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The Lines We Draw by Tim Franks: A taut, satisfyingly woven narrative about being Jewish and a journalist

This book is at once a family chronicle, an inquiry into the nature of writing and the forces that shape one's self, and a history that spans centuries

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In a book loaded with grief, Tim Franks also manages to be funny

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The Lines We Draw: The Journalist, the Jew and an Argument About Identity

Author: Tim Franks

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When Tim Franks became [BBC's Middle East](#) correspondent in 2007, he was accused of being a self-loathing Jew and an Islamophobe.

In certain ways, being Jewish and a journalist are similar. Both are outsiders, perceived suspiciously by many. For millennia, Jews have experienced imposter syndrome, “hated and hacked at”, Franks writes, “even when, and maybe particularly when they have come from inside the establishment”.

Franks's *The Lines We Draw* is at once a family chronicle, an inquiry into the nature of writing and the forces that shape one's self, and a history that spans centuries.

It begins with family. Franks's ancestors, survivors of the Inquisition, included Benjamin Disraeli and cigar-makers, crisscrossing Europe, Venezuela and Cuba, until most were murdered in the 1940s. Many of Franks's family had settled in Lithuania, where almost 96 per cent of Jewish people were killed, and in Amsterdam, which had, until then, long been a sanctuary.

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The specificity of language is crucial to Franks as both a Jew and a journalist. Having earlier discussed the Talmudic tradition of debate, he argues that a carefully chosen word does not just wrest us “from torpor” but is needed in the reporting of horrors past and present, which itself “demands an intricate measurement of taste”.

He recollects the bombed Gaza home of Dr Izzeldin Abuelaish, whose daughters had just been killed. Although not new to wreckage and death, Franks had “never done so in the company of a father ... Down here: rubble, wire, dust, bracelet. Up there: hair clumps glued on ceiling.”

It may seem improbable, but Franks is funny. About Disraeli: “He was no ordinary Jewish stock; it was, to clarify, consommé juif.” He also delights in making fun of himself in moments of “buttock-cramping” embarrassment, consciously conforming, perhaps, to English and Jewish stereotypes with his affection for wordplay and self-deprecation.

[Burying the Enemy - The Story of Those who Cared for the Dead in Two World Wars: A civilising veneer for savagery]

With its many characters and locations, the book may initially require patience, especially for those unfamiliar with Jewish terminology. However, the narrative is tautly, satisfyingly woven. Seemingly random anecdotes – an earthquake in Italy, a locker-room exchange at the Super Bowl – later resonate.

Moreover, in a book loaded with grief, Franks chooses to end on another J word, joy – revelling in a musician-forebear who palled around with the Mozarts, and a journalist’s wonder about the world. There are many contradictions and unanswered questions in Franks’s book; his aim – in which he succeeds – is to articulate them with richness and clarity.

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