

PARTNERPLAN

John McCulloch - Israel September 2020

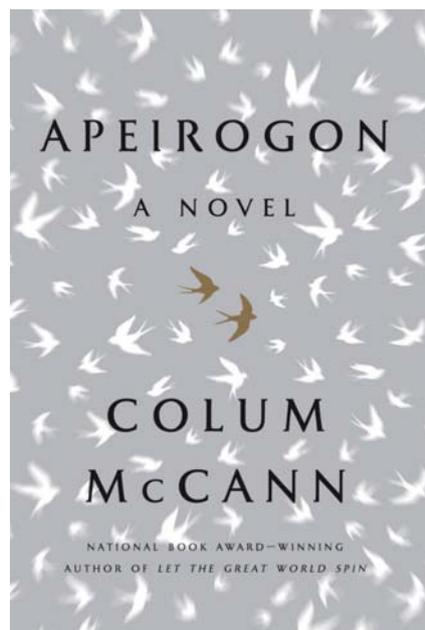
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The Place of Encounter

Rami, the poet, the Sufi, said something that I will never forget: Beyond right and wrong there is a field, I'll meet you there." We were right and we were wrong and we met in a field. We realized that we wanted to kill each other to achieve the same thing, peace and security. Imagine that, what an irony, it's crazy.

— Colum McCann,

Fear makes money, and it makes laws, and it takes land, and it builds settlements, and fear likes to keep everyone silent.



— Colum McCann, Apeirogon

One of the books I have been reading recently is Colum McCann's documentary fiction novel *Apeirogon*, recently serialised by BBC Radio 4. Reading it has transported me back to the dusty streets of Beit Jala, the ochre coloured earth of the surrounding landscape, the olive groves and craggy escarpments encircled by walls and barbed wire. During these past months of furlough and lockdown in Scotland, reading of these familiar places has made me yearn to return to this troubled and conflicted land that I have come to love.

PARTNERPLAN

It is a landscape scarred by the injustices of occupation and fear; but what gives me a glimmer of hope is when I encounter people from opposite sides of this asymmetrical conflict, reaching across the walls and barriers of fear, reminding us that another world is possible.

Apeirogon tells the true story of two fathers, one Israeli and one Palestinian, who become friends after they both tragically lose their daughters in what is arguably one of the most intractable conflicts in the world. Rami Elhanan, an ex-Israeli army veteran lost his 13-year-old daughter Smadar to a suicide bombing in Jerusalem in 1997 when she was out shopping with friends. Some years later, Bassam Aramin's ten year old daughter Abir died after being fatally wounded by a rubber bullet fired by Israeli soldier.

Some of you who have visited the Holy Land May have had the chance to meet Rami and Bassam. Rami is involved in the Church of Scotland partner *The Parent's Circle*, and Bassam in *Combatants for Peace*.

Both Rami and Bassam have made the choice to not allow the tragedy that befell each of their families to fuel hatred and suspicion of the other. At one juncture in *Apeirogon* we read:

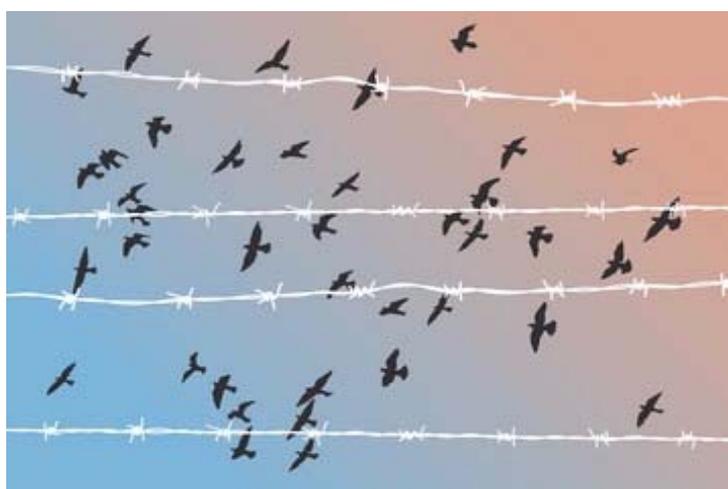
Once I thought we could never solve our conflict, we would continue hating each other forever, but it is not written anywhere that we have to go on killing each other. The hero makes a friend of his enemy. That's my duty. Don't thank me for doing it. That's all it is, my duty. When they killed my daughter, they killed my fear. I can do anything now.

— Colum McCann, *Apeirogon*

As well as telling the story of the friendship between both men, the documentary novel evokes the landscape of Israel and the West Bank in poetic terms, capturing the fragile beauty that grows amidst a landscape scarred by military occupation. The migration and flight of birds is a recurring image throughout, as questions of freedom and the fragility of beauty are woven into the narrative.

It was that time of the evening when Beit Jala willed itself to cool down: the land breathed, the sun dipped, the birds rose, the hills took on a sudden burst of dark green.

— Colum McCann



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A few months before lockdown, I remember meeting Rami at an event he was hosting to talk about his and Bassam's work for peace and justice, and I was deeply inspired of how their friendship has broken down barriers of mistrust and suspicion.

Below are some links to the work Rami and Bassam are involved in.

The Parent's Circle

To work towards an end to violence and towards achieving an accepted political agreement.

The PCFF members are opposed to the occupation and believe that it is possible to end the conflict. They wish to influence the public and the political decision makers to choose reconciliation and the path of peace over violence and war



He was aware, he said, that humiliation was a deep wound. We are Semitic, both of us, Israelis and Palestinians together.

— Colum McCann, Apeiogon

Please do visit their website below, and circulate it to those in your community who may be interested what they do.

<https://www.theparentscircle.org/en/pcff-home-page-en/>

PARTNERPLAN

Combatants for Peace

Combatants for Peace, founded in 2006, is a non-profit, volunteer organization of ex-combatant Israelis and Palestinians, men and women, who have laid down their weapons and rejected all means of violence. We are working together to end the occupation of Palestine, bring just peace to the land, and demonstrate that Israelis and Palestinians can work and live together.



The film *Disturbing the Peace* gives an interesting insight into their work (click on trailer below for a short conspectus):

<https://youtu.be/A95PDQWr4xs>

You can find more information and stories on their website:

<https://cfpeace.org/bassam-aramin/>

Closing Thoughts

I was talking to a Jewish friend on the phone earlier this week, and she said 'what chance is there of ever finding a resolution to this conflict, if we do not sit down and talk with each other'. Of course, conversation alone is never enough, but it can be a start.

When we encounter the other, we can begin to see them as human beings. The conflict is of course not one that is equally balanced between two opposing sides, but this should not stop people meeting and talking, to try and reach out to the other in the risky place of encounter.

The pain of an Israeli father and mother grieving for their lost child, and the pain of Palestinian parents who have also suffered similar bereavement; are wounds that cut across the socio-political, religious and ideological barriers.

If there is ever to be a just peace in Israel Palestine, it will come when those from opposing sides can recognise the humanity of the other, as fellow-human beings dignified by being made in the image of God; and work together for a peace built on justice for all.

We are all connected in our global village, not just in Israel Palestine but across our conflicted world. What we do and don't do affects those around us, for we live in community. We can all play our part in building a better world, in embodying the Kingdom of God, which always comes to heal and make new.

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I leave you with the words of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, from *The Brothers Karamazov*:

For all is like an ocean, all flows and connects; touch it in one place and it echoes at the other end of the world.



John