



Extreme Rambling: Walking Israel's Separation Barrier. For Fun.

Mark Thomas

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'Good fences make good neighbours, but what about bad ones?'

The Israeli barrier is probably the most iconic divider of land since the Berlin Wall. It has been declared illegal under international law and its impact on life in the West Bank has been enormous.

Mark Thomas - as only he could - decided the only way to really get to grips with this huge divide was to use the barrier as a route map, to 'walk the wall', covering the entire distance with little more in his armoury than Kendal Mint Cake and a box of blister plasters.

In the course of his ramble he was tear-gassed, stoned, sunburned, rained on and hailed on and even lost the wall a couple of times. But thankfully he was also welcomed and looked after by Israelis and Palestinians - from farmers and soldiers to smugglers and zookeepers - and finally earned a unique insight of the real Middle East in all its entrenched and yet life-affirming glory. And all without hardly ever getting arrested!

Extreme Rambling: Walking Israel's Separation Barrier. For Fun. Details

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From Reader Review Extreme Rambling: Walking Israel's Separation Barrier. For Fun. for online ebook

Ben Baker says

As funny as Thomas' writing style can be, this was a hard read to get through simply because of the subject matter - the Israel / Palestine situation - which can at times get suffocatingly sad to think about. Thats not to say I wouldn't recommend this book which I would in a heartbeat as a frequently hilarious, always eye opening look at something most people would gladly turn away from and ignore.

Red Dog says

An extremely enjoyable book, the seriousness of the subject leavened by Mark Thomas' humour and inherent understanding of the foolishness of what he is trying to undertake, which in turn mirrors the surrealism/foolishness of Israel's attempt to turn the fantasy of a border into a concrete and barbed wire reality.

The only element that I would have liked some clarification on was why two Israelis that he met, one an officer of the Border Police, the other a mayor of one of the towns Thomas passed through, were not identified by name, especially since Thomas does such a good job of humanising everyone else that he met. I suppose the Border Police office might not have wanted to be identified for security reasons, but an elected official is a public person - without being told why these two didn't want to be identified (or why the decision was made not to identify them), it left the suspicion that they were being presented as caricatures or stereotypes, which to a large extent is one of the main factors that drives the troubles in the Middle East as it is - Israeli and Palestinian leaders can portray their neighbours as a dangerous and dehumanised 'other', rather than as the human beings they actually are.

But that aside, I'd recommend this book to anyone with a political conscience and a sense of humour.

Paul says

I liked the books Mark Thomas writes he tries to educate you through the medium of humour. How will I highlight the problems in Israel I will ramble, because I'm British, beside the wall being built mix up the anecdotes about the people I mean with some fact and figures and he does it very well.

The book highlights life on both sides of the Wall that is going up to separate Israel and Palestine, I don't feel he is trying to make you take sides but is really highlighting the human suffering that is going on in this conflict.

Dancingsocks says

I went to see the tour of this book a few years ago (2011?) and learnt a lot and also laughed a lot.

With the Palestinian/Israeli conflict in the headlines I thought I'd educate myself a little more.

A fascinating and often funny book about a ramble that shows the lunacy of religion being used to justify anything. The persecuted still feel persecuted and therefore persecute others.

I'd recommend reading it.

liberal sprinkles says

Is the Security Barrier really a security device to protect Israel against suicide bombings, or a poor attempt at land grabbing, one that in fact perpetuates hate and could well cause the very thing it hopes to prevent? Mark Thomas presents both sides of the story as he rambles down the length of the Barrier with cameraman Phil Stebbing and characters from both sides of the divide, although he never tries to hide his pro-Palestinian leanings, or his contempt of the militant pro-Wall supporters. That might set some readers against the book, but I'd say read it before you judge it.

Extreme Rambling is a politically charged travelogue/reportage about the impact the Barrier Israel has built to cordon off the West Bank. With sometimes self-deprecating humor, Thomas reveals ridiculous, yet often sad, shocking and horrifying facts as he walks both sides of the Wall, judged to be illegal by the International Court of Justice. With light writing and insightful interviews with Palestinians villagers and politicians, as well as Israeli settlers, administrators, politicians and anti-Wall activists, he manages to explain the issue very clearly as he documents the Wall's existence and the impact it and the Israeli Occupation have had on Palestinians, like:

- towns divided, with agricultural land lost to the Israeli side of the Barrier;
- economies of border towns shut down;
- Palestinians made jobless because they aren't allowed to cross into Israel;
- Palestinians evicted from their homes or made to apply for permits from Israel to continue living in their own homes;
- Palestinian towns forced to apply for Israeli permits (often denied) to build everything from schools to hospitals; or slapped with demolition orders against (or which have had demolished) roads and existing buildings, from mosques to homes;
- West Bank Palestinians forced to live next to polluting Israeli factories that have been denied the right to operate on Israeli land; or denied the right to build a waste water treatment plant for their town;
- children forced to walk to school through a tunnel they share with human sewage;
- access to water supplies limited by Israel;
- a Palestinian village used as a live firing Israeli military training zone.

Why is Israel doing all this? Israelis say: To ensure security against suicide bombings, the number of which Thomas quotes Israelis as saying has declined from 365 a year before the Wall to zero. Palestinians and Barrier opponents say: To grab more land for Israel with as few Palestinians in it as possible; to "persuade" Palestinians to leave their lands, made inhospitable with hardly bearable living conditions; to cut East Jerusalem off from the rest of the West Bank, making it impossible for Palestine to have a capital there.

At what point do such actions justified under the guise of security become a violation of human rights and ethnic cleansing? When you discriminate on racist grounds and take away people's dignity, would you not create a sense of rage and an urge to retaliate? Thomas raises these questions and makes an excellent point when he says: "...when you make kids walk through tunnels of human s**t and stop a father seeing his sick baby, then I reckon you will probably need that security."

Thomas adopts a casual and irreverent tone (plus lots of rude comments) that makes the book very readable although the humor at time seems forced. But the strength of the book lies not in the writing but in the information it imparts and the stories of the ordinary lives affected by the crisis. For someone who has admittedly not been following related news closely, Extreme Rambling was a true eye opener.

Marc Nash says

This book is of vital significance and major irritation by equal parts. Mark Thomas is a British comedian, political prankster and who knew – a serious rambler, someone I am rather partial to for his comedy politics which he deftly twins. Now prior to the divisions over Brexit and immigration in the UK, the two major issues arousing political militancy are animal rights and ramblers' rights. Somewhat bourgeois concerns you might feel. And this feeds into Thomas's book for better and for worse.

Walking along the land up by the Israeli Apartheid Wall/Security Barrier (depending on where you stand), Thomas gives us a full explanation of what the issues between Israelis and Palestinians are on the ground. A really important contribution I feel, probably less so for those already polarised and shouting on social media, but for those who see these strident appeals and swipe left while stifling a yawn. So you get to understand just what is meant by the terms such as Settlers, land grab, water provision, Refugees and what each of the antagonists believes ideologically. It's anecdotal as Thomas talks to the people he meets along the walk, but it has the solidity of fact because the various antagonists betray their true vision.

This is my takeaway from the book. After the spate of Palestinian suicide bombs during the Second Intifadah (Uprising), Israel resolved to build what it called a security barrier (or even 'fence'). They also launched an assault on the Palestinian settlement of Jenin where most of the suicide bombers came from. The Intifadah ran out of momentum, for reasons that are unclear to all (though when you send you top boys to their deaths with explosive strapped to them, then you cull your own resources as the Japanese Kamikazes also discovered). But the Israelis went ahead and built the wall anyway. The wall took up the land it was built on, including land for buffer zones, checkpoints, military bases near the checkpoints and support roads. The barrier does not go hard up against existing buildings, so yet more land is subordinated to the wall. Whose land was used for all these demands, Palestinian land. Farmers had their farms cut in two, divided by a wall. Queues to pass through checkpoints grew, meaning Palestinian workers spent more time getting to and from their work in Israel.

So far so pretty much incontrovertible, but this is where ideologues betray themselves. The wall ostensibly was to protect Israeli communities. Many of those communities in the West Bank are deemed illegal by the international community, since they are beyond the so-called Green Line which demarcates the end of Israel's territory. The international community however has done nothing to enforce its own dictat, other than occasional freezes on further development of Israeli settlements. These settlements tend to be populated by the religious right wing in Israel, who see themselves as pioneers and claim borders for Israel as laid out in the Old Testament, which extend to Bagdad. The West Bank they regard not as Palestinian, but as ancient Judaea and Samaria and theirs by right. They oppose the wall that supposedly protects them, because it

seems to set limits on Israel's claims and de facto marks out a Palestinian state. This explicitly seems to mean that built into the programme of the wall is a land grab and a conscious attempt to shrink and divide Palestinian land to make any unified Palestinian state a distant prospect. When the Israeli military demilitarise a base, settlers are quick to move on to it and claim it for new settlements, it is no longer a no man's no go zone under military control, but now land claimed by and for Israel. When Palestinians stone Israelis, they are arrested, their houses raided. When Israeli settlers stone Palestinian children forced into a narrow belt of land to attend their school, either Israel provides a military escort, or Christian human rights groups do it; but the Israelis are not arrested, nor are their houses raided.

Thomas provides more detail and more perspectives than outlined here, but now to why the book also irritates. Thomas treats very serious political issues that he clearly feels passionately, by injecting humour. There are plenty of good quips and turns of phrase here, but they detract from the seriousness of the points on show here. Further, most gags involve references to British things, describing specific Israelis or Palestinians with some well worn British trope. Is the customer services desk at useless UK electrical store Dixons universal enough to be applied to a denizen of the Middle East? My US readers of this review can tell me if they've even heard of Dixons. This does not serve the book well and only point up Thomas' somewhat colonial attitudes to cultures very different to his own. He's not unaware of it, frequently pulling himself up with irritation that he said something or failed to say something, to enter the culture of the people he was with. And what could be more insulting than a British man asserting his right to untrammelled rambling, in a zone where few have the right to walk freely. As much as Thomas provokes the Kafkaesque absurd responses of the Israeli army and police patrolling the wall, he is protected by a UK passport, a Press Card, a TV camera to document his confrontations and fixers from both communities to ensure he is never really under threat (when arrested by the military, his Israeli fixer gets him released, even though it is the Jewish Sabbath). Palestinians simply don't have such resources or options to provoke the Israeli military. I don't think Thomas would last 5 minutes if he tried to pull this stunt in say disputed Crimea or the tribal lands between Pakistan and Afghanistan. There is a privilege of being British that Thomas plays up to for the whole language and thrust of this book, when he really shouldn't be if he wanted the arguments to remain up front and central.

Heather Cawte says

Mark Thomas' books are always thought-provoking. He has you crying with laughter at one minute - usually telling a story against himself - and then horrified the next. I've read all his books, and they just keep on getting better.

This is the account of his rambling holiday - the length of the Barrier that Israel is erecting around the West Bank. He meets people on both sides of the Barrier, good ones and crazy ones, sad ones and angry ones. He tries very hard to be fair to both sides, and I felt I understood much more about the situation when I finished.

But a warning - don't read this on public transport. People look at you oddly when you laugh out loud.

Bjørn Gunnar says

Crazy idea to walk the separation barrier for fun. And it is fun in a weird tragic way. And well written. The author even visits 'my' village, Jayyus, in the Qalqilya district and gets a brilliant quote from Mayor Abu Taher: "The problem here is that in Palestine the children are soldiers, and in Israel the soldiers are children". West Bank revisited in tears and laughter. Motivation for a real re-visit in May is steadily rising!

Eliza Genang says

I had seen this book a number of times at the library and not borrowed it. Why? It is so obviously something I'd love to read... A few chapters in I realised the reason. Good old fashioned green-eyed jealousy. This is exactly the sort of adventure that a more awesome version of myself would love to plan and do. Of course I'd first need to get some more balls, more get up and go and more extroversion. Then I'd be set.

This is all incredibly well done. Mark and his cameraman Phil walk the wall on both sides and are accompanied by numerous locals who act as guides, interpreters and hosts. These locals are the heart of the book and through these temporary relationships Mark tells the story of the wall in a human, raw and complex way. I learnt heaps. I laughed often. I will be recommending this book for years to come with wild eyes, I just know it. One of the best books I have ever read.

Arda says

I spotted this book at an old bookshop in West Jerusalem after promising myself not to buy any more books this year. On the cover is the Israeli flag, the Palestinian flag, "Walking Israel's Barrier. For Fun" it says. There's a picture of a kid on a donkey, there's a tank, a young girl. What is this supposed to be? I wonder if this 'Mark Thomas' is an Israeli, or if he's a random foreigner who has no idea where he's going. On the back-cover it says "Good fences make good neighbours, but what about bad ones?" There's a picture of an Israeli soldier there too.

At this point I have to admit I do not always keep my self-promises. And in this case, this proves to be a good thing. My fear was that I would have this book sit on my shelf for years, but I was in for a surprise when I ended up finishing the entire thing in less than three days.

This is the type of book that makes you smile and cry.

I know people often say these types of things about random things (and mostly about silly romantic comedies), but when I say smile, I actually mean SMILE, smart-smile: a genuine type of smile that smart stand-up comedians manage to deliver. And when I say that this book may make you want to cry, I actually mean it makes you SAD to think of how ignorance, arrogance and intolerance can lead to oppression. It's a "how can we live in a world that oppresses against an entire people based on race?" cry. It's a "hasn't history taught us anything?" cry. A "these characters are not mere characters but actual living breathing human beings who are being treated like animals in a cage" cry. It's a "how could people live under such horrid circumstances like they're in a zoo?" cry. And every once in a while, I had to shake myself upon realizing that this zoo he's describing... is the zoo around me. These people he's interviewing... I actually know some of them. This intolerable reality he's talking about... is all too familiar. I happen to live in East Jerusalem." That kind of sad.

The barrier, the wall, the "security fence" ... has been functioning for almost ten years now. We see it. We get stopped by it. We hear stories revolving around it. We walk by it. We listen to music as we pass by it. But it doesn't matter how many times I see it, every single day, I wake up, and I'm shocked. Every day, I am shocked to realize that we live in a time, that justifies caging people in, and blocking them out, through a systematic wall. How could it be OK? How could this wall be OK?

Mark Thomas, it turns out, is just as shocked. He's no Palestinian. He's no Israeli. He does not even live in this circus. But he's nevertheless shocked. A lot of the characters in this book are also shocked. One of the persons who walks the wall with him has to punch it every two minutes as a sign of disapproval. Others try to escape its reality. But the shock is there. It's obviously not only me who wakes up in this state of mind every day. People's lives are affected more than one can imagine - and it's not something one can merely "get used to." There's something seriously wrong in this picture, and I have a lot of respect for Mark and Phil for 'talking the talk and walking the walk.'

Perhaps Mark is not the most knowledgeable person about Middle East affairs, and this book actually could have used a final edit and a spelling re-check (the most amusing and ironic of which was typing "Machon Watch" instead of "Machsom Watch"!) Also, more information could have been added with regards to citizenship and identity cards in how they affect childbirth and relationships. However, unlike most news sources and/or politicians who depict the conflict through the political lens, Mark and Phil are two lads who happen to be human, and say it as it is.

Their portrayal of walking the wall is as simple and basic as that of a kid who would state the obvious in a "are you shitting me?" kind of way. There is no fake diplomacy or zealot argument here; these two are not obsessed with being politically correct. Mark is almost a stereotypical "bloke" and if you pay close attention, you can almost visualize him with the Kendal Mint Cakes [which I had to look up] and double-socks, he's so blunt it's almost rude, and he is not one who takes himself too seriously. He seems like the type of guy who would not be shy to poke fun at anything just for the sake of a good laugh, except that he also happens to have a conscience.

Side-jokes and mint cakes aside, at the end of every chapter, Mark brings out the beseeching voices of the people who are left helpless, and are being collectively punished simply for having been born on the wrong side of the wall. I could not help thinking that Mark and Phil must be somewhat traumatized, or at least haunted, by some of the stories and experiences shared, but in that respect, we all probably should be haunted too. This is not just a 'recommended book', it is rather urgent. As Mark urges, "this cannot be ignored any more."

Jennifer says

I don't know comedian Mark Thomas' work all that well but I harboured a suspicion that his work was more polemic than funny - more shouting than careful discussion.

However, I really enjoyed this book - it was light-hearted and heavy-hearted. It could not avoid being the latter but Thomas usefully keeps a tight rein on the understandable rage. The result is a 'more light than heat' book which examines the issues, the landscape and the people affected by the building of the fence/wall/barricade in Israel/Palestine. There is also a fair bit about the psychology of rambling.

I laughed out loud a few times and the whole thing had a wry tone. It is an implicit call to action by the

ignorant and complacent, and yes, it does make it a little harder to have a good old moan about one's own existence, but it was still comfortable enough for a bedtime read.

I am now keener to read some of his other books on the arms trade and Coca Cola.

Teresa Darragh says

I have to ask myself: why did I pick this book to read? Is it because I had visited these countries and wanted to hear it from someone else's perspective?

So far with this book, I can see the funny side to some situations and at other times the heart breaking despair at what is happening to a whole nation of people, by another group of people namely the Israel government, its policy makers, and its military.

I am feeling so depressed and angry at reading story after story of the inhuman treatment of Palestinian people that is taking place on a daily basis.

If I had not visited this place myself and heard and seen with my own ears and eyes about the awful events that are taking place there, would I have really believed the stories this author is describing and of the events that he has written about? I would be asking myself, and others, is he telling the truth?

The problem, however, is that I know everything he is saying. He is telling the truth. These deliberated situations such as walls, checkpoints, children being arrested, no freedom of movement, land grabs, home demolitions, lack of resources, and no infrastructure are all being forced on the people of Palestine as a whole.

I agree with Mark when he questions whether the wall is really for security or for land grab.

I now believe, like him, that if the oppression of the people of Palestine continues in such an inhumane manner then they would reap the seed they sow. When you brutalize a group of people, expect them to retaliate. The worst thing about what is going on is that these actions are not even being hidden by the Israeli government: it is there for everyone to see. This is all being allowed to take place. And for this to happen while the rest of the world and their governments sit back and allow for this to happen is a disgrace.

I would recommend this book to anyone to read. I am sure there is a lot more he could have said and written about, but I understand that to give an accurate account of most events that happened in 10 weeks would never be enough. I give this book a 5 star rate. It is a well-written book and a must read for anyone who wants to understand the Palestine and Israel situation.

Pete Hardy says

A fascinating insight into the current problems in Israel. While, as one might expect, pro-Palestinian, one

can't ignore the irony of a country that has a national holiday for 'Holocaust Day' yet carries on much as the Nazi's did in Warsaw and other ghettos. Some laughs to be had, a great style which is page-turning, though one sometimes has to gasp for air. And that is only because there is only so much injustice one can read in one day.

Rob Saunders says

One of the reviews says: "Horrifying and hilarious" and I couldn't agree more. Very well written and very witty (to be expected from him though).

Quite an eye opener as I'm guilty of not really knowing anything that's been going on between Israel and Palestine but I now don't want anything that has been grown in Israel (I know this is only showing part of the story happening over there but still!)

Very interesting read and I heartily recommend it

Mark Love says

I wasn't sure what to expect from this book. I like Mark Thomas, and enjoy his live stand-up, but this risked being like "Round Ireland With A Fridge" with added suicide bombers. But that goes to show just how little I know, or knew.

Any book about Israel, The West Bank and the illegal barrier that separates them can't fail to deal with some fairly hefty issues, and Mark Thomas sets out with the objective of seeing both sides of the wall. But his objectiveness disappears about the time of his first blister and the unavoidable injustices, asymmetry and surreal nature of the divide become apparent.

But this book manages to tread the line between preachy, informative and downright funny. The human stories, tragedies and perspectives from both sides are maddening, humbling and saddening, such as the son who watched his 84 year old father writhe on the ground with a broken back for 8hrs after falling from a tree just across the barrier and being refused permission to crawl back through a checkpoint until the allotted opening time. Or the Palestinian whose house was divided in two, and has been prosecuted for going to his kitchen. Or the kids who have to walk alongside a tunnel of shit to get to school, or the ones who have to walk with an armed guard.

This book is an incredibly easy way to get to understand some of the history, geography and politics surrounding this obstacle to peace. And bloody funny too.
