

Interview with Jeff Talarigo

by Danielle Watson

"Choosing the subject matter for my books is the most important thing. If I do not feel a deep passion for the subject, I would not be able to sustain the energy or discipline to write them," says Jeff Talarigo, our newest Etruscan, and author of the forthcoming title *In the Cemetery of the Orange Trees*. "The people I write about – the leprosy patients in Japan, the North Korean refugees, and now the Palestinians in Gaza – inspire me to tell their stories."

This novel is told in loosely linked stories that explore the Palestinian's seven-decade long diaspora. The history of modern day Gaza is told as it has never been told: through the eyes of a night guardian of a talking goat; a carrier pigeon that befriends a young boy who sells photos of martyrs; a refugee who eats books and then recites them word for word; a Palestinian father who sneaks animals into Gaza through a labyrinth of tunnels; a talking sheep who is caged in the Gaza Zoo. In the Cemetery of the Orange Trees is a disquieting allegory of the clash between the occupied and the occupier.

Talarigo worked as a journalist the first time he traveled to Gaza. What he saw was an image that has changed his life, and his writing—forever.

"I saw a couple of boys in the Jabaliya Refugee Camp – the setting for much of the book – playing with an injured bird. The boys had tied a string, about a yard or two long, around the bird's neck and were tossing it into the air. When the string ran out, the bird fell back into the boy's hands," Talarigo says. "When I saw this, I thought that I could best tell the story of Gaza in the form of a novel, rather than a journalistic piece."

Talarigo says that while in Gaza, he did very little writing. Instead, he collected images, conducted interviews, walked and observed, picking out even the smallest of details. He carried these images in his notebook for months—or even years—before he ever began to write about them.

Talarigo travels alone to research his books. He says that traveling alone makes you more approachable, and that in order to be objective and true to what he sees, he must be alone.

"My first week in Jabaliya, I don't think that many people trusted me, this American who suddenly appeared in this enormous refugee camp (over 130,000), at a time of great unrest and human rights violations. But one morning I asked Fayez, the first person I met in Gaza and whose family I lived with, if he had a razor so I could shave. He told me his brother was a barber and would shave me that night," Talarigo says. "Well, that evening, I sat on a chair in a room in the house and about three dozen curious onlookers came to see me get shaved. As the straight edge was held to my neck, I asked the barber if he realized how much I trusted him and he smiled and said that he did. The next morning, almost anyone that I wanted to speak with, spoke to me. I never planned this at all, but I think this somewhat unintended show of trust on my part paved the way for most people trusting me with their stories."

Talarigo arrived in Gaza with very little—a backpack and no knowledge of Arabic.

He says, "My first hour I was caught in a crossfire between the Palestinian youth throwing rocks at the soldiers and the soldiers answering with rubber bullets and teargas. After that, I never felt in danger for my life although I was detained several times by the Israeli army, but my passport, for the most part, was my ticket to freedom; however my Palestinian friends were not always so fortunate."

In the Cemetery of the Orange Trees is a conglomerate of images, experiences, and interviews from Talarigo's seven months living in the Gaza Strip. However, he let these ideas ruminate and mature before moving them from his notebook to a story.

"I never rush these wonderful images that I get through research or observation. I allow them to settle in and when they are ready to be written, I write them, often at a frenetic pace," he says. "I was so very fortunate, in my early days of writing fiction, to have befriended Colum McCann, the wonderful Irish writer, who was teaching English in the same city where I lived in Japan in 1993, and he always told me to learn as much as you can about the subject, forget it, then recreate it."

While living in Gaza, Talarigo said he experienced one of the greatest moments of his life, one he believes wouldn't have happened if he wasn't traveling alone.

"One of the greatest moments in my life was when I was in Gaza and I was sitting on my backpack near the market. Not far away there was a clash between the soldiers and the kids coming home from school. A young girl, perhaps ten, wearing a light pink hijab, walked through the crowd and the chaos and handed me a bottle of Gaza 7UP," he says. "Before she left, I gave her a small doll that I had in my backpack. A moment like that doesn't happen when traveling with others; it is a moment I will take to the grave."

For those who are interested in writing about somewhere they're traveling to, Talarigo offers this advice: "When you go to a place to write about it, go alone, always go alone and see with your eyes, not the eyes of the locals that want to show you what they think you want to see, or show you what they want you see."

Talarigo's inspiration comes from both across the ocean and in his own backyard. He wakes up before the sun and writes and on weekend treks through the mountains.

"Out here in Northern California, there is so much diverse natural beauty, and I often go hiking and taking photos, arriving well before sunrise, and staying well after the sun is on its way to another part of the world," he says. "For me, being in nature, like writing, is a balm for my aches."

Danie Watson currently resides in Nanticoke, PA with her fiancé Daniel and is working towards her M.A. in Creative Nonfiction.