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A STONE IN MY HAND

by *Cathryn Clinton*



It has been a month since eleven-year-old Malaak's beloved father left Gaza City to look for work in Israel, only to disappear. Every day she climbs up to the roof and waits for him, imagining that she can fly to the prison cell where she is sure he waits. She speaks little to anyone except her dove, Abdo.

As tensions mount between Palestinians and Israelis, Malaak realizes she can no longer remain in her world of silence. Each day is a struggle as she lives with the knowledge that her brother—who has become involved with a group of young radicals—may be the next victim of hate. To save her brother and herself, Malaak must move beyond the violence that surrounds her.

Discussion Questions:

1. Daily life is a challenge for Malaak, an eleven-year-old girl living in Gaza City during the 1980s. When we first meet her, she hardly speaks to anyone. Explain why you think she is so quiet.
2. A friendly bird lives on the roof of her home, and Malaak has named it Abdo. She seems happier when she is with Abdo. Why might having a pet to talk to make her feel better? Have you ever had a pet you were able to talk to about your problems? How did it make you feel?
3. At one point in the story, Malaak sees an old man with a goat (p. 24), and it reminds her of a story about her father. What is the story? Why do you think her family history is so important to her?
4. When Malaak comes face-to-face with an Israeli soldier, she seems very frightened (p. 28). What did she think would happen? What did you think would happen to her? If you were Malaak, what would you have done? What do you think it would be like to have soldiers from another country stationed in the city where you live?
5. Later Malaak finds out from her sister that the soldier actually wanted to be sure she was not hurt. What does that tell you about the soldier? What else do you know about the soldier from the description in the book?
6. What does Malaak's mother say about what it means to be brave (p. 42)? What do you think she means? What do you think it means to be brave?

7. Six weeks pass before Malaak's mother tells her that her father has been killed in an explosion set by Islamic fighters. Why do you think she waited so long? What would you have done in her mother's place? Why?
8. What kind of person is Tariq? What does he have in common with Malaak and her family? Why do you think Hamid spends so much time with him?
9. One of the chapters is called "The Warning" (p. 81). What does the name of the chapter mean to you?
10. In Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington, D.C., there is a memorial called the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. People go there to show respect to American soldiers who died in war and whose identities are not known. Why do you think the U.S. has such a place? Why does Malaak think that all Palestinians are unknown soldiers?
11. Malaak's brother Hamid and his friend Tariq become increasingly involved with a new group of friends who frighten her. Who are the people they are spending their time with? Why is Malaak frightened? How is Hamid changing? Why do you think he is changing? Knowing what he thought about violence and extremism, what do you think Malaak's father would say to Hamid and Tariq if he could speak to them?
12. What is the meaning of the stones on the roof? Why does Malaak bring them down from the roof? What are her brother and Tariq planning to do with the stones? What did you think would happen to the stones? What do you think about what actually happened? Were you surprised?
13. After Hamid is wounded, he is taken to a nearby hospital. Where does his mother want him to be taken? Why does she want him to go somewhere else? Where does he end up? What does this tell you about the conditions in Gaza during the time this novel takes place?
14. When Hamid is in a coma, unconscious and apparently unaware of what is going on around him, Malaak visits him twice. On each occasion, she brings something to him. What does she bring? Why do you think she brings these things?
15. What do you think will happen to Hamid? To Malaak? To the rest of the family?
16. While Israeli settlements have been dismantled, and Israeli soldiers are no longer stationed in the Gaza Strip, it remains Israeli-occupied territory under international law. Israeli troops maintain control over Gaza's land and sea borders, and the movement of people and goods in and out of the Gaza Strip is tightly regulated by the Israeli military. As a result, Gazans often say that they are living under siege. Try to find out more about the living conditions of Gazans today.
17. Some of the people who are living in Gaza now used to live in Israel when it was called Palestine and governed by the British. Some of them are the children and grandchildren of people who used to live in Israel before it became an independent country in 1948. Many of these people live in refugee camps. Some of them want to go back to their old homes and land within Israel. Some want to stay in Gaza. What do you think they should do?
18. There are many Jews living in Israel now who came from other places. Some of them came to live in Israel because they wanted to, while others came because they were no longer welcome in their former countries and had no other place to go. When they first came to Israel, they lived in refugee camps, some of them very similar to the ones in Gaza. Today there are no Jews in Israel living in refugee camps. In what way is this similar to the situation in Gaza? In what way is it different?
19. If you could write to Malaak, what would you say? What would you wish for her? If you were giving her advice, what would it be?

To the Reader:

The history of Gaza is long and complicated. It was ruled by the Philistines and the Israelites during the time of the Bible. Since then it has been part of the Assyrian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Ottoman, and British Empires. Between 1948 and 1967, Gaza was controlled by Egypt, and in 1967 it was occupied by Israel. In August 2005, Israeli forces withdrew from Gaza in a stated attempt to give more control to the Palestinian people and their government.

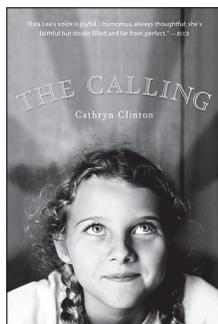
However, Israel does not officially recognize the Palestinian government, and Palestine does not officially recognize the Israeli government. This situation has led to missile attacks into Israel by Hamas, a part of the Palestinian government, and another invasion of Palestine by Israel. There is no peace treaty between Israel and the Palestinians yet, although we can certainly hope that there will be peace some day soon.

About Cathryn Clinton

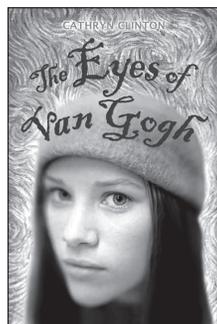
Cathryn Clinton's first novel, *The Calling*, was named a *Publishers Weekly* "Flying Start." The second novel, *A Stone in My Hand*, received numerous accolades. "While in graduate school, I had a writing assignment to choose a picture of someone and write about that person," Clinton says. "In an article about Gaza in *National Geographic*, I saw a picture of a young Palestinian girl holding a bird in her hand. There was a look of strength

in her face. This intrigued me, and I wondered how this girl had survived both internally and externally when the conditions of her growing-up years were so harsh. So I sat down and began writing the story of Malaak." Cathryn Clinton graduated from Vermont College's MFA program in writing for children.

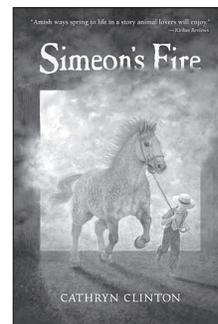
Also by Cathryn Clinton:



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