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*Contestable Truths, Incontestable Lies* by Steven Sher  
(review)

Richard Jeffrey Newman

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**CONTESTABLE TRUTHS, INCONTESTABLE LIES**

Steven Sher

Dos Madres

<https://www.dosmadres.com/shop/contestable-truths-incontestable-lies-by-steven-sher/>

110 Pages; Print, \$18.00

*Richard Jeffrey Newman*

Each time I read Steven Sher's *Contestable Truths, Incontestable Lies* in preparation for writing this review—and I read it three times—my response rooted itself in an idea that, for me, is best embodied by quotes from two very different poets. The first is William Butler Yeats's well-known saying, "Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry." The second is from Khaled Mattawa's introduction to *Without an Alphabet, without a Face: Selected Poems of Saadi Youssef* (2002). "Poetry," Mattawa says there, "can only be an exploration of ideology, not a means of expressing belief in it." As an orthodox Jew living in Israel, Sher would no doubt reject any characterization of his book as ideological, since the book's ethos is for him a matter of deeply held religious faith. That faith, however, nonetheless aligns itself with and helps to perpetuate the material consequences, especially to the Palestinians, of a political ideology that I need to acknowledge up front is precisely antithetical to my own. This is why I read the book three times: to make sure, when I say I think it represents overall a failure of craft and vision, that I am talking about the poetry, not my political differences with the author.

Before I get into that, though, I want to acknowledge that there are some fine poems in this book, from those in the spirit of imagism, like "Construction Cranes over Jerusalem"—"Great wingless birds / migrate from dreams, // alight to feed / on stone and steel"—to poems that can only have emerged

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from a deeply felt and fully engaged commitment to religious faith, like “Tefillin”:

What the knot holds  
none can know. Straps  
ground stray thoughts

and love contracts,  
the universe reduced  
to two black holes.

At dawn, G-d’s  
dark eye sockets  
send forth light.

Tefillin (phylacteries in English) are a pair of black leather boxes attached to black leather straps. One of the pair is designed to fit over the wearer’s forehead, while the other is designed to be worn on the arm. Each box contains portions of the Torah written on parchment. Anyone reading this poem who has ever *lawn tefillin* (put them on before morning prayers) will recognize immediately the way the ritual of wrapping the black strap around one’s arm—in a configuration spelling out *Shadai*, one of the names of God—does indeed “ground stray thoughts,” preparing the wearer to enter prayer fully focused.

The content of “Tefillin” may be culturally specific, but the mastery in its concision and precision recall for me the poems of Arab Andalusia, which may emerge from a different religious tradition but plumb the spiritual depths of the relationship between darkness and light in analogous ways. When I say that I think Sher’s book fails, in other words, I do not mean that I think he is not a skilled poet. Indeed, based on the handful of poems that the two I’ve quoted above represent, I’d say he is a very skilled poet. Rather, I think the book fails because in treating its dominant themes—all of which center on the idea that Israel is the divinely promised Jewish homeland—Sher too often crosses the line, in Yeats’s terms, from poetry into rhetoric and, in Mattawa’s, from exploration into declaration.

This problem is perhaps most obviously exemplified in “Bombing Gaza,” which is modeled on the passage in Genesis (18:23–32) where Abraham bar-

gains with God for the lives of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. For Abraham's sake, God agrees not to destroy the cities if even just ten righteous men can be found there. In the end, though, since such men don't exist, God destroys both cities with fire and brimstone (Genesis 19:24). Here is "Bombing Gaza" in its entirety:

I who am no more  
than dust must ask.  
What if you find fifty  
righteous souls?  
*I won't destroy it.*

Or forty say  
they're filled with awe.  
*I won't destroy it.*

What if thirty  
thirst for justice?  
*I won't destroy it.*

If twenty-five possess  
kind hearts?  
*I won't destroy it.*

Or twenty defend  
a virgin's honor?  
*I won't destroy it.*

Fifteen redeem  
the orphans, feed the poor?  
*I won't destroy it.*

And what if ten,  
if only ten repent?  
*For ten but not one less*  
I'll spare Hamas.

The fact that we know how the story of Sodom and Gomorrah ends, which Abraham could not have known, makes this poem deeply problematic. To begin with, the rhetorical ploy of conflating Hamas/Gaza with Sodom and Gomorrah completely erases the profoundly contested history that gave rise to the existence of Hamas and Gaza in the first place. More to the point,

though, since we know that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were found to be without any morally redeeming qualities, that conflation implicitly extends the same judgment to the Palestinians.

Sher's speaker, in other words, is no Abraham. Disingenuous at best, his questions are not sincere attempts to save the lives of those who would perish in the bombing. Rather, because he has already equated those people with the irredeemable Sodomites, his questions are actually assertions that the righteous for whom Gaza might otherwise be spared do not exist. Understood in this way, what Sher presents as a poem exploring what it would mean to have compassion for the people of Gaza becomes instead a declaration that those people actually *deserve* to be bombed. This dehumanization of the Palestinians is evident throughout the book, from its perhaps most subtle expression in "Looking East from Mt. Scopus," the first poem in the collection and the one which therefore frames everything that follows, to its more explicit expression in "Spit," which recalls nothing so much as the racist, blame-the-victim logic that white society has historically used in this country to explain the supposedly irrational and gratuitously antisocial behavior of Black people.

Notwithstanding the fine poems I cited above, in other words, Sher's book as a whole concerns itself primarily with delegitimizing any claim the Palestinians might have to a homeland on the land where the State of Israel now exists. It is hardly surprising, then, in the book's final poem, "Jerusalem, Overlooking Kidron Valley," that when Sher's speaker asserts that "this land belongs to those who love it," he switches almost immediately to the first person plural, "we" and "us," the implication being that the Jews are the only ones who truly feel, whose humanity makes them truly capable of, this love.

There is one more idea about poetry, about what a poem is, that I thought about while reading *Contestable Truths, Incontestable Lies*. When I was her student back in the 1980s, June Jordan defined a poem for us as "a vehicle for telling the truth." In her introduction to *June Jordan's Poetry for the People* (1995), she says it this way, "You cannot write lies and write good poetry." The idea put forth in "Bombing Gaza," that Gaza and the people who live there are no different from the biblically irredeemable Sodomites and therefore "deserve" to be bombed, is a lie, as is the idea that Jews are the only ones capable of loving as a homeland the land that is now called the State of Israel. What is not a lie is the depth of religious feeling that connects Steven Sher and those

who share his beliefs to that land. What it means to live with and act on those feelings deserves a poetry committed to telling the truth about them, however complex and uncomfortable that truth might be. Unfortunately, those poems are not to be found in *Contestable Truths, Incontestable Lies*.

**RICHARD JEFFREY NEWMAN** is the author, most recently, of *Words for What Those Men Have Done*, a collection of poems, and *The Teller of Tales: Stories from Ferdowsi's Shahnameh*, translations of selections from the classical Persian epic. He is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Nassau Community College in Garden City, New York. His website is [www.richardjnewman.com](http://www.richardjnewman.com).

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**A MAP OF THE HEAVENS: SELECTED POEMS, 1975–2017**

Janet Hamill

Spuyten Duyvil

<http://www.spuytenduyvil.net/a-map-of-the-heavens.html>

213 pages; Print, \$18.00

*Jane Rosenberg LaForge*

Of all the nostalgias for the before times—before the pandemic, the internet, even before MTV and the Reagan Revolution—the art and musical movements born out of the 1970s downtown New York scene are among the most potent. The late Keith Haring's works are ubiquitous on greeting cards and billboards. David Byrne of the Talking Heads, which rose to prominence during the golden age of New York City nightlife, performs now on Broadway as an elder statesman of rock 'n' roll. Patti Smith, poet, performer, songwriter, and winner of a National Book Award for her memoir, is regarded as a national treasure. The poet Janet Hamill witnessed the birth and nurturing of these scene-makers and their styles, particularly the ascent of Smith, her friend since college. (They once stayed up past midnight to hear the first FM radio broadcast of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, a night Smith documented in an introduction to *All the Songs*: