

# The humans behind the headlines



ORIT ARFA. (Courtesy)

IN **'THE Settler,'** a young woman goes through a crisis of faith after being evacuated from her home in Gush Katif.

(Illustrative/Ronen Zvulun/Reuters)

• LAURA KELLY

On the 10th anniversary of the disengagement from the Gaza Strip, and in celebration of the release of the Hebrew version of her novel, *The Settler*, Orit Arfa is re-releasing the English version.

In the novel, the protagonist goes through a crisis of faith after her family is removed from their home in Gush Katif in the Gaza Strip. Once a good religious Zionist girl, Sarah Dakar trades in her flowing skirts for hip-hugging jeans and changes into Shachar, night-club royalty of the Tel Aviv party scene. Yet as much as Shachar tries to forget Sarah, she must re-examine what she truly believes in – and just maybe this can help her find peace.

Arfa calls her book “a novel of modern Israel,” and it is. She explores nuances in the country and its people that are white-washed in the international press. Each of her characters explores a different facet of Israeli society – national-religious, *datlash* (formerly religious), secular, minority, kibbutznik, Tel Aviv partier – and the internal struggle of each identity. No one can be put into a box, and even when the characters force their own preconceived notions on others, the author shows again that people are much more complicated than they appear.

Arfa herself is more complicated than she appears. The daughter of an Israeli mother and American father, she came to Israel in 1999 and has always pushed the boundaries of free speech and showmanship. She gained notoriety for a series of viral videos parodying popular Miley

Cyrus hits, turning Cyrus’s pop-dance numbers “We Won’t Stop” and “Wrecking Ball” into anthems for right-wing, pro-settlement activists.

Most recently she created the parody girl group The Gaza Girls – in which she plays all three members – singing the unfortunately catchy tune “Stop and Kill All the Jews!” Media outlets were unsure what to make of the music video (some couldn’t tell if it was a parody or a real release), and the Times of Israel ran a picture of Arfa with a story about a foreign national arrested in Spain for distributing the video – implying Arfa was the one arrested. The article also ran a comment from Anti-Defamation League head Abe Foxman condemning the video, not knowing it was a spoof.

But in reality, Arfa is a sweet, if thrill-seeking, proud Jewish woman. She is a regular contributor to *The Jerusalem Post* and does well at humanizing her characters.

Which is the triumph of *The Settler*. While the world has seen pictures of IDF soldiers forcibly removing Israeli Jews from their homes, Arfa zooms in on these moments and adds dialogue and a back story. The opening chapters of her novel take place in the Dakars’ living room in Neveh Dekalim, one of the settlements of Gush Katif. The family tries in vain to convince the soldiers to leave them be, first plying them with their farm-fresh vegetables and then appealing to their Jewish souls. But the soldiers have orders, and they’ve left any sentiments for these people back in their own homes.

It’s clear the stories and situations the author describes are pulled straight from the headlines. In one particular scene, Shabbat

dinner gossip recounts evacuees’ tales of woe: “Customers in Holland are threatening to sue us for breaking the contract,” a farmer’s wife complains; “The Brooms have to stay with relatives because the hotel isn’t wheelchair-friendly”; “We can’t get compensation until we prove our years of residence.” One can almost see these sentences as outrage in any daily newspaper covering the fallout of the disengagement.

It makes sense that Arfa would weave these criticisms in this way. The inspiration for her novel came from the time she spent in Gush Katif and writing about the aftermath for the *Post*. One can easily see how those interviews paint the picture we see in her novel.

And while the disengagement itself is a compelling story, and the landscapes of Gush Katif, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are settings rich with personality, Arfa goes further, setting music – the composition, study, remuneration and enjoyment of it – as a barometer for measuring the evolution and redemption of the characters. From music theory to manufactured pop to DJ worship culture, the author touches on a very Jewish-Israeli trait: the love for and necessity of song and dance.

Arfa’s novel doesn’t try to say what was wrong and what was right during the disengagement. In fact, this debate is the central struggle for most of her characters. Her goal instead is to give the reader a better sense of the picture and the human faces behind the headlines. ■

Orit Arfa will perform songs inspired by the novel at the launch party on August 13, which will take place at 9:30 p.m. at Ha’uman 17, 88 Abarbanel Street, Tel Aviv.

## THE SETTLER

By Orit Arfa  
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