

### Sabra Zoo

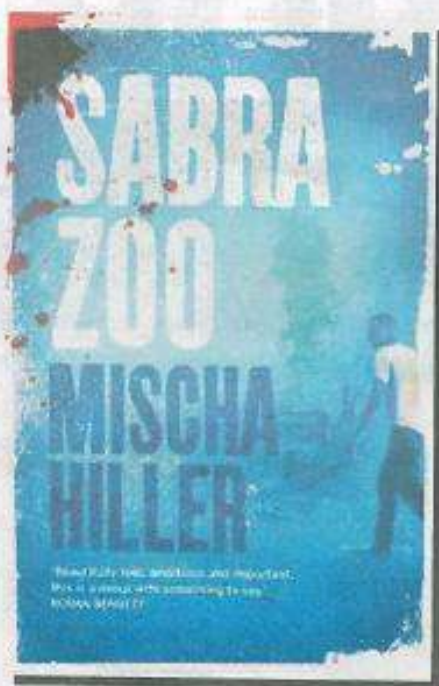
By Mischa Hiller  
(Telegram Books)

At first glance this book did not appeal to me; the conflict and carnage in the Middle East have reached a stage where I could no longer determine what the real issues were, so I didn't believe I would take away anything new from a novel that uses the region as a backdrop. But upon learning that the narrator is a child, I was persuaded to leave my judgements aside.

The story of *Sabra Zoo* is recounted by 18-year-old Ivan – half Danish, half Palestinian – who remains in Beirut after his parents and the cadres of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) are evacuated during the 1982 siege.

Like any other teenager, Ivan's reason for staying is not exactly clear – not even to him, never mind the reader. He continues his work as an unofficial interpreter for the various international medical volunteers stationed in the Sabra refugee camp, west of Beirut. He also doubles as an undercover agent for the PLO.

Finding himself mainly in the company of adults, Ivan joins in the drinking and smoking with the ease of a veteran. Through his interpreting work, he makes friends with Eli, a Norwegian physiotherapist whom he



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pines for, and 10-year-old Youssef, whose leg is amputated due to shrapnel wounds.

At the end of the first siege, the Palestinians, Americans and French troops occupying Beirut leave abruptly, allowing the Christian Arab Phalangists – supposedly shielded by the Israelis – to move in and engage in what is now famously referred to as the Sabra Massacre. As rumours begin to circulate about atrocities taking place in the now cordoned camp, Ivan attempts to rescue his friends from the slaughter...

The intensity of the Middle East often elicits strong emotions, but author Mischa Hiller's use of the teenage Ivan as narrator provides an opportunity to make an unbiased assessment of man's inhumanity to man.

The bluntness of the young Ivan's voice is refreshing, but at the same time very poignant. In *Sabra Zoo*, the fact that something broken in one place cannot be mended without fixing everything becomes very clear.

And this leaves us with the ultimate question: why do we ever resort to war?



*Ifedinma Dimbo, originally from Nigeria, is the author of She Was Foolish? More details about her work and the Irish Writers' Exchange can be found at [www.irishwritersexchange.com](http://www.irishwritersexchange.com)*