

Laird, Elizabeth and Sonia Nimr. *A Little Piece of Ground*. IL: Haymarket Books, 2008.

Review by Dr. Sandra Alfonsi

A Little Piece of Ground is a well-written novel, stylistically and linguistically appropriate for students in the 7th grade. It fits the parameters of what was called world literature, now renamed "global" literature. That being said, *A Little Piece of Ground* is a problematic, highly inflammatory, biased and agenda-based novel that will corrupt young minds and incite racial and religious hatred. I want to comment on the content and protagonist in *A Little Piece of Ground* as they relate to two points found in a letter sent by a principal of a New England middle school to concerned parents.

Parental Guide to 7th Grade English Global Literature Circles

1. It is the case that several of the young protagonists in these fictional works live in difficult circumstances and undergo traumatic, life-changing events. But because they are all Young Adult (rather than adult) novels, conflicts are examined, but hope prevails. Far from being bleak in their overall tone, because the protagonists overcome many challenges, these carefully chosen novels celebrate the triumph of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Our maturing readers gain a greater understanding of the challenges faced by youth in other cultures, as well as insight into the culture itself. Reading is the safest way for young people to learn about the world in which they live and come to terms with real-life issues.

The protagonist does indeed "live in difficult circumstances and undergo traumatic, life-changing events." However, the book does not present itself as a work of fiction. The two "testimonials" carried on the opening page that precedes the title page endow the novel with a biographical, authentic, non-fiction identity, thereby coloring the perspective of the student reading it. As to the letter's assertion that because the protagonist is young "conflicts are examined, but hope prevails," the only hope that prevails in this protagonist is that of the eventual destruction of Israel. The statement that "these novels celebrate the triumph of the human spirit in the face of adversity" does not apply to *A Little Piece of Ground* since the survival of the protagonist's human spirit depends on his ability to hate. Students who read this book learn that hatred gives a *raison d'être* for survival "in the face of adversity." As for the final sentence in the first point, that reading may be the safest way for "young people to learn about the world," this book is in no way a safe haven for young people who yearn to spread their wings and discover the world in which they live.

2. The structure of the project allows students to take control of their own learning. They will engage in historical and geographical research related to their work and will discuss the plights and decisions of various characters, as well as the author's purpose and fictional techniques, through Moodle, a virtual learning environment. Not only will students gain a greater understanding of other people, places, and cultures, they will also work toward bridging cultural

differences and understanding different perspectives. They will discover that no single narrative reveals the entire story, and that every author writes from a given perspective.

The statements in point two are not sustainable and represent the most dangerous aspects of this new program called Global Literature Cycles which allows students to “take control of their own learning.” As a university professor, I know from experience that very few of my students are capable of taking control of their own learning. I doubt that any youngsters in the 7th grade can do so. As for the assertion that they will “engage in historical and geographical research related to their work”, I would like to know how they will do so without accurate instruction by their teacher. The “testimonials” at the beginning of *A Little Piece of Ground* indoctrinate the students with anti-Israel propaganda, plant seeds of ethnic and religious hatred in fertile young minds and insure the direction of their historical research. These young students cannot possibly comprehend the author’s purpose or understand her fictional techniques. Most American students do not speak or write English correctly – at any age, and they do not have the skills of literary and linguistic analysis. *A Little Piece of Ground* is historically inaccurate, narrated from one perspective and relentless in its teaching of hatred of Israel and Israelis. There is no other perspective. The academic methodology of the project is as dangerously flawed as the novel. Allowed to do their own research, students will arrive at Internet sites that spew anti-Israel propaganda couched in revisionist history. These students will not discover “that no single narrative reveals the entire truth.” They will learn unbridled hatred of Israel and a virulent form of anti-Semitism.