

The Myrtle Tree

By Jad El Hage,

Banipal Books, 2007.

*Reviewed by David Clark*

The reader is quickly transported to scenes of village life where characterisation is larger than life. At the outset, there is a sense of foreboding, as the raging civil war outside slowly draws nearer. But it is the inner conflicts within the village itself that take centre stage for much of the novel. It is a chronicle of the disintegration of traditional life, hitherto strongly bound to the rhythm of the soil and the seasons, in which proverbs encapsulated all you need to know, but now giving way to a new, chaotic and unpredictable order. Young men, eager for battle and bloodshed, challenge the authority of their elders. Hakim, the village dentist, healer and mediator, is also the repository of village lore and custodian of the keys to the old disused castle. He seeks to keep the village united in the face of demands by the outside militia wishing to use the castle as a training ground for raw recruits; for a while he appears to succeed.

As the story unfolds, we glimpse, through the eyes of the narrator, some of the full horrors of civil war. Hakim falls victim to the escalating hostilities between neighbouring villages, and Adam, his nephew, spends time amidst the ruins and basement shelters of Beirut, sorting out the bureaucratic formalities following a death. Later on, Adam takes his daughter to a nearby market town and witnesses the parading of mutilated and executed bodies. The senseless and brutal civil war firmly takes hold of every part of Lebanese society and as Jad El Hage writes: 'ideas and ideologies went to the back burner, leaving gangs of robbers and looters to rule'. And yet, it is the passing away of the traditional village that the author is mourning above all else. The author conveys a vision of a more harmonious past in which rural life was associated not only with the land and honest toil, but also with a place and time in which members of different religions shared a common tradition and common values.

Those who were able to, fled the raging civil war and sought refuge elsewhere, in nearby Cyprus and further afield in Australia or South America. Jad El Hage left for Australia in 1985, but still manages to spend part of his time in his village in northern Lebanon. Clearly he cannot shake free from his roots and remains firmly attached to the age-old ideals. It is a difficult balancing act to maintain and his novel clearly conveys his nostalgia, longing and affection for a past way of life that has been forever shattered by civil war.