

TO THE END OF THE LAND

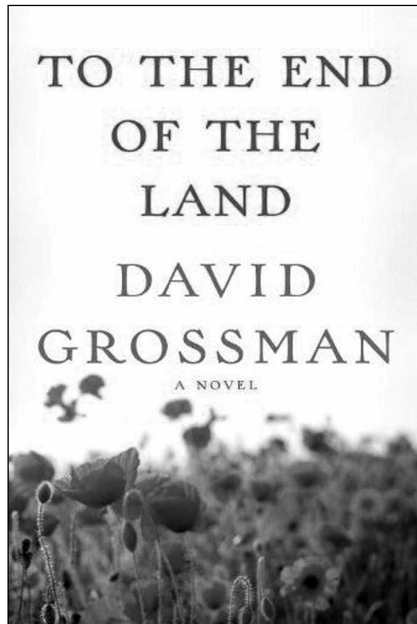
David Grossman. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2010. 577 pages.

Reviewed by Martha and Marty Roth

While there is no doubt in our minds that David Grossman is a major novelist (his earlier novel *See Under: Love* convinced us of that), *To the End of the Land* is a flawed masterpiece.

The current novel opens during the 1967 war. Three Jewish-Israeli teenagers form lifelong bonds when they are patients in the isolation ward of an abandoned hospital. The girl is Ora, the two boys, Avram and Ilan. They fall in love, all three, and develop the habit of caring for one another until they are healed.

The novel then jumps to the year 2000. Ora, Avram and Ilan have grown up and created a uniquely dysfunctional family. Ora has borne two sons, one fathered by each man. This complex family structure unfolds as Ora narrates her anxieties and fears about life in Israel, and we come to know these people—even Ilan, a relatively shadowy presence—as well as any characters in recent fiction. The narration stays with the family as they break up and re-combine: Grossman sucks out every bit of marrow, gets every shred of meat off the bone. Toward the novel’s end, Ora realizes that she has been “reciting a eulogy for the family that once was, that will never be again.”



The story of the novel, as opposed to the constantly unfolding backstory, is simple: Ora’s younger son Ofer finishes his military tour of duty, and the two of them plan a hiking trip in the Galilee. Then the Second Intifada erupts, and Ofer volunteers for continued duty. Ora takes him to join his unit, then realizes she cannot bear to simply wait at home, so she picks up Avram and takes him on the walking trip (hence the title).

Ora and Avram walk, they camp, they meet a few people, they find the land studded with memorials to the dead, killed in the almost continuous battles that have been fought on this territory since 1948. Ora so dreads hearing of Ofer’s death that she vows not to listen to the radio, read the newspapers, or allow anyone she meets on the trek to tell her the latest news. If she cannot be found, she imagines, then the Kafkaesque Notifiers will not be able to tell her about Ofer and

she may, in this way, keep him alive.

As for Avram, Ora has not seen him for some time, although he is Ofer’s biological father, and she tries, on their walk, to recreate Ofer for him, this son he has never known, through her memories—another way of keeping him alive. Through Ora’s impassioned evocation of Ofer, Avram—who suffers from severe physical and psychological wounds incurred during the Sinai war—slowly comes back to life.

In Ora, Grossman has created a large and rich character, but we found it difficult to admire or identify with her. Her fears are personally debilitating, almost psychotic, even though Grossman suggests they are the fears of all mothers for their sons. Ora believes she can read the thoughts of others, especially her lovers and children. To an extent, all mothers imagine they are inside their children’s heads, at least for the early years of life, but Ora’s madness is that she is a middle-aged woman living in a fantasy world of almost amniotic intimacy with her sons.

Ora is not an allegorical embodiment of *eretz yisrael*, the land itself (as Grossman also suggests)—she is too gritty, too particular—even though her mind is a labyrinth of recent history, legend, superstition, science, and agony. Every avenue on which her thoughts travel lead to the same agonized place: Ofer has re-enlisted in the IDF, and she lives in fear of hearing that he is dead.

Avram is the other centre of the novel, albeit a mute and hidden one, and he is Ora and Ilan’s darling, their lifelong object of fascination. “What a strange person,” Ora thinks early in the novel, “You never

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can tell if he's serious or joking, or if he's very smart or a total idiot." During the Yom Kippur War he was captured by Egyptians, tortured and imprisoned for three years, and he returns from captivity in a near-catatonic state.

Does Ora's breakdown, hysteria, madness—call it what you will—have anything to do with the "situation," the Occupation, as opposed to the drain of militarization that any mother in an embattled society might feel? The only Palestinian character in the novel is the taxi driver, Sami, a family fixture. Ora hires him to drive her and Ofer to his unit, and later to pick up Avram—who, sunk in debility, pisses on Sami's new upholstery. On the long drive, they stop to bring a sick Palestinian child to an encampment where he can be cared for. Ora's perception of the "other"—even though she describes him as a longtime family friend—is clouded by her narcissism, and her sympathy for Sami moves along that notorious equal playing field that defenders of the Israeli occupation regularly invoke:

*How had she not realized what Sami was going through when he saw those injured, beaten people? She swears that the first thing she'll do when she gets home is call him and apologize. She will ... force him to make up with her. And if he refuses, she'll explain in the simplest way that they have to make up, because if she and he cannot make up after one bad day, then maybe there really is no chance that the greater conflict will be resolved.*

Although the novel is an extravagant demonstration of Ora's hypersensitivity, she is cruelly insensitive to the lived realities of her Palestinian ser-

vant and "friend." Ora thinks herself apart from or above the racism of her society, but the novel doesn't confirm this: "Ora's cheeks are flushed. It was the way he [Sami] shoved her into that 'you people' that riled her up . . . as though she is with *them*." But earlier she had asked him to drive Ofer to his military base, a "little detail" she had forgotten to mention when she phoned him to set up the trip. Eventually she realizes that "he is the only Arab in this convoy . . . and she too starts to feel a prickle of sweat: he's simply scared, he's dying of fear, how could I have done this to him?" And maybe, by the end of the novel, she has learned who he is: "perhaps going out of his mind was the only way a Palestinian could get through all the checkpoints and the permits and the physical examinations."

Grossman's Israel, in Ora's 576 page-long wail of anguish, is both a state of total militarization and, perversely, an eternal victim. It opens at the historical high-water mark of 1967 and yet represents it only as a time of fear and infection—an adolescent fantasy of conquering Arab armies. Ora's sons in their turn are driven temporarily insane by fear, as we learn from long passages in which panicky compulsions or obsessions distort their childish behaviour. But when they come out the other side of terror, they have the heavily armoured personalities of professional soldiers.

Ora and others live with the constant anxiety of Arab aggression or Arab conquest but will in no way acknowledge that this is less than a fact of nature, that they as Israeli citizens had and have a hand in this and some measure of responsibility for it.

In the Galilee Avram, who has come out of the almost comatose condition in which he can't control his bladder, his limbs or his speech, thinks about a woman trailing

*a crimson thread behind her. Perhaps it is an umbilical cord that comes out of her and keeps going forever. He imagines ... men, women, and children streaming out of the towns and villages... to tie their own threads to hers.... [H]e sees a red tapestry spreading out over the expanses below him, clinging to them like a fishing net, a thin, bleeding mesh that glistens in the sun.*

Such lyrical passages lift the narrative out of where-we-went-on-our-walking-trip and ask to be considered at the level of myth or epic; but the myth is one of physical connection to the land.

We must acknowledge that the story of the novel outside the novel is bitterly sad. David Grossman's middle child, Uri, was about to enter the armoured regiment in which his older brother Jonathan served, and Grossman, like Ora, was engaging in magical thinking by writing this novel. Uri died when his tank was hit by a Hezbollah missile.

As a consequence of Ora's centrality, the narrative is sometimes suffocatingly inward, too constrained for such a large, ambitious novel. And it can't really build, since its whole movement is that of avoidance, evasion, and waiting. Still, *To the End of the Land* is a major novel—often large, bold and incisive and filled with moments of great narrative force. It is beautifully written, and the translation by Jessica Cohen—though it has been criticized as excessively idiomatic—couldn't be better. ♦