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‘City of Oranges’ is the gripping story of six families, one city and two peoples

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British author and journalist Adam LeBor, Eastern European correspondent for The Times (of London), is an increasingly rare breed of journalist: As he shows in this extensively researched and vividly written work, "City of Oranges," he knows that both stories and facts are needed to make experience meaningful to the reader.

In "City of Oranges," LeBor has combined his literary, historiographic and journalistic skills to produce a gripping narrative of six families from the once-great city of Jaffa, known in the 19th and early 20th centuries as "the Bride of the Sea." With clear attention to detail and in vivid color, he uses the stories of these families to reveal the relationships between individual lives and family sagas and political context and national histories.

The six families are a mix of Jews and Arabs, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, Christian and Muslim; well-off and struggling, landed and displaced. LeBor traces the sprawling Chelouche dynasty, his main Jewish family who can trace their ancestry back to the expulsion from Spain in *2, as they gain personal prosperity and public stature. He writes about the Gedays, a Christian Arab family who refused to sell land to the Jews and refused to flee in 1948; the Meislens, grandparents and parents of the famous sculptor; the Andraus family, whose father, Amin, becomes the leader of Jaffa's Arabs after enduring suspicion from their fellow Arabs and derision from the Jews. There is the story of Yaakov Yosefov, the Bulgarian Jew who become Yoram Aharoni and an underground fighter; and the Hamamis, once middle-class pillars of Jaffa's Muslim community and now dispersed throughout the world.

LeBor presents the families and their individual members without hiding the self-serving interests, ruthlessness and deep compassion of both Jews and Arabs alike. While never

denying his own Judaism, he never takes one side or the other. Through the stories of these families, we, the readers, come to understand and empathize, as if within concentric circles, not only with the families, but also with the city and with the two nations. This is narrative journalism at its best: in-depth reporting that reads like well-written fiction, well-researched and with rich detail, but never over-zealously academic or tedious, providing broad historical context, complexity and insight.

LeBor's choice of Jaffa as the paradigmatic city of his narrative is interesting. Jaffa is perhaps more common, and more typically both Arab and Israeli than Jerusalem. Unlike Jerusalem, weighted down with history and religion, Jaffa, with a past dating back thousands of years, pointing outwards toward the Mediterranean, was the epitome of the secular and open-minded city, with a past dating back thousands of years and its face pointing to the future.

Before the establishment of the State of Israel, Jaffa was a cosmopolitan city, with English, French, Italian and Arabic schools, sports clubs, cinemas, newspapers, coffee houses and a radio station. In May 1921, 55 people were killed when Jaffa became one of the early battlefields of the conflict.

Before the 1948 war, Jaffa's Arab population reached between 70,000 and 80,000; after the War of Independence, there were less than 5,000 Arabs remaining. LeBor refuses to provide the standard reasons for this - while citing that the Arabs were not driven out forcibly in the war and that most fled, he also acknowledges the fear, deliberately promoted by the Israelis, which caused them to flee. But he also reveals the inner tensions between those Palestinians who did stay and those who fled, returning in 1967 and hoping to "claim back" their properties and their histories.

By the mid-20th century, Jaffa was completely overtaken by its upstart neighbor, Tel Aviv, much as, Arabs will tell you, many Arab cities throughout Israel were replaced by Jewish settlement, much as the people themselves were replaced.

Although the narratives are complex and sometimes confusing, LeBor does make us feel for his characters. His greatest achievement is his ability to tell the conflicting narratives, illustrating, with real people's lives, how the story of Israel's independence is the story of the Palestinian nakba (catastrophe) and arousing the readers' empathy for both sides across that very wide chasm. By forcing us to experience historical, social and political issues at the level of personal, felt life, he manages to convey to the reader how these narratives are somehow both parallel, never overlapping, and yet also deeply intertwined, realizing, perhaps, that in the Middle East, the battle over the narrative is a battle over identity, memory and the claim to history as much as it is a battle over territory. Throughout, LeBor refuses to take sides, so "City of Oranges" provides no satisfaction for readers who seek confirmation or support for their own positions.

LeBor still believes that Jaffa could become a model of Arab- Jewish coexistence, and, in fact, there are many important efforts - a bilingual school, kindergartens and even coffee shops - that provide him with hope. But LeBor, moving beyond the narrative to his own analysis, seems to underestimate the extent to which individual and collective identity are inseparable in the Middle East and that such efforts are likely to remain marginal in the foreseeable future.