Jerusalem Post / International edition
Jan. 4, 2004

Survivor syndrome
By ALYS YABLON

Due Preparations For The Plague:
A Novel by Janette Turner Hospital.
W.W. Norton & Co.
401 pp. $24.95

Daniel Defoe was five years old when the Bubonic Plague struck London in 1665.
Throughout his adulthood, Defoe remained obsessed with the fear of another outbreak of the Plague, also known as the Black Death, which wiped out whole communities. When the plague did recur in France in 1720, he was so concerned about its recurrence in England that he wrote two books on the subject in one year. One was A Journal of the Plague Year, which is still taught in universities as an exemplary 18th century novel. The other, long out of print, was a sort of how-to survival guide called Due Preparations for the Plague - a culmination of his many years of thinking about the subject.
Janette Turner Hospital's novel, by the same name, explores terrorism as our modern version of the Plague, and touches on the obsession and paranoia of the survivor, and of the culture at large, in the wake of horrific events.
Air France Flight 64, filled with Americans and Jews traveling from Paris to New York, is hijacked by terrorists in 1987. Aside from the children, who are released via an escape hatch and kept in a gymnasium in Germany until their frantic relatives come to claim them, everyone is killed when the plane is blown up, live on international television. Or so it seems for the next 13 years.
By 2000, Samantha, who lost both her parents and her baby brother in the hijacking when she was just six, remains consumed with conspiracy theories, and begins to locate dangerous classified information about the flight in her pursuit of justice. She and several other child survivors band together in a sort of cult of anger and paranoia, convinced that the CIA was involved in the deaths.
Another survivor, Lowell, whose mother was killed on the flight when he was a teenager, is plagued by nightmares and the sort of debilitating distraction that keeps him from functioning as a husband and father. Samantha contacts Lowell, who is at first reluctant to join forces.
"What can be worse than not knowing?" she asks him.
"The explanation might be worse, Lowell thinks... it is after death, Lowell knows, that riddles and slow torments begin."
But when his father, an intelligence officer, dies in a car accident, Lowell discovers secret documents relating to the hijacking, and contacts Samantha after all. Together they piece together the awful truth.
The novel weaves through time, and as readers we are taken on an expansive ride of uncertainty and suspense as each new character is introduced. Are they agents? Double agents? Innocent bystanders? The plot thickens and thickens again, and although the story itself comes together fairly easily, almost predictably, it is the desperation of characters facing sudden and gruesome violence and death from so many angles that compels one to keep reading.
More impressive than the detailed story itself is the way Turner Hospital evokes the life-long fear and anxiety that plague the survivors of terror attacks. It is particularly eerie to read this book in Jerusalem, where the threat of terrorism looms daily.
BOMBARDED BY attacks, we are often overwhelmed by their immediacy, by the person we know who was killed or injured or standing two blocks away, by the wrenching personal stories of the victims and their families. And then another attack occurs, and we are forced to absorb a whole new set of stories and emotions, and often in the process we lose track of the former set. The cycle repeats itself over and over. So we talk about "waves" of terror, as if there was a force beyond any control driving these acts of deliberate murder. A wave of violence, say, like the wave of a plague that is carried in the air, infecting us in unthinkably large numbers. In the end, what Defoe wrote nearly 300 years ago still applies to us today: there is nothing much you can do to prepare for a plague - when it comes, you can only try to guess what will be the right place and the right time, and think about what you would do in the face of sudden death.

Toward the end of the novel, we discover that 10 adult passengers were taken from the plane before it was blown up, given gas masks and protective suits, and placed in a dark cell infused with toxic gas for 24 hours, where they were used as final collateral by the terrorists. Realizing that time is running out and that death is inescapable, the 10 victims remove their masks and one by one give final testimony, telling the stories they suddenly find most essential in the final moments of their lives.

Homer Longchamp, an African American professor who found himself on Flight 64 by a fluke chain of events, philosophizes in his final moments: "I don't know... which of the three great mysteries can be considered the most impenetrable. Life. Or death. Or randomness. But I think randomness, the maddening neatness of randomness. Yes, I think the geography of chance is the ultimate teaser, intellectually and morally, because of the sheer enormity of divergence that results from a micro-change here and a micro-change there."

This poignant statement, which applies as easily to the days of the bubonic plague as it does to New York City in 2001 or Israel today, is a testament to Turner Hospital's masterful grasp of her novel's dark subject.