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# In the Cemetery of the Orange Trees

## By Jeff Talarigo

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A Study Guide for Students

### Synopsis

*In the Cemetery of the Orange Trees* is a disquieting allegory of the clash between the occupied and the occupier. It is late 1948 and days before his wife is to give birth for the first time, Ghassan, is approached by two talking jackals threatening him that, if he doesn't paint the signs of the newly named villages and towns, his wife will give birth to a goat. Thus begins the exile to Gaza of Ghassan and his goat. Told in loosely linked stories, *In the Cemetery of the Orange Trees* explores the Palestinians seven-decade long diaspora. The history of modern day Gaza is told as it has never been told: through the eyes of a night guardian of a talking goat; a carrier pigeon that befriends a young boy who sells photos of martyrs; a refugee who eats books and then recites them word for word; a Palestinian father who sneaks animals into Gaza through a labyrinth of tunnels; a talking sheep who is caged in the Gaza Zoo. Woven throughout the novel, an American arrives in Gaza, witnessing the beauty and horror of this widely ignored place, leaving, months later, a person never again the same.

### Why Include This Book in the Classroom?

Jeff Talarigo was awarded a fellowship at the New York Public Library's Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers. The *Ginseng Hunter* (published April, 2008, Nan Talese/Doubleday) is his second novel and was placed on the American Library Association's Notable Book List of 2009. His short fiction has been published in many journals, including *AGNI* and *Puerto del Sol*, and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2013. Talarigo's work has been translated into German, Spanish, Hebrew, Thai, and Korean. Currently living in Oakland, CA, he is at work on a four-act play on Gaza, a memoir/family history and a novel on human trafficking.

### Author Bio

Jeff Talarigo is the author of two novels: *The Pearl Diver* and *The Ginseng Hunter*. Talarigo was born in Pennsylvania in 1961 and graduated from Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania in 1983. Over the next seven years, Talarigo worked as a racquetball pro, magazine publisher, in a wood shop, and as a journalist. In 1990, Talarigo embarked on a three-month journey by land from the Gaza Strip to Khartoum, Sudan and back. This was Talarigo's first stay in the Jabaliya refugee camp in the Gaza Strip, a place where he would return to live in 1993.

From 1991 to 2006 Talarigo lived in Kyushu, Japan where he taught English and began writing fiction. *The Pearl Diver* was published in 2004 (Nan Talese/Doubleday) and was awarded the American Academy of Arts and Letters Rosenthal Award and was a Kiriyama Prize notable book.

Talarigo, along with his wife and son, moved back to the United States in 2006. He was awarded a fellowship at the New York Public Library's Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers. *The Ginseng Hunter* (published April, 2008, Nan Talese/Doubleday) is his second novel and was placed on the American Library Association's Notable Book List of 2009. His short fiction has been published in many journals, including *AGNI* and *Puerto del Sol*, and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2013. Talarigo's work has been translated into German, Spanish, Hebrew, Thai, and Korean. Currently living in Oakland, CA, he has finished his third book, a novel set in Gaza, and is at work on a four-act play on Gaza, a memoir/family history and a novel on human trafficking.

# Study Questions

## Section 1: "So That We Never Forget"

1. Animals are seen throughout the book as speakers of the story. What is the significance of animals being the speakers? Does it affect how the readers perceive the story?
2. Can the animals be seen as more than simply the speakers in the book? Do you view the animals as a symbol in any or all of the stories? Does this change the significance of the animals? Why or why not?

Writing Prompt: Create a scene using an animal as the narrator of the story.

## Section 2: "Border Shearing"

1. The theme or themes of a story tell readers of the author's message. What do you view as the theme or themes of *In the Cemetery of the Orange Trees*?
2. How much of a role does death and destruction have throughout the entire book?

Writing Prompt: In "A Two Cigarette Story," the story of the boy selling the bird on the string is discussed. What is the significance of the bird on the string to the story overall? How does it impact the reader's viewpoint as the other stories are discussed?

## Section 3: "My Father, The Mole"

1. Many of the stories focus on endurance and how it affects the characters in the book. How can the need to endure change how someone does something? Is this change always positive or can it have a negative effect?
2. How much of love and family is a factor in these stories? Do they motivate the characters to follow their path?

Writing Prompt: In order to know endurance, characters have to go through many different emotions and struggles. Compare and contrast how enduring through good and bad times can affect characters' actions and decisions.

## Section 4: "A Four Cigarette Story"

1. What is the significance of the two different story lines? Do the animals' speaker stories influence the American's story or is the American

influencing the animals' speaker stories?

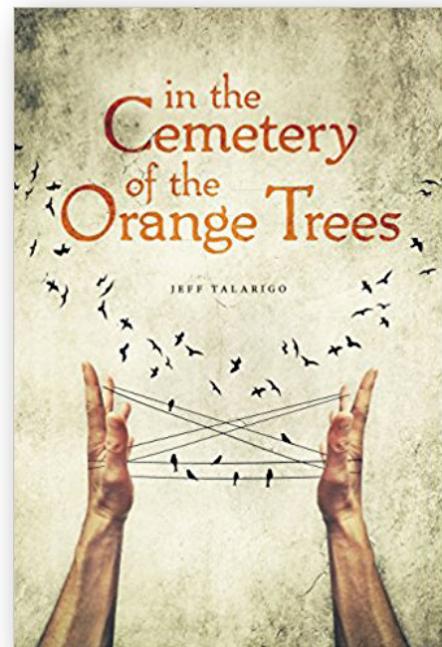
2. What does the American's story and viewpoint contribute to the story?

Writing Prompt: In the story "The Boy Who Sold Martyrs," the boy is fascinated and obsessed with the photographs of martyrs. What is the significance of the boy burying the photographs in the sand map? How does this action lead to the boy's ultimate end?

## Section 5: "As Far As One Can Go"

1. In "Border Shearing," what is the message that the sheep is trying to tell the readers? How are certain actions done by the sheep viewed, as death and destruction while other actions are heroic?
2. How does "As Far As One Can Go" leave a lasting impact on the reader? Does the ending explain to the readers the overall message of the book?

Writing Prompt: In "As Far As One Can Go," Shafiq sees the gazelle and runs after it. What do you think is the importance of Shafiq catching the gazelle?



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