



Pumpkinflowers: A Soldier's Story by Matti Friedman.

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In his beautifully written *Pumpkinflowers*, journalist Matti Friedman has given us a nonfiction *All Quiet on the Western Front* for the Israeli soldiers who served on the northern front in the “Security Zone” Israel maintained in South Lebanon from 1982 to 2000. Readers will appreciate his lyrical prose and the effective blend of memoir and journalism in his narrative, with its richly drawn characters and detailed settings and situations. The book will appeal as well to military historians and students of the modern Middle East, specifically Israel and Lebanon. It will also be an excellent choice for a literature course, as an example of a compelling, sometimes heartbreaking war narrative.

Friedman divides his book into four sections: Part 1 covers the training and deployment of a unit of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) at an outpost nicknamed “the Pumpkin,” as told through the story of Avi, a soldier who served there beginning in 1994. Part 2 concerns the “Four Mothers,” a civilian movement that challenged the security zone strategy and helped precipitate Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. In Part 3, Friedman chronicles his own service at the Pumpkin and, in Part 4, recounts his return to Lebanon as a tourist traveling on a Canadian passport. He means to make sense of his time at Pumpkin and its effects on himself and other Israelis in the march of Middle East history. In so doing, he illuminates the forgotten sacrifices and hard work of a generation of Israeli soldiers in an unsung and unnamed war (ix, 222). One wishes for a parallel book by a Hizballah veteran who fought the IDF or by an ordinary resident during the eighteen-year Israeli presence in Southern Lebanon.

In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon and evicted the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from its training and staging grounds for attacks on Israel. But the Lebanese civil war kept Israel from consolidating a new, Israel-friendly, Christian Lebanese government. In 1985, Israel retreated to a nine-mile-wide sector running the length of the Israel-Lebanon border. The PLO was gone but a more dangerous, indigenous enemy—Hizballah, the Lebanese Shi’a Islamist organization—was determined to force the IDF out of Lebanon.

Friedman immigrated to Israel from Canada at age eighteen and soon found himself serving as a radioman, based with other young Israeli soldiers at “the Pumpkin” and tasked with keeping Hizballah at bay and safeguarding the communities in northern Israel. His account vividly evokes the tedious hours, punctured by moments of terror, of life at the outpost. Preoccupied with the mental and physical demands of their deployment, the soldiers were initially untouched by the controversy brewing back home over the purpose and efficacy of the Security Zone. Friedman shows his skills as a journalist in reporting on the “Four Mothers” movement, clarifying the societal forces behind the government’s decision to withdraw from Lebanon.

Looking back, Friedman was puzzled by his, and his unit’s, lack of hatred for their enemy (125). Although their mission required them to kill or be killed, the commonalties between the teenaged Israeli soldiers and the teenaged Hizballah fighters struck Friedman both as a soldier and, later, as a tourist in Lebanon. At the village of Qana, Friedman saw a photograph of a Lebanese victim, “a smiling young man ... born the same year” as himself (212). In the Hizballah museum at the Khiam prison, he

watched a video of the reunion of liberated prison inmates with their “jubilant families,” and “felt happy for them” (216). A proud Israeli veteran, Friedman pays tribute to comrades who fell in the Security Zone, while perceptively exposing the absurdities and contradictions of maintaining a Security Zone that reflected not any sound strategic planning, but a series of reactive, ad hoc decisions.

In the heady days after the launch of the Oslo peace process (1993), observers were abuzz about the prospect of a “new Middle East” that would feature peace, compromise, and mutual prosperity. In this environment, the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 seemed to mark “the end of something bad, not the beginning of something worse” (158). But, Friedman argues, what everyone missed was that the forgotten war in the Security Zone, “on the periphery of the periphery” (222), augured a new kind of conflict in a new Middle East, replete with suicide bombers, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), guerrilla warfare, and endless skirmishes instead of decisive battles with clear-cut victors and vanquished.

In an episode variously known as “the Pumpkin Incident,” the “Flag Incident” or “the Disgrace,” Hizballah filmed four of its fighters assaulting the outpost, killing one soldier and planting a Hizballah flag that fluttered briefly until IDF soldiers repulsed the attackers and removed it.

The world has become so used to this type of thing that it’s hard to imagine how potent it was when Hizballah broadcast the jumpy footage of guerrillas with rifles and rocket launchers, shouting in Arabic, a sound track of martial music. Hizballah understood that the images of the attack could be more important than the attack itself... It was the very beginning of videotaped violence and the media war, which is a war not for territory but for “consciousness.” ... [T]he TV images were the real weapons... The footage was broadcast across the Middle East In the days that followed the Hizballah man entered everyone’s living rooms, raised his arms, and drove his flag in again and again. Israelis were horrified... It assumed the dimensions of a major military defeat. (32, 34)

Slick social media clips soon followed, heralding a Middle East in the midst of change—but not for the better. The saga of the Security Zone was not the end of an era, but

the start of ... a new era in which conflict surges, shifts or fades but doesn’t end, in which the most you can hope for is not peace, or the arrival of a better age, but only to remain safe as long as possible. None of us could have foreseen how the region would be seized by its own violence—the way Syria, a short drive from the outpost, would be devoured, and Iraq, and Libya, and Yemen, and much of the Islamic world around us. The outpost was the beginning. Its end was still the beginning. (222)

Friedman returned to the Pumpkin in 2002, as a tourist on his Canadian passport, exploring (by taxi excursions) the area around Beirut and the north and south of Lebanon. He visited locations he had known intimately, but only through his binoculars. He went to the Khiam prison, now a Hizballah museum, and the abandoned UN base at Qana, where an errant Israeli shell killed over a hundred civilians sheltering there in April 1996. To identify himself as an IDF veteran would have been dangerous; as it was, he lost his nerve the first time his taxi driver passed the hill where the ruins of the Pumpkin lay. Could he tell the driver to stop without arousing suspicion about his knowledge that something was there, something invisible from the road? He did later summon the nerve (and a twenty-dollar bill) to ask the driver to pull over.

Atop the western embankment a Hizballah flag flew at last, but it was just a ragged scrap of fabric that had once been yellow. For a time this hill was worth our lives, but even the enemy seemed to know that now it was worth nothing at all. That seems like a universal lesson for a soldier, knowledge available if you are lucky enough to get through your trials unscathed and able to make it back afterward to whatever hill you were once told to capture or defend—and if you are willing to listen to what these places try

to tell you about the significance of your decisions, about the way you were borne this way and that by tides beyond your comprehension. (221)

Pumpkinflowers has its shortcomings. Friedman calls it the first and last history of the Pumpkin (25), asserting that there are no published histories of the South Lebanon Security Zone (19, 22–24) and that events there are “recorded in no archive” (66) or mentioned only in “scraps” of evidence (59). But a great deal of research on the Security Zone has appeared in scholarly journals and monographs about the first Lebanon War and Hizballah. And, too, Israel has begun to declassify material—government documents, reports, memos, and correspondence—as per the standard thirty-year rule.

In terms of popular culture, Friedman mentions only in passing (164) the Israeli movie *Beaufort* (2007), which tells the story of the soldiers who manned the Security Zone outpost of that name before and during the IDF withdrawal. Several other realistic and thought-provoking Israeli movies,¹ some set in the Security Zone and produced by veterans of the First Lebanon War, go unmentioned here. The book lacks a proper bibliography and footnotes, other than informal “notes on sources” at the end.

Finally, it is very odd that Friedman dedicates his book “to those who chose to defend Israel in the Security Zone and died” (243), when in fact, as he himself makes abundantly clear, those soldiers did not get to choose their posts, only how to carry out their assignments, which most of them did with valor and professionalism.

Interested lay readers will find this to be a very accessible and moving book. Experts will learn something from it about political and military strategy and the dire effects that decisions made in headquarters and command centers had on the grunts charged with carrying them out. The neologism “Pumpkinflowers” combines the name of the outpost with “flowers” signifying, in IDF slang, wounded soldiers. As Friedman so powerfully demonstrates, none of the troops who served in the Security Zone got out unscathed.

1. E.g., *Two Fingers from Sidon* (1986), *The Cherry Season* (1990), *Cup Final* (1991), *Yossi and Jagger* (2002), *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), *Lebanon* (2009), *The Last Band in Lebanon* (2016).