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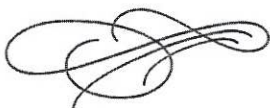
Palestine Voices
Guest-edited by Yousef Khanfar

(757–815) to Kahlil Gibran (1883–1931), and includes mention of such icons as Umm Kalthum, names that even noninitiates will have already heard. He moves on to chapters dealing with religion and national identity, the epistemological frameworks of modern Arab thought, writers who grapple with the profound effects of oil wealth, the issues behind the seemingly unresolvable differences among Arab peoples (the Palestinian question, American hegemony, the re-Islamization of the region), the relics of the Cold War, feminism within the Muslim context, the successes and failures of Arab nationalism in its heyday, and the pitched battles between modern secularists and religious conservatives over decades, or even centuries. This handbook approach makes the book ideal for classroom use or even for an adult continuing-education program like OLLI that seeks to touch on the key areas of Arab thought from the Arab perspective.

One of the final chapters, and perhaps the most useful, deals with attempts at ideological reconciliation, a topic unlikely to make headline news but which introduces such concepts as the *wassatiya*, or middle way, and the Islamic reformist thought of such writers as the Algerian Mohammed Arkoun.

As I was working on this review in an apartment shared with my ninety-eight-year-old aunt above the port of Beirut in the summer of 2020, the blast of August 4 destroyed the apartment, almost killed me, and shattered the computer I was working on, even tearing the cover off Corm's book. The ideas presented here have become all the more urgent. May Corm's voice be heard and his ideas implemented in these more than troubled times.

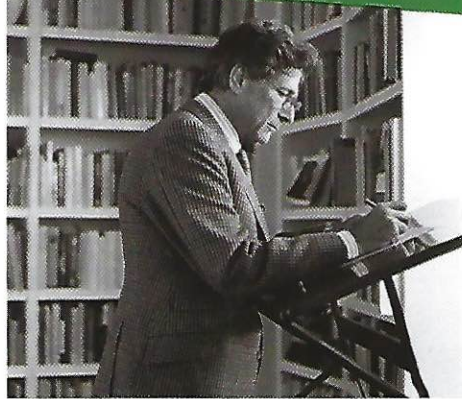
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PLACES OF MIND

A LIFE OF
EDWARD SAID

TIMOTHY BRENNAN



Timothy Brennan
*Places of Mind:
A Life of Edward Said*

New York. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
2021. 464 pages.

THE BIOGRAPHY OF an English professor who is known for eclectic bibliographies ignoring doctrinal lines would, ideally, draw on appropriately unique sources. In *Places of Mind*, Timothy Brennan, former advisee and longtime friend of Edward Said, does exactly this. Brennan, a professor of comparative literature at the University of Minnesota, consults former students, colleagues, allies, and antagonists—as well as FBI files, personal correspondence, and decades of published work—to write an unprecedented account of Said's life.

Said taught at Columbia University from 1963 until his death in 2003. Despite his fervent political activism, which included membership on the Palestinian National Council, and engaging with both Jimmy Carter and Yasser Arafat to advance Palestinian interests, his primary object was always arts and letters. Said's critique in *Orientalism* of Western depictions of the

Oriental "other" remains a foundational text in postcolonial studies. His frequent media appearances, witty retorts, and enthusiasm for writing for the *New York Times*, *Grand Street*, and even *House and Garden* gave him the verve of the public intellectual despite his longtime university tenure. Brennan rightly places Said in the coterie of prominent postwar, left-wing intellectuals including Noam Chomsky, Hannah Arendt, and Susan Sontag, and he notes that Said "was the only one of them who taught literature for a living."

Said was an inveterate critic. Of *Beginnings*, his exploration of modernism and critical theory, Brennan writes: "His point . . . was to suggest that fiction and criticism were equally foundational, and that criticism, not necessarily fiction, was where the deepest cultural recesses of society were laid bare." If Said's work reminds readers of the critic's often overlooked capacity for genuine artistry, Brennan's book reminds us how a keen biographer can make an already luminous subject radiant. Describing Said's suspicion of the postmodernists, he writes, "He refused to follow them into that abyss, even while admiring the brio of their triumph in getting intellectuals to feel the dizziness of thought as its ground was cut from beneath their feet." Places of the mind, Said knew, are tectonic, unstable, always subject to shifting currents beneath.

While Brennan depicts in rich detail Said's prolific career as "the closest thing America had to Sartre," the vulnerable, idiosyncratic human behind the professor and pundit feels buried. Whole chapters summarize Said's major projects, but it is only two-thirds of the way into the biography that readers really encounter domestic scenes and previously unpublished personal details. Said woke up at five a.m. He made English muffins with complimentary containers of jam saved from frequent travels. Only Volvic or Evian water was suitable for the espresso machine, and only he was allowed to operate it. He adored Mont Blanc pens. He loathed fancy restaurants. For twenty years he turned down offers from Harvard. He started and abandoned a

semi-autobiographical novel. When asked in London by a young Palestinian student for advice about funding his education, Said mailed him a £1,500 check. His children teased him for having elitist taste in music. Unable to cope when his son, Wadie, was hospitalized with osteomyelitis, he fled to a concert. He saw a therapist his entire adult life.

These are the delicious, humanizing details that sustain a compelling biography in part because they are not available in the subject's own oeuvre. Brennan supplies these anecdotes in an altogether enthralling biography, but, much like reading Said, his focus on complex literary history can be exhausting. Nevertheless, *Places of Mind* is a masterful portrait that encourages readers to continue grappling with the complicated ideas to which Said devoted his life.

Peter Krause
New York

Kevin Barry

That Old Country Music: Stories

New York. Doubleday. 2020. 208 pages.

THOUGH NO GHOSTS move through its pages, Kevin Barry's *That Old Country Music* is a catalog of hauntings. The characters who populate these eleven stories are bedeviled by phantoms: memories and possibilities, places they can't forget, and people they really should. The resultant confrontations are chronicled by the Irish author with equal parts earthy relatability and offhand poeticism.

Barry introduces his collection with a quote from filmmaker Jane Campion on "the romantic impulse," characterized as both "heroic" and "foolhardy." Several of Barry's stories vividly evoke this tight-rope walk. "The Coast of Leitrim" finds its underachieving-aesthete protagonist easing into an affair with a like-minded Polish émigré, then almost wrecking things through nothing more than petty insecurity. In "Saint Catherine of the Fields," a

middle-aged music scholar confronts his romantic failings while transcribing a folk ballad about a woman who, with her husband's support, enraptures and destroys an unsuspecting herdsman for "no more than a sport." And in the titular tale, a young mother-to-be contemplates her destiny while waiting for her baby's father, an ex-paramour of her mother's, to return with the spoils of a petrol-station robbery.

A raw form of self-discovery marks "Deer Season," in which a country girl with a taste for Bolaño novels harnesses "the new soft rhythm of her power" to seduce a forestry worker into taking her virginity, running him out of town in the process. Two other stories offer alternate takes on notions of absorbing identity through others. In "Old Stock," a writer inherits a country cottage from his satyrish uncle ("Cause of death: the west of Ireland"), then gets more than he bargained for when the house's aphrodisiac properties begin to turn him into the old libertine reincarnate. Another elder bequeaths his self to the more willing protagonist of "Roma Kid," who wanders away from her rootless family, is rescued from injury by a trailer-dwelling pensioner, and slowly assimilates

his home, his books, and his very way of being.

Barry was once something of a nomad himself, boasting seventeen addresses by his midthirties, and an ambivalence about the itinerant lifestyle shades the narrator of "Extremadura (Until Night Falls)," a cynical wanderer washed up in western Spain, and the rich-pig mother and son of "Toronto and the State of Grace," who crash-land in the narrator's pub to reminisce about their rancorous ramblings as they drink themselves to metaphorical and (in one case) literal death. Even legends are not immune to the traveler's travails in "Roethke in the Bughouse," a fictionalized chronicle of the American poet's unexpected institutionalization during an early 1960s pilgrimage to the coastal isle of Inishbofin.

Yet no matter where we roam, our travels terminate the same way, a fact Barry examines in a pair of striking tales that grapple with the inevitability of death. The shaggy-dog-scented "Who's-Dead McCarthy" chronicles a man whose daily bread is the incessant sharing of the details of recent passings, simply because he finds the very notion of death "impressive . . . no one has the answer to it." And a troubled small-town police sergeant aims to answer that yawning question in "Ox Mountain Death Song," as he stalks the terminally ill scion of a clan of ne'er-do-well murderers, a man he feels certain will otherwise become a killer himself before it's all over. "Take one of them and spare one of us," the sergeant tells himself, as he succumbs to the pull of his unsupported certainty and gives Barry's collection of spirit stories one of its few authentic ghosts.

Matt R. Lohr
Pittsburgh

