*1947: Where Now Begins*, Elisabeth Åsbrink review by Krista Nave

Other Press (translated by Fiona Graham)

*1947: Where Now Begins* is a historical nonfiction book written by Elisabeth Åsbrink. The events of 1947 are contextualized through human narratives and experiences, as Åsbrink tells the story of many people’s lives, including her father’s, through this pivotal year. Åsbrink’s writing background as a journalist and playwright serves her well; the book is as well researched as any article should be, and as emotionally evocative and narratively complex as any play. The book is far from a distant recounting of the past, but instead is full of vivid and emotional scenes.

What happened in the year 1947? Nazis are put on trial as the term genocide is created by one desperate and ostracized lawyer. The Jewish people try to heal in any way they can, either fleeing to a Palestine that will not accept them, or returning home to the burnt ruins of their former lives. People fall in love, fathers are mourned, Nazis flee Europe, UFO’s are sighted, books are written, countries are born, and people are laid to rest. The chapters of *Where Now Begins* are divided into months, and then locations, where Åsbrink delves into the minds of real life characters in this book, allowing us to see their thoughts and emotions. Despite being about moments from the past, the narration is written in the present tense. For these people, 1947 is now, and they have no idea how the decisions they make will affect them next week, let alone how they will impact the world. However, the audience, with our knowledge of the present, knows their future. Each sentence written by Åsbrink, and each choice made by these people, is overlaid with a keen sense of dramatic irony. She takes the time to question them, but the answers are only known by the audience. Åsbrink tackles heavy concepts such as fascism with beautiful language, writing “while the democratically minded embrace the concept of universality, Fascism mutates from nationalism into an international nationalism. An idea that everyone will be absorbed into a single white body, with a single black heart” (179). She does not explain it in dull, political terms, but allows the reader to visualize it, to feel the malignant emotion at the heart of hateful ideology.

The year 1947 is personally relevant to Åsbrink as well, as she weaves the story of her young father, his parents, and grandparents into her text. She dedicates an entire section to them that reads more like a personal essay, as she explains their lives and deaths, and the trauma that affects her generations later: “I don’t want to write this. I stand in falling rain, falling death, words that evoke death, and death that evokes my words. My father’s fatherlessness” (121). As her grandfather travels home to his family, and to his eventual death, in a boat with a boxful of oranges, Åsbrink asks questions that can only be answered by the dead, “how many oranges, were they done up in tissue paper, did they smell of sun and fresh sweetness, did they glow in his arms” (121). Åsbrink stunning prose evokes an unspeakable emotion. She expertly balances large and small events and places them as of equal emotional importance. If I were to criticize anything about this book, it would be exclusion of Asia from the events and locations depicted. However, writing about every significant event in the world, even in just one year, is a gargantuan task, and Åsbrink does well in her focus on Europe, the Middle East, and America.

Though it describes events that took place seventy or more so years ago, *1947: Where Now Begins* is startlingly, politically relevant to today’s world. It explains the origins of the Israel-Palestine conflict that continues to this day and affects many of our lives. If you wonder how fascism or Nazism survived the end of World War II, Åsbrink showcases the people that kept it alive in their hearts, mind, and writings. But this book is not just for the politically-minded. Anyone interested in the past, the present, human stories, or beautiful prose will find something that touches them in this thought-provoking text.