

Nathan Thrall: A Jerusalem Tragedy [C1]

A cavallo tra cronaca e analisi socio-politica, questo americano di origine ebraica denuncia il sistema di discriminazioni di cui sono vittime i palestinesi sotto l'occupazione israeliana. Un racconto emozionante che ha ottenuto il Premio Pulitzer.

Winner of the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction, Nathan Thrall's book *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama* is not an easy read. It is, in fact, a difficult one for two reasons: it is painful because it deals with the tragedy of a school bus accident, and a father's desperate search for the [whereabouts](#) and condition of his five-year-old son. It is also challenging because [it tackles](#) the complexity of everyday life in the [West Bank](#) under Israeli occupation, while also recounting the basic facts of a [fifty-plus](#)-year conflict with no end in sight.

A SYSTEM OF CONTROL

Nathan Thrall is a Jewish American journalist based in Jerusalem. His work has been published in [outlets](#) such as The New York Times Magazine, The Guardian and The London Review of Books. For more than a decade, he also worked as a senior analyst for the International Crisis Group, a [nonprofit think tank](#) conducting research and analysis on global crises. With a style that is both informative and emotionally absorbing, Thrall's main [achievement](#) in his award-winning book is his ability to integrate an in-depth analysis of the cruel and somewhat Kafkaesque situation of the millions of Palestinians living in the [West Bank](#) and Jerusalem with a compelling and intimate chronicle of the lives of a handful of characters transformed by a tragedy that could have been [averted](#). In a meeting with the press in Barcelona's Centre de Cultura Contemporània, Thrall discussed the main motivation for his book. **Nathan Thrall (American accent):** The book was actually written out of a frustration with the way that the world deals with Israel-Palestine. When there is a war in Gaza, when there is [bloodshed](#), when there's an intifada, an [uprising](#)... the world suddenly pays attention. And

they say, “We need [to restore](#) calm.” And what I wanted to do with this book was to write about that [so-called](#) calm, which is anything but calm for Palestinians. And so long as the world is calling simply to get back to the situation that we were in, we are [doomed](#) to keep seeing this story repeat again and again and again. Of course, right now a ceasefire is the most urgent need. And of course it’s correct that the world’s eyes are on Gaza. But if we really want to see an end to the suffering, what we need to do is to address the situation as it exists when there is a ceasefire. The situation of this [so-called](#) calm is one of deep, deep injustice that the whole world is largely complicit in, or ignores, or tacitly supports. This is a system that has existed for over half a century. My desire in choosing to tell a story like this one about something [seemingly commonplace](#) like a car accident, something that happens all over the world, was to explore this system of control, to allow the reader to feel what it actually is to live under it and to have to navigate it.

OCTOBER SEVENTH

Although the book deals with a tragedy that occurred in 2012, it came out just a few days before the 7 October Hamas attack that [triggered](#) the disproportionate Israeli [retaliation](#) on Gaza. **Nathan Thrall:** The book came out on October 3rd and four days later was October 7th. Abed and I had given a talk in New Jersey on Friday night, October 6th. We came back to Brooklyn, where we were staying, and we [were both up](#) communicating with family, that was seven hours ahead of us in Israel-Palestine. And the first news actually I got of the October 7th was from my wife sending me voice notes on WhatsApp, and I started to look online at the news and there was nothing yet. Then I started to see the first images of militants from Gaza in a pickup truck in the centre of Sderot, and still there were no news articles. And I immediately knew that everything was going to change, that this was going to be a war on a scale that we had never seen before in Gaza. It was obvious to me. The atmosphere in the US and the UK immediately after October 7th was very intolerant to a message of sympathy for Palestinians living under decades of Israeli control. Every discussion of occupation was

treated as though it were a justification of the killing of civilians on October 7th.

SPEAK OUT

As an American Jew, Thrall acknowledges that his denunciation of the Israeli occupation has a broader [reach](#) on the global stage. However, it is a difficult mission that still faces significant opposition. **Nathan Thrall:** I feel that I have a greater responsibility, as a result of being Jewish, to [speak out](#) because of that immunity that I have. A year ago I taught the first-ever class entitled 'Apartheid in Israel-Palestine' at a College in the US. I think it's the first class of that kind anywhere in the world. And for sure, a Palestinian Arab or Muslim professor would be at risk of ending their career if they tried to teach that class. And so I was very glad to be able to do it. And the school suffered as a result of the class. They lost two and a half million dollars from one donor over the class. The Israeli consulate in New York tried to have the class canceled, the Anti Defamation League tried to have the class canceled, and they all failed. The school [stood by](#) me and the class went forward. The American Jewish community is, of course, [overwhelmingly](#) pro-Israel, and there is a big generational divide that has gotten much bigger in the last months. My hope is that my book will [reach](#) some of those people and will help to persuade them. But of course I am well aware that the American Jewish community, especially the older generation, is very, very [reluctant](#) to even hear the message in this book. I think it's a necessary fight. I think it's necessary to change their views and I wrote this book hoping that it would affect them. I've had many American Jewish readers who have told me that their views have been changed by this book. But I also have members of my own family who could never read this book. My mother for years has told me she can't read what I write; it's too painful for her.

GHETTOS AND CHECKPOINTS

Thrall manages to describe the historical and political context in detail: the internal [quarrels](#) within the Palestinian resistance, as well as the decades of manoeuvres to draw the borders of the occupation; the [maze](#) of checkpoints

and bureaucracy that makes Arab lives nearly impossible, and the [patchwork](#) of ghettos and [settlements](#), along with the managerial decisions that ultimately led to the deaths of six Palestinian children and one teacher in an accident that could have been avoided. **Nathan Thrall:** One of the most depressing aspects of life in Israel-Palestine is how easy it is for the privileged class to ignore the oppression of Palestinians. This is one of the key pillars of the longevity of the system; it has existed for as long as it has because it is very easy as an Israeli Jew to live your life not thinking about Palestinians at all. In Jerusalem, you're forced much more to see them, to see the wall, to see them as workers, and inside West Jerusalem; Jerusalem is 40 per cent Palestinian. But even in Jerusalem, the population just ignores it. They drive by this [walled](#) ghetto and they ignore it. The most prestigious university in Israel, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has a campus at Mount Scopus, which has beautiful, [manicured grounds](#), a Botanic Garden, and from this university you look down literally on the ghetto in which the parents and the children in this book live. And you can see the checkpoint, you can see the construction that's totally unregulated, you can see the absence of [sidewalks](#), you can see the roads in [disrepair](#), you can see the congestion... And it's ignored.

APARTHEID

A year after the Israeli army's [retaliation](#) on Gaza began, Thrall has no [qualms](#) about arguing that a taboo word like 'apartheid' is applicable to the conditions that Palestinians [endure](#). **Nathan Thrall:** For me the use of the word 'apartheid' is very important. Not because the word [conveys](#) something that everybody automatically knows. It's not about the power of the word. It's about the analysis that it represents. It represents a different conceptual frame for looking at Israel-Palestine. And so it moves us from a framework of 'good Israel-bad occupation', which is temporary, to a single system of Israeli control of domination over Palestinians that's applied in different ways to different groups of Palestinians. Nowhere in the area under Israel's control do Palestinians have equal rights to Jews. And to frame it in this way is to have a much clearer and more accurate picture of what is actually happening in this place.

A POLITE CONVERSATION

In Thrall's opinion, the debate about possible solutions to the conflict will be pointless and ineffective until the international community confronts the injustice of the living conditions Palestinians [endure](#) under Israeli occupation even in times of relative peace. **Nathan Thrall:** I think that one of the things that has been allowing this situation to continue as long as it has, for it to exist for over half a century, is this focus on solutions. It has been a debate about one state or two states or confederation at the expense of talking of the reality every day of control over Palestinian lives, of children taken from their homes in the middle of the night by the army and held for throwing stones at an occupying army, of a system of administrative detention where people can be held indefinitely without trial or charge. These are the everyday realities that the conversation about should we have one state or should we have two states ignores. Meanwhile, Israeli [settlements](#) are expanding, Palestinians are being constricted into smaller and smaller areas. And so if we look at this trajectory that we're going on, [it] looks much more like the experience of the Native Americans in the United States. And meanwhile, the whole polite, liberal conversation is about one state or two states. All of that conversation [winds up](#) actually just facilitating the real process that's happening on the ground, which is Palestinian displacement and constriction into smaller and smaller areas.

Glossary

- **disrepair** = rovina
- **seemingly** = apparentemente
- **commonplace** = normale, usuale
- **were both up** = essere sveglio
- **patchwork** = mosaico
- **reluctant** = riluttante
- **quarrels** = liti
- **conveys** = trasmettere
- **think tank** = gruppo di esperti
- **so-called** = cosiddetta
- **doomed** = destinato, condannato
- **retaliation** = ritorsione, rappresaglia
- **whereabouts** = posizione
- **achievement** = conquista
- **qualms** = scrupoli
- **winds up** = finire per
- **bloodshed** = spargimento di sangue
- **settlements** = insediamenti
- **sidewalks** = marciapiedi
- **stood by** = rimanere
- **overwhelmingly** = in grande maggioranza
- **fifty-plus** = più di cinquanta
- **outlets** = mezzi di comunicazione
- **triggered** = scatenare
- **speak out** = parlare apertamente
- **averted** = evitare
- **walled** = murato
- **manicured grounds** = giardini curati
- **nonprofit** = senza scopo di lucro
- **uprising** = rivolta
- **to restore** = ristabilire
- **maze** = labirinto
- **it tackles** = affrontare

- **West Bank** = Cisgiordania
- **reach** = portata
- **endure** = sopportare