

# Settler saga

'A small hilltop, in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of everywhere' By Janice Weizman

**IS THERE** any place on earth that evokes stronger reactions, from enthusiasm to horror, from rage to joy, from hopelessness and despair to messianic euphoria, than the Israeli settlements in the territory commonly known as the “West Bank”?

The settlement of these lands, the ongoing saga in which fundamentalist Jews, right-wing ideologues and seekers of cheap housing lobbied, manipulated, back-scratched, and did whatever it took in order to establish, often against official government policy, defiant new communities, has been extensively documented in numerous newspaper reports, geo-political studies, fact-finding missions and the like.

What has been far rarer is the portrayal of these communities and the people who inhabit them in fictional form. In this sense, “The Hilltop” by Israeli novelist Assaf Gavron is a unique attempt to consider the phenomenon not from a merely political point of view, but as a tale of human endeavor, in all its glory and its folly. The book, Gavron’s seventh, is the winner of the 2013 Bernstein prize, an annual Israeli literary award for writers 50 years of age and younger. Translated from the Hebrew by Steven Cohen, it has been published in Dutch and German and has been bought by publishers in France, Italy, Holland and Sweden.

“The Hilltop” opens with an account of how Othneil Assis, a former bookkeeper and resident of the fictional settlement of Ma’aleh Hermesh, came to found Ma’aleh Hermesh C. First, he stakes a claim to a field he has appropriated in order to expand his crop output. He then secures a permit to set up a guard hut and makeshift office in a shipping container. When a fellow settler, a friend from his yeshiva high school, “somehow” gets his hands on two additional trailers, their wives and children move in and the Ma’aleh Hermesh C outpost is born. “The brigade commander told later of receiving a call on his two-way radio on a cold winter night with a report of five new twenty-two-square-meter trailers that had been set up on the land adjacent to the Assis farm. He arrived on the scene to find several trucks and trailers at the site. The settlers, he said, blocked his command car from approaching. The head of the regional council turned up, things got heated, and the brigade commander, who came under a barrage of abuse, called the Civil Administration for advice on how to proceed. The new trailers, he was told, were there without a permit. However, their removal, too, required authorization, which they didn’t have. And thus the soldiers loaded the settlers onto the military vehicles and drove them away – with the records of the army and Defense Ministry duly

noting that the outpost had been evacuated.

“The settlers returned the very next day, and the brigade commander turned his attention to more pressing matters. Thus the outpost took hold.”

Yet it is that very uncertainty and ambiguity that seem to ensure the outpost's survival

But all of this is only the prologue. The book’s plotlines unfold several years later when the outpost has grown into a small community of ideologically motivated families still living in trailers, still dependent on a fickle generator, stubbornly, yet happily, struggling to raise their families and endure the hardships of life in a quasi-legal outpost.

The settlement thrives, yet it cannot escape the shadow of its misbegotten origins. For Ma’aleh Hermesh C, like its real-life counterparts, is not merely a place to live. It is a place where every road, every field, every trailer offers an opportunity to affirm or object; to turn a blind eye or to put one’s foot down;



A woman prays on the roof of her home during the demolition of 10 structures in the Ma'ale Rehavam outpost in the West Bank, May 14

NATI SHOHAT / FLASH 90

to issue an evacuation order or to suspend it. It's a place where everything is blurry – the borders, land ownership, authority, law and order. Yet it is that very uncertainty and ambiguity that seem to ensure the outpost's survival.

Though the cast of characters here is large, including Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet) informants, Japanese businessmen, Arab olive growers, American donors, left-wing demonstrators, and teenage "Second Life" gamers, the book's main protagonists are two brothers, Gabi and Roni Kupper, ex-kibbutzniks whose lives have led them each, for very different reasons, to seek refuge at Ma'aleh Hermesh C.

**GABI, WHOSE** short fuse and impulsive behavior have resulted in his estrangement from his wife and son, has found solace and hope of redemption in religion. Roni, a former investment banker who made and lost a fortune in New York arrives at the door of Gabi's trailer wheeling a suitcase containing all his worldly possessions. The brothers' respective stories unfold over the course of the book as each struggles to make a fresh beginning and learn from past mistakes. In telling their stories, "The Hilltop" explores the way the political, the social and the personal come together to construct identity.

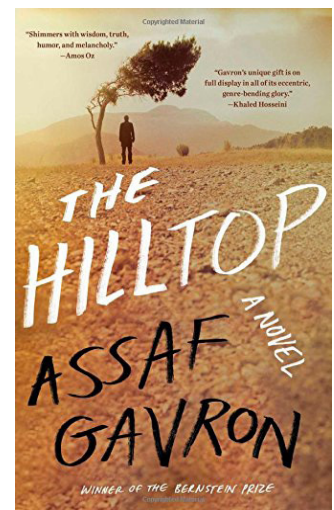
By attempting to depict the workings of an ideological community while homing in on the personal stories of its inhabitants, Gavron has taken on a complex challenge. His narrative lens shifts fluidly,

zooming in on the deep-seated psychological motivations of individuals, and then panning out to depict key episodes in the life of the settlement.

Though Gavron himself comes from the opposite side of the ideological and religious spectrum, he has succeeded in conveying the worldview of religious right-wing Jews while refraining from passing judgment on their choices and actions. He rejects the temptation, which one senses he felt, to directly express his deep disapproval of the settlement project, and instead portrays, from a wry yet insightful perspective, the way the community manages to survive.

For Ma'aleh Hermesh C exists under constant threat from all corners – from evacuation to the forces of nature to the constant circle of violence with their Palestinian neighbors. To Gavron, Ma'aleh Hermesh C is something of a Phoenix, able to rise, fall, and pick itself up and start again, thanks to the ambivalence of the powers that be and the wiles, and determination, of its inhabitants.

In the final scene of the book, after the authorities have finally implemented the evacuation and demolition of the outpost, we see Gabi, "leisurely knocking nails into planks of wood, which will be assembled on top of the other, and become walls, and thus resurrect his cabin..." This image, whether one finds it uplifting or infuriating, is an apt one for the West Bank outposts and those who go to live in them – "on a small hilltop, in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of everywhere." ■



**The Hilltop**  
By Assaf Gavron  
Scribner  
464 pages; \$26