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Stones, Glass Houses, Sontag and Said

To put it all in a nutshell, come the month of May Edward Said won't be traveling to Vienna; Susan Sontag will be traveling to Jerusalem.

It's a backhanded tribute to his effectiveness as a spokesman for the Palestinian cause that the attacks on the Palestinian Said have, across the past couple of years, reached new levels of envenomed absurdity.

The latest uproar over Said concerns a trip to Lebanon he made last summer, in the course of which he and his family took the opportunity to travel to the recently evacuated "security zone" formerly occupied by Israeli forces. First they visited the terrible Khiam prison and torture center, then a deserted border post, abandoned by Israeli troops and now crowded with festive Lebanese exuberantly throwing stones at the heavily fortified border.

In competitive emulation of his son, Said pitched a stone and was photographed in the act. You can scarcely blame the man for being stunned at the consequences. Throw a rock at a border fence, and if you are a Palestinian called Edward Said you'll be the object of sharply hostile articles about the infamous stone toss in the *New York Times*, face a campaign to be fired from your tenured job at Columbia University and—this is the latest at time of writing—be disinvented by the Freud Society and Museum in Vienna from a longstanding engagement to deliver the annual Freud lecture there in May. (To its credit, Columbia stands by him and says the calls for his removal are preposterous and offensive.)

What, aside from being an articulate Palestinian, is Said's crime? As he himself has written, while "I have always advocated resistance to Zionist occupation, I have never argued for anything but peaceful coexistence between us and the Jews of Israel once Israel's military repression and dispossession of Palestinians has stopped." Perhaps that's the problem. Said makes a reasoned and persuasive case for justice for Palestinians. He doesn't say that the Jews should be driven into the sea. These, not the fanatics, are the dangerous folks.

Let us now contemplate the role of Susan Sontag, another public intellectual of large reputation. You can pretty much gauge a writer's political sedateness and respectability in America by the kind of awards they reap, and it is not unfair to say that the literary and indeed grant-distributing establishment deems Sontag safe. Aside from the 2000 National Book Award for her latest novel, *In America*, she received in 1990 the liberal imprimatur of a five-year (and richly endowed) "genius" fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation, which once contemplated giving just such a fellowship to Said but retreated after furious protests from one influential Jewish board member, Saul Bellow.

Now Sontag has been named the Jerusalem Prize laureate for 2001, twentieth recipient of the biennial award since its inauguration in 1963. The award, worth \$5,000, along with a scroll issued by the mayor of Jerusalem, is proclaimedly given to writers whose works reflect the freedom of the individual in society.

Sontag was selected by a three-member panel of judges, com-



prising the Labor Party's Shimon Peres (now Ariel Sharon's foreign minister) and two Hebrew University professors, Lena Shiloni and Shimon Sandbank. Peres approvingly cited Sontag's description of herself: "First she's Jewish, then she's a writer, then she's American. She lives Israel with emotion and the world with obligation." When notified of her latest accolade, Sontag's response was, "I trust you have some idea of how honored and moved, deeply moved, I am to have been awarded this year's Jerusalem Prize." Sontag is now scheduled

to go to Jerusalem for the May 9 awards ceremony.

Why dwell on the mostly tarnished currency of international literary backslapping? I do so to make a couple of points concerning double standards. American intellectuals can be nobly strident in protesting the travails of East Timorese, Rwandans, Central American peasants, Chechens and other beleaguered groups. But for almost all of them the Palestinians and their troubles have always been invisible.

It can scarcely be said that Sontag is a notably political writer. But there was an issue of the 1990s on which she did raise her voice. Along with her son, David Rieff, Sontag became a passionate advocate of NATO intervention against Yugoslavia, or, if you prefer, Serbia. On May 2, 1999, Sontag wrote an essay in the *New York Times Magazine*, "Why Are We in Kosovo?" urgently justifying NATO's intervention. "What if the French Government began slaughtering large numbers of Corsicans and driving the rest out of Corsica...or the Italian Government began emptying out Sicily or Sardinia, creating a million refugees...?"

Sontag cannot be entirely unaware of a country at the eastern end of the Mediterranean from which at least 750,000 residents have been expelled. She has always been appreciative of irony. Does she see no irony in the fact that she, assiduous critic of Slobodan Milosevic, is now planning to travel to get a prize in Israel, currently led by a man, Ariel Sharon, whose credentials as a war criminal are robust? Does Sontag see no irony in getting a prize premised on the recipient's sensitivity to issues of human freedom, in a society where the freedom of Palestinians is unrelentingly suppressed? Imagine what bitter words she would have been ready to hurl at a writer voyaging to the Serb portion of Sarajevo to receive money and a fulsome scroll from Radovan Karadzic or Milosevic, praising her commitment to freedom of the individual.

Yet here she is, packing her bags to travel to a city over which Sharon declares Israel's absolute and eternal control—in violation of international law—and whose latest turmoils he personally provoked by insisting on traveling under the protection of a thousand soldiers to provoke Palestinians in their holy places.

When the South African writer Nadine Gordimer was offered the Jerusalem Prize a number of years ago, she declined, saying she did not care to travel from one apartheid society to another. But to take that kind of position in the United States would be a risky course for a prudent intellectual. Said knows he lives in a glass house, yet he had the admirable effrontery to throw his stone. ■

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