Born in Gaza
Hernan Zin, 2015

In the summer of 2014 confrontations between the Israel Defence Forces and Palestinians across the West Bank and Gaza escalated into a seven-week war in which around 2,100 Palestinians and 90 Israelis were killed, the third in less than a decade. Born in Gaza, filmed during and after this latest war, tells this story through the eyes of children living there.

The director Hernan Zin’s choice to place children as central narrators underscores the brutality that even the most innocent have to bear in Gaza. In some of the film’s most difficult moments, a group of boys revisit the beach where they had been playing football when four of their cousins were killed by Israeli shelling. The boys who survived have been left with crippling trauma. One, Hamada, indicates the shrapnel left in his chest; another, Montazar, suffers from hysterical fits and suicidal thoughts.

The film also accompanies a young girl, Sundus, whose eyelids were burned permanently open, to her hospital visits. Another boy, Mahmud, relates how he and his family are unable to walk on their own farmland for fear of unexploded missiles.

These children tell of Gaza’s ongoing tragedy even when the bombs are not falling. ‘I just want to live like other children,’ says Mohamed, who waits in hope for a ceasefire so that he can work in better conditions. Forced by poverty to leave school, he sells recyclables that he collects from rubbish tips, his family’s only source of income.

The Israeli siege of Gaza has stifled the strip’s economic activity: the movement of people and goods across the border is tightly controlled by Israel and Egypt.

In the film, no help comes from the Palestinian authorities. Even Hamada, whose family’s suffering is well-known because the attack on the boys playing football was widely reported, says that the governments in Gaza and Ramallah visited his home but have done nothing for them. Instead the children are forced into early adulthood. They speak with unsettling gravity and poise of needing medical and psychological help, having to go to work to save their families from starvation and, in one case, of wanting to join the resistance to avenge a cousin’s death.

Knowing the context behind Gaza’s destruction and siege is necessary for understanding what the solutions could be, as Zin emphasized at a London screening. Yet context is entirely absent from the film. Non-specialist viewers will be less familiar with why the siege has gone on so long. Israeli government security procedures constrict life and economic activity, which in turn provokes further attacks from Gaza’s militant groups such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas.
Ahmed, a Gazan boy, holds an Israeli mortar shell.

Anti-Islamist sentiments in Egypt fuel that country’s clamping down on movement across its border with Gaza. Without any insight into this complex situation, a viewer could easily be left wondering: how could Palestinians allow this to happen to their children?

The film’s focus on the suffering of Gaza’s children is also a strength, however. The tragedy is presented in its simplicity: this siege and the wars are devastating the lives of innocents whose only transgression is to have been born in Gaza.

The broader story provides little hope: locals and experts expect another war to break out soon, particularly as few of the conditions of the August 2014 ceasefire between Israel and Hamas have been met. Attempts to rebuild what the war destroyed are blocked by politics and a lack of funding, and psychological healing will take years even if another war is prevented.

Gazans trying to escape to Europe by boat all too often are drowned on the journey. The only true hope for a better future for Gaza’s children lies in a solution to the broader conflict. Palestinian attempts to forward their cause at the multilateral level might revive the moribund peace process, but until these bear fruit they can expect to face greater troubles.

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**Reading List: Mexico**

**El Narco – Inside Mexico’s Criminal Insurgency**

*Joan Grillo* (Bloomsbury, £8.99)

Among the many books about Mexico’s drug cartels, this is a fast-paced page-turner that manages to be comprehensive on the causes of the problem, chilling on its effects and compelling on the larger-than-life personalities involved.

**Nothing, Nobody, the Voices of the Mexico City Earthquake**

*Elena Poniatowska* (Temple University Press, £22.99)

A gripping collage of first-hand accounts of the ‘Big One’ – the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. The harrowing descriptions of devastation, the government’s slow reaction, and the collective rescue efforts are as graphic as the book’s black-and-white photos of collapsed buildings, twisted metal and grief.

**The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail**

*Oscar Martinez* (Verso, £14.99)

How desperate do you have to be before clinging to the roof of a freight train and defying drug gangs, robbery, rape and death look a better option than staying in Central America or Mexico? Salvadoran journalist Oscar Martínez’s courageous and empathetic descriptions from his eight trips riding *The Beast* through Mexico with undocumented migrants are an eye-opening and urgent read.

**Signs Preceding the End of the World**

*Yuri Herrera* (And Other Stories, £8.99)

The US border looms large in Mexico and its shadow, and the experience of crossing it, is skilfully explored in this tale of a woman’s search for her brother. Herrera, hailed as one of Mexico’s greats of the genre, mines rich metaphors to construct this multi-layered odyssey.

**Prayers for the Stolen**

*Jennifer Clement* (Hogarth, £12.99)

Clement portrays the fate of being a female in Guerrero, a wild west badland state in the headlines for the abduction of 43 students last year. Women hide to escape drug lords or risk being stolen in a novel rooted firmly in very uncomfortable fact.

**The Labyrinth of Solitude**

*Octavio Paz* (Penguin Classics, £14.99)

The classic exploration of the essence of Mexicanness by one of the country’s most revered intellectuals; his descriptions of the national psyche are as sharp as they were when the collection of essays was first published in 1950.

**Mongrels, Bastards, Orphans and Vagabonds: Mexican Immigration and the Future of Race in America**

*Gregory Rodriguez* (Vintage, $11)

Mexican-American race relations viewed through the prism of Mexico’s own colonial melting pot. The book contains an engaging and well-documented history of how the Spanish conquest created and defined a new racial identity and is thought-provoking on how that legacy is playing out in the United States today.

Jude Webber is Mexico and Central America Correspondent for the Financial Times. Mexico is the market focus country at the London Book Fair, April 14-16.