

In the Ruins: The 1909 Massacres of Armenians in Adana, Turkey

Zabel Yessayan

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This unsparing, unflinching, and darkly poetic account of the 1909 massacre of 30,000 Armenians in Adana, Turkey, makes Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* seem like leisure reading. That's because Zabel Yessayan, one of the most important Armenian woman writers of the modern era, is relentless in capturing every horrid detail of genocide: every burnt building, every blood-streaked field, and every broken and whimpering face of those who survived the massacre.

In the Ruins reads like a travelogue as the author ventures across the threshold of civility into ruins of incomprehensible brutality. Part of a humanitarian envoy, she tries her best to comfort orphans, prisoners, and invalids, struggling with her own depression and an overwhelming sense of grief. Combining journalistic observations with poetic and philosophical reflections, the book has been credited with creating a new genre called "testimony literature." It both records historical events and gives voice and identity to a decimated race of people. That voice and identity don't negate the "crimson nightmare" of ethnic cleansing, but they offer hope and solidarity for survivors. Emerging throughout these lurid chapters is what Yessayan describes as the "untiring, unconscious genius for rebirth."

The first-person format also provides a prescient and harrowing perspective on post-traumatic stress disorder. Unlike drier, more clinical accounts of PTSD, the vivid prose depicts victims' emotions with heart-wrenching detail, revealing the maddening effects of violence on the human psyche, especially on children.

This new English translation of *In the Ruins*, equipped with grisly photos, couldn't be timelier. While it calls attention to past atrocities—prophetically speaking to the later genocidal horrors of the twentieth century—it reminds all present-day readers of the potential violence and barbarity simmering beneath racial and ethnic tensions.

SCOTT NEUFFER (Summer 2016)

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