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Aghast in Gaza

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VICIOUS CIRCLE

A Novel of Complicity

By Robert Littell

Overlook. 300 pp. \$24.95

Setting an espionage thriller in the Middle East is tricky. During the months between the editing and the publishing of Robert Littell's latest suspense novel, the Hamas party won the majority of seats on the Palestinian legislative council, and the open conflict that some of the characters in "Vicious Circle" seek to prevent is now unfolding on CNN and al-Jazeera. None of this, though, dilutes Littell's central thesis (or spoils his muscularly plotted suspense). In his speculative game of three-dimensional chess, the pieces may not reflect recent history, but it's a game that never reaches checkmate.

"Vicious Circle" begins in the very near future, shortly after George W. Bush has left office and been succeeded by the first female president, a "curt and crabby" woman with no small amount of either intelligence or ambition. (Littell never names his "Madame President"; readers will no doubt draw their own conclusions.) Donald Rumsfeld is out of the Cabinet, and U.S. diplomatic strategy has become, if not dovish, a bit less hawkish -- motivated less by the desire to stanch the bloodshed in Gaza than to keep it from spreading to the West.

After another attempted terrorist attack (anthrax, by crop duster in Illinois) and an ominous wave of Muslim violence in Europe, the United States has crafted a Middle East peace treaty that satisfies, if not mollifies, the heads of the Palestinian Authority and Israel. But there are religious fanatics on both sides who find compromise worse than surrender, and they are determined to do anything to derail the treaty before it can be signed.

The fragile detente is thrown dangerously off-kilter when a group of radical Palestinians kidnaps Rabbi Apfulbaum, an American Jew as addicted to publicity as he is opposed to the peace treaty. His captor and interrogator is a man known as the Doctor, and through interrogation and conversation the two begin a slow pas de deux that threatens to scuttle the tentative peace.

The story is told on the ground in Gaza and its environs, as well as narrated from Washington by Harvard professor Zachary Taylor Sawyer, who is serving as a special assistant to the president on Middle Eastern affairs. Sawyer is dictating a contemporaneous account of the crisis for future historians, chronicling "the furious disagreements that are shoved under the carpet to give the impression that the highest level of government speaks with one voice." Although Sawyer narrates parts of "Vicious Circle," he's less important than some minor figures who have significant roles to play, including a Palestinian warrior named Yussuf and his wife, Maali, who is captured by the Israelis. Others who find themselves swept up in this crisis are Rabbi Apfulbaum's naive young secretary and a Mossad spy who is working with the Israeli police force to secure Apfulbaum's freedom.

Littell, a former Newsweek journalist, is particularly unsparring when it comes to sketching the character of Max Sweeney, the Jerusalem bureau chief for a large unnamed American newspaper. Deaf in one ear (Littell likes to employ physical manifestations of spiritual and mental shortcomings; both the Doctor

and the rabbi are nearly blind), Sweeney is widely perceived to be sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, but that doesn't stop powerful people on both sides of the conflict from trying to spin him with the skill of veteran Hollywood publicists. When he's offered a rare interview with the Doctor, Sweeney is forced to swallow his revulsion in service of the exclusive, and when he arrives at the hideout where the Doctor has stashed the rabbi, the question becomes who's playing whom: the Jews or the Muslims, the press or its subjects?

Ultimately, "Vicious Circle" would have been even more taut without Sawyer's tape-recorded interludes; the story in Gaza moves briskly and is much more interesting than the boardroom and speakerphone action back in Washington. But Littell scores with his major point -- that the Doctor and the rabbi are so polarized that they're actually alike.

Both even bear marks on their foreheads (the Doctor from Islamic prayer, the rabbi from praying at the Wailing Wall); they're men who have beaten their heads to bruises in service to their respective gods.

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