

Losing Battles

By COLM TOIBIN
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In the introduction to his 2003 collection of journalism, "Death as a Way of Life," the Israeli novelist [David Grossman](#) wrote: "The daily reality in which I live surpasses anything I could imagine, and it seeps into my deepest parts." In a note at the conclusion of his somber, haunting new novel, "To the End of the Land," he explains that he began writing it in May 2003 — around the same time he wrote that introduction, six months before the end of his older son's military service and a year and a half before his younger son, Uri, enlisted. "At the time," he writes, "I had the feeling — or rather, a wish — that the book I was writing would protect him."

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Ruth Gwily

David Grossman

TO THE END OF THE LAND

By David Grossman
Translated by Jessica Cohen
576 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$26.95

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"On Aug. 12, 2006," Grossman continues, "in the final hours of the Second Lebanon War, Uri was killed in Southern Lebanon." By that time, most of this book "was already written. What changed, above all, was the echo of the reality in which the final draft was written."

It is a testament to Grossman's novelistic talent, indeed perhaps his genius, that "To the End of the Land" manages to create and dramatize a world that gives both the reality and the echo their full due. He weaves the essences of private life into the tapestry of history with deliberate and delicate skill; he has created a panorama of breathtaking emotional force, a masterpiece of pacing, of dedicated storytelling, with characters whose lives are etched with extraordinary, vivid detail. While his novel has the vast sweep of pure tragedy, it is also at times playful, and utterly engrossing; it is filled with original and unexpected detail about domestic life, about the shapes and shadows that surround love and memory, and about the sharp and desperate edges of loss and fear.

This novel is, on the one hand, a retelling of Truffaut's "Jules and Jim," in which two guys, best friends, fall in love with the same girl. Ora, the girl in this novel, is emotional, introspective, filled with an ability to notice and an ability to love. As for the boys, Ilan is rational, vulnerable, brittle, oddly needy and nerdy; and Avram is impulsive, brilliant, superintelligent, larger than life. Having loved them both, Ora finally decides to marry Ilan, and they have a son, Adam; a few years later, made pregnant by Avram, she has

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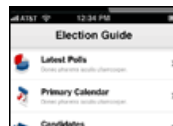
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A Syrian outpost after its conquest by the Israeli army, 1967.

a second son, Ofer, who is brought up as though he were Ilan's child.

In another society, this might have the makings of a comedy, but in Israel between 1967 and 2000, the years in which the novel takes place, public life had a way of eating into the most private moments and the most intimate relationships and poisoning them. Avram is captured and tortured during the 1973 war; this free-spirited, somewhat goofy genius is thereafter a broken man. He does not want to have anything to do with his old friends and does not want to see his son.

In parallel with the pain and terror of war, there is daily life. Grossman offers a wonderful, almost quirky account of Ora raising her two boys. He has a way of making the most ordinary moments glow, each detail chosen to suggest how odd and engaging people are, and how unsimple and deeply interesting human relations become. Like everything else in the book, the haven of love and care that Ora creates for her sons and her husband is invaded by fear and misery and a sort of coarseness once her sons begin their military service, entering a world of roadblocks, ambushes and arrests that she can only imagine in horror.

With her husband and elder son away in South America, Ora arranges to go on a hike with Ofer when his time with the military is up. Instead, he re-enlists. Ora must again live in fear of the "notifiers" from the army, who might call in the night, knocking on her door to deliver bad news.

Rather than staying at home and waiting, however, Ora settles on an almost magical way of keeping her son safe: she will not be there for the notifiers if they call. She will go to the north of Israel without a phone, where no one can notify her of anything, and she will hike south and not listen to news. She will find Avram, the boy's father, and she will make him come with her.

The novel traces what happens as they walk and talk. Most of the time this device works brilliantly. Ora needs to tell Avram about his son, every single detail she can think of, to make him come alive for his natural father for the first time. By invoking him with such zeal, however, she is already placing him in the past. This casts a shadow on their walk and imbues their conversation with a sort of dark tension. At times, Ora's level of self-consciousness, her alertness to the emotional contours of things, her exquisite introspection, give this story the depth and privacy of an [Ingmar Bergman](#) film, especially "Scenes From a Marriage." The story she tells darts between public and private life, between war and torture on the one hand and the sweet anxieties of bourgeois life on the other.

As in other novels of love and loyalty in a time of conflict — [Nadine Gordimer's](#) "Burger's Daughter," [Michael Ondaatje's](#) "English Patient" or Shirley Hazzard's "Great Fire" — there is a palpable urgency here about the carnal and the sexual. The portrait of Ora as a woman alive in her body is one of the triumphs of Grossman's book.

Grossman also manages to play the ordinary against the highly charged. He displays masterly control over the emotional life of the novel, maintaining it at a very high level indeed, and then pushing it at points where the narrative becomes almost unbearable. There is a moment, for example, when Ora and Avram meet a man on their journey who says, "It's good to get away from the news a bit, especially after yesterday," and you simply

have to put the book down, so great is your fear for Ora’s son. There is another moment, told in flashback, when Avram, delirious in the hospital, having been released from captivity after the war, when he was led to believe that Israel had been fully defeated, asks Ora: “Is there . . . Is there an Israel?” Again, the tension becomes so great that you hold your breath.

To say this is an antiwar book is to put it too mildly, and in any case such labels do an injustice to its great sweep, the levels of its sympathy. There is a plenitude of felt life in the book. There is a novelist’s notice taken of the sheer complexity not only of the characters but of the legacy of pain and conflict written into the gnarled and beautiful landscape through which Ora and Avram walk. And there is the story itself, unfolded with care and truth, wit and tenderness and rare understanding. This is one of those few novels that feel as though they have made a difference to the world.

Colm Toibin is the author, most recently, of the novel “Brooklyn.”

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