
Children of Catastrophe

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Jamal Krayem Kanj
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'Anyone who believes you can't change history has never tried to write memoirs.' A telling quote from David Ben-Gurion, Zionist leader and first Prime Minister of Israel. At the time of writing, the US-mediated peace talks between Israeli and Palestinian officials have come to a standstill. The 52-year conflict has boiled down to what it has forever been: a war between media and memoir.

That's what gives 'Children of Catastrophe', a relatively straightforward account of life as a refugee by Jamal Krayem Kanj, its intrinsic value.

Born ten years after the Nakba (the catastrophic expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland in 1948) Kanj's memoir shares his memories of life growing up in Northern Lebanon's Nahr el Bared camp, controversially demolished by the Lebanese army in 2007.

His descriptions of the camp's economic and social structure are detailed and pragmatic, from collecting water from the camp's well as a child to AK47 training with the PLO as a teenager. Unexpected treasure includes Kanj's first-hand evidence of the dynamite fishing and other damage that has destroyed Lebanon's Mediterranean coastline.

The book's subtitle 'Journey from a Palestinian Refugee Camp to America', however, is slightly misleading – only a few of the book's 200-odd pages touch on Kanj's transition to America.

At times Kanj tells his story so matter-of-factly it is amusing (on his return from a UN-sponsored journey to Jerusalem, he does not dwell on how it feels to leave behind his ancestor's homeland, but how comfortably he slept through his transatlantic flight). Kanj is not trying to 'change history', only to draw attention to what is too often ignored, or may later be forgotten.

Natasha Dirany