



# Almost Dead

*Assaf Gavron*

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## **Almost Dead** Assaf Gavron

"[An] original and powerful writer.... His clear and honest writing blasts right through the clichés and the politically correct surface to touch the chaotic and ambiguous core of the Israeli identity." —Etgar Keret

"In a dazzling display of empathy, Gavron creates two equally compelling narrators, the bomber and his victim. This is a virtuoso work; a pitch-perfect rendering of real Israeli life in all its chaos, energy, humor and terror. I couldn't put it down." — Geraldine Brooks

Politically incorrect, provocative, and steeped in wit and irony, *Almost Dead* is a fast-paced tragicomic novel about the perfectly ordinary madness in today's Middle East.

## **Almost Dead Details**

Date : Published April 13th 2010 by Harper Perennial (first published 2006)

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Author : Assaf Gavron

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# From Reader Review Almost Dead for online ebook

## Msbergie Kamilacritter says

While neither the command of the English language nor style of writing in the translation is elegant, it serves to depict a roughness, choppiness and predominant sense of anxiety. This is fitting since it is unimaginable that one could ever experience a sense of calm and peace within the context of Israel/Palestine. For once I am able to grasp the gravity and truth of the situation in the Middle East. *Croc Attack!* follows a machine-gun-rhythm that splashes the horror of human terror into one's mind, without resorting to pulp violence. In my opinion this is a heart-wrenching feat that Gavron achieves by remaining objective, yet empathetic.

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## Lori says

ARC from publisher

Every once in awhile, a book will find it's way into my hands that takes me completely by surprise. A book that grabs ahold of me and refuses to let go. Had it not been for a little something called work (you know, the place we go to do the things we have to do in order to get those little green papers that allow us to pay our bills?), I would have been done with this novel days ago.... because it was just so darn hard to put down!

It takes place in Tel Aviv - for the most part - and follows the deeply intertwined lives of two young men: Eitan ,a Jewish software salesman known to friends and family as 'The Croc', who miraculously survives multiple suicide bombings and Fahmi, heavily influenced by his older brother, who works along side the Palestinian suicide bombers preparing them to carry out their missions.

This is the third book I have read, back to back, that takes place outside of the United States. This is quite rare for me, and totally unintentional. The reason I make note of this is a slightly embarrassing one: I am geographically and culturally challenged. There. I said it. Phew. And I've been extremely lucky with my most recent reads (*Agaat*, *The Case of the Missing Servant*, and this one!).

Usually, reading novels that take place in other countries leaves me slightly confused, feeling disconnected from the characters because I simply cannot relate to or empathize with them.

With *Almost Dead*, not only did I read a fantastic story of survival and confusion, hatred and forgiveness, but I learned so much about a topic and a culture that I had no previous experience with or knowledge of before and I felt an intimate connection with the two main characters.

Gavron takes his readers into the mind of comatose Fahmi, who we quickly discover can hear and feel everything that is going on around him in the hospital but is unable to open his eyes or respond. This clearly frustrates him, and to escape his helplessness, he withdraws into memories - recalling all the events that led him to his current existence of complete dependance on his nurse and the machines that keep him alive ('one tube for piss, one tube for air').

A reluctant fighter in the war between two misunderstood and proud cultures, Fahmi follows his brothers lead, preparing the way for the suicide bombers - the men who are willing to sacrifice themselves for their beliefs, to take their rightful place beside their God. Though he does not want to give up his own life for the

war, Fahmi uses his skills to create the belt bombs that these men will detonate.

Simultaneously, Gavron moves us through the chaotic moments of Eitan's life as he learns of the suicide bombing of Little Bus Number 5 moments after he stepped off of it. Feeling guilty, he tracks down the Shuli - girlfriend of the man who sat next to him on the Little Bus in order to pass on a message. This decision puts The Croc on a journey of crazy coincidences - surviving the sniper shootings on the road to Jerusalem, and another suicide bomber attack at a local coffee shop. Eitan gains celebrity status, joins a therapy group, and pulls off an amateur investigation to find out just what secrets the man on the Little Bus was concealing.

Incredibly paced, the book picks up speed from page one and refuses to slow down. The side by side chapters of Eitan and Fahmi begin to narrow the gaps, pushing through the memories of the past into the present - connecting our two storylines in a perfectly timed finale.

Little by little, Gavron gives the readers enough information to begin connecting the dots on their own. But that does nothing to stop you from wanting to see how it all comes together.

I love books that get me thinking about the events that have taken place in my life - how much of what happens to me is brought about due to the decisions I've made? How much of it was made to happen by someone or something else?

If only I had left the house 5 minutes earlier, or taken the SUV instead of the car, or eaten my breakfast at home instead of taking it in the car with me - would I have missed hitting that deer? If I hadn't quit my old job, and started at the new one on the same day as my husband, would we have met somewhere else, still fallen in love, and gotten married?

If Harper Perennial hadn't sent me an email offering a copy of this book for review, would I have eventually bought it and read it on my own? If I read this book 3 years ago, or 2 year from now, would I have loved it as much as I do now?

Ladies and Gentlemen - meet my Next Best Book. Don't miss this one. It may become your Next Best Book as well!

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## **Barry Hammond says**

Contrasting humour with suspense, Assaf Gavron's *Almost Dead* tells the story of two contrasting characters: a mid-thirties Israeli yuppie nicknamed 'Croc,' who works for a time management company, with Fahmi, a reluctant Palestinian bomb-maker and terrorist who, when we meet him, is in a coma recalling his life. Croc becomes a minor celebrity because he survives three terror attacks. Fahmi is trying to understand his life and how he got where he is. It becomes evident early on that the two are heading for a collision course because Fahmi's older brother thinks Croc should be taken out as he's become a symbol to the people in Tel Aviv. Gavron was educated in London and Vancouver and brings both an insider's view of Israel, where he grew up, and an outsider's jaundiced view of both the country and its modern reality TV media landscape and the culture of celebrity. Mixing satire with a detective story, keeps the suspense building and the book is equal parts wit and a serious comment on modern Israeli life. It's dead-on in both aspects and a must-read for anyone trying to fathom the complexities of the Middle East or for anyone who enjoys a thriller. Top marks for Gavron! - BH.

**Ayelet Waldman says**

Now this one I really liked.

**Hermien says**

Croc and Fahmi tell the story in alternate chapters which keeps up the suspense until the end. I felt the book was well balanced between the Israeli and Palestinian view points and gave a good insight into living in a world full of conflict.

**Hannah Rosenthal says**

[illegible]

**Jeremy says**

While I have to give Gavron credit for taking on the frightful task of writing a novel about the suicide bombings of the second intifada (and one which incorporates both Israeli and Palestinian voices), I was kind of underwhelmed for most of this. He's obviously trying to depict an awful period without resorting to cheap political stances, but he ends up with narration that seems so listless, so hopelessly casual most of the time, that this reads more like an early draft of a better book that just never got written.

The characterizations are weak and the development of them and the plot are a haphazard mess. He introduces far too many characters who revolve around Eitan and Fahmi's perspectives without having any sort of effect or real relevance within their points of view.

In spite of that, Gavron does do an excellent job at hinting at a few things; the sheer mental exhaustion from fear that everyone in this society faced at this time, the ambiguity of being a first generation Israeli, of being rooted in places like Tel Aviv and Jerusalem without being truly 'rooted' there, and of the passive misery which the IDF can inflict without firing a single rubber bullet, but simply by disrupting the basic, meager infrastructure which Palestinians live under, and of the casual racism/anti-semitism that have sadly become common currency on both sides of an intractable divide.

This might just be kind of an impossible topic to really write a solid novel about. Suicide bombings are already fraught with misery and hyperbolic emotions on so many levels, both direct and implicit, that trying to turn them into the centerpiece for literary fiction seems like a really dicey prospect, especially when the characters and plot are already on shaky territory to begin with.

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## Shahar says

4.5 jumping head first into one of the delicate issues in israel and treating it with a rude gentleness.  
Funny , sad , moving. great book

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## Maya Panika says

One suicide bomber blows up a bus. Another blows himself up in a café. A sniper attacks a busy road – Eitan Enoch, known to all as the ‘Croc’ survives all three incidents and finds himself an unwilling celebrity, a symbol of Israeli resistance. Meanwhile, a Palestinian would-be terrorist lies in a coma in a Jerusalem hospital, trying to figure out what has happened to him and how his fate fits that of the Croc.

Croc Attack is pitched as a dark comedy – to be honest, it’s not really that funny, but it is a very engaging page turner with a tragi-comic feel and a lot to say about everyday life and attitudes in Israel. Dark, depressing and highly recommended.

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## Kelly (and the Book Boar) says

Find all of my reviews at: <http://52bookminimum.blogspot.com/>

Eitan Einoch (or “Croc” to his friends) spends his days counting time (literally) at what just might be the most boring office job in the history of the universe in Tel Aviv. Due to incessant nagging requests from his girlfriend, Croc rides a “Little No. 5” (a/k/a minibus) to and from the office each day, believing that any suicide bomber worth his salt wouldn’t waste his chance on 72 awaiting virgins by only blowing up a handful of victims. But then . . . .

Miraculously Croc survives with only a bit more than a headache. Remembering a conversation with a fellow passenger whose hinky meter was going off right before the big ka-boom, Croc decides to track down said passenger’s girlfriend in order to pass on his last words. On the way his car is caught in the crossfire of another targeted bus. Again, Croc proves that . . . .

(Ha! I have a sneaking suspicion Assaf Gavron never imagined a Destiny’s Child reference popping up in a review of his book, but I do what I do.)

And right when things are looking up . . . . .

Croc's unheard of ability to beat death makes him a bit of a national hero, and that is how we come to meet Fahmi. Fahmi tells of his rise to want-to-be Palestinian suicide bomber from a hospital bed, where he lies in a coma – which made me keep picturing . . . .

\*shudder\*

The dual narratives rotate throughout the book, leading up to the inevitable moment when the men's worlds intertwine.

I need to take a moment and give mad props to the ladies and gentlemen at the big (not to be confused with porny) library . . . .

Obviously not much needs to be done in order to get me to read . . . but dangling free stuff in front of me and presenting a list of recommendations to help me "Push My Shelf" has been quite the eye opener. I not only realized why some books (\*cough *The Red Tent* cough\*) should have continued to collect dust on my shelf, but I got to read this little gem I would have probably never even stumbled upon if it had not been for this challenge. It proposed some questions people all around the world should be asking themselves . . . .

***"They talk about the Muslims, but who dropped two bombs on Japan and killed three hundred thousand?"***

And presented some sage advice . . . .

***"We need to be strong, not to be cowed. Everyone should get on with their lives. Get on buses. Drive on roads. Drink coffee! Because if we don't have a normal life, what do we have left? We have to remain human beings. That's the most important thing. That's the only thing, I suppose. Because what are we if we're not human beings? If we lose ourselves, then . . . well, we've lost."***

Somehow it managed to do it with a brilliant wit, as well.

Recommended to anyone else who wants to "push their shelf." The glass is mine, though . . . .

*Book # 5. Challenge complete! THE PINT GLASS IS MIIIIIIINE.*

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## **Shannon (Giraffe Days) says**

Eitan Enoch, who goes by the nickname Croc, is a fairly ordinary thirty-three year old man living in Tel Aviv with a super-anxious girlfriend, Duchi, and parents who moved back to America. But now, something unordinary is happening to Croc: he survives a suicide bomb attack. And then gunfire on the highway to Jerusalem. And then another suicide bomber's attack in a cafe while he is having coffee with the girlfriend of

a man who died in the first attack. In the space of just a few days, Eitan becomes a bit of a local celebrity. The man they couldn't kill. A symbol for Jewish resistance, survival, persecution and God's favour.

In Palestine, the brothers behind all three attacks plot their fourth. Fahmi is still just a teenager but already he has been taught how to make bombs, while his older brother Bilahl organises everything, plots and plans and tries to make Fahmi to be as fundamentally zealous as he is. Their father wants Fahmi to go to university, to prosper and be happy and not become one of these super-religious nuts. But the power of Fahmi's brother is greater than his father's. Now he lies in a coma in a Jewish hospital, reliving the events that led to this point in his life and how he came to meet "the Croc", like him even, while his brother plans a way for Fahmi to kill him.

Eitan's focus is elsewhere. He isn't terribly concerned about being a target of Palestinian anger and righteousness. He's fallen in love with the girlfriend of a man who stood next to him on the bus, the same bus that blew up not long after Eitan got off it. He's become immersed in the puzzle of this man, Giora Guetta, and what he was doing in Tel Aviv that day, who he was meeting and why. The clues that will lead him to the answers lie in Giora's palm pilot, a device that escaped destruction by being propelled from the bus and into a tree. But it is only with the help of a young Palestinian man whom he befriends that he will understand any of it.

*Almost Dead* is partly meant as a comedy, according to the back of the book, but if it is one it is decidedly a black comedy. Told in chapters that alternate between Eitan's first-person narrative and Fahmi's first-person narrative, it has moments of irony but is actually as serious and heavy-hearted as it sounds, especially the Palestinian half. I didn't read it as a comedy. It was far too sad for that.

One of the novels' strengths is how it contrasts the lives of Palestinians with that of middle-class Jews living in Israel. It wasn't flattering, though it does always make me feel some hope that so many Israelites (such as the author) are sympathetic and understanding (and possibly angry about) the occupation of Palestine and what the Palestinians are forced to endure simply for living on land Israel's government wants. Obviously it's not quite that simple, and yet it is. Fahmi's chapters were heart-wrenching and complex and tragic. You can see how he got to where he was, you can see how stuck he is, and you can see how hard it is, once you're on a trajectory, to get off it.

In contrast, Eitan's life is more familiar, even if he lives in the midst of a war zone. He lives in an apartment with his girlfriend, Duchi, whom he doesn't seem to love all that much. He works for a company whose business is to find ways to save other companies time, and his reaction to surviving three separate attacks is one of stunned disbelief, shock, numbness, ambivalence, unconcern, deep concern, and a determination to distract himself completely with some strange, random mystery that really has nothing to do with him. He doesn't feel anger and doesn't even seem to be afraid. Like many middle class people, he struggles to have an opinion one way or the other, recognising that people on both sides are angry and hurt, and unwilling to draw either side's anger or hurt by expressing an opinion (as he noticeably fails to do on the talk show he's invited to be in). He's been living in Israel a long time, but doesn't seem to have spent any amount of time thinking about the issues that surround him.

The story is a little slow at times - that is to say, the middle is a bit slow - but it starts strong and picks up the pace more towards the end, where things start to really converge. I didn't find Eitan to be all that interesting a character, in the grand scheme of things, especially in light of Fahmi's more pivotal story. Yet, I couldn't say that one is more important than the other. They were both realistic, and both represented a truth about Israel and Palestine - not the only truth, but one of many. It is social commentary, and a critique of the situation, without proselytising or moralising: it gently probes the grey areas, the individual humans who help make up



a vast and complicated tapestry of lives lived and lost and decisions made that can't be undone. Eitan's story seems like a distraction from this bigger story, but when the answers come in it reads more like an analogy, or a fable, or just a fuck-up in the midst of a bigger fuck-up. A "my god the world is a messy, screwed-up place of unpredictability." It both shakes its head at that and embraces it. I couldn't, in the end, decide what I thought, because it seemed to me that there was something going on here that I couldn't hope to capture and understand by simple virtue of the fact that I haven't lived lives anything like Eitan's or Fahmi's. That only makes me want to learn more, and be open to more perspectives, and to try harder at understanding something that is so much bigger than me and my life.

At its core, this is a book about humanity and the human experience; how, when you get right down to it, we are all the same, regardless of race or ethnicity or class or anything else. We're all human. We all feel and breathe and think and react and we all feel like we're in little isolated bubbles and we forget that everyone feels the same way. It's only when we reach out in search of a connection that we discover, or remember, that whether we're Israeli or Palestinian, Jewish or Muslim, we're still all human. Yet as a story, *Almost Dead* didn't quite manage to engage me or satisfy me, and what began with strength and charisma became a bit, well, ordinary, as if it lost the point it was trying to make in the flabby middle, and tried to recover at the end but by then the steam had gone out of it. Still, it's a story that will stay with you, and as a character Fahmi especially is so human you feel you can reach into the page and touch him. Hug him. Protect him. Save him. So human that you know you can't, you can only watch helplessly as walks the path of self-destruction in an attempt to find himself, stand up for his people, and live a just and meaningful life. It is tragic in its hollowness. These are the things that stay with me after reading this book, and so no, I couldn't read it as a comedy.

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## **Ulysses says**

The concept behind this book-- two intertwined stories of an Israeli schlub who survives three consecutive terror attacks in one week and the reluctant Palestinian jihadi in a coma whose older brother organized the attacks-- induced me to pick it up on a whim despite having no prior knowledge about the book or its author. Half of the way in, I was questioning my judgment and finding myself reminded of that key truth of modern literature: a neat-sounding concept doth by no means a decent book make. However, I bit the bullet, continued onward, and found myself pleasantly rewarded as the second half of the book quickly redeemed the relatively mediocre first.

The inner monologue of the two protagonists reads like the inner monologue of a 17-year-old, and the plotlines ultimately fall a few yards short of meeting up in a logical and satisfying fashion, considering the tone of dramatic inevitability with which the characters' parallel stories are presented. On the other hand, I commend the author for his artful job of creating two opposed (or are they really?) characters that the reader can identify with equally-- the sympathetic Palestinian terrorist in particular, considering that the author is an Israeli Jew. And the ending, despite its above-mentioned failure to sew the two plotlines together as completely the first 99% of the book had seemed to be promising, is still artfully executed and far more touching than I had been expecting. A thoroughly decent book, overall.

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## **lisa says**

what started out a little slow for me developed into a highly entertaining read and i'm so glad that i took a

chance and picked this book up. Almost Dead has two running stories told in alternating chapters, each with its own main character.

the first storyline is of Eitan, nicknamed "Croc", a Tel Aviv businessman who manages to narrowly miss three consecutive suicide bombing attempts, becoming a bit of a media celebrity, dubbed the "Croc Attack". the Croc is immediately likable, the type of person i'd like to know, but is just dealt all the wrong cards. through a few very serendipitous encounters, he finds himself hunting the true identity of one of the men killed in the first attack, all the while dealing with post traumatic stress disorder and an all too realistic failing relationship.

the second storyline follows Fahmi, a member of a terrorist shell that has coordinated the specific attacks that Croc was coincidentally involved. throughout his chapters, he is in a coma, recalling the events leading up to his hospitalization. though Fahmi is a terrorist, he is written with compassion and has an honesty that you can't help but admire. his brother is the extremist leader of their unit and Fahmi is merely feeling the familial obligation of living up to his brother's expectations and his grandfather's legacy. however, when Fahmi's brother is captured, the task of killing the Croc Attack, who has humiliated their efforts, is in Fahmi's hands alone.

the writing was sharp and humorous, and the story pulled along at a steady pace throughout. though i found the story of Eitan much more engaging than that of Fahmi to begin with, they actually developed well together and i found that by the end, i wasn't feeling that favoritism any longer. and the ending was just wow! i think i read the last 50 pages in a blink.

the characters were well realized and were both relatable, in their own ways - Croc, with his optimism and huge heart, and Fahmi, with his misguided energy and love for his family. i was actually surprised to find that i had any emotion at all for Fahmi, but i really did, despite his position and his acts. altogether, this book just took me by surprise, in a good way.

Almost Dead was an excellent perspective piece with a fantastic ending, and i would definitely recommend it to anyone interested in a slightly different take on terrorists and their victims.

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## **Christopher Litsinger says**

One thing that stands out about this "translation" is that one of the two translators is the original author of the Hebrew book. So it's easy to trust the translation here, and that let me settle right in and enjoy the tone of this book. It's young and modern, and definitely provides an insight into the lives of the young in Israel. My favorite quote from the book - the main character describing the differences between himself and his girlfriend - provides a good sense of the tone and feel of a book:

The difference between me and Duchi, in one sentence, is this: I say, things will be all right, and if they aren't, that's all right too. Duchi says, things will not be all right, and if they are, that's not all right either. OK, two sentences.

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## **Jonfaith says**

Mark a point for unlikely success. While not Woody Allen, there is a space for potential chuckles. Who would imagine that a novel predicated on suicide bombings could harness a humorous edge while tastefully plumbing the edges of the human condition? The plot doesn't exactly transcend or transform, but there remains a grist, somehow a smoke and beer appear applicable.

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