

OLIVES

A VIOLENT ROMANCE
ALEXANDER McNABB

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Olives

Alexander McNabb knows firsthand the challenges that face a Brit settling into this region. We just hope the Dubai-based writer had an easier time than Paul Stokes, the protagonist of 'Olives' his new 'violent romance'.

Your day job is in public relations. Why did you start writing?

I'd written millions of words as a journalist, editor and PR guy and thought if I could write speeches and editorials for kings, superstar CEOs and the like, I could make up anything. I was right, too.

Which came first, the storyline or the desire to write a book?

The desire to write a book. My first book, 'Space', was intended to spoof airport novels, you know those Robert Ludlum sort of books. It was very funny but a bit sloppy stylistically. Agents told me humour wouldn't sell, so I decided

to write a serious book. 'Olives' happened, quite literally, after I had gone to sleep one night listening to a piece of music that made me think of a girl dancing in the rain. I woke up with a book in my head.

You had trouble finding a publisher. How did you deal with that?

Over the years, between 'Space', 'Olives' and my third book, 'Beirut', I've picked up over 250 rejections. I dealt with it by picking myself up every time and flinging myself at the wall again. Eventually, having picked up a London literary agent but still no publisher, I decided to

walk around the wall. If I have one regret, it's that I didn't walk around that wall earlier.

Do you think that highlighting the Arab side of the Arab/Israeli conflict may have contributed to your difficulty finding a publisher?

I think the fact that my books are set in the Middle East has certainly contributed to UK agents' decision not to take the projects up. I have picked up a number of daft comments, some of which would resonate with 'looks like Beirut' blogger Jad Aoun and his campaign to stop people using that lazy, out of date simile.

Did you have a political agenda with 'Olives'?

Not as such, but I did want to use the book to make its audience (it was originally written with a British audience in mind) think a little bit more about the difference between a terrorist, a freedom fighter, an activist and so on – that there are people behind those glib headlines, a human story that's probably one of the most repressed narratives in the world today.

Why do you choose Middle East conflict areas as the setting for your books?

Well, it didn't start that way; my first book was set in Richmond, London. The next three are set in Jordan and Lebanon, but not for any specific reason other than I have spent a lot of time in both countries and find much to love in both – as well as lots of colour and inspiration.

Are you using 'Olives' as a way to set the record straight with Western readers about the Middle East?

A little bit. It's certainly intended to help people get a little more interested in the region and its conflicts, perhaps to take an interest they otherwise wouldn't have taken and actually wonder about the other side to the story. But I didn't want to become yet another biased, hysterical voice. I'd hope that 'Olives' is an enjoyable, readable book that leaves people wanting to know

more rather than feeling they've been evangelised at.

Were the character Paul and his new life in Jordan in any way inspired by your own transition to the Middle East?

No, Paul is based firmly on a number of young, callow Brits I have met over the years – mainly journalists – and my own amusement at watching how they have reacted to my mainly Arab colleagues. He's transformed by his experience, tries to become closer to Aisha – even becomes a smoker. But the more he 'goes local' the more he finds himself uncertain as to what to do – with the blackmailing, double-dealing spook Lynch hardly helping matters and his girlfriend Anne, a metaphor for the pull of home, forcing him to confront his increasing alienation and confusion. Poor Paul isn't much of a hero – he's the bit of us we'd all rather wasn't there, the decision that's not quite as brave as we'd like to think we'd take for ourselves, the lack of certitude where we'd all rather think we'd be more committed.

'Olives' and 'Beirut' both feature British Intelligence officer Gerald Lynch. Are you developing the next James Bond?

No, not by any means. He just hung around and he's developed a lot, become a rounder character – in 'Olives' you only see him through Paul's eyes, but in 'Beirut' you get to learn a lot more about the man behind the spook. He's complex and intelligent yet he's a bit too fond of the sauce and prone to violence. He's too flawed to be a James Bond, but I've become quite fond of him over the years.

What's next for you?

Publishing testosterone-soaked international spy thriller 'Beirut', probably not under that title, this November and finishing my third serious novel for publication next year. After that, who knows?

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