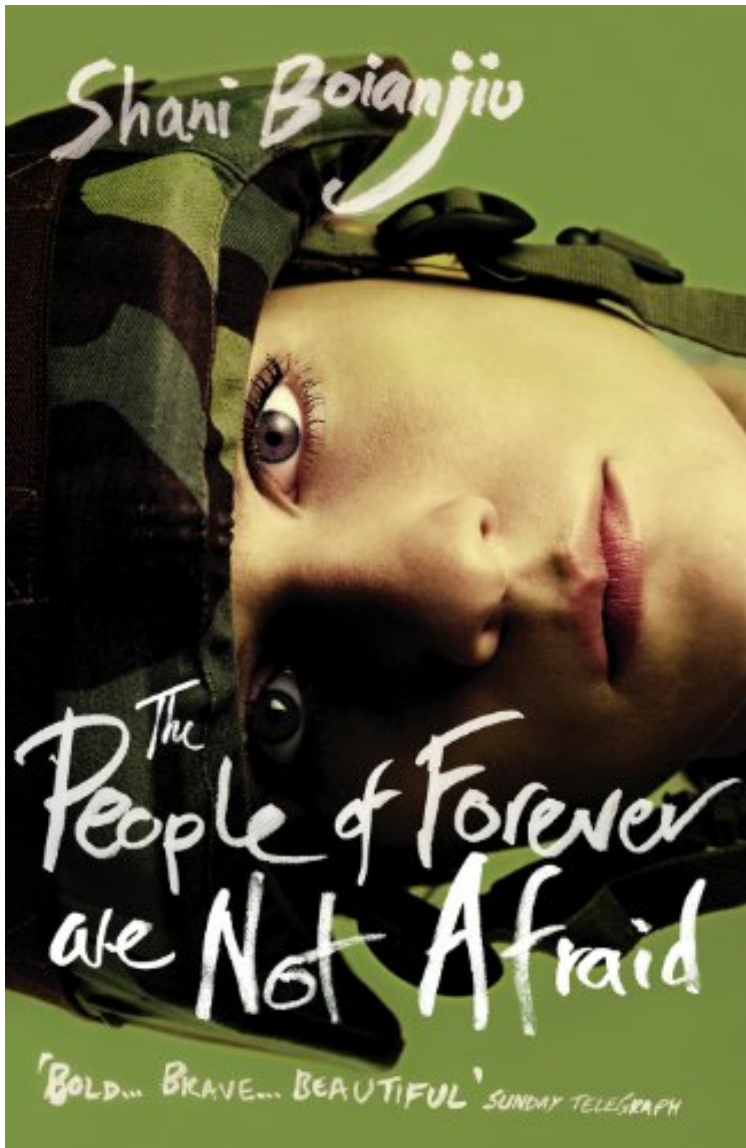


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The People of Forever are not Afraid



Par Shani Boianjiu
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurLonglisted for the Womens Prize for FictionYael, Avishag and Lea grow up together in a tiny, dusty village in Israel. They attend high school, gossip about boys, and try to find ways to alleviate the universal boredom of teenage life. Then at eighteen they are conscripted into the army. Yael trains marksmen, Avishag stands guard watching refugees throw themselves at barbed-wire fences and Lea, posted at a checkpoint, imagines the stories behind the familiar faces that pass by her day after day. All of them live in that single intense second before danger erupts, all of them trying to survive however they canShortlisted for The Jewish Quarterly Wingate PrizeExtraitOther People's ChildrenHistory Is Almost OverThere is dust in this caravan of a classroom, and Mira the teacher's hair is fake orange and scorched at the tips. We are

seniors now, seventeen, and we have almost finished all of Israeli history. We finished the history of the world in tenth grade. In our textbook, the pages already speak to us of 1982, just a few years before we were born, just a year before this town was built, when there were only pine trees and garbage hills here by the Lebanese border. The words of Mira the teacher, who is also Avishag's mother, almost touch the secret ones of all our parents in their drunken evenings. History is almost over. "There are going to be eight definitions in the Peace of the Galilee War quiz next Friday, and there is nothing we haven't covered. PLO, SAM, IAF, RPG children," Mira says. I am pretty sure I know all the terms, except for maybe RPG children. I am not as good with definitions that have real words in them. They scare me a little. But I don't care about this quiz. I will almost swear; I don't care one bit. I still have my sandwich waiting for me in my backpack. It has tomatoes and mayo and mustard and salt and nothing more. The best part is that my mother puts it inside a plastic bag and then she wraps it in blue napkins and it takes about two minutes to unwrap it. That way even if it is a day when I am not hungry I can wait for something. That's something, and I can keep from screaming. It has been eight years since I discovered mustard-mayo-tomato. I snap my fingers under my jaw. I roll my eyes. I grind my teeth. I have been doing these things since I was little, sitting in class. I can't do this for much longer. My teeth hurt. Forty minutes till recess, but I can't keep sitting here, and I can't and I won't and I--How They Make Airplanes "PLO, SAM, IAF, RPG children," Mira the teacher says. "Who wants to practice reading some definitions out loud before the quiz?" SAM is some sort of Syrian submarine. And IAF is the Israeli Air Force. I know what children are, and that RPG children were children who tried to shoot RPGs at our soldiers and ended up burning each other because they were uninformed, and children. But that might be a repetitive definition. Last time the bitch took off five points because she said I used the word "very" seven times in the same definition and that I used it in places where you can't really use "very." She is looking at me, or at Avishag, who is sitting next to me, or at Lea, who is sitting next to her. She sighs. I think she needs to have very corrective eye surgery. Lea shoots a look right back, as if she is convinced Mira was looking at her. She always thinks everyone must be looking at her. "Can you at least pretend to be writing this down, Yael?" Mira asks me and sits down behind her desk. I pull my eyes away from Lea. I pick up the pen and write: when are we going to stop thinking about things that don't matter and start thinking about things that do matter? fuck me raw I have to go to the bathroom. Outside the classroom caravan there is the bathroom caravan. When I stand on top of the closed toilet and press my nose against the tiny window, I can see the end of the village and breathe the bleach they use to clean this forsaken window till I am dizzy. I can see houses and gardens and mothers of babies on benches, all scattered like Lego parts abandoned by a giant child at the side of the cement road leading to the brown mountains sleeping ahead. Right outside the gates of the school, I see a young man. He is wearing a brown shirt and his skin is light brown and he could almost disappear on this mountain if it weren't for his green eyes, two leaves in the middle of this nothing. It's Dan. My Dan. Avishag's brother. I am almost sure. When I come back to class from the bathroom, I see that someone has written in the old, fat notebook, right below my question. Avishag and I have been writing in notebooks to each other since second grade. For a while we kept the stories we wrote with Lea when we all played Exquisite Corpse in a notebook too, but by seventh grade Lea had stopped playing with us, or with any of her old friends. She started collecting girls, pets, instead, to do as she said. Avishag said the two of us should still write in a notebook, even though two people can't play Exquisite Corpse. She said the notebooks are something we can keep around longer than notes on loose leaf and that this way, when we're eighteen, we'll be able to look back and remember all the people who loved us back then, back when we were young. And that way she'd also have a place for her sketches, and she could make sure I saw each of them. Also, she said when we were fourteen, we could have the word "fuck" in each sentence if we wanted to and not get caught, and we do want to, and we should, and we must. It is a rule. fuck me rawer Recently, it is like Avishag doesn't even exist. Everything I say she says a little louder. Then she grows quiet. She plays with the golden necklace on her dark chest. She fine-tunes her bra strap. She watches her hair grow longer and she grows silent. I guess I am growing in the same ways. But the thing is, for the first time in the history of the world, someone other than Avishag wrote in the notebook while I was gone. I am almost sure. There is another odd line, and no "fuck." i am alone all the time. even right now, I am alone I close the notebook. I want to ask Avishag if her brother Dan came into the classroom when I was gone, but I don't. Avishag and Dan's mother, Mira, is special among mothers because she is a teacher. She is a teacher because she had to come and be a teacher in a village instead of in Jerusalem. Avishag's dad left them, so they didn't have enough money to stay in Jerusalem. My mother works in the company in the village that makes parts that go into machines that help make machines that can make airplanes. Lea's

mother works in the company in the village that makes parts that go into machines that help make machines that can make airplanes. I am alone all the time. I have this idea. I am going to have a party even if it kills me, and I still don't know where the party is going to be, and I can't know, and I won't know anything more in the next twenty minutes because I am in class, but so help me God, Dan is going to come to this party. He will if I call to invite him, that's just manners, and it is this brilliant idea I just thought of, out of nowhere, a party, and if one more person tells me that sometimes it is Ok to be alone, I will scream and it is going to be awkward. "Peace," I say and get up from my desk. I pick up my backpack. When Avishag gets up, her chair scratches the linoleum floor and makes Mira's lips pucker as if she just ate a whole lemon from the tree of the Levy family. "There are still twenty minutes left in this class," she says. She might think we'll stay, but we leave. "Fuck it. Peace," Avishag says. This is rare. Avishag hates it when swear words are said out loud. She only loves them written, so this is rare. Four boys get up as well. In fourth grade one of them ate a whole lemon from the Levy family's tree on a dare, but nothing happened after that. You Can't Talk to

Anyone Avishag and I are walking up on the main dirt road leading up from the school. When I open my mouth, I can taste specks of the footsteps of our classmates before us and our own from the day before. I can barely speak there is so much in my mouth. "I'm, like, dying. We have to have a party tonight. We have to make some calls," I say. "Noam and Emuna told me that Yochai told them that his brother heard from Lea's sister Sarit where to get reception," Avishag says. Her black eyes squint. All the cellular phones in the town don't work right now. At first there was no reception only at school. Then last Wednesday we didn't have reception even after we jumped behind the wooden gate and cut math. Avishag got two bars for, like, ten seconds, but it wasn't enough to call anyone. Then it became one bar and didn't change back. We already walked to the grocery store, but there was no reception there, so we bought a pack of Marlboros and some gummy bears and walked to the ATM, but there was no reception there, so we walked to the small park, but there was no reception there, and someone had puked on the only swing big enough for two, so we didn't even stay, and then there was no other place in town we could go. "It is actually not Noam or Yochai who told me," Avishag says. "Dan told me. He is speaking to me again. Or at least, enough to say that there is reception by the cellular tower." I don't look at Avishag after she says that. I want to ask her if Dan came in and wrote in the notebook, but I know better. The cellular tower. Of course. Sometimes I think that if it weren't for people like Dan the whole village would die, we're that stupid. What Is Love In my whole entire life I only decided to love one boy, Avishag's brother, Dan. I have had the same boyfriend, Moshe, since I was twelve, but that's not really fair because I didn't really get to decide to love him. He was a family friend who threw apples at me, so I didn't really have a choice. Two weeks ago we broke up. We also broke up nine weeks ago. He has been in the army for about six months now, anyway. Dan is already done with all of that. Dan used to have this test. That's why I decided to love him. It would drive him fucking crazy, this test. Right at the end of Jerusalem Street, our town has a view. It has a view of the entire world and its sister. Really, it does. Standing there on top of that tiny hill you can see four mountains bursting with forever-green Mediterranean forest. You can see blankets of red anemones and pillows of purple anemones and circles of yellow daisies. And little caves protected by willows, and well, it hurts almost to look at it. Like seeing other people's children on the other side of the street. And there are benches, of course, right there at the end of Jerusalem Street, and you would think you could sit and look out at this view, except you can't. Because if you did, your back would be to the view, and you would be staring at house number twenty-four on Jerusalem Street, and all you would notice are the underwear hanging to dry and an orphaned dog leash on the yellow grass and the recycling bin out on the porch. And he would bring people there, Dan, and he would ask, what is wrong with this picture what is wrong what is wrong, and no one could tell him and he would grow mad, grow loud, and he would say that if it weren't for people like him the whole village would fucking die, we're that stupid. He can be arrogant. And then the person he would bring there from the town, his classmate, his mother's friend, his sister, his younger sister, would sit there staring at the yellow grass of house twenty-four for a while and say, "You said you wanted to hang out. I don't understand." But I understood. In seventh grade, after I left Avishag's house, Dan jumped at me from behind an olive tree. Above him there were imported sycamore trees and birds, and the birds were invisible but swished around so quickly in circles they made spots of light dance around him, like in a discotheque. He moved one step closer. And then one more. He was so close I could see two eyelashes that had fallen off and were resting on his left cheek. I looked down, embarrassed, and noticed that his feet were bare and long. I snapped my fingers under my neck, nervous. He was so tall, just like Avishag. Or maybe I was short. "Do you want to hang out?" he asked. When I sat on that bench I just felt tired for a second. I turned my back around again

and again to look away, so Dan wouldn't see how excited I was, so I would have something else beautiful to think about. And then it hit me. "So a person comes and he has two benches and they tell him, 'Use cement and plant these benches in the ground,' and he, well," I said. I just wanted to have something to say, but Dan's green eyes were beaming, and his thick eyebrows were going up and down. After that we sat there for a while on the ground, looking at the red blankets and caves ahead, and I told him all my secrets. That night I think I loved him a bit, but I don't know if it was true love because I only loved him because he loved me, or something I said. You could see that he did by the way he was rocking back and forth and also because when I showed him the notebook he promised he would write in it one day, something fucking smart. I never spoke to him again after that night. Two months later he told Avishag one of my secrets. Two years after that he went into the army, and when he got back, instead of working in the company in the village that makes parts that go into machines that help make machines that make airplanes, or going to professional school so he could later be paid more to work in the company in the town that makes parts that go into machines that help make machines that make airplanes, he just stayed home and drew pictures of military boots. I know because my sister went there last week to play with his littlest sister, and when she came back she said there were sketches of boots and boots and boots. The entire kitchen wall was black with them, and heavy. *Revue de presse* "A searing novel" (Catherine Taylor Guardian) "In a humorous and beguiling deadpan, Boianjiu conveys the fleeting, vanishing experience of hovering between adolescence and adulthood, at the same time as providing a rare portrait of young Israelis being minced through military service" (Robert Collins Sunday Times) "A memorably bold novel... Somewhere between the sardonic humour of Etgar Keret and the epic storytelling of David Grossman, Boianjiu has created a brave, beautiful, political literature that is entirely her own" (Catherine Taylor Sunday Telegraph) "This unflinching debut novel depicts with depth and acuity the disorientating effects of fear on young minds... The girls are often lost for words, but the author successfully finds a voice to express the dehumanising horror of warfare in this fragmented plot held together with a passionate, poetic eloquence" (Anita Sethi Observer) "[Boianjiu's] voice is distinct. It's confident, raw, amusing - a lot like her women" (New York Times)