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The Man in Blue Pyjamas: A Prison Memoir by Jalal Barzanji (review)

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

I am sitting at the window of my apartment, overlooking the mountains that mark out the ancient villages of Dyana and Rawanduz. The Iranian border is sixty kilometres to my right, the Turkish border ninety kilometres to my left, and I can feel the stories being held here. Two days ago I was driving past the Citadel in Hawler (Erbil) and the walls resonated with the pain of the past. This is Kurdistan, for better or worse. It is in this setting that I read Jalal Barzanji's memoir and even now, in a time of peace, I can climb inside his words. Many people in Kurdistan have this story. Imprisonment, torture, and death have touched numerous families and yet still the people rise and face another day.

The title of Barzanji's memoir does not bode well for cozy, bedtime reading. It immediately reminds one of The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas (Boyne, 2006) and the horror and sadness that is contained in that novel. This is no accident, I'm sure, and with the scene set with the title, foreword, preface, and introduction, we know that what will come next will be difficult to digest. There are maps that help to locate Kurdistan within the region and to identify the towns referred to within Kurdistan. These maps make the journey we take with Barzanji easier to place.

The style of the memoir is elliptical and nonlinear. It is memory, full of holes and half-remembered stories. The memoir begins with Barzanji's first arrest while he is wearing his thin, blue pyjamas. He is taken from the boredom of entertaining guests to the horror of being beaten, blindfolded, and thrown into prison number one. The fact that his pregnant wife and his young daughter are at the hospital saves them from being taken alongside his mother, sister, brothers, and guests.

Barzanji then takes the reader through his life, backwards and forwards, as one memory sparks another, often not related in any specific way, but of course, this is how the mind works. Interspersed with his personal narration are stories from the other prisoners. These are random tales told by the men closest to him in the cell – ranging from first night love to the loss of a beloved child and many others in between.

There is somewhat of a monotone throughout the narration and yet it is only when the occasional sparks of Barzanji's humour skip across the page that this is noticed. The distinct flatness of the text is a clever tool for displaying the way in which Kurdish

people deal with the horrors they have lived through. We get the feeling that if there was a slight reference to the deep emotion that the text hints at, there would be no way back, Barzanji would be undone. Of course, this could be my own interpretation and the depth of emotion may have been lost in translation. This is a distinct possibility because of the effusiveness of the Kurdish language that one has to plow through in order to find the essence of an English equivalent.

One of the liveliest pieces of writing occurs when the family journeys back to their village, which has been destroyed by the Iraqi military. On the way Barzanji's mother asks them to stop the car every now and then and takes them to different places that she remembers: a field of wild flowers, an orchard, a waterfall. These were areas that the younger family members were unaware of and despite her illiteracy, as Barzanji states, his mother was able to add poetry, colour, and life to their journey.

Interspersed with photographs and Barzanji's poetry, we are able to navigate through the pain of the story, knowing that for him there is a happy ending. This memoir is a testament to the strength and adaptability of a nation that refuses to give up and Barzanji's story is echoed through the lives of those who have survived.