioning the Occupation.

In his book *Occupation Diaries*, Palestinian author Raja Shehadeh de-

scribes attending a historian's lecture about the *Nakba* — the word, meaning "catastrophe," that Palestinians and their supporters use to describe the founding of the state of Israel in 1948. Shehadeh writes:

As I sat listening once again to all the details of what happened, I wondered whether I would ever tire of hearing about and seeing films on 1948 and the Nakba. It is like Shahryar, the king in A Thousand and One Nights who can never tire of listening to Scheherazade. We continue to be bewildered and wonder how it could have happened, why it happened, how it can be explained and understood. We can never have enough of it.

I wondered what it meant to be so chained to a single narrative, to endure a sort of Sisyphean curse to hear and retell the same stories of oppression, exile and occupation over and over again.

I first visited the region at the end of 1999. I'd travelled to Jerusalem because I wanted to be somewhere interesting when the clock turned on the new millennium. I've returned to Israel and Palestine many times since

Marcello Di Cintio is a Calgary writer whose books include Poets and Pahlevans: A Journey into the Heart of Iran, and Walls, which won the 2013 Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for Political Writing. Excerpted from Song of the Caged Bird. Copyright © 2014 Marcello Di Cintio. Excerpted by permission of Knopf Canada, a division of Random House of Canada Ltd, a Penguin Random House company. All rights reserved.

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then, both as a writer and a traveler, and although my understanding of the Occupation increased with each visit, I always saw the Palestinians in this same context of anger and deprivation. Like most outsiders — regardless of which side of the conflict our sympathies lie with — this was the only narrative I'd ever heard. Palestinians had been simplified by a seemingly unending struggle. They are characters in a single story.

I wanted to see if and how this story would manifest in my students' writing, but I didn't want to influence what they chose to write about. I didn't want them to think I expected stories about checkpoints or the "separation wall" or their grandfather's uprooted olive trees. I wondered how many, if given the chance to write about whatever they wanted, would retell the same Occupation narratives.

Their stories started to arrive by email a few days after class, and I forwarded each piece to the other participants to read. Many were accompanied by apologies and disclaimers that betrayed a lack of confidence in their own work — a common phenomenon in writing workshops. Bettye feared her story was "contrived." Nora, another of the Americans, apologized for narrowly exceeding the arbitrary five-hundred-word limit I imposed. Dina wrote to say she'd composed two stories for the assignment, but didn't like either of them. "Plus I think that I've done them wrong," she continued. "I understood the assignment, but this understanding plays hide and seek with me. It vanishes when I'm writing and when I'm done it pops up to say that I didn't do it right." Hana was less poetic with her self-criticism:

*Dear Marcello,
Here is my poorly written piece of
nonfiction.
Have a nice day,
Hana*

Bettye described spending a summer in an old wooden house her father was disassembling plank by plank. Dina wrote about the day her little brother wandered off during Friday prayers at Jerusalem's al-Aqsa mosque. They eventually found him. Donna, the third American, wrote about ice hockey, of all things, and I teased her for pandering to her Canadian instructor. Yara wrote a charming piece about eating ice cream in the winter as a child, a mild rebellion that shocked her classmates. "Very few things fail to surprise Catholic school girls," she wrote. Heba wrote about how her family lived in her father's pharmacy for six months during the Second Intifada to avoid having to pass back and forth through Israeli checkpoints. Nora described a conference of international aid workers she attended, Kefah wrote about a night spent in Jordan before a family holiday to Puerto Rico and Mariam wrote about a trip she made to Bolivia with her parents. Mariam's story was the weakest. Her English was tentative, and I worried that she would not be able to keep up with the others.

Hana's story, however, was the most striking. In it, she describes challenging her conservative father's authority and religion. Early in the piece her father tells her, "I will give you some orders that you have to follow without even arguing, because, lately, I notice you are deviating from the right path." Hana resists him. Tempers flash. He threatens to "enslave" her. She accuses her father of forcing her to wear the veil and treating her like a possession. He throws tea at her, calls her scum, and yells "I cannot allow the existence of a heretic in my family." Then, after Hana cries that she hates him, her father turns to Hana's mother and says "Bring me a knife. I want to slaughter her."

I'd spent less than a week "in residence" and already I was out of my league. I didn't know how to respond to Hana's story. As an outsider, I didn't know whether I had any right or responsibility to address the abuse Hana described. I didn't even know how to react to her bravery, her willingness to share this experience with the group.

Instead, in a page of notes I would share with her the next class, I retreated into the comfortable mush of writing workshop conventions. I critiqued her use of adjectives and the formality of her dialogue, and suggested she slow her pacing. I recommended she add more physical details to the scene, hoping the request didn't sound perverse.

The group met again the following weekend. Hana was late and we all talked about her story while waiting for her to arrive. The piece had made everyone nervous: some of the other students couldn't believe that she had written it. When Hana finally came into the room, she was not wearing her hijab. Her hair hung long and straight to her shoulders and her bangs were cut into a severe line just above her eyebrows. I sensed a collective gasp when she appeared, but no one said anything until we finished discussing her story. Then Nora leaned forward and asked, in Arabic, "When did you stop wearing hijab?" Hana told us she abandoned the veil earlier in the week. She had been considering doing so for awhile, but writing the story finally compelled her.

I didn't understand the full weight of what had occurred until I spoke with Nora after the class. She told me that abandoning the veil was a serious rebellion in Palestine. It is one thing to have never worn hijab, and many young Palestinian women don't, but to jettison one's headscarf as an adult is seen as a conscious and deliberate rejection of one's faith. Many in the community would consider Hana's decision scandalous. While so-called honour killings of disobedient women are rarer in Palestine than elsewhere, they still occur — and for lesser transgressions that Hana's. We'd read about her father's temper and his threats, and we all worried about her.

In the wake of Hana's story and the drama surrounding her rejection of the hijab, it took me a few days to recognize that only one of the women, Heba, wrote about the Occupation. Even her story, despite having the Second Intifada as its setting, was more about her relationship with her little brother than about the conflict. My students' assign-

ments provided my first glimpses of a complete Palestinian life. Until then, I'd only viewed Palestinians through the lens of the struggle: through journalism, activism and political discourse.

After reading my students' stories, I wanted to see the Palestinian experience from a different starting point. Not one *apart* from the struggle — I'd seen enough to know that the Occupation saturates nearly every aspect of Palestinian existence — but a starting point that exists *alongside* of the conflict.

Near the end of my residency, Morgan invited me to participate in a literary night at Café la Vie, a lovely garden café near central Ramallah that she runs with her Palestinian husband. Accustomed to poorly attended literary readings in Canada, I was unprepared for the crowd at la Vie. The garden filled before I arrived, and the staff had moved nearly every chair from the inside of the café into the garden for the reading. (Only a few chairs remained indoors for the handful of customers wanting to watch a high-stakes Euro Cup match. At la Vie, at least, poetry trumps soccer.) Fairy lights hung from the trees and wrapped around the tree trunks. Thick clouds of citrus-scented smoke tumbled out of the mouths of the nargileh smokers. Lemon-mint was the preferred flavour that spring, though I was more partial to watermelon.

There were several foreigners among the crowd, young activist types wearing kaffiyehs and speaking tortured Arabic with European accents. Most of the audience, though, were Palestinians of varying ages. Author Raja Shehadeh sat among them at a table in the back with his wife. I shared the night with a couple of local poets,

the Palestinian-American poet Hala Alyan and a fabulous local guitarist. The main draw, though, was Kefah Fanni, a local poet in his fifties. Morgan told me Fanni rarely reads in public and his appearance at la Vie was an extraordinary occasion. Fanni, suitably bohemian in his beard and beret, recited soft Arabic verses from loose pages while the audience sat still and respectful.

As a writer, I've taken much from my travels in Palestine. I've written about how Muslims in Jerusalem celebrate Ramadan while under Occupation. I've written a profile about Ali Jiddah and a female Israeli soldier I befriended back in 2000. My last book includes a long chapter about Palestinians who live in the shadow of the wall Israel has built around the West Bank. But I didn't read from any of these at la Vie. The idea of reflecting my experiences of the struggle back to those who live it every day struck me as arrogant. And I didn't want to darken such a night with bleak politics.

Instead, I took my cue from my Palestinian students who wrote about their intimate lives and read from a short memoir I wrote about becoming a father. It is a story about a common sort of struggle. And about love. As I read to an audience far more attentive than those I am used to, I could sense, in a tiny way and only for a moment, what Darwish meant when he said writing about love liberated his humanity. To stand in Palestine and read aloud about something other than the familiar narrative — to speak not of the Nakba or the Wall or the fallen olive trees — felt profoundly human. I'd read from the same story back home several times, but nowhere did the experience feel as visceral as that night in Ramallah. ■

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