

West Bank Story

Laurel Kallen

RONIT & JAMIL

Pamela L. Laskin

Katherine Tegen Books
www.harpercollins.com/
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192 Pages; Print, \$17.99

In *Ronit & Jamil*, Pamela Laskin delivers a beguiling young adult novel in verse. As Ronit, an Israeli girl, and Jamil, a Palestinian boy, fall in love and deploy their ingenuity to outwit those who would thwart their romantic relationship, the reader is likely to fall in love with both of these spirited characters. Ronit and Jamil share a passion for one another, as well as a resolve to escape the usual fate of star-crossed lovers.

The characters's names intentionally recall those of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) and Laskin makes the most of this allusion by liberally quoting the bard. While Jamil cites the Muslim poets Rumi and Darwish, Ronit is acutely aware of the similarities between her plight and Juliet's. She cites *Romeo and Juliet* numerous times, as when she compares the bronze color of Jamil's skin to her own: "I am whiter than new snow / upon a raven's back" and later, when she realizes the speed with which the relationship is growing in intensity. "It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden / too like lightning."

The poems that comprise *Ronit and Jamil* are distributed among five acts as in Shakespeare's play and written in the alternating voices of the love-struck teens—voices that are more alike than distinct from one another. This resemblance reflects a conscious decision on Laskin's part, ostensibly

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to highlight the similarities between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. Such likenesses are further emphasized by the parallels between corresponding Hebrew and Arabic words and customs, as when Jamil describes his mother's good food. "We talk / around the dinner table: / Ommi's good food: / Hummus, falafel, baba ghanoush." On the next page, the scene portrayed at Ronit's house is identical, except for a slight difference in the word for mother. "We talk / around the dinner table: / Imah's good food: / Hummus, falafel, baba ghanoush."

Similarly, Ronit speaks of accompanying her "Abba" to work and Jamil mentions going to the clinic with his "Abi." The teens' fathers work together at a medical facility, Jamil's as a doctor and Ronit's as a pharmacist. Their collegial relationship at the clinic paves the way for Ronit and Jamil to become acquainted. One wonders whether the casualness of the two fathers in allowing their children to meet might not reflect a strong, though unconscious, wish for unity and peace.

Indeed, both Ronit and Jamil notice the irony in the fact that they physically resemble one another (except for Ronit's paler skin). When Ronit first sees Jamil, she says, "Who are you? / You could be my brother / (though I have no brother) / but not the way I feel / when I look / into those dreamy hazel eyes of yours." Later in the book, when the two take a walk together, Jamil is confident that no one will notice anything amiss. "[W]e are together / and we look like siblings. / No one knows / how burnt I am around her."

Despite the similarities in the voices of Ronit

and Jamil, the two are sometimes disarmingly distinct as when Ronit thinks, "Arab boy, / with your gaze / my skin / slips off of/ my heart." Jamil, however, momentarily preoccupied with his own buff body assumes that Ronit is equally enthralled: "Israeli girl, / I know you are looking / at the muscles in my arms. / (I work with weights / most days)." When these differences appear, they lend a charming slant to the parallelism of the voices. The fact that Ronit's and Jamil's sentiments do not always precisely coincide provides the characters with a credibility that they might not otherwise enjoy.

The poems incorporate a variety of forms, including sonnets, pantoums, and ghazals in addition to free verse. The repetition that occurs in the pantoums and ghazals recalls both the "tale as old as time" quality of the couple's forbidden love and the enduring nature of the conflict that has made it forbidden. Both occur generation after generation.

In the pantoum, "He Touched My Hand," Ronit gives voice to her excitement:

Smiling morning replaces frowning night
darkness stumbles out like a drunken man.
Jamil's big bones startle my sight
if Abba only knew he touched my hand.

Darkness stumbles out like a drunken man
discover light inside his hazel eyes
if Abba only knew he touched my hand
my body rustles and it cries.

Jamil's parallel pantoum, "Lightning Strikes," expresses similar turmoil.

The first thing that I notice are her eyes
as blue as day or sorrow they have rage
she teases me to enter, my demise
if Abi only knew my heart is caged.

As blue as day or sorrow they have rage
from years of being told to stay away
if Abi only knew my heart is caged
a cacophony of hands that beg to stay.

The poems necessarily include references to the geopolitical landscape as when Ronit says (a few lines later in the pantoum just cited), "Discover light inside his hazel eyes / a cease-fire already taking place...." Similarly Jamil's pantoum speaks of "the monster fence with signs 'Do not trespass'" (a reference to the separation barrier that Israel has been building near the "Green Line" between Israel and the West Bank).

The hot dry climate of the region provides an appropriate backdrop for the thirst the lovers experience when they are apart and the quenching they enjoy when they are together. The landscape is powerfully evoked in repeated references to a river (the Jordan River) in Jamil's ghazal:

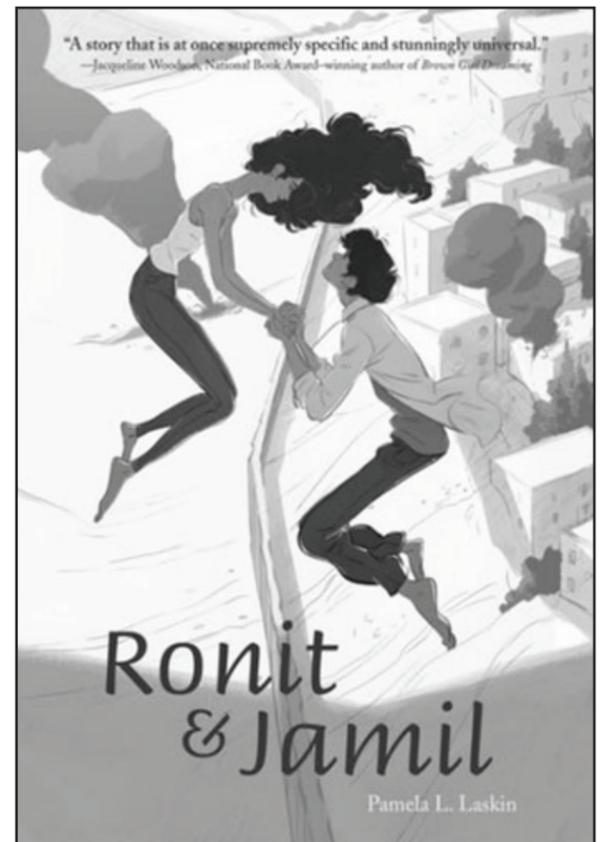
My nickname is Jordan
I was named for a river.

My Abi doesn't know me
since I feel like a river.

These Jerusalem streets are hot
so I pine for a river.

In contrast, the word that repeats in Ronit's ghazal is "desert."

There is a whirlwind of sand in the desert
But I find your hand in the desert.



My bones are brittle
until I see you in the desert,

and I am withered
but then I dance in the desert.

Ultimately, the ability of Ronit and Jamil to see the political situation through one another's eyes lends the story a hopefulness that all who long for peace in the region and throughout the world will seize upon. In a text message, Ronit says to Jamil:

You say land
was taken
from your farmers
to build the fence,
and olive trees
were uprooted.

This makes me sad.
This makes me scared.

Jamil responds empathetically,
I didn't want to make you
scared,
sad,
it's just when we talk about
whose land it is
as the rockets fly from Gaza,
and one lands
near your home,

I want you to understand
there are no answers
except for us.

The solution that Ronit and Jamil find is to run away together. As they prepare, Jamil draws on the words of Mahmoud Darwish:

Our weight has
become light like our
houses in the faraway winds.
We have become two friends
of the strange creatures in
the clouds...and we are now
loosened from the gravity of
identity's land.

Thus, the complexity of identity is brought

—Kallen continued on next page

to the fore—there is both political and personal identity—and these can clash. Identity can either free us or enslave us—and it usually does both. Even as Ronit and Jamil work to free themselves by planning to run away together, Chaim, Ronit’s father, and Mohammed, Jamil’s dad, explode in a sonnet crown that expresses their inability to accept their children’s relationship, i.e., an inability to transcend their political identity. In this opposition, however, they are, paradoxically and sadly, united.

Fortunately, their shared parental anger provides only a weak thunder for the lightning that has struck the hearts of Ronit and Jamil, whose last words as they leave are “PEACE. / LOVE. / PEACE.”

Because Ronit and Jamil do not die and do not give up hope, Laskin’s book leaves us with a sense that peace and love can and will triumph over division and hatred—and this is a feeling (and, hopefully, a truth) that readers of all ages will find inspiring.

Laurel Kallen teaches writing at the City University of New York. She is a poet and fiction writer who has received CCNY’s Stark Short Fiction Award and Teacher/Writer Award. Her work has appeared in venues including Atlanta Review, Big Bridge, Portland Review, Devil’s Lake, Willow Review, and Jabberwock. She is the author of *The Forms of Discomfort* (2012), by *Finishing Line Press*. Kallen has reviewed poetry for American Book Review, Pleiades, and Big City Lit.

Interesting Animals

Andrew Dorkin

WHAT WOULD ANIMALS SAY IF WE ASKED THE RIGHT QUESTIONS?

Vinciane Despret

Brett Buchanan, trans.

University of Minnesota Press

www.upress.umn.edu

249 Pages; Print, \$30.00

What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions? is a series of twenty-six short essays—from “A for Artists: Stupid like a painter?” to “Z for Zoophilia: Can horses consent?”—in which Vinciane Despret encourages us to “hesitate” before claiming knowledge about other species. In “Y for YouTube: Are animals the new celebrities?,” Despret attributes the ever-increasing popularity of animal videos to viewers’ fascination with non-humans as “talented beings, remarkable for their heroism, sociality, cognitive and relational intelligence, humor, unpredictability, and inventiveness.” Yet even as we marvel at their behaviors and abilities, humans continue to underestimate these beings who cannot plainly tell us what they think, feel, want, or know. For Despret, a Belgian “philosophical ethologist,” accurately understanding other species depends on our willingness to ask the right questions, to think carefully about how best to ask them, and to think flexibly when interpreting the animals’s responses.

Trained in both philosophy and psychology, Despret practices a “version” of ethology—the science of animal behavior—“in a way that returns it to its etymology, *ethos*, and the manners, customs, and habits that tie together beings who share, that is, create together, the same ecological niche.” In his laudatory foreword to *What Would Animals Say*, Bruno Latour describes Despret as an empiricist—“interested in objective facts and grounded claims”—and, more specifically, an “additive empiricist,” one who seeks not to “eliminate alternative accounts” but “to add, to complicate, to specify...to slow down and, above all, hesitate so as to multiply the voices that can be heard.” Inspired by thinkers like Latour, Donna Haraway, Isabelle Stengers, and Michel Serres, Despret performs an important role of the philosopher: questioning science’s methods and assumptions in order to open overlooked or unforeseen paths of inquiry.

The most prominent of translator Brett Buchanan’s recent efforts to introduce English-speaking audiences to Despret, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* originally appeared in French as *Que diraient les animaux, si...on leur posait les bonnes questions?* Buchanan’s translation lives up to the high standards set by its predecessors in the University of Minnesota Press’s Posthumanities series (edited by Cary Wolfe), which for the past decade has offered some of the most exciting, provocative, and inventive writing in animal studies, post-humanism,

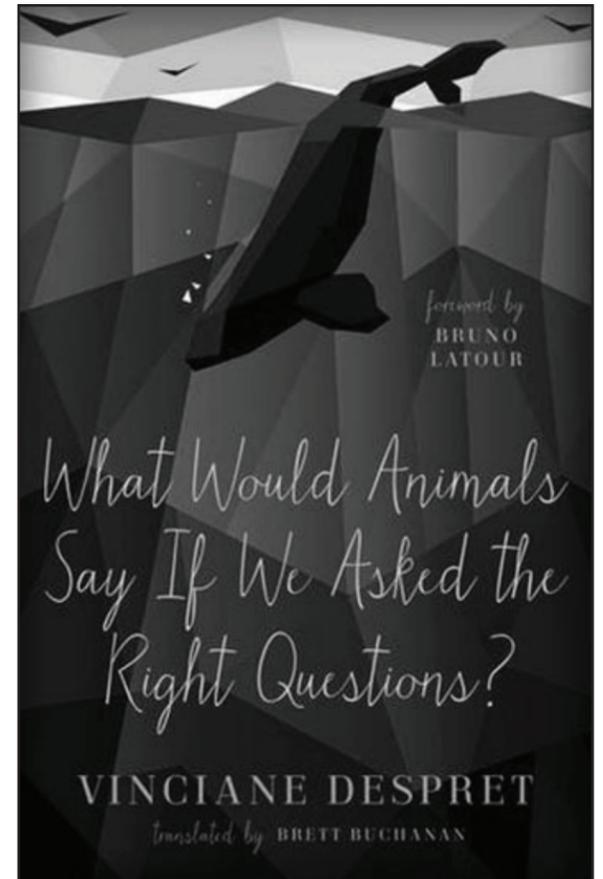
media theory, and the scientific humanities. In this tradition, Despret writes to facilitate substantive conversations between the sciences and humanities, academics and amateurs, theory and practice, and—above all—between humans and animals.

Despret insists that animals become more interesting to humans—research scientists, animal handlers, and amateurs of all stripes—when humans spend more time asking what interests animals. For instance, “M for Magpies: How can we interest elephants in mirrors?” re-opens the case of mirror-recognition experiments conducted with magpies and elephants; though the researchers concluded that only some individuals can recognize themselves, Despret reframes the issue in terms of interest rather than capability, asking “what might have interested these self-recognizing magpies and elephants in the test...and why aren’t the non-self-recognizing animals interested?” By underestimating the animals they study, researchers unwittingly overlook a number of variables, in spite of (and often because of) their earnest efforts to rigorously “control” the experiment and avoid influencing the results; whether in the field or lab, researchers impose artificial conditions that affect the animals in ways that may circumscribe their responses. Thus, in “C for Corporeal: Is it all right to urinate in front of animals?,” Despret argues that the conventional approach to fieldwork—such that a primatologist among a pack of baboons should act as if she is invisible to them—is “doomed to fail” because it is “based on the idea that baboons will be indifferent

Animals become more interesting to humans when humans spend more time asking what interests animals.

to indifference.” Instead, Despret advocates that observers should be “responsible” (after Haraway) and “politely accountable” to their animal hosts. By emphasizing that individual animals may respond to us with interest or indifference, cooperation or noncompliance, Despret shepherds her readers toward recognizing animals as collaborators and agents in inter-species relationships rather than victims, tools, or subjects of human industry, labor, and research.

Pulled in several directions by the numerous genres and disciplines in which it participates, Despret’s book strikes a precarious balance that may nonetheless confuse or alienate some readers. Published by an academic press, but courting a wider audience, the back cover description touts its appeal to dog owners—attempting, no doubt, to build on the success of Haraway’s *When Species Meet* (2008); while Haraway’s influence is significant, dogs are never discussed at length in *What Would Animals Say*. Readers enticed by the front cover’s beautiful geometric illustration of a whale will also be disappointed to find no whales



in Despret’s text. Then again, such disappointments may be intentional; in her opening note, “How to Use This Book,” Despret writes, “I hope that one will be surprised *not* to find what one is looking for.” Indeed, scholarly readers seeking to mine conclusions from Despret’s book for a literature review or passing citation will be frustrated by its inherent resistance to such instrumentality. An abecedary of short essays posing provocative questions but seldom arriving at answers, *What Would Animals Say* could be said to lack a coherent, original argument. Ordered alphabetically, her chapters can be read selectively or in any order, like a collection of poems, stories, or—as Latour describes them—“scientific fables”; to this end, Despret cleverly includes cross-references throughout the text, pointing out connections between chapters and suggesting alternative, often recursive paths through her book.

What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions? is for readers willing to zigzag through a book and dwell in unresolved questions. For scientists and humanists willing to slow down and enjoy her eccentric but brilliant style—and for animal-lovers willing to humor its erudition—surprises, insights, and interesting questions abound in Despret’s menagerie.

Andrew Dorkin is a PhD candidate in the English Department at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. His research focuses primarily on American modernism and theories of humor and media. He has also written essays on topics that include aesthetic subcultures on social media, contemporary avant-garde children’s poetry, and hyperbole in the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson.