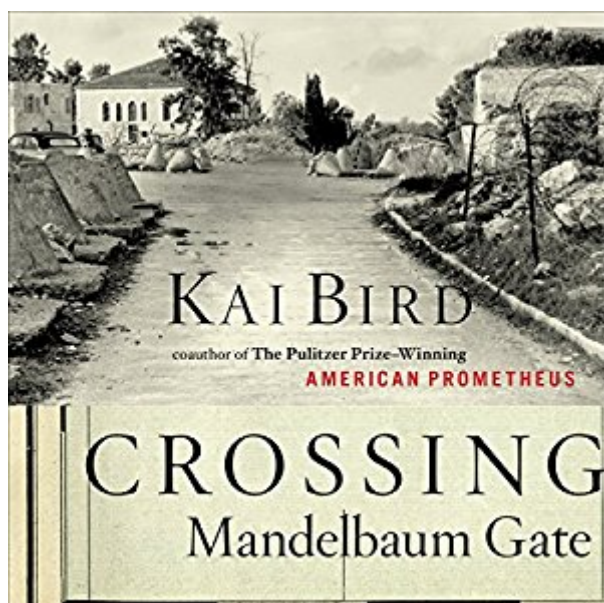


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# Crossing Mandelbaum Gate: Coming Of Age Between The Arabs And Israelis, 1956-1978



## Synopsis

DIVIDED CITY is a vivid memoir of an American boy growing up in the midst of the Arab-Israeli conflict, three major wars and three decades of political upheavals in the Middle East. Set in Jerusalem (1956-1958), Beirut (1970), Saudi Arabia (1962-1965), Amman and Cairo (1965-1967), Bird's book explains through a blend of memoir and history why the Western experience in the Middle East has been so turbulent. Through Bird's Zelig-like presence, the reader experiences the Suez War of 1956, the June 1967 War and the Black September hijackings of 1970 that led to the Jordanian Civil War. Bird's memoir shows how all of these momentous events led to the rise and tragic downfall of a secular Arab nationalist ethos -- only to be replaced by the rise of a fundamentalist, politically reactionary Islamist movement. The narrative history tells the stories of such illuminating figures as life-long Jerusalem resident George Antonius, author of *The Arab Awakening*, and his charismatic wife; Jordan's King Hussein and his CIA connections; the businessman Salem bin Laden, Osama's older brother and a family friend; Saudi kings Faisal and Khalid; President Nasser of Egypt; and Leila Khaled, the striking young Palestinian radical who hijacked one of the Black September planes. The son of a U.S. Foreign Service officer, Kai Bird spent his formative years with the Arabs, but he ended up marrying the only daughter of two Holocaust survivors. This Shoah survival story becomes a part of Bird's own personal narrative, and provides him with a deeper understanding of the historical relationship between the destruction of European Jewry and the Arab-Israeli conflict. This extraordinary memoir by a Pulitzer-prize-winning historian sheds new light on all the wars of the Middle East fought in the name of identity. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I was given the chance to review this book by Kai Bird, Pulitzer Prize winning author of *American Prometheus*. Given my interest in the Middle East, I was very excited to read this book. The author tells the reader in the beginning that the book is a personal memoir and history of the region in which he grew up as the son of an American diplomat. As he lived in Places like Jerusalem (hence the metaphor for the crossing of the now non-existent Mandlebaum Gate) between Arab controlled East Jerusalem and Israeli controlled West Jerusalem, Cairo, Beirut, Saudi Arabia and India, Bird lived through many important events during the 1950's through 1970's. I really didn't know what to expect from this book, but it turned out to be a great read. At first, I was annoyed by the constant shift in the narrative between the author's youthful memories and later events. However, after a while, the narrative made perfect sense. By describing his memories of the events as he lived through them (for example, the 1956 Arab/Israeli War) and later events, the author was giving us 'the rest of the story.' I found many of these anecdotes to be very interesting and I was surprised by my overall lack of knowledge of some versions of these events. The discussion of Egypt's Nasser and his leadership during the 1956 and 1967 wars was fascinating. Also, his own involvement during Black September in 1970 was also riveting during the Palestinian uprising in Jordan. I also loved the descriptions of life in the Aramco Oil towns in Saudi Arabia during the 1950's. Indeed, as the author himself notes, life was certainly far more 'American' in these places than even America itself. And, as compared to now, these 'oil towns' are now fortified and enclosed.

This book is a fascinating, personal perspective on the Middle East, with an emphasis on the word "personal." The author is very clear that, despite being filled with historical references, this is a memoir, not a history. I'm a little confused by some of the negative reviewers who complain, basically, that "This book, which the author clearly states is biased, is biased!!!" Bird admits that his sympathies after a childhood spent in Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia, lie primarily -- primarily, not exclusively -- with the Palestinian side of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Does the fact that he acknowledges that Israel has committed some atrocities make him, as some reviewers claim, a racist and an anti-semitic? I think not, but read the book and decide for yourself. What is undeniable is that this book provides a unique, personal perspective on a troubled region during the very years when the problems of today were taking shape. He offers very concise chapters

featuring quick but well-written (and yes, at times, biased) histories of modern Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel, all from an eyewitness perspective. He acknowledges his own flaws as a non-impartial observer, and tries as much as possible to give a balanced account of a complicated region. And perhaps most important he gives it all a nostalgic, personal slant that would never be found in a straight "history." Even if his take on the region is biased, it has value for providing an emotional chronicle of a region that most Americans only hear about in impersonal terms on the evening news. Long story short: I picked this up out of curiosity and found that I couldn't put it down, and it has inspired me to learn more about the Middle East and the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

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