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CRIME | Marilyn Stasio

State of Conflict

IN her sixth and last mystery, **MURDER IN JERUSALEM** (HarperCollins, \$24.95), Batya Gur finally challenges her hero, Chief Superintendent Michael Ohayon, to take a stand on Zionism. That ideological reckoning will never lead to the deeper political dialogue the Israeli author, who died last year at the age of 57, might have taken up in subsequent novels. But it plainly identifies the existential conundrum that's been driving this series from the beginning: the task of defining Israel's national identity.

As always, Gur approaches the debate obliquely by sending Ohayon into a self-contained community to investigate a murder that threatens to destabilize this little subculture. Previous novels have placed the watchful detective in a psychoanalytic institute, a university literature department, a circle of classical musicians, a neighborhood of immigrants and a kibbutz. By allowing the volatile inhabitants of these respective microcosms to air their narrow views on the domestic conflicts of the Jewish state, Ohayon is able to gain insight into their insular lives. But the core issues are always the same: who has the right to live among us — and who among us would destroy us?

Politics, religion and sex are the divisive forces in "Murder in Jerusalem," a biting cultural exposé (in Evan Fallenberg's sharp-toothed translation) that takes place in 1997 in the offices and production studios of the state-sponsored television station.

Between the chaos of the news operation and the bloated egos of the staff, Ohayon doesn't know where to begin his investigation of the death of the set designer on a film production of S. Y. Agnon's novella "Iddo and Eynam." But in his patient way, he methodically sifts through the professional hostilities and personal animosities and comes to a compassionate understanding of the tragic and, in the end, dehumanizing compromises people make for the sake of their ideals.

Gur allows herself a sharp broadside against the sorry state of Israeli television (which reflects "how Israel sees itself, and what Israel thinks about literature and art") and the contributing role of the government ("which wants to believe that most Israelis are stupid and soulless"). But the corrosive truth she aims to uncover goes beyond the corruption of the media and the cynicism of politicians to something at the very heart of the Israeli identity — "the destruction out of which we arose and are, in fact, made."



Isolde Ohlbaum

Batya Gur