Poetry The Arab poet who inspired JR Rowling

K Rowling has long possessed the mythical philosopher's knack of turning every stone she touches to gold, so when she cited the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish as a political inspiration, you know he's a made man.

Except that, in the

Arab world, Darwish,

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who died at the age of 67 in 2008, needs no magic boost: long regarded as Palestine's national poet, he has given voice to suffering with poems such as Identity Card (Write down! / I am an Arab / And my identity card number is fifty thousand / I have eight children / And the ninth will come after a summer L/ Will you be angry?). Rowling named the poet in an extended tweet explaining why, despite beingamong 150 signatories Who called for a dialogue with Israel in an open letter to the Guard-

ian last week, she would not be joining a cultural boycott. "The true human cost of the Palestinian conflict was seared upon my consciousness, as upon many others', by the heart-splitting poetry of Mahmoud Darwish," she wrote. "I believe strongly that cultural dialogue and collaboration is more important than ever before and that cultural boycotts are divisive, discriminatory and counter-productive."

The problem with this reading of Darwish and his work, however, is that his life was a catalogue of dialogue denied. Burnt out ofhis home village of Birwa as a small child, he fell in and out of love with the PLO,

spent much of his life in exi e an ended it in a Texas hospital.

Four years before his death, he was awarded a major prize in Holland, giving a speech that gestured at the "charming illusion" of art: "A person can only be born in one place. However, he may die several times elsewhere: in the exiles and prisons, and in a homeland transformed by the occupation and oppression into a nightmare," he said. "Poetry is perhaps what teaches us to nurture the charming illusion: how to be reborn out of ourselves over and over again, and use words to construct a better world, a fictitious world that enables us to sign a pact for a permanent and comprehensive peace ... with life." Claire Armitstead

