

Books

To be a distant witness

A couple of weeks after 5-year-old Hind Rajab called for help while trapped in a car under Israeli military fire in Gaza City, her decomposing body was found in February, 2024 alongside those of her family and the burned-out ambulance and remains of the paramedics who had been sent to rescue her. Since the Government of Israel began its military campaign in Gaza after the deadly attack and hostage-taking by Hamas on Oct 7, 2023, hospitals have been destroyed, health workers detained or killed, and humanitarian aid and essential supplies denied passage. Forced displacement has been followed by bombing of designated safe zones. Such is the scope of destruction that a new acronym has joined the medical humanitarian lexicon: wounded child, no surviving family (WCNSF).

Hind's death features in Omar El Akkad's new book *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This*. He describes how her story was initially reported in western media "as though it were a missing-persons case, as though this child simply walked out of sight and then walked straight out of this life". There is, El Akkad argues, safety in the language used by some elements of the media to describe the war in Gaza, where "buildings are never destroyed but rather spontaneously combust"; there is also power in "the privilege of describing a thing vaguely, incompletely" which "is inseparable from the privilege of looking away". Writing the book as a distant witness to these events, he says, "what power assumes, ultimately, is that all those who weren't directly affected by this, who only had to bear the minor inconvenience of hearing about these deaths from afar, will move on, will forget" and asks, "is there distance great enough, to be free of this?".

El Akkad points to a wider uncertainty surrounding coverage of events involving victims of the global majority. He does not believe that "every editor of every major publication in the West" is unconcerned about the "inconvenient Brown people who keep getting killed and maimed by the thousands", but "to never see these people in daily life, to never converse with them...these things bleed into the story, or the absence of story".

In ten chapters, he presents a crisp, critical, and arresting indictment of the contradictions of western liberalism in the face of atrocity. Born in Cairo,

"...El Akkad's book is a call to conscience, holding a mirror to anyone who claims to uphold the values of health equity, human rights, and social justice."

Egypt, and now based in Portland, OR, USA, El Akkad interrogates the American dream he once subscribed to, narrating his own departure from western idealism through the lens of memories of the Gulf War in the early 1990s, his career as a journalist, reporting from Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, and novelist, and his experiences as a US citizen.

The book is an unlearning and questioning of the realities of the international rules-based order, notions of universal human rights, dignity, and equal justice for all. As El Akkad breaks away from the ideals of liberalism—a term he struggles to define—he exposes the gap between the performance of the western power apparatus and reality. The book opens with an excerpt from Tayeb Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North*, with the narrator's thoughts on the aftermath of European

colonisation after returning home to newly independent Sudan following several years studying in the UK. Later El Akkad reflects on the narrative arc of the immigrant, having witnessed Europeans and North Americans move to the Middle East and "immediately cocoon themselves into gated compounds and gated friendships" and only briefly engaging with "their host nation's ways of living". After he moved to the West himself, he learned how immigrants are routinely accused of refusing "to assimilate". Those who attempt to exercise western freedoms, "the freedom to speak and to criticize, to hold power accountable", are swiftly told by some to "go back to where you came from".

One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This poses piercing questions: "How does one finish the sentence: 'it is unfortunate that tens of thousands of children are dead, but...'?"; where was international condemnation for the "obliteration of Gaza's hospitals, which seemingly in the Western conception are not sites of healing?"; "What purer expression of power than to say: I know. I know but will do nothing"? Rather than revealing a corruption of the perceived ethical orientation of western governments and institutions, witnessing these events on screen as they unfold has shown, El Akkad writes, "That so far as the West stands in historical reality, nothing has evolved, nothing has become more enlightened." He offers the possibility that such ceaseless killing is a result of the system "functioning exactly as intended".

Besides the ledger of silence and complicity, El Akkad keeps another, of the doctors in Gaza who could not leave their patients, the Palestinians who filmed and documented the violence in Gaza as it happened, the Palestinian puppet maker who



One day, when it's safe, when there's no personal downside to calling a thing what it is, when it's too late to hold anyone accountable, everyone will have always been against this

Omar El Akkad

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continued making toys for children while injured and displaced, and protestors all over the world who raised their voices.

The book's longer title reads *One day, when it's safe, when there's no personal downside to calling a thing what it is, when it's too late to hold anyone accountable, everyone will have always been against this*. In the future, when the present is comfortably in the past, much will be written about what happened in Gaza, he writes: "The truth and reconciliation

committees are coming. The land acknowledgements are coming... Entire departments of postcolonial studies will churn out papers interrogating the obliviousness that led us all to that very dark place."

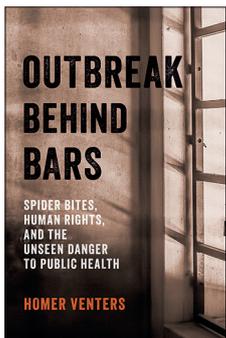
There is an unflinching urgency to El Akkad's writing, which will resonate with many and sting others. But the strength of feeling is unmistakable. Readers need no reminder that two uncontradictory truths can coexist: recognising the loss of life in Israel on Oct 7 and hostages in captivity, while

affirming the Palestinian people's right to live safely and with dignity in their homeland. In this light, El Akkad's book is a call to conscience, holding a mirror to anyone who claims to uphold the values of health equity, human rights, and social justice. The book is not without hope, but in an increasingly volatile geopolitical reality, the question of solving this brutal "ballet of impossible reconciling" remains.

Mandip Aujla



A public health prescription for US carceral facilities



The USA has one of the highest rates of incarceration in the world. Shelves of books and reams of media exposés have revealed the inhumanity of American jails, prisons, and immigration detention facilities. They describe overcrowding, violence, prevalence of use of solitary confinement, arbitrariness in rules and their application, neglect and indifference to health needs, and inadequate oversight and accountability. *Outbreak Behind Bars: Spider Bites, Human Rights, and the Unseen Danger to Public Health*, by physician and epidemiologist Homer Venters, adds to this literature by focusing on the negligence, indifference, and malfeasance that characterise responses to infectious disease threats in US carceral facilities. Venter's stories about the pain, morbidity, and mortality resulting from lack of sound public health practices are accompanied by detailed and practical prescriptions for preventing, assessing, and treating infectious disease in these facilities.

Venters is a former Chief Medical Officer and Associate Commissioner for Correctional Health Services for the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, where he oversaw health services for the jail system, including care at the

infamous Rikers Island detention centre. As recounted in his earlier book, *Life and Death in Rikers Island*, Venters' affiliation was with a health department rather than a corrections agency or a prisoner health services contractor. As a result, he had greater independence than most correctional health administrators to challenge deficiencies and reform practices.

His experience led him to serve as an expert for litigants, including the US Department of Justice, challenging gross inadequacies in health care in prisons, jails, and immigration detention centres. That role led, in

"Under the Trump administration, the federal commitment to protect the human rights—including the right to health—of incarcerated people has evaporated."

turn, to his hiring by federal courts to evaluate implementation of judicial orders requiring reforms. His new book is an in-depth account of the insights he gained about the systemic deficiencies in the control of exposure and response to infectious agents, with chapters on tuberculosis, meticillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), COVID-19, and scabies and other skin infections. At the end of each chapter, he offers

practical recommendations for prison officials and health administrators on appropriate assessment of infectious disease threats and responses to them. Some of his recommendations are quite basic, such as supplying dry towels and adequate laundry services to prevent transmission of skin diseases. Other recommendations address more vexing issues, including prevention of disease spread in the closed and often overcrowded environments of detention facilities. But here Venters also shows how to put preventive measures into place.

At the same time, Venters recognises more deep-seated obstacles to infection control in carceral facilities. They begin with the often-toxic culture of disrespect and dehumanisation of incarcerated people, who are often not listened to when they raise concerns either about their own health or facility operations. The security staff dominate that culture, too often viewing requests for medical care as nothing more than attention-seeking or manipulative behaviour. That leads guards to deny or delay the ability to see a health professional and, when called to account, sometimes even to falsify records. Venters describes how clinicians themselves are often influenced by that culture, leading some to downplay the seriousness

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