



Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies

Interview with Rutu Modan

Author of the graphic novels *Exit Wounds (Drawn and Quarterly, 2008)* and *The Property (Drawn and Quarterly, 2013)*

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Exit Wounds and The Property read more as a snapshot of a person's life at a moment in time in contrast to Guy Delisle's or Mariane Satrapi's work, which is years-spanning. Was it a conscious approach to show a story that was time-limited?

Not conscious. I think it is fiction, not a commentary. Usually in a story you have some time. *Exit Wounds* is a few months' time and *The Property* is a week. All the relationships are connected to a time and a place. Something is happening and then it's finished. It's different from an autobiography where you are looking at a lifetime and trying to understand it. When you are writing fiction you are focusing on this idea, you condense time for it to become denser.

But there are autobiographical aspects.

There are. Fiction is always based on real things from which you get material from. Especially when I'm thinking of ideas, I'm thinking of how they connect to my life and how I want to express them. In order to understand them, I think of things that have happened to me and to the people around me. It has allowed me – because in life I'm a private person – to be very honest and to tell the truth. Fiction allows me to be very open about myself and about family secrets.

We are a very secretive people. It's like an instinct to have secrets. I don't know if it's a family thing or a Jewish thing but yes, when I'm writing fiction I can tell everything. Nobody knows which the truth is or which the fiction is. But everything is very truthful.

I wanted to ask about the overlaying themes of death, family and the search for a lost relative in your work. Did you consciously put these themes in your work? Was this something you were looking for and were trying to address?

I don't usually have a theme that I want to express. I'm looking for a good story. A good story will be interesting enough for two or three years, because this is how much it takes for me to write a graphic novel. But also, it needs to be interesting for other people. I don't believe in planning the themes. A lot comes from the unconscious, it's a combination of both.

For example, when I had the idea for *The Property*, it started as a sentence in my head. I was looking for an idea for a story. At the time, you're very open to the world and you're looking for someone to tell you something or to remember something. *The Property* came to me in a sentence: "Grandmother and granddaughter are going to Poland to look for their family property". You have

characters, a place and a target. It already sounds like a journey and it has elements of a story. My family is from Poland and Poland represents the holocaust. It's wider than a personal story.

What I knew about the story was that it would take place today and that I knew nothing about Poland, because my family left just at the beginning of the Second World War, and they didn't speak about it at all. Once in the nineties, during a family dinner, they were speaking about people going to Poland to visit, and my grandmothers were both in agreement that they had no desire to go to Poland to see it. For them, it was one big cemetery. And I accepted it. We are Israelis and we don't have a past. Our past was bible times.

But then I had this idea of writing about Poland today. I was living in England at the time and I had a friend from Poland. She was from a small village and not Jewish. I told her that I was going to write about Poland but I didn't tell her about the subject. I didn't want to scare her. I wanted to do research. After ten minutes of describing her village, she told me that her parents were living in a house that belonged to Jews before the war. And the people in the village were afraid that they would come and take the property back. Polish people were afraid of both Jews and the Germans coming to take their property, putting them together in the same box, without it making sense. I let her speak about it without saying anything but, in my heart, I was very happy because I understood that I found a conflict. It would now be up to me to make the story. The themes came afterwards. The theme of memory is built in but I didn't think about it at the time. It slowly became part of the book. Everyone in the story, except for the main character, is dealing with the past obsessively, each in their own different way. But it took me time to understand it. I was focusing on the story, not on the themes.

The theme of death is also very interesting. In *Exit Wounds*, Drawn and Quarterly [the publisher] asked for an Israeli story and I agreed but said that I wouldn't be doing the *Persepolis* of Israel. In the beginning of the 2000s, it was the second intifada, and every day there was something, every day there was a bomb. It was a very difficult time. It was on my mind and I wanted to show the Israeli reality. So I wrote a story about this missing body which could not be identified that I saw in a documentary. It was the story of a girl who was looking for her lover along with his son. They think that maybe he is the dead person. It was an opportunity for me to show Israeli life and attitude towards tension and conflict.

It was when I was colouring the book that I understood that the story was about me. My father died long before I started the book. I suddenly understood that this journey was also mine. That he perhaps had not died and that if I went to look for him I would find him. It's not a rational thought but I think it's something very common when somebody that you love disappears. But I didn't know it when I was writing the book.

I remember while reading *Exit Wounds* the moment when they arrive at the morgue to identify the body and it's not there anymore, because there were more bodies coming in, with the mortician stating it like it was nothing. I wanted to ask you about the social numbness depicted in the book.

You can look at it as numbness but also as a way to protect yourself. You can get killed by a car or plane accident but you cannot think about it all the time. You have no control of the crash. At the time in the 2000s, it was every day and everywhere. I remember going to take photos for research and a bomb went off in the same afternoon. There is no reason to live in a frightened state. So we have to develop this numbness. You can also look at it as courage but it's also numbness, it's true. It's very sad because when you're numbing yourself, you're numbing yourself from everything and from the pain of the Palestinians. When you're suffering you can

only think of your pain. You become very self-centred in order to protect yourself. I don't think the Israelis are worse people than other people. I think that as affected they are, they have to protect themselves by saying that they have suffered enough, and that they are the victims here. The Property is also connected to victimhood. The Palestinians are also victims, they share their own victimhood so it's not a good combination, to fight for who is the biggest victim.

What can you do? A couple of years ago there was this terrible operation in Gaza. Tel Aviv was also bombed. I don't have a shelter in my house, so I might as well look at what's happening outside. You're becoming tougher but it's not good for you, this toughness.

Both your graphic novels were first published in English. How is the tradition of comics in Israel?

There is no tradition of comics in Israel. There are comic artists working but they are not seen as an industry as in the US or in France. You must have an industry for a medium to be part of a culture. There were artists when I started but for me it was a very natural way to express myself from a very young age. There was this great comic artist in a magazine who is not known outside Israel. He did political comics but in a wider sense. He influenced a lot of people to do comics but it wasn't an industry.

I don't see a difference in the medium. I understand the difference in tools, but it's a story. When I went to the art academy, there was a Professor who started the first comics' course in the nineties, and I fell in love with the medium. Most of the artists started like this. Usually they self-publish or find an editor who likes comics and is willing to publish their work in newspapers. In books, it's only recently during the past five years.

Would you say that now there is some sort of comic industry in Israel?

No. But there are more translations, and some publishers are willing to take the risk to publish a graphic novel. I don't know if there will ever be an industry. There are still no exclusive comic publishers. I think there are three comic shops in Israel. Maybe two.

We have about ten in Athens.

It's not tradition but because there isn't any, the comics are very interesting. Every artist takes a bit from here, a bit from there. When you don't have a tradition it's easier. You are just doing what you want, taking from American and European comics, and the combination is this.

Were both your works published in Israel? How were they received?

Yes. Both of them. Exit Wounds was first published in the US and Europe and only then, I went to an Israeli publisher. The Property was easier because Exit Wounds sold quite well. They were well received by young people interested in comics, but the Property had a wider audience and sold better. But it is still considered a strange artistic expression, like a strange bird.

The grandma in the Property feels like the most relatable character. Could you talk a bit about her?

She is a combination of both my grandmothers. Both Polish from Warsaw, who came at the same time to Israel. After Exit Wounds, I wrote a short story for the New York Times about them. The reaction, because of the immediacy of the Internet, was incredible. Japanese and Italian people were saying that this was exactly their grandma. So I understood that the typical Jewish grandmother is the typical grandmother. I was

also contacted by a Chinese film company who wanted to make The Property into a live-action film, but as a Chinese version. They said that this was exactly a typical Chinese grandmother.

I understand that your next project will be archaeologically-based. Could you give us some info about it?

Again, I was looking for a story. Exit Wounds was about now, and The Property was about 70 years ago. Now I'm going 2000 years back. It's still a work in progress, so it's difficult for me to talk about it. I've been working on it for years. Perhaps it's more difficult because it's more political in a way.

The story is about an independent archaeologist like Indiana Jones, but in current times, and she's a woman. She has this tablet and is digging for treasure in the West Bank. She is digging under the wall to reach this treasure from biblical times. At the same time, there are Palestinians who are also digging a tunnel from the West Bank into Israeli territory. And then they meet. But it's not just about that. It's a looking for the treasure story.

It was interesting to read and study about the past outside of the Ministry of Education. To find out what really happened and in which order. It was amazing research. I have met the strangest people, including a Palestinian robber who robs antiques, digging illegally in the West Bank and selling to Jews. The Jews are the only ones who want to buy what he finds. This was very interesting, he was in his 30s and very open. He was showing me all the things he was selling and what was the most expensive things he had.

For the Israelis, all that matters is what happened 2000 years ago. What happened in between doesn't matter. I got an education in Israel, so we are only thinking about that. To the Palestinians it means nothing because they are natives that cannot understand why it's so important, while the Israelis cannot understand why it's not important. It's a different way of thinking and this is why you don't find a combination of a narrative that will be acceptable by both.

One of the things I learned – I consider myself from the left – is that if all the settlements disappeared tomorrow it would be good. And I cannot understand why for them it's so important to be there. The tragedy that I learned, and I'm ashamed to say I only learned now, is that the Regional Kingdom of Israel and Judah was not on the coast. It was in the territories. The settlers will never give it up because for them this is the reason why the Israelis belong there. This is not my point of view, but now I understand theirs. For them, if we have a connection to this place, it's because of these territories. This is very tragic, and this is why it will be very difficult to divide it.

Ms. Modan, thank you very much for the interview and for your time.