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Norwegian author and journalist Runo Isaksen was motivated to write this book after attending a conference in 2000 during which the South African writer Andrè Brink highlighted the importance of literature in understanding conflict and possibly facilitating reconciliation in his native country. Brink noted that it was crucial to understand the “enemy’s” literature. Mahmoud Darwish, the celebrated “national poet of Palestine” and an omnipresent figure in Isaksen’s book, agreed: “It is very important to know one another. Ignorance is not the best recipe for good neighborliness.” (p. 7) Isaksen poses the question of whether literature can play a role in helping one side see the other, although the most interesting sections of *Literature and War* concern the writers’ assessments of their own cultures, not the “enemy’s.” Isaksen is forced to limit his pool of writers to those who acknowledge the value of such an enterprise, specifically secular, left-of-center living authors currently living in Israel or the Palestinian territories. The interviews were conducted between 2002 and 2003. Despite his pronouncement that “there is no security wall in this book,” Isaksen’s journey only confirms how far each cultural community has to go before truly understanding or even engaging the other in a meaningful way. (p.12)

Isaksen divides the book evenly between Israeli and Palestinian authors. The section on Israeli authors is considerably stronger and more reflective of the diversity of opinion in Israel. The young iconoclast Etgar Keret is careful to separate his “Jewishness” from his Israeli citizenship, seeing the two as sometimes incompatible and even destructive in modern Israel: “I personally feel more Jewish than Israeli because Israel is a fucked-up nationalist country, just like all other nationalist countries.” (p.17) Keret laments the rise of the “new Jew” as an antidote to the weak and defeated Diasporan Jews. Isaksen asks all Israeli authors about the proper place of the Holocaust in their literature and Israeli culture more generally. Most authors interviewed echo
Keret’s claim that the centrality of the Holocaust makes it difficult for Israelis to empathize with any suffering other than their own. David Grossman, whom Isaksen identifies as the most appreciated Israeli writer among Palestinians, makes an effort to write well-rounded Palestinian characters. He criticizes Israel for recreating the ghetto, both for themselves and the Palestinians. When asked why Israelis read far less Palestinian literature than the other way around, Grossman notes that “it can be difficult to confront the history of the other side directly – the side you humiliate, occupy, and are in conflict with.” (p. 48) Amos Oz, a founding member of Israel’s Peace Now movement in 1977, argues that the entire conflict is a “Greek tragedy where right fights against right.” (p.66) One of the most revealing interviews is with the Sephardic Jewish author, Dorit Rabinayn. Rabinayan belongs to the 70-75% of Israel’s population that has an Arab cultural background, a fact that defines her writing and fuels her hopes of acting as a cultural bridge between Israelis and Palestinians. Rabinayan writes about the “silent voices” in Israel, principally Jews with an Arabic background overshadowed by a European Jewish elite she believes ignores the majority population. Israel is part of the Middle East, not Europe, she argues. Isaksen is effective in getting important Israeli cultural figures to dissect their own cultures, but even the most sympathetic and intellectually curious interviewees are ignorant of the other side or have doubts about the utility of literature. Meir Shalev expresses the case eloquently: “If you only have two hours of literature per week, then Moby Dick and Dostoevsky are more important than Mahmoud Darwish. Literature must not just become a little donkey that has to carry all these political issues on its back.” (pp. 84-85)

Isaksen’s visits across the wire were not quite as revealing, partly because physical access to the writers themselves was challenging. Mahmoud Shuqair declared Palestinian intellectuals secular, rooted in radical left-wing ideology, and influenced by Western culture, all of which suggests Palestinian writers hardly speak for the larger Palestinian population. Isaksen asks each Palestinian whether sex, religion and politics are Arabic taboos in literature. Isaksen is also fascinated with the efficacy of Arabic modernism in a culture where these taboos severely restrict artistic freedom. Although Isaksen interviews women authors on both sides of the conflict, only the Palestinian women expressed dissatisfaction with their own culture. Liana Badr
writes about the history of women in the PLO to correct the image that they are only secretaries, mothers, and sisters. She is also concerned with the Palestinian drift towards Hamas, a more significant trend now than at the time of Isaksen’s interviews. Zakarriya Muhammad believes that a fundamentalist is incapable of being a good writer. Muhammad claims that he feels closer to David Grossman than Sheikh Yassin (the spiritual leader of Hamas), “but the truth is that Israel oppresses me to the point where they almost forced me to join Hamas.” (p. 168) Despite obvious tensions between writers on both sides, there is some common ground. Perhaps not surprisingly, both agree that a political solution is a prerequisite to a profound cultural dialogue. Darwish, the last interview in the book, argues for a three-way strategy – knowledge, dialogue, and normalization. Normalization is accomplished only after a two-state solution. Isaksen may not have determined if either side can know the other through literature, but he has interviewed some of the more eloquent observers of interminable Israeli-Palestinian conflict.