



# Martyrs' Crossing

*Amy Wilentz*

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**“SOPHISTICATED AND SUSPENSEFUL . . . TAUTLY WRITTEN . . . Wilentz knows the world she writes about very well, and her descriptions have a solid specificity that lends authority to her fiction.”**  
–*The New York Times Book Review*

“At a closed Israeli checkpoint, Marina, a Palestinian mother, clutches her ailing boy, desperate for access to Jerusalem and its doctors. When a young Israeli soldier waits too long before deciding to disobey orders, a martyr is born. Thus begins a graceful, painful, illuminating novel of the Middle East. . . . [Wilentz’s] prose tugs at the reader. . . . The characters are magnetic. . . . [This] is a very human tale of regrets, revenge, and the elusive nature of absolution.”  
–*Entertainment Weekly*

**“SO PRECISE, SO STARTLING, SO UNFORGETTABLE. . . . These characters are all pawns of history and politics, but Wilentz makes them live.”**  
–*Los Angeles Times*

“MAGNIFICENT . . . Wilentz writes with a prose style reminiscent of *The New Yorker*’s highest ambitions: crystalline, pure, faultlessly communicative. . . . Like the best documentaries, *Martyrs’ Crossing* allows us unprecedented access to a little-understood and often misrepresented part of the world.”  
–*Chicago Tribune*

**“A BRILLIANTLY RESEARCHED MEDIDATION ON THE CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE EAST . . . *Martyr’s Crossing* matches *Damascus Gate* in the quality of research and the mass of intriguing characters—and yet it remains a lean thriller.”**  
–*The New York Observer*

## Martyrs' Crossing Details

Date : Published January 2nd 2002 by Ballantine Books (first published 2001)

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Author : Amy Wilentz

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# From Reader Review *Martyrs' Crossing* for online ebook

## Steve Cran says

Story starts off at a checkpoint where the mother is trying to get her asthmatic son to Haddassa hospital in Jerusalem. Of course the checkpoint is closed and the child does not get through in time. The Israelis immediately launch a cover up and the Palestinians launch a find the soldier campaign. Marina the mother has a husband who is in Jail. Her father George is critical of the Palestinian Authority in its effort to use the incident for propaganda. The soldier himself feels guilty and so the story propels forward. Informative of a human drama where people of both populations are used as pawns in game of power brokers

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## Kathy Kattenburg says

Desperately sad. Even more so because it's real. Yes, it's a novel and the characters are imagined, but what happens to them happens to Israelis and Palestinians every day. And Amy Wilentz knows what she's writing about -- she was the Jerusalem correspondent for The New Yorker for two years. It is extraordinarily well-written, and is that true rarity: a book about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that sees the humanity, and the tragedy, on both sides.

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## Kristen says

*Martyr's Crossing* is a well-crafted political novel about our common humanity and what political violence does to individuals. The book's characters are not predictable stereotypes, but rather flesh and blood.

Wilentz's political insights are right on. Here's the Palestinian-American grandfather of the toddler who dies at the beginning of the novel, musing on how events can be manipulated: "You find something, something good, something that really sparks the people because it comes from deep down, and you pump it. Something like the torture of a prisoner, the assassination of a poet - the murder of a child. He remembered Ahmed's lecture on manipulating the fortuitous in history: History can change a man's standing overnight. A speech, a coup, an unforeseen incident. Pump it till it's dry."

Here's another, again from the grandfather: "The problem of Palestine was that everyone wanted things simple: everyone was an extremist because everyone wanted things simple. It was the problem of humanity. Good and evil, as if there were only those two."

The story takes in many moving scenes, such as when the young Israeli soldier puts on his uniform and visits the American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem, and feels the scorn of the guests and staff; when the Palestinian-American grandfather finally visits the house his family fled in 1948, his parents coming alive to him as he touches the furniture they left behind, and talks with the Jewish family living there now; the young mother ironing her dead toddler's clothes, getting the wrinkles out, making them flat, thinking of a lifetime of sheets ahead of her; and a comforting, beautiful description of what the characters experience while dying.

I have a small quibble with one too pat plot point, and wonder too if the characters are too self-examining, too nuanced - nearly all of them understanding so many nuances of the conflict, giving perhaps not enough

differentiation between them. Neither of these questions got in the way of my enjoying these characters, the plot, Wilentz's keen insights or her graceful writing style.

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### **Gerry says**

A Boston-born woman of Palestinian descent has returned to Palestine with her husband, a committed freedom-fighter now jailed by the Israelis. When their two-year-old son dies for lack of medical attention due to an Israeli-enforced border closing that separates him from the hospital, the Palestinians regard him as a martyr, and his death becomes a rallying point for political extremists. But Marina understands that a dead child is only that, not a symbol, not a martyr, only a dead child sadly mourned by those who loved him, and her new understanding of the cost of political and territorial conflict will tear her away from her husband and her adopted homeland. Very well done!

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### **Jenifer says**

It is hard to describe how such a grim book could be so intriguing or in many ways so beautiful. Painful tragedy besets a Palestinian woman and what follows is both painful and stunning as we follow each corollary in the aftermath - those who mourn, those who exploit, those who cower and those who seek forgiveness. I gained a great appreciation for the ongoing Palestinian/Israeli conflict in a highly relatable way, and a new sympathy for both sides. A sober and haunting tale which is mostly character driven and rich with philosophy on the human condition and that which we often inflict upon each other. The central themes and conflicts yank at my senses of kindness and justice.

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### **Marguerite says**

*Martyrs' Crossing* begins at an Israeli checkpoint in Jerusalem. A Palestinian mother seeking medical care for her toddler son is refused entry because her husband has been jailed by the Israelis. The baby dies, and all parties try to use the death for their own purposes. Amy Wilentz's novel pits Palestinians against Israelis, but also each other. The Israelis are of more than one mind as well. New views clash with old as another generation of leaders takes their place. The events unfold with tragic consequences. As good as *The Attack* in its ability to help a reader understand multiple and opposing views. The novel is well-paced and the characters true to themselves. Wilentz writes about Jerusalem and the politics of the place with authority. The ambiguities at the end of the story are consistent with the setting, too.

"The problem of Palestine was that everyone wanted things simple: everyone was an extremist because everyone wanted things simple. It was the problem of humanity. Good and evil, as if there were only those two. The interesting thing was to seek truth and then face it."

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### **Sam says**

I enjoyed the description of how everyone in this story is basically screwed by history. I never felt that I got inside the emotional lives of any of the characters however. Her style reminded me of Dickens where the plot

is more primary than the characters themselves. Since its a history I don't know well enough it was good to see inside it.

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### **Joanne says**

I received this book from Goodreads for my honest review. This was a difficult story to process. It involves an incident at a checkpoint crossing where a Palestinian boy dies due to delay in allowing him and his Palestinian-American mother to get medical help in Israel. The story is told through multiple viewpoints and there are no victors here. The tragic consequences are felt by all - the mother who is torn between her life with her imprisoned husband there and her father who lives stateside, the young Israeli soldier who has to live with the guilt of his actions, the gravely ill grandfather, the Palestinian leaders who want to use this incident for political gain. Well written and introspective, but very bleak.

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### **Marvin says**

A story rich in human emotion set in contemporary Ramallah & Jerusalem. A Palestinian American who returned to Palestine to marry a Hamas activist watches her son die at a checkpoint as she waits to get clearance to get through to take him to a hospital in Jerusalem. The story of the political & emotional fallout of that tragic event is told from the viewpoint of the mother, her father (a cardiac specialist at Harvard who's also an activist on behalf of Palestinian rights), & the soldier who tried to get clearance for the mother & child & who is held responsible by the Palestinians for the child's death, and, to a lesser extent, the child's father and a PLO leader (& childhood friend of the child's grandfather, though they've become political enemies in recent years). This rich book is highly sensitive to the political & emotional complexities of the situation--a book I won't soon forget.

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### **Carol says**

A friend of mine (thanks Grace R) told me this was an unbiased book about the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. She was correct. Wilentz was the Jerusalem correspondent for The New Yorker from 1995 to 1997 and I can only assume that she drew the story from that experience. To be able to relate the experience in such an unbiased manner is phenomenal. To understand the impossible snarl of politics and social life and tell it with intense skill and nuance is powerful. Beyond that, I loved the cadence of her writing and her insertions of comedic phraseology at just the right moment.

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### **Cecelia Hightower says**

(2001/311 pages) It took the author three years to write this book, her first novel. It is a book about the crisis

in the Middle East, really between Palestinians and Israelis. It is a political book in one sense but really a very human tale of regrets, revenge, and the elusive nature of absolution. The characters are all well developed and her writing is very sophisticated. She was the editor of "The Nation" and truly has an understanding of the situation, and presents these characters in her book as "real people" and "real situations".

I must admit that I had my dictionary close at hand, and often had to even go to my computer for a description of certain Palestinian words and Israeli words.

The book begins at a closed Israeli checkpoint, where a Palestinian mother, clutches her ailing boy, desperate for access to Jerusalem and its doctors. When a young Israeli soldier waits too long before deciding to disobey orders, a martyr is born.

And so the story develops from there.

It was a very different book for me to read, but even though it was quite sad, I learned a great deal about this ongoing conflict.

I read this book on the recommendation of a friend. In fact, it is her book so I must return it.

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### **Foxglow says**

Not my usual genre. The first third of the book I was afraid that it was going to be about the political maneuvering that follows tragedy in the Middle East. Then it became a story about those affected by the tragedy.

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### **Jendimmick says**

This is a political story with a human touch. A young Palestinian-American woman raised in Cambridge returns to her homeland to marry a Hamas activist, while her academic father watches from the safety of Harvard University with a mixture of pride, guilt and horror as her life spins out of control. Marina's husband is incarcerated in Israel for involvement in a terrorist plot and their toddler dies a needless death while awaiting checkpoint authorization to cross the border to access urgent medical care for his asthma. The political drama that ensues as a result of his preventable martyrdom reveals both the absurdity and humanity that exists on both sides of this age old conflict. The writing is poignant and the story is gripping at times, though the overall tone is depressing and somewhat fatalistic. I wouldn't say I enjoyed the book, but I was moved by it and came away with a deeper understanding of the complexities of the volatile situation in the Middle East. ~ Ms Dimmick

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### **Tamara says**

This book does not provide any easy answers to the Israeli/Palestinian issue, but it certainly makes it more personal. I loved the tension, the characters are so real... I highly recommend it. Yes, it is not a spoiler to say a child dies, but that is not what the focus is. I hesitated to pick it up at first for that very reason, but I am SO

glad I did.

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### **Ari says**

This book had its ups and downs. It started off being very captivating, then transformed itself into something rather boring after approximately 50 pages. It became interesting again for the last 100 pages. Overall, the characters were intriguing, and they were usually (but not always) believable as well.

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### **Lorraine says**

This quote, from the book itself, encompasses its' meaning: "Endings do not happen here. Things did not come to a close, even on the rare occasions when they seem to. In the Holy Land, you could haggle for a century or two over and INCH of unusable land, and really MEAN it."

A very good read.

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### **James Millikan says**

Martyr's Crossing was just not my book. The relative popularity of the novel strikes me as victory of marketing rather than a reflection of its merits. True, a summary of the central events of the book sound captivating: set against the perennial headline-grabbing backdrop of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Martyr's Crossing expounds upon the broad-reaching consequences of the death of a Palestinian child at an Israeli checkpoint. All the ingredients of a bestselling novel are here--the ripple effects of a high stakes decision by the checkpoint official, the tremendous momentum that fuels the "find the soldier" campaign that ensues, a kidnapping, the slow moving train-wreck of anger coupled with irreconcilable philosophical differences--but these high-emotion (and well-worn) elements of the storyline struck me as mundane and uninspired. Wilentz's storyline made me feel cultured and sophisticated when the question of what I was reading arose among peers, but upon turning the final page I felt no better informed about the political situation in the Middle East, and no better versed in the human condition--which in my eyes is the measure of a truly distinguished novelist.

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### **Laura Myers says**

This was a tough story, but fascinating look at the people embrittled within Israel and Palestine. The story deviated in a way I was at first disappointed, but decided to continue on and found I was glad I stuck with it. Really this is a story of people and what we will do to help or condemn those with religious and cultural differences, however, this is so much more, as the divisiveness between those of Israel and Palestine.

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### **Betsey says**

FANTASTiC



From Publishers Weekly

A former Jerusalem correspondent for the New Yorker and 1990 National Book Critics Circle nonfiction nominee, Wilentz supplements a natural storyteller's eye for character with a reporter's grasp of swirling political detail in this complex, haunting debut novel. At a checkpoint in Jerusalem, a beautiful young Palestinian woman begs an Israeli soldier for permission to "cross over" in order to get her two-year-old son to the hospital. The soldier, Lt. Ari Doron, frantically telephones headquarters, but is rebuffed by an anonymous commander: the woman is Marina Raad Hajimi, wife of jailed Hamas terrorist Hassan Hajimi, and therefore presumptively barred from Israel during a border "closure." Within minutes, the child dies, devastating family members on both sides of the checkpoint. It turns out the little boy was the grandson of American cardiologist George Raad, a secular Palestinian patriot whose iconoclastic views are courted, but largely ignored, by the Palestinian leadership. Despite his failing health, George returns to Ramallah to be with his bereaved daughter and to shelter her from the gathering political storm, as Palestinian discontents gear up to play "Find the Soldier." The soldier, meanwhile, plagued with guilt over "his dead baby," is unable to stay out of Ramallah, where he seeks absolution from Marina and George before the newly liberated Hajimi finds him. Characters on both sides of the border are nuanced, sympathetic and deeply ambivalent, which heightens the well-crafted suspense: you don't know what will happen next because neither do they. Wilentz's insight into the region is so sharp that even the maelstrom she depicts is vivid and comprehensible, a full-fledged human tragedy from every perspective. Agent, Deborah Karl. (Mar.)Forecasts: The timeliness of this story, plus Wilentz's writing credentials, make this a sure shot for review attention and healthy sales.

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--This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

From School Library Journal

Adult/High School-In this well-crafted novel, Wilentz looks through the eyes of her sharply drawn characters to explore both the objective issues and the subjective realities that form the fabric of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An ill Palestinian child dies at an Israeli-border checkpoint while the young post commander is pressing headquarters for permission to allow the boy and his mother to cross into Israel for medical care. The Palestinian political leaders proclaim the boy a martyr, rallying crowds with a cry for vengeance: "Find the soldier." The Israeli military's doctor fashions a version of the event to shield the army from blame. From this realistic beginning, *Martyrs' Crossing* dramatizes how easily tragic events escalate into violence. The mother of the dead boy is American-born Marina Hajimi, who married Hassan, a Palestinian. A Hamas activist, he is imprisoned in Israel. Marina's father is an eminent American cardiologist, an intellectual who fled Palestine with his family in 1948 and who is critical of a Palestinian authority he believes is corrupt. Lieutenant Ari Doron, empathetic and "unassailably honest," finds himself affected by the pain and the beauty of this woman whose son is dead because he refused to disobey orders. The major characters are principled people, torn by grief and guilt but unwilling to be manipulated for political purposes. Some of the other characters are less nobly motivated. Teens who are interested in the Middle East will come away from the novel with a better understanding of why the conflict so defies resolution.

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## Mary says

I read this a while ago, so here's a plot overview from the Amazon site. Definitely worth it.

A former Jerusalem correspondent for the New Yorker and 1990 National Book Critics Circle nonfiction nominee, Wilentz supplements a natural storyteller's eye for character with a reporter's grasp of swirling

political detail in this complex, haunting debut novel. At a checkpoint in Jerusalem, a beautiful young Palestinian woman begs an Israeli soldier for permission to "cross over" in order to get her two-year-old son to the hospital. The soldier, Lt. Ari Doron, frantically telephones headquarters, but is rebuffed by an anonymous commander: the woman is Marina Raad Hajimi, wife of jailed Hamas terrorist Hassan Hajimi, and therefore presumptively barred from Israel during a border "closure." Within minutes, the child dies, devastating family members on both sides of the checkpoint. It turns out the little boy was the grandson of American cardiologist George Raad, a secular Palestinian patriot whose iconoclastic views are courted, but largely ignored, by the Palestinian leadership. Despite his failing health, George returns to Ramallah to be with his bereaved daughter and to shelter her from the gathering political storm, as Palestinian discontents gear up to play "Find the Soldier." The soldier, meanwhile, plagued with guilt over "his dead baby," is unable to stay out of Ramallah, where he seeks absolution from Marina and George before the newly liberated Hajimi finds him. Characters on both sides of the border are nuanced, sympathetic and deeply ambivalent, which heightens the well-crafted suspense: you don't know what will happen next because neither do they. Wilentz's insight into the region is so sharp that even the maelstrom she depicts is vivid and comprehensible, a full-fledged human tragedy from every perspective.

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