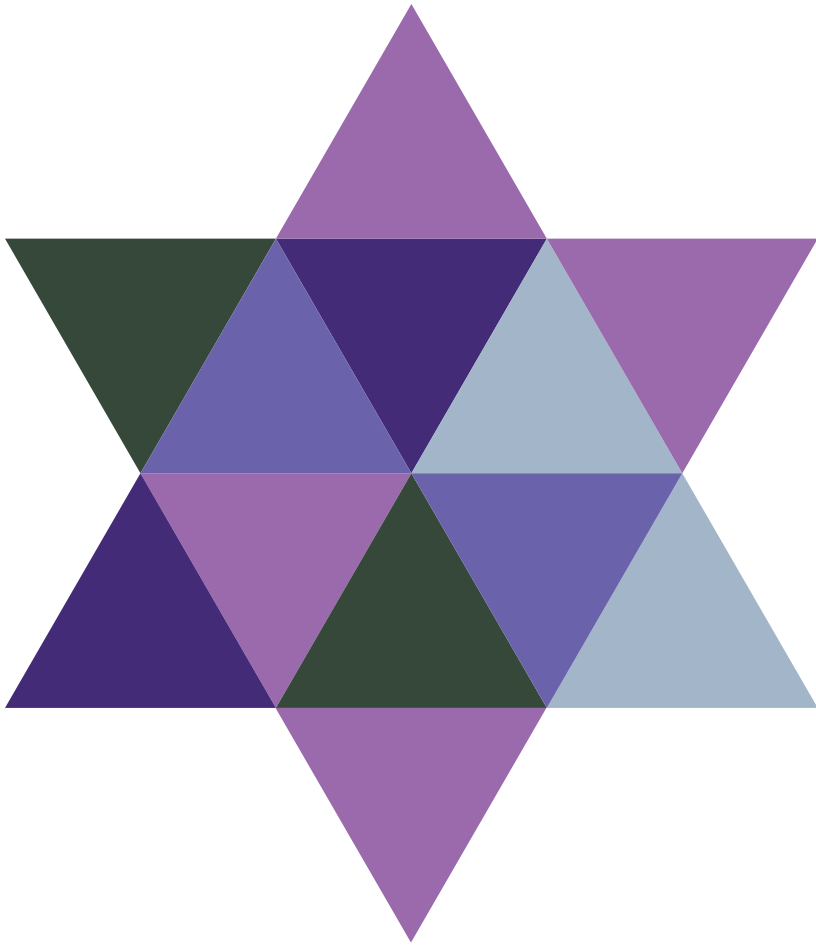


JEWISH  
BOOK  
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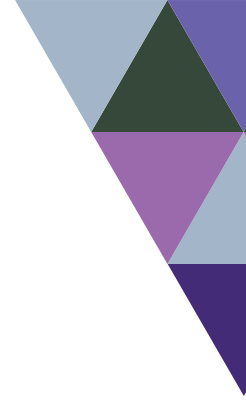
[www.jewishbookcouncil.org](http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org)

2018-2019  
national  
jewish  
book club





2018-2019  
national jewish  
book club



# dear reader:

Welcome to the National Jewish Book Club; we're so glad you joined us! JBC Book Clubs, a division of Jewish Book Council, launched this project to create a community of readers. Through it, we hope to introduce you to works of Jewish literature that you may not have encountered in the past and reunite you with stories with which you may be quite familiar.

We're excited to offer you the fifth annual National Jewish Book Club selection guide. Join over 1,600 book clubs around the world in reading National Jewish Book Club titles and engaging in conversations about these books.

To keep a conversation going throughout the year, NJBC readers are invited to join our discussion forum on Facebook. It is an active group where you can connect to readers around the world about the books that you are reading. Search for the JBC Book Club group on Facebook and request to join.

## *How it works:*

Jewish Book Council has selected 16 titles, a mix of fiction and non-fiction, from the breadth of Jewish literature which are featured here. Each title was chosen after careful consideration as an interesting read that has the potential to engender conversation among your book group about significant and/or timely issues within the Jewish community. When read together, the collection creates one possible view of the American Jewish literary landscape.

Participating book clubs can use this guide to craft their own reading experience, choosing how many of the suggested titles they wish to read and in what order (see suggestions on page 4).

If you aren't already part of a book club and are hoping to start one, the National Jewish Book Club provides a ready-made book club experience with books to choose from and discussion questions at your fingertips. Additionally, JBC Book Clubs can provide a step-by-step explanation of how to set up a new book club.

For those who wish to use this guide as a personal reading list outside of any book club, we hope you enjoy the selections! If you wish to discuss them, join the Facebook group and start a conversation.

## *A few notes about this guide:*

This guide features a brief summary and discussion questions for the National Jewish Book Club titles for 2018-2019. For a complete list of the books, please see page 2-3.

Prices for the books are not listed, as price will vary depending on format and retailer. Publication dates listed are for the most recent edition of the title.

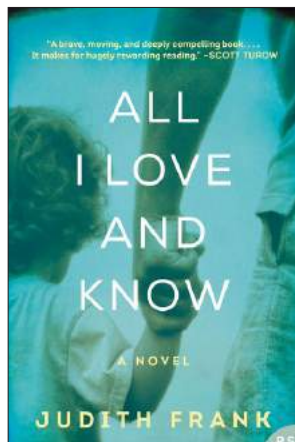
Whenever available, the edition listed will be the paperback. All paperback editions are noted.

The summaries of the books were compiled from the book publishers, as were many of the discussion questions. Questions that were prepared by Jewish Book Council are labeled as such. For permission to reprint JBC's discussion questions, please email [bookclub@jewishbooks.org](mailto:bookclub@jewishbooks.org).

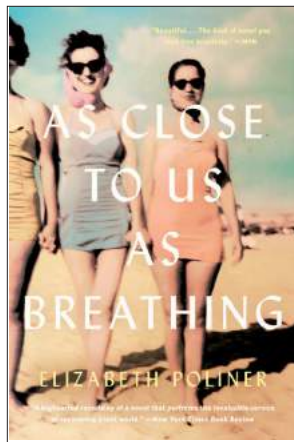
Many of the discussion questions contain spoilers about the plot, so please keep that in mind as you read through this guide.

Book clubs are able to connect with selected authors via video chats through the JBC Live Chat program. For more information about authors available for Skyping, please email [bookclub@jewishbooks.org](mailto:bookclub@jewishbooks.org)

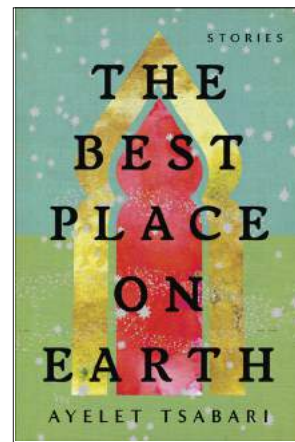
# contents: fiction



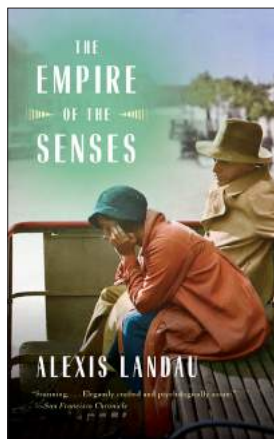
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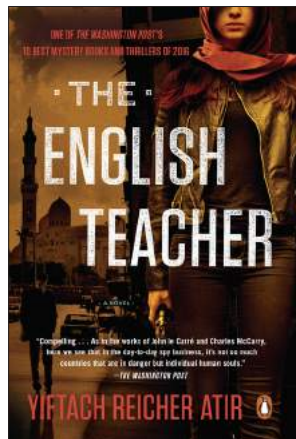
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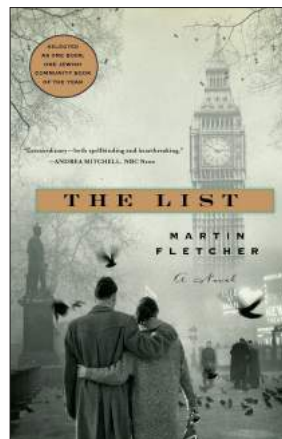
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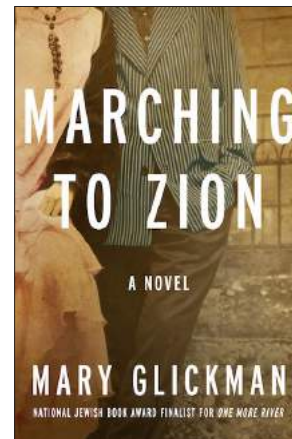
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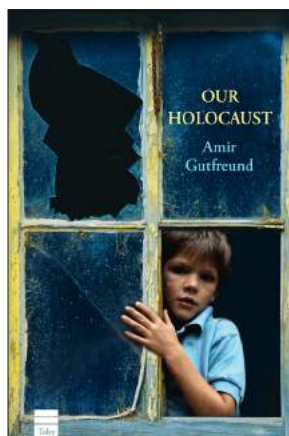
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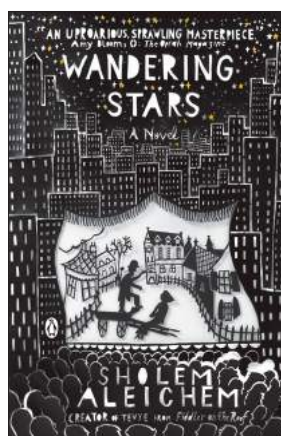
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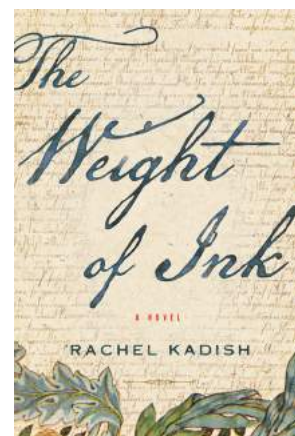
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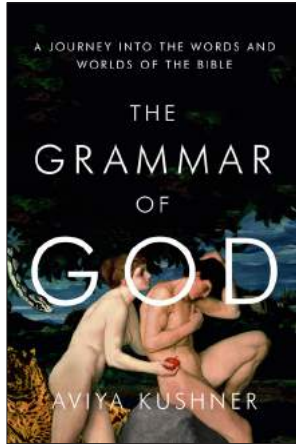


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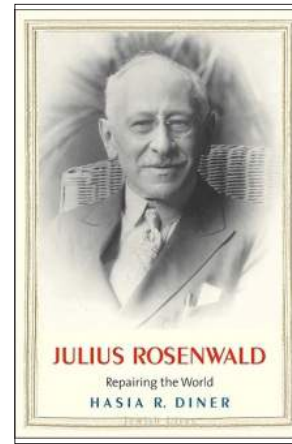
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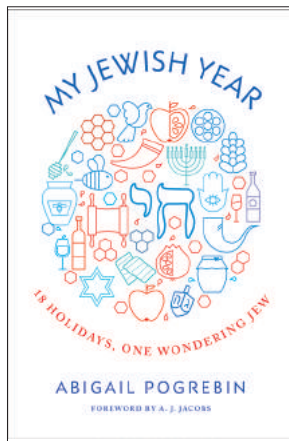
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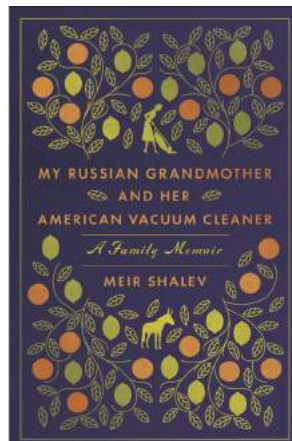
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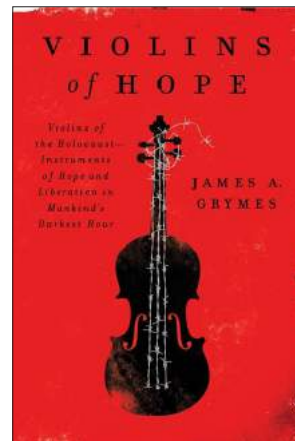
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# reading these books

We loved reading these books and thinking about the kinds of conversations that could arise from them, and we hope you will too. In selecting the sixteen titles, we have tried to cover many different genres and topics to offer a small taste of many aspects of Jewish literature and life. While not every book may be your favorite, the conversations that can be generated from these readings have the potential to be lively and fascinating.

As mentioned before, the National Jewish Book Club program is designed to allow book clubs and readers to customize their participation. The selection of books provides a little something for everyone, but we know that sixteen books is a lot to read in one year!

To assist in your reading, JBC has arranged the books in suggested orders, one that gives an assortment throughout the year, and one that follows a thematic arc. In reviewing the list of books, remember that you can choose one to read or twelve. Maybe your book club reads only fiction or only non-fiction, you don't usually read short stories, or some of the books just don't interest you as much—if you are following one of the orders below, just skip those books and continue on.

## Thematic:

*My Jewish Year*  
*The Grammar of God*  
*The Weight of Ink*  
*The List*  
*Our Holocaust*  
*Violins of Hope*  
*The Empire of the Senses*  
*The House of Twenty Thousand  
Books*  
*Julius Rosenwald*  
*Marching to Zion*  
*All I Love and Know*  
*As Close to Us as Breathing*  
*Wandering Stars*  
*My Russian Grandmother and  
her American Vacuum Cleaner*  
*The Best Place on Earth*  
*The English Teacher*

## Assorted:

*Wandering Stars*  
*The List*  
*The Best Place on Earth*  
*The House of Twenty Thousand  
Books*  
*All I Love and Know*  
*My Jewish Year*  
*Our Holocaust*  
*The Empire of the Senses*  
*The Grammar of God*  
*My Russian Grandmother and  
her American Vacuum Cleaner*  
*The Weight of Ink*  
*Marching to Zion*  
*The English Teacher*  
*Violins of Hope*  
*Julius Rosenwald*  
*As Close to Us as Breathing*





# fiction

## all i love and know

JUDITH FRANK



William Morrow  
2015 pbk 448 pp.

This is a searing drama of a modern American family on the brink of dissolution, one that explores adoption, gay marriage, and love lost and found.

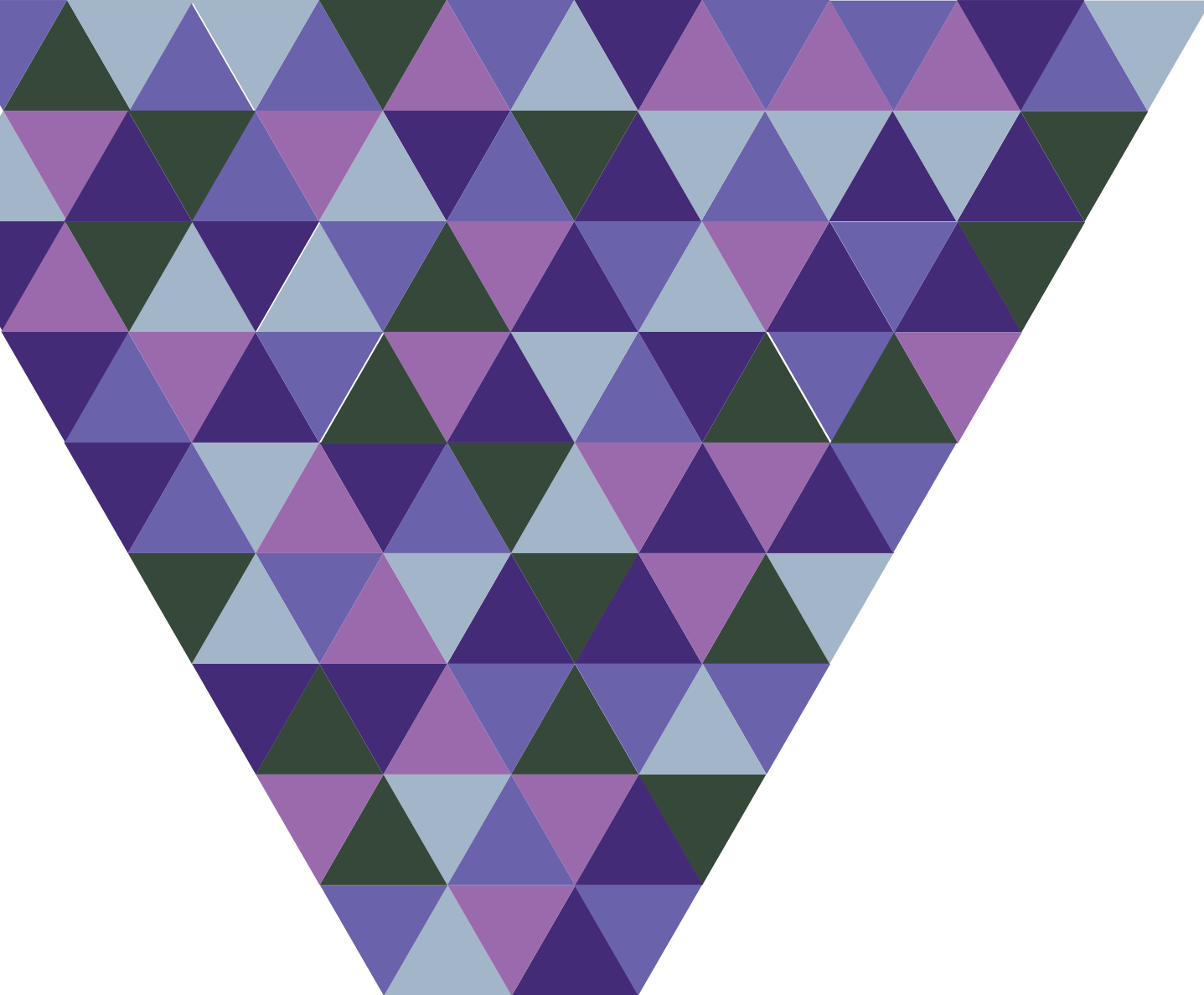
For years, Matthew Greene and Daniel Rosen have enjoyed a quiet domestic life together in Northampton, Massachusetts. Opposites in many ways, they have grown together and made their relationship work. But when they learn that Daniel's twin brother and sister-in-law have been killed in a bombing in Jerusalem, their lives are suddenly, utterly transformed.

In dealing with their families and the need to make a decision about who will raise the deceased couple's two children, both Matthew and Daniel are confronted with challenges that strike at the very heart of their relationship. What is Matthew's place in an extended family that does not completely accept him or the commitment he and Daniel have made? How do Daniel's questions about his identity as a Jewish man affect his life as a gay American? Tensions only intensify when they learn that the deceased parents wanted Matthew and Daniel to adopt the children—six-year-old Gal, and baby Noam.

The impact this instant new family has on Matthew, Daniel, and their relationship is subtle and heartbreaking, yet not without glimmers of hope. They must learn to reinvent and redefine their bond in profound, sometimes painful ways. What kind of parents can these two men really be? How does a family become strong enough to stay together and endure? And are there limits to honesty or commitment—or love?

## discussion questions

1. The first 45 pages of *All I Love and Know* are narrated from Matt's point of view. Why might Frank have chosen him as the initial point-of-view character in this novel? How does Matt's outsider status — as a young gay man, as a non-Jew, as “the boyfriend” — put him in an awkward or advantageous position as Daniel's partner in this crisis? What about as a parent to Noam and Gal?
2. In what ways is *All I Love and Know* about the experience of being a twin? What does being a twin mean to Daniel, and how does it affect his thinking about rebuilding his life after Joel's death? We're told that he and Joel “invented the semifacetious idea of twinsism: the act of stereotyping or fetishizing twins”. What does that running joke tell us about their feelings about twinship?
3. *All I Love and Know* can be read as a novel about parenting and being parented: as these gay men become sudden parents, they are thrust into contact with their own parents and confront their feelings about being their parents' children. What are the aspects of parenting that the novel asks you to think about? What do you think Daniel and Matt's relative strengths are as parents to Gal and Noam?
4. Matt moved to Northampton after his best friend Jay died of AIDS. How does Jay's death change the way he handles this new crisis? How does this AIDS story relate to the central narrative of terrorism and trauma? What is at stake in the fight Matt and Daniel have over the relative “innocence” of Jay's and Joel's deaths?
5. Why do you think Frank decided to make Malka and Yaakov Holocaust survivors? What does their experience add to the novel's story of survival? At the military cemetery, Malka surprises Daniel by comparing victims of terror to Holocaust survivors and claims that Israelis despise them both. What is the connection, in her mind? Does her bitterness make you think differently about her?
6. Israel is very important to many American Jews, and it appeals to the Rosen sons in different ways. What does Israeli culture have to offer Daniel and Joel as young men from an affluent Jewish-American family?



7. In a central event of the novel, talking to a reporter, Daniel says of the terrorist who killed his brother, "...I can understand trying to violently place yourself within the Israelis' field of vision, in a way they can't ignore. I don't condone it, but I do understand it". He receives hate mail in response, and wonders whether he has "breached an important code of conduct, or failed at some response crucial to the common human enterprise". What do you make of Daniel's response to the terrorist attack? Is he doing something wrong? Does the novel make you think any differently about terrorism?

8. Daniel has a left-of-center position about the Israeli occupation. From what kinds of sources does he get his information? What factors from his personal life contribute to the way he feels about Israel's policies? And conversely, how does his political position impact or impede his mourning process? What do you think the novel is trying to say about the tension between the personal and the political?

9. Daniel grieves throughout the novel, sometimes in alienating ways. He believes Matt and his friends are pressuring him for "grieving wrong," and feels they're trying to push him into therapy. Matt believes that Daniel has

become "frozen" and "different". What are the factors that have made Daniel's process especially grueling? How did you respond to the ways in which he becomes "frozen"?

10. Does Gal get lost accidentally or on purpose in the Jerusalem shuk? What kind of internal drama is being enacted as she races away from the suspicious box, feeling her parents at her heels? What kind of figure is Chezzi the fishmonger? What does this frightening event express about Gal's relationship with Daniel?

11. The idea of gay marriage comes up in this story, and it takes one character some time to warm to the idea. In this era of victory for marriage equality in many U.S. states, why do you think some gay and lesbian people might be ambivalent about getting married?

Questions courtesy of HarperCollins

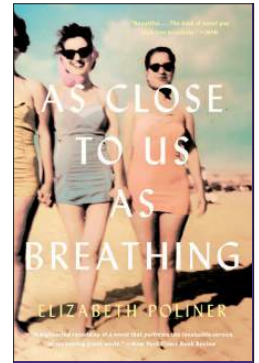
# as close to us as breathing

ELIZABETH POLINER

In 1948, a small stretch of the Woodmont, Connecticut shoreline, affectionately named “Bagel Beach,” has long been a summer destination for Jewish families. Here sisters Ada, Vivie, and Bec assemble at their beloved family cottage, with children in tow and weekend-only husbands who arrive each Friday in time for the Sabbath meal.

During the weekdays, freedom reigns. Ada, the family beauty, relaxes and grows more playful, unimpeded by her rule-driven, religious husband. Vivie, once terribly wronged by her sister, is now the family diplomat and an increasingly inventive chef. Unmarried Bec finds herself forced to choose between the family-centric life she’s always known and a passion-filled life with the married man with whom she’s had a secret years-long affair.

But when a terrible accident occurs on the sisters’ watch, a summer of hope and self-discovery transforms into a lifetime of atonement and loss for members of this close-knit clan. Seen through the eyes of Molly, who was twelve years old when she witnessed the accident, this is the story of a tragedy and its aftermath, of expanding lives painfully collapsed. Can Molly, decades after the event, draw from her aunt Bec’s hard-won wisdom and free herself from the burden that destroyed so many others?

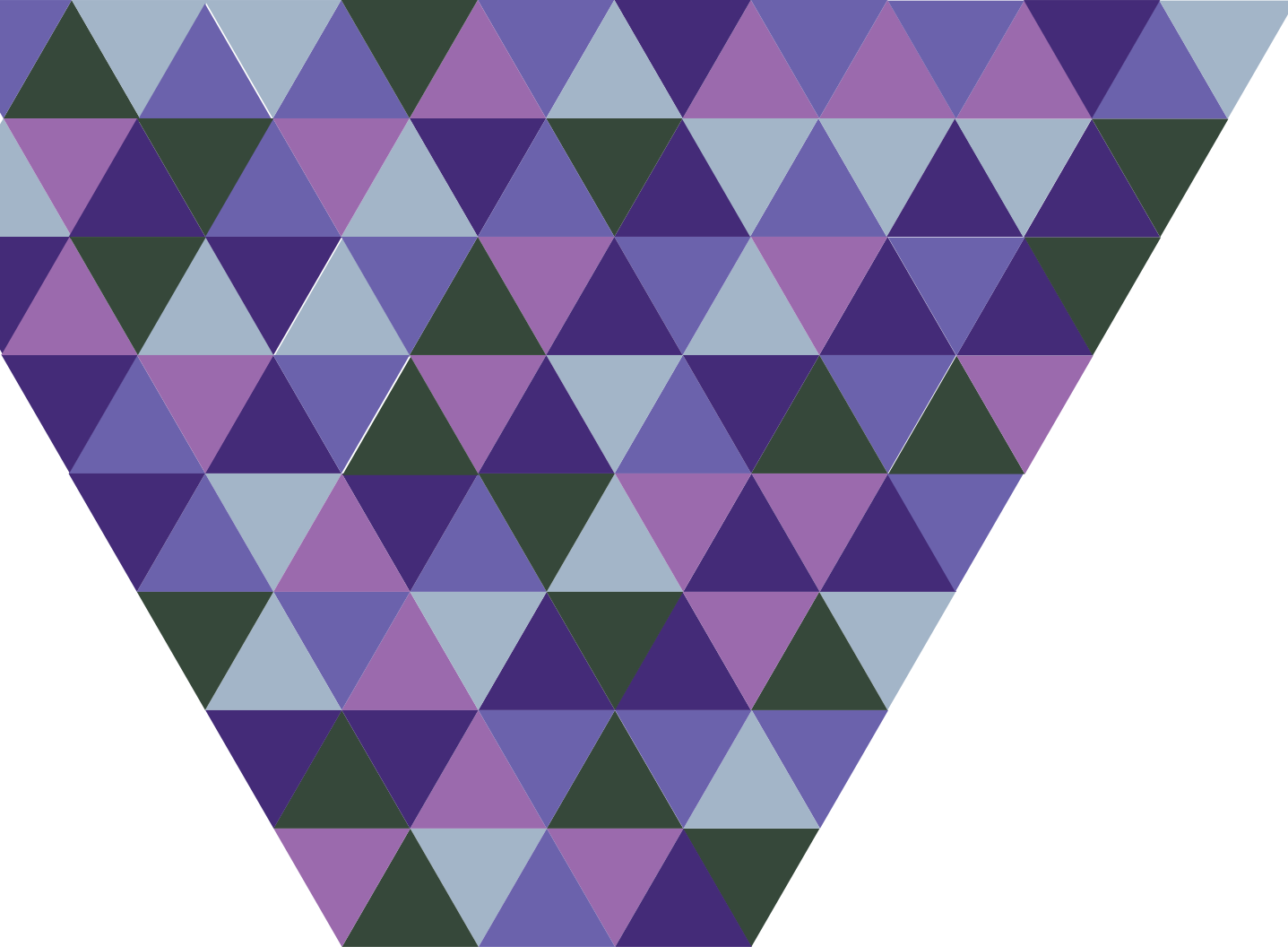


Lee Boudreaux/Back Bay Books  
2016 (pbk) 368 pp.

## discussion questions

1. What did you make of Poliner’s choice to have Molly narrate the novel? How did her point of view add to your understanding of the Leibritsky family?
2. On page 286 (after Nina has received stitches on her forehead), Molly states: “That’s when I sensed something I hadn’t before: that I needed [my family members], that I couldn’t be me, the person only I spoke to, a quiet patter in my head . . . I couldn’t be me, her, without them.” How does Molly’s narration of the novel reflect this sense of identity as both personal and relational? How does that theme play out in the lives of other characters in the book?
3. Atonement is a recurring theme of the novel. Discuss the ways the different characters atone, and what each seem to be atoning for. After Davy’s death, do any of the characters feel entitled to happiness?
4. Discuss the ways that the past seems to continually inform the present throughout the novel. What, if anything, do we inherit, both from our families and from our history?
5. While Judaism is clearly very important to the Leibritsky family, religion doesn’t seem to mean the same thing to each member of the family. How do the different characters interact with and internalize their faith? How does religion, including the social system that comprises the religion, support and/or undermine the different members of the Leibritsky family? Discuss the role that ritual and tradition plays throughout the novel.
6. Many members of the Leibritsky clan seem to be pulled by competing ties—to themselves as individuals, and to their sense of belonging to a group, whether that be the family group or the religious group. Discuss how this plays out with different characters.
7. In the beginning of the novel, Zelik tells a young Mort: “This is how you were born: Jewish. This is the family you were born into: of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You can’t change that.” How do the themes of family and religion intersect in the novel? How do they differ?
8. Did you relate to or sympathize with one sister over the others? If so, which one?
9. At one point in the novel, Molly says of Bec, “The thing about family, she knew, was that you were either in or you were out.” How does this sentiment play out in other ways for the Leibritsky family? For the most part, they are part of a very insular community. How does this help and hinder various characters throughout the novel?
10. The setting of the Milford coastline in 1948 consists of boroughs that are divided up by ethnicity. In what ways does the novel incorporate the idea of boundaries, whether geographic or interpersonal?

continued



11. Early in the novel Bec tells Molly, “You have to be yourself. You have to. Or something in you dies.” In what ways does the social and religious world of the Leibritskys in 1948 allow or inhibit the characters to be themselves? In what ways do the characters, especially after the accident, allow or inhibit their own personal freedom?

12. The word “freedom” appears several times in the first third of the book. For example, “I’m free!” Davy cried while jumping on his bed upon arriving at Woodmont for the summer. From the perspective of fifty years later, Molly states: “Here’s what I sense: that at the summer’s start Davy’s words were true for each of us, though not for the same reason, and that all of this—the different ways we found and grabbed at our freedom—had so much to do, ultimately, with this boy’s death.” What does Molly mean by this statement? Do you agree?

13. Are the limitations and avenues to “freedom” for the characters in the novel similar to limitations and avenues in other cultures? Is this story, in some way, universal?

14. As a child in Russia, Molly’s grandfather, Maks Syrkin, experienced the violence and dislocation of pogroms against Jews. He also experienced, at a young age, the death

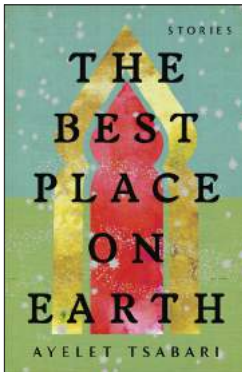
of his father. How does he try to make life in America safe for his family? In what ways is the story of the Syrkin and Leibritsky clans typical of immigrants generally? How does Davy’s death impact their journey toward the “American Dream”?

15. The Leibritsky’s cousin Reuben in Israel, a Holocaust survivor, suffers from being a displaced person. Late in the novel, Molly uses that phrase to describe herself and Bec when she states: “We arrived at the unmarked territory of our adult female lives not as pioneers but, like our cousin Reuben and all the Jews pouring into Israel after the war—or like the rest of my family, forever unmoored by the events of 1948—as displaced persons, as refugees.” What does Molly mean by this statement with regard to herself and Bec, and with regard to her family generally?

Questions courtesy of Little, Brown & Co.

# the best place on earth

AYELET TSABARI



Simon & Schuster  
2016 255 pp.  
50th anniversary ed.

Reminiscent of the early work of Jhumpa Lahiri, Ayelet Tsabari's award-winning debut collection of stories is global in scope yet intimate in feel, beautifully written, and emotionally powerful. From Israel to India to Canada, Tsabari's indelible characters grapple with love, violence, faith, the slipperiness of identity, and the challenges of balancing old traditions with modern times.

These eleven spellbinding stories often focus on Israel's Mizrahi Jews, featuring mothers and children, soldiers and bohemians, lovers and best friends, all searching for their place in the world. In "Tikkun," a man crosses paths with his free-spirited ex-girlfriend now a married Orthodox Jew—and minutes later barely escapes tragedy. In "Brit Milah," a mother travels from Israel to visit her daughter in Canada and is stunned by her grandson's upbringing. A young medic in the Israeli army bends the rules to potentially dangerous consequence in "Casualties." After her mom passes away, a teenage girl comes to live with her aunt outside Tel Aviv and has her first experience with unrequited love in "Say It Again, Say Something Else." And in the moving title story, two estranged sisters—one whose marriage is ending, the other whose relationship is just beginning—try to recapture the close bond they had as kids.



Absorbing, tender, and sharply observed, *The Best Place on Earth* infuses moments of sorrow with small moments of grace: a boy composes poetry in a bomb shelter, an old photo helps a girl make sense of her mother's rootless past. Tsabari's voice is gentle yet wise, illuminating the burdens of history, the strength of the heart, and our universal desire to belong.

## discussion questions

1. What are some of the themes that are threaded throughout the eleven stories?
2. What do the characters in *The Best Place on Earth* have in common?
3. Many of the stories are set against a background of war and conflict. How does the political and domestic intertwine in these stories?
4. Discuss the use of foreign languages in the stories. What techniques did the author use to incorporate the Hebrew language in the book?
5. Many of these characters are trying to get away from something: home, history, tradition, family, love. Talk about the theme of flight in these stories.
6. The opening story, "Tikkun," is about a meeting of former lovers against the backdrop of a bombing in Jerusalem. Why is the story called "Tikkun"?
7. Many of the stories in the book deal with cultural clashes within families. What are the reasons for those clashes? How are they reconciled?
8. The story "Invisible" features a Filipina caregiver working illegally in Israel. What is the role of magic in this story? How did you experience the ending of this story?
9. Does the order of the stories create a narrative arc for the collection? Does the book as a whole have a sense of an ending?
10. How did reading the stories complicate your notions of Israel and of the Jewish experience?
11. What do you think of the title of the book? What is The Best Place on Earth?

Questions courtesy of Ayelet Tsabari and Random House

# the empire of the senses

ALEXIS LANDAU

*The Empire of the Senses* is an enthralling tale of love and war, duty and self-discovery. It begins in 1914 when Lev Perlmutter, an assimilated German Jew fighting in World War I, finds unexpected companionship on the Eastern Front; back at home, his wife Josephine embarks on a clandestine affair of her own.

A decade later, during the heady, politically charged interwar years in Berlin, their children—one, a nascent Fascist struggling with his sexuality, the other a young woman entranced by the glitz and glamour of the Jazz Age—experience their own romantic awakenings.

With a painter's sensibility for the layered images that comprise our lives, this exquisite novel by Alexis Landau marks the emergence of a writer uniquely talented in bringing the past to the present.



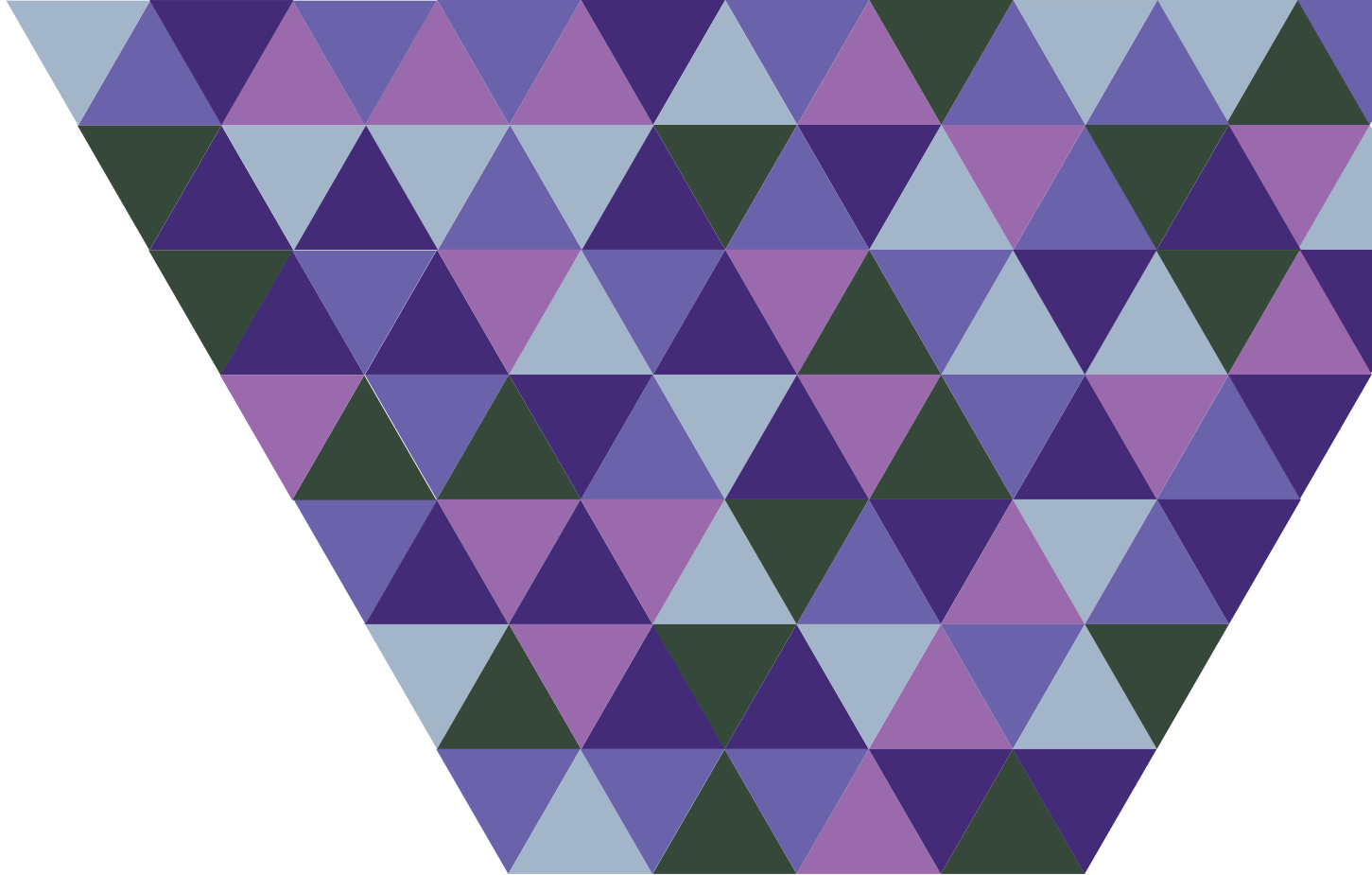
Vintage  
2016 (pbk)

496 pp.

## discussion questions

1. Discuss the title. What does it mean to you?
2. Many of the Jewish characters in the book were secular Jews, persecuted for their race. What is the role of religion in the story? Can a system of political beliefs be considered a religion?
3. Although the story of the Perlmutter family is fiction, many aspects of the novel are historically accurate. What did you learn from this account? Do you have events that occurred in your own family's past that you can relate?
4. Initially, Lev and Josephine seemed to genuinely love each other. Neither were particularly religious, and Josephine didn't feel her family's dislike of Lev's background (and Lev himself) as a hardship. Would they have continued to love each other if not for the war? Would they have stayed together, if not for the war?
5. Describe the character of Leah, particularly as opposed to Josephine? How are they different? Are there similarities between the two women?
6. Do you think Lev and Leah would have continued to love each other, and as intensely, if they had been able to be together?
7. Lev is a deserter from the army. When he signed up for the Army, he deserted his family, in a way. How did he desert Josephine? How did he desert Leah? Did Franz desert his Jewishness? Did Vicky desert her relationship with her mother? What other forms of desertion, emotional and physical, occur in the book, and what other words would you use in place of "desertion"?
8. Friday, June 10, 1927: The author recounts this day several times to from the point-of-view of each character. What do you learn about the individual family members as they move through his/her day?
9. Vicky is a teenager, eager to assert her independence and individuality. What are the confinements she feels? How does she react to them? What does she embrace?
10. Franz, too, is trying to find himself. What does he need to do to assert himself? What new ideals does he embrace?
11. The Perlmutter family are a family, although four incredibly different people. Do they seem ambivalent to one another? They seem to react very strongly to each other, but not to come closer together. How does the core (or lack thereof) of this family affect them so deeply? Can the war be blamed for these negative connections?

continued



12. Josephine is an ever-evolving character. Describe her relationship with Dr. Dührkoop. How does the introduction of Herr K change what begins as a clinical arrangement? How does her newfound liaison change her? Where does the interest in mysticism and death fit in? Do you think Josephine is trying too hard to live in the past, or is she focused on her future?

13. What happens to the relationship between Josephine and Lev?

14. Discuss the character of Otto. He appears in the two separate sections of Lev's life, the two separate sections of the story. What role does he play in the novel?

15. Vicky has much in common with her father. How is her love with Geza similar to his love with Leah? How does this love change Vicky? What do you think makes this love work, through all of its hardships? What do Vicky and Geza have that Lev and Leah did not?

16. Franz grew up with Lev as his hero. What changed? How does Franz's behavior as a teenager reflect that change? Franz loved soldiers and Franz had a crush on Wolf. If Franz had shared the truth about his sexuality with anyone in his family, do you think he would have become so involved with the Nazis? So anti-Semitic? How are the feelings toward Franz's father, soldiers/heroes, and Wolf bound together for him?

17. Describe the incident at Nuremberg. How did it affect the three Perlmutter differently? Why were there reactions so different? How would Franz have reacted, if he were there?

18. If Franz and Vicky had been closer, what would have changed for the two?

19. In certain key respects, Franz's family didn't know him. Is he a sympathetic character, despite what he has done?

20. What about Josephine? She was left behind during the hardships of war, deserted in her marriage, lost and left alone by her mother's death, and poorly dealt with by her psychologist. Does she deserve sympathy?

21. In the end, Lev is alone. But, as throughout the story, he doesn't seem to feel it. Does Lev deserve his solitude? Is it a hardship? How do you feel about him as a protagonist?

Questions courtesy of



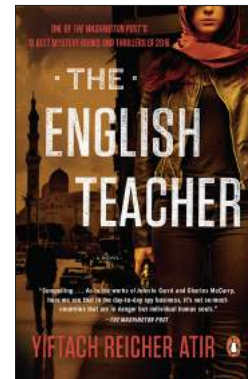
# the english teacher

YIFTACH REICHER ATIR;  
PHILIP SIMPSON, trans.

For readers of John Le Carré and viewers of *Homeland*, a slow-burning psychological spy-thriller by a former brigadier general of intelligence in the Israeli army

After attending her father's funeral, former Mossad agent Rachel Goldschmitt empties her bank account and disappears. But when she makes a cryptic phone call to her former handler, Ehud, the Mossad sends him to track her down. Finding no leads, he must retrace her career as a spy to figure out why she abandoned Mossad before she can do any damage to Israel. But he soon discovers that after living under cover for so long, an agent's assumed identity and her real one can blur, catching loyalty, love, and truth between them. In the midst of a high-risk, high-stakes investigation, Ehud begins to question whether he ever knew his agent at all.

In *The English Teacher*, Yiftach R. Atir drew on his own experience in intelligence to weave a psychologically nuanced thriller that explores the pressures of living under an assumed identity for months at a time.



Penguin Books  
2016 (pbk)

272 pp.

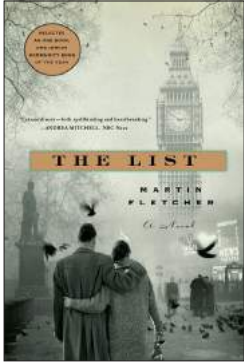
## discussion questions

1. Television shows like *Homeland* and *Fauda* show a variety of perspectives on espionage. How does *The English Teacher* portray the work that intelligence officers do? How does Reicher Atir cut against the idea that adversarial countries are all at odds with one another, and that stories about spies show a battle between good and evil?
2. There are some other notable examples of former intelligence officials writing thrillers, perhaps most famously John Le Carré. How do you think Reicher Atir's background in intelligence affected the way he told this story?
3. Throughout the story, Rachel felt herself getting close to the people she interacted with while undercover. Do you think it is possible to have a real relationship with someone while keeping your own identity a secret? Was there a sense in which the Rachel that Rashid knew was Rachel herself? And would you consider her friendship with Barbara to be genuine?
4. Was it right that Ehud shared information about Rachel with her father while concealing it from her? And if she had known that her father knew what she was doing for so many years, do you think she would have been better able to live with having been undercover for so long?
5. After keeping secrets for most of her adult life, the possibility of not having to worry about keeping them anymore would be strong. Do you think Rachel should have gone back to find Rashid? Do you think she expected him to be more receptive of her sudden re-entry into her life?
6. Being a veteran of the intelligence community, Rachel knew that she was taking a big risk by going back to the Arab Country. But do you think Rachel knew she would be killed? Was it worth the risk for her to stop living under the weight of having so much of her life be a secret?
7. From James Bond to Jack Ryan, many of the popular depictions of spies show espionage as the work of men. How did Rachel's experience differ from what we might consider this "usual" spy narrative? In what ways did she face greater risks as a woman?
8. Rachel put herself through countless risks during her time undercover, and was placed in harm's way to protect her identity and complete the missions she was given. Do you think she was treated fairly by her own government?

Questions courtesy of Penguin Books

# the list

MARTIN FLETCHER



St. Martin's Griffin  
2012 (pbk) 352 pp.

London, October 1945. Austrian refugees Georg and Edith await the birth of their first child. Yet how can they celebrate when almost every day brings news of another relative or friend murdered in the Holocaust? Their struggle to rebuild their lives is further threatened by growing anti-Semitism in London's streets; Englishmen want to take homes and jobs from Jewish refugees and give them to returning servicemen.

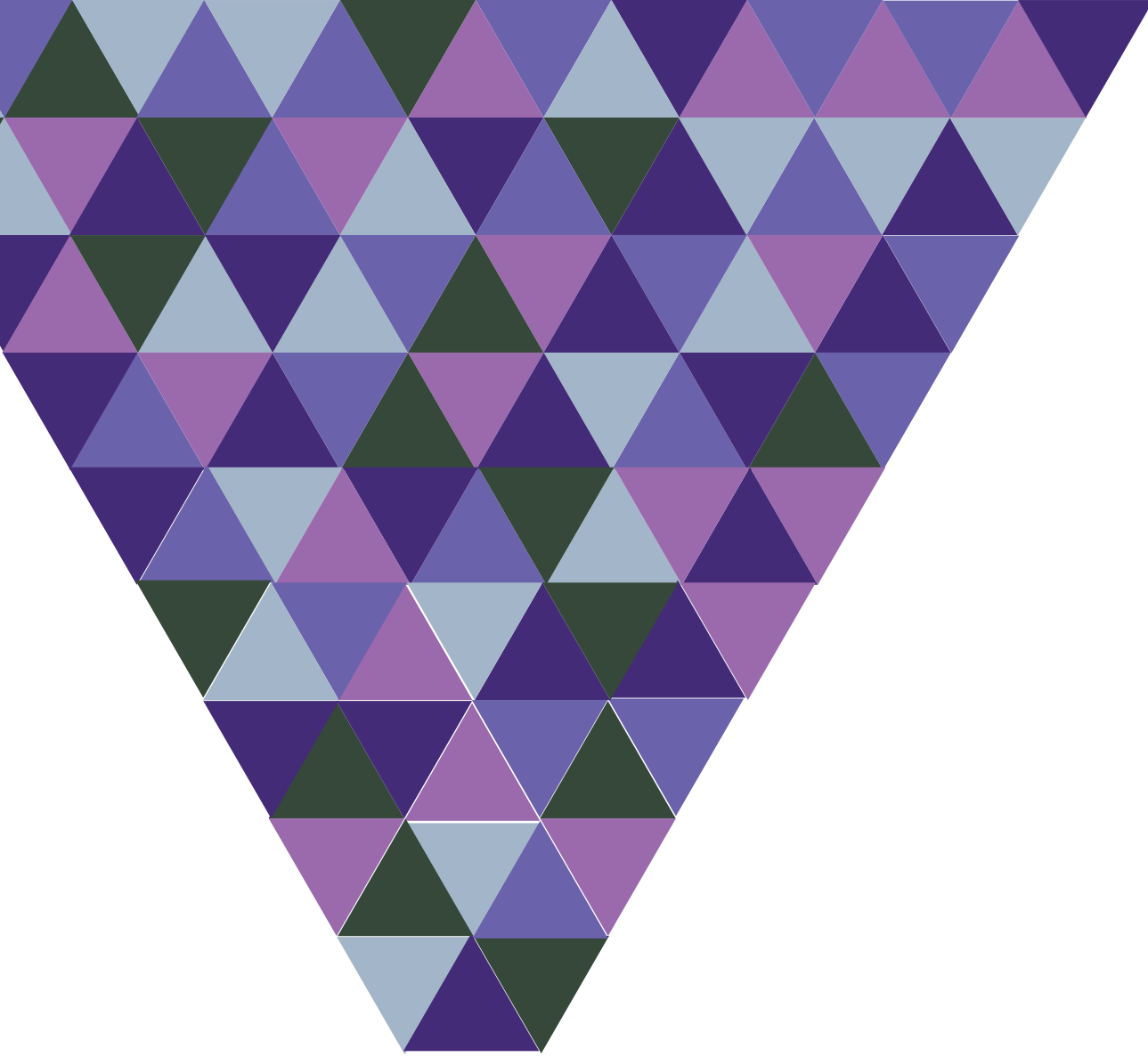
Edith's father is believed to have survived, and finding him rests on Georg's shoulders. Then Georg learns of a plot by Palestinian Jews to assassinate Britain's foreign minister. Georg must try to stop the murder, all the while navigating a city that wants to "eject the aliens."

In *The List*, Fletcher investigates an ignored and painful chapter in London's history. The novel is both a breathless thriller of postwar sabotage and a heartrending and historically accurate portrait of an almost forgotten era. In this sensitive, deeply touching, and impossible-to-forget story, Martin Fletcher explores the themes of hope, prejudice, loss and love that make up the lives of all refugees everywhere.

## discussion questions

1. Can a refugee be considered in the same category as a Holocaust survivor? Did Edith and Georg suffer in any way that is comparable to Anna's suffering?
2. When Edith left her family at Vienna's rail station, she knew she may never see them again. Then it is in another train station in London that Edith greets her cousin Anna, the first Holocaust survivor that she has met. What is the significance of the rail stations? Do they symbolize the journey of the characters or is it just a coincidence?
3. When Edith and Georg discover that Papi may be alive somewhere in Europe, they are torn and argue. Edith wants Georg to go to Vienna and look for her father. Was that possible? Should he have gone? What would have awaited him in Europe so soon after the end of World War 2?
4. When did you realize that Ismael was not an Egyptian anti-semite but an undercover Palestinian Jew? Was his relationship with Anna convincing?
5. Anna arrived in London with all the burden of Auschwitz and refused to talk about it. Why did she refuse? Was it helpful to her to remain silent or would she have benefited from the catharsis of talking about her experiences?
6. What kind of a person is Anna? What happened to her in the Holocaust? She is the silent character of the book yet she has a very strong presence in the story. Why?
7. Would it have been good for the Jews in Palestine to assassinate Ernest Bevin or harmful to their cause? How widespread was Jewish terrorism in Britain?
8. How wide-spread was anti-Semitism in Britain at that time? And today? In other countries?
9. To be a Jewish refugee in London, or anywhere for that matter, and to suspect, but not to know for sure, that your family is being tortured and killed in Europe - what must that have been like?
10. And then after the war, the suspense and drawn-out struggle to discover their relatives's fate - to what extent could other people understand and sympathise? Or is there no way for uninvolved people to understand? Did their understanding matter to the Jews then?
11. Did refugees take the jobs and homes of returning soldiers? Was that a fair complaint?
12. Did Jews have the right to fight back in the streets or should they have relied on the police to defend them? What was more important? To fight back physically or to try to educate the British to accept the Jews?

continued



13. Was Georg too weak in his relationship with Ismael? Should he have resisted earlier? Should he have informed the police as soon as he understood what Ismael was planning?

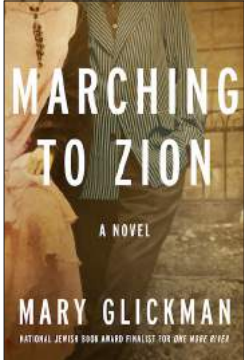
14. The landlords Albert and Sally – why did they not evict the refugees to make room for soldiers? What was their attitude towards the refugees? Was it typical of the British?

15 How did the British behave towards the Jews? Was it any different from other countries? How has it changed today?

Questions courtesy of Thomas Dunne Books

# marching to zion

MARY GLICKMAN



Open Road Media  
2013 (pbk) 262 pp.

In 1916, Mags Preacher arrives in the big city of St. Louis, fresh from the piney woods, hoping to learn the beauty trade. Instead, she winds up with a job at Fishbein's Funeral Home, run by an émigré who came to America to flee the pogroms of Russia. Mags knows nothing about Jews except that they killed the Lord Jesus Christ, but by the time her boss saves her life during the race riots in East St. Louis, all her perceptions have changed.

*Marching to Zion* is the story of Mags and of Mr. Fishbein, but it's also the story of Fishbein's daughter, Minerva, a beautiful redhead with an air of danger about her, and Magnus Bailey, Fishbein's charismatic business partner and Mags's first friend in town. When Magnus falls for Minerva's willful spirit, he'll learn just how dangerous she can be for a black man in America.

Readers of Mary Glickman's *One More River* will celebrate the return of Aurora Mae Stanton, who joins a cast of vibrant new characters in a tale that stretches from East St. Louis, Missouri, to Memphis, Tennessee, from World War I to the Great Depression. Hailed as "a powerful reminder of the discrimination and unspeakable hardships African Americans suffered," *Marching to Zion* is a gripping love story, a fascinating angle on history, and a compelling meditation on justice and fate.

## discussion questions

1. What is the importance of the book's title? Is the concept of Zion strictly Jewish or can it apply to any individual striving to find home?
2. Minnie and Magnus Bailey's romance is a major source of conflict. Would the course of the novel be any different if an African American woman fell in love with a Jewish man?
3. While in hiding during the riot, Mags asks Fishbein what is happening. He replies, "A pogrom." What similarities are there between the pogroms of Eastern Europe and those of the East St. Louis Riot of 1917?
4. Magnus Bailey often lies outright or by omission in order to protect Minnie. Do his deceptions do more harm than good for her?
5. Fishbein inscribes the words Beloved Daughter and Mother and Nothing Is Certain Under the Sun on his daughter's grave marker. Do you think these are fitting words to encapsulate and commemorate her life?
6. Sara Kate bears a strong resemblance to her father, George, and for that reason, Mags can hardly stand to look at her. Conversely, Fishbein recognizes that Golde resembles her mother, which causes him to keep her close. Why do these characters have different reactions to the memories of those they have loved and lost? What is the significance of traits of the dead persisting through future generations?
7. Fishbein is the "saddest man in the world" and Golde "would be an odd duck wherever she went." At the end of the novel, do you think Fishbein has finally found happiness?
8. What does it mean that, as Fishbein says, "America puts the stamp on you in Technicolor"?
9. How would the story differ if Minnie and Magnus met in the same years but when living in the Northeast or on the West Coast instead of in Missouri?
10. The third-person point of view shifts seamlessly between many characters in *Marching to Zion*. In your opinion, who is the main character in the novel? Why?
11. Racial and religious intolerance affect every character in *Marching to Zion*. In what ways do these issues similarly plague society today? What progress has been made since the era of *Marching to Zion*?

Questions courtesy of Open Road Media

# our holocaust

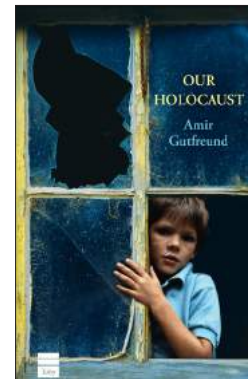
AMIR GUTFREUND;  
JESSICA COHEN, trans.

Amir and Effi collected relatives. With Holocaust survivors for parents and few other ‘real’ relatives alive, relationships operated under a “Law of Compression” in which tenuous connections turned friends into uncles, cousins and grandparents.

Life was framed by Grandpa Lolek, the parsimonious and eccentric old rogue who put his tea bags through Selektion, and Grandpa Yosef, the neighborhood saint, who knew everything about everything, but refused to talk of his own past. Amir and Effi also collected information about what happened Over There.

This was more difficult than collecting relatives; nobody would tell them any details because they weren’t yet Old Enough. The intrepid pair won’t let this stop them, and their quest for knowledge results in adventures both funny and alarming, as they try to unearth their neighbors’ stories.

As Amir grows up, his obsession with understanding the Holocaust remains with him, and finally Old Enough to know, the unforgettable cast of characters that populate his world open their hearts, souls, and pasts to him...

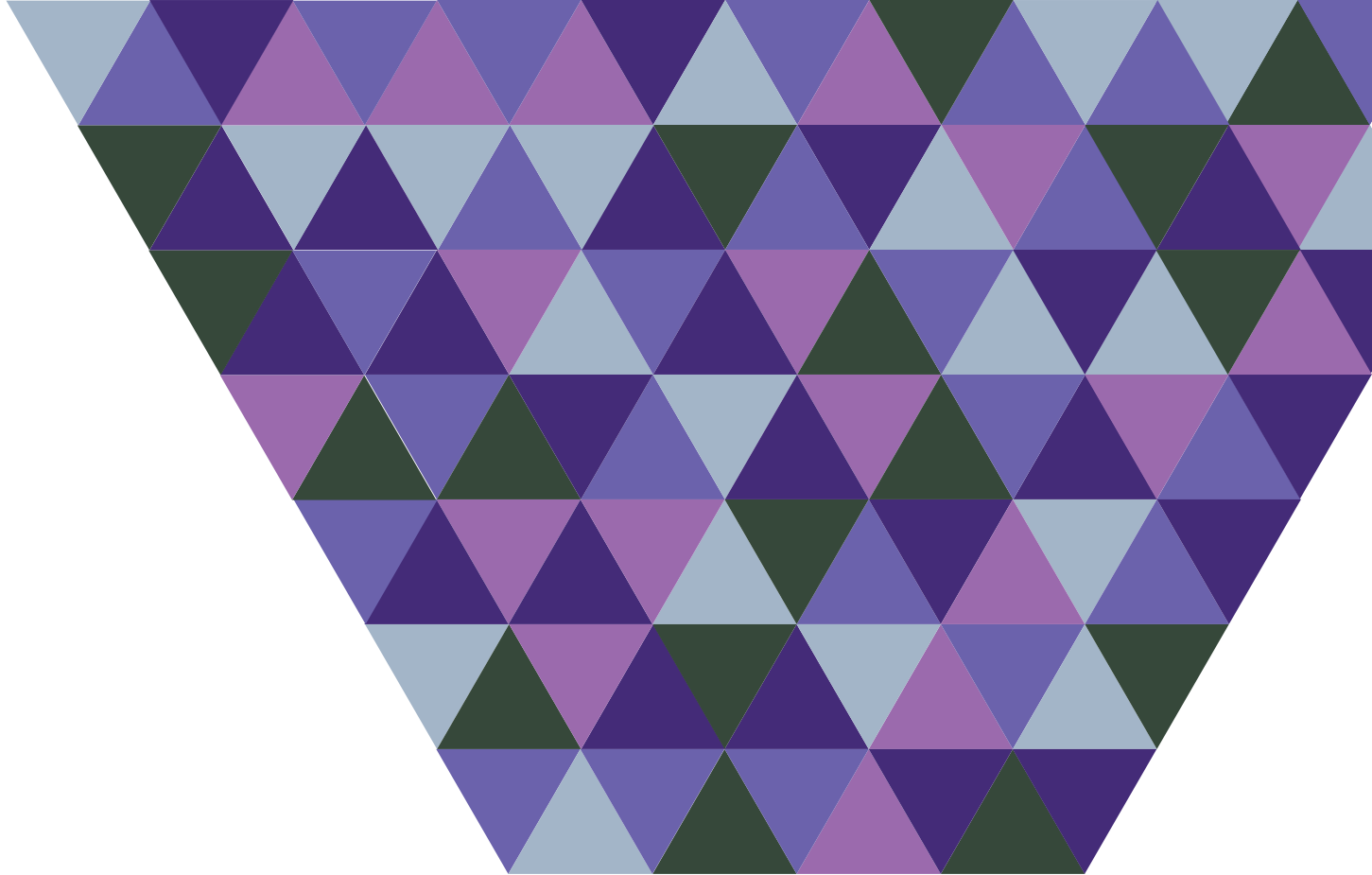


AmazonCrossing  
2012 (pbk) 418 pp.

## discussion questions

1. Amir Gutfreund has said, “Even if I write an instruction manual for a washing machine, it will always contain humor, and it will always contain the Holocaust. It’s a part of me.” How do you see this statement reflected in this thinly-veiled autobiographical novel?
2. There are several subterranean images in this novel, from the sewers that Gershon Klima cleans to the cellar of Grandpa Lolek’s home. What do these underground areas signify in this story? Why are Amir and Effi so eager to excavate them?
3. What is the “Law of Compression”? How does it serve as a response to the Holocaust?
4. Gutfreund describes two *Shoahs*: the public one declaimed at school ceremonies by means of a siren, and the private one that involves his extended family (p. 49). What is the difference between the two *Shoahs*? What do they both have in common? How does this concept shed light on the meaning of the book’s title?
5. Gutfreund writes, “The Holocaust extended its reach beyond the neighborhood. Traces of *Shoah* lurked in the most surprising places, like the little shops where Dad went to order wallpaper or buy light bulbs” (p. 85). What does he mean in saying that traces of the *Shoah* lurked in surprising places? Can you think of some examples in the book? Do you think the *Shoah* lurks as noticeably in America as it does in the Israel the Gutfreund describes? Why or why not?
6. In speaking of the period when he was finally Old Enough, Gutfreund comments, “We did not abandon the *Shoah* but we bundled it up into one single day like everyone else did. Holocaust Remembrance Day. Like a pile of leaves neatly raked” (p. 156). Do you think he is being critical of Holocaust Remembrance Day? How do you feel about this institution?
7. In telling his war story, Grandpa Yosef comments, “Today I am *Shoah*-smart, you could say, and I know that people like Adler were marked men from the beginning. Who would live? Who would die? Was there any way to predict? That’s not what I’m saying. But there were those whose fate was marked on them from the beginning. The brazen would live, the pure would die” (p. 258). What does Grandpa Yosef mean by “*Shoah*-smart”? Do you think this is something of which he is proud? Is there any point to being “*Shoah*-smart” after the war is long over?
8. When Grandpa Yosef alludes to Yariv while telling his story, Gutfreund remarks parenthetically, “Suddenly, my Yariv, in the middle of the camps” (p. 263). Gutfreund’s son Yariv was of course born many years after the war was over. So what does Gutfreund mean by this comment? How does it relate to the title of the book?

continued



9. What is the difference in opinion between Gutfreund and Attorney Perl regarding the proper way to treat war criminals? Which side do you agree with, and why?

10. Gutfreund says that the people he most hates are those who were only doing their jobs — those who did not actually hate Jews (p. 364). Why are these individuals the most loathsome to him?

11. What is Gutfreund's reaction to the German washing machine that his wife brings home (see p. 373)? Are you familiar with this practice of boycotting German products? How do you feel about people who still do so today?

12. What is the Lebensborn that Hans Oderman describes (p. 400)? How does this relate to the Final Solution? Does Oderman's personal and academic interest in the Lebensborn remind you of another obsession in this book? What do you think Gutfreund is trying to show by suggesting this parallel?

13. Is Gutfreund a religious man? How does he account for his father's survival, and for the survival of those members of his family and community who share their stories?

Questions created and commissioned by Makom, the Israel Education Lab of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

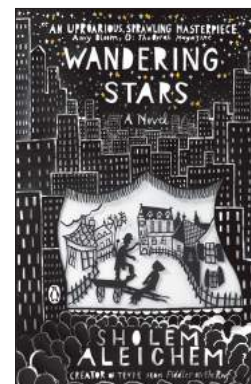
# wandering stars

SHOLEM ALEICHEM;  
ALIZA SHEVRIN, trans.

Translated in full for the first time, one hundred years after its original publication, the acclaimed epic love story set in the colorful world of the Yiddish theater.

*Wandering Stars* spans ten years and two continents, relating the adventures of Reizel and Leibel, young shtetl dwellers in late nineteenth-century Russia who fall under the spell of a traveling acting company. Together they run away from home to become entertainers themselves, and then tour separately around Europe, ultimately reuniting in New York.

*Wandering Stars* is an engrossing romance, a great New York story, and an anthem for the magic of the theater.



Penguin Books  
2010 (pbk) 480 pp.

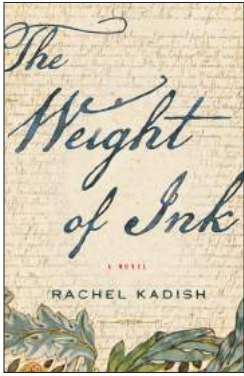
## discussion questions

- In the forward, Tony Kushner writes that the citizens of Holeneshti are "Once free, free to wander; once wandering, longing for home." How is this true for Rosa and Leo? How is this true for the other members of their theater troupes?
- What do Rosa and Leo hope to accomplish by leaving their shtetl and joining the theater world? Do they ultimately accomplish what they hoped for? And do they remain true to themselves in the process?
- How do the various performers and producers of the theater companies illustrate the reinvention, ambition, and hard work that are at the core of the immigrant experience? Are they happy? Is the world of Yiddish theater appealing?
- Sholem Aleichem writes: "America was a great ocean into which flowed all rivers. It was a wonderful dream that, to be sure, did not always come true; it was the farthest point, beyond which one could go no further; the ultimate remedy that, if it could not help you, no doctor on earth could" (p. 240). Discuss how this quote represents the experiences or attitudes of many immigrants to the United States at the turn of the century. Is there anyone in your family history that would have identified with this statement?
- Compare the Jewish communities in New York and Holeneshti. What common threads connect them? How are the inhabitants different? What traditions are preserved and why?
- On p. 410, the narrator describes the New York City subway system and sees it as the embodiment of the city itself. Is his description accurate today? Does it describe your idea of New York?
- Although the plot of *Wandering Stars* is set into motion by the actions of Rosa and Leo, they are only two in a wide cast of characters. Which of the other characters most captured your attention? Why?
- Are there any entirely good or bad characters in the novel? What kind of a moral picture does the narrator paint of the world of Yiddish theater?
- Rosa, Madame Cherniak, Henrietta, and Zlatke are very different characters, but one thing that unites them is a relationship with Leo. What does each woman want from him? Does she achieve her goal? How do their stories overlap?
- Who is the narrator of this novel? What opinions does the narrator have about the characters and events in the novel? How would you describe the tone of voice? Does the narrator seem to have a preference between the old life in the shtetl and the new life in America?
- For well over 100 years, Sholem Aleichem has been one of the most beloved writers of Jewish literature. Judging by *Wandering Stars*, what do you think it is that accounts for this popularity?
- Although it is certainly a comic novel, do you think *Wandering Stars* has a happy ending? Why or why not?

Questions courtesy of Penguin Books

# the weight of ink

RACHEL KADISH



Mariner Books  
2018 (pbk)

304 pp.



Set in London of the 1660s and of the early twenty-first century, *The Weight of Ink* is the interwoven tale of two women of remarkable intellect: Ester Velasquez, an emigrant from Amsterdam who is permitted to scribe for a blind rabbi, just before the plague hits the city; and Helen Watt, an ailing historian with a love of Jewish history.

When Helen is summoned by a former student to view a cache of newly discovered seventeenth-century Jewish documents, she enlists the help of Aaron Levy, an American graduate student as impatient as he is charming, and embarks on one last project: to determine the identity of the documents' scribe, the elusive "Aleph."

Electrifying and ambitious, *The Weight of Ink* is about women separated by centuries—and the choices and sacrifices they must make in order to reconcile the life of the heart and mind.

## discussion questions

1. Describing the impact of his blindness, the rabbi says to Ester, "I came to understand how much of the world was now banned from me—for my hands would never again turn the pages of a book, nor be stained with the sweet, grave weight of ink, a thing I had loved since first memory" (p. 196).

For the rabbi and for Ester, ink means many things—among them freedom, community, power, and danger. What does the written word mean to you? Is it as powerful today, amid all our forms of media, as it was to the rabbi and to Ester?

2. The novel opens with a quote from Shakespeare's Sonnet 71: "Nay, if you read this line, remember not / The hand that writ it."

Which characters in the novel choose to give anonymously, or without receiving any credit?

Would you be willing to have your most meaningful accomplishments remain anonymous or even be attributed to others? In today's interconnected world, with privacy so hard to achieve, is there anything you would write or say if you knew your words would be anonymous?

3. In order to write, Ester betrays the rabbi's trust. Yet in her final confession Ester says, "Yet I would choose again my very same sin, though it would mean my compunction should wrack me another lifetime and beyond" (p. 529).

Is Ester's betrayal of the rabbi's trust forgivable? When freedom of thought and loyalty argue against each other, which should a person choose?

4. John, Manuel, and Alvaro offer Ester very different sorts of love. What does each offer her, and what sacrifice does each require? How might you answer this question for the love between Dror and Helen?

5. Both Helen and Ester fear love. How do they wrestle with this fear? Could they have made choices other than the ones they made?

6. In what ways does Aaron mature over the course of the book?

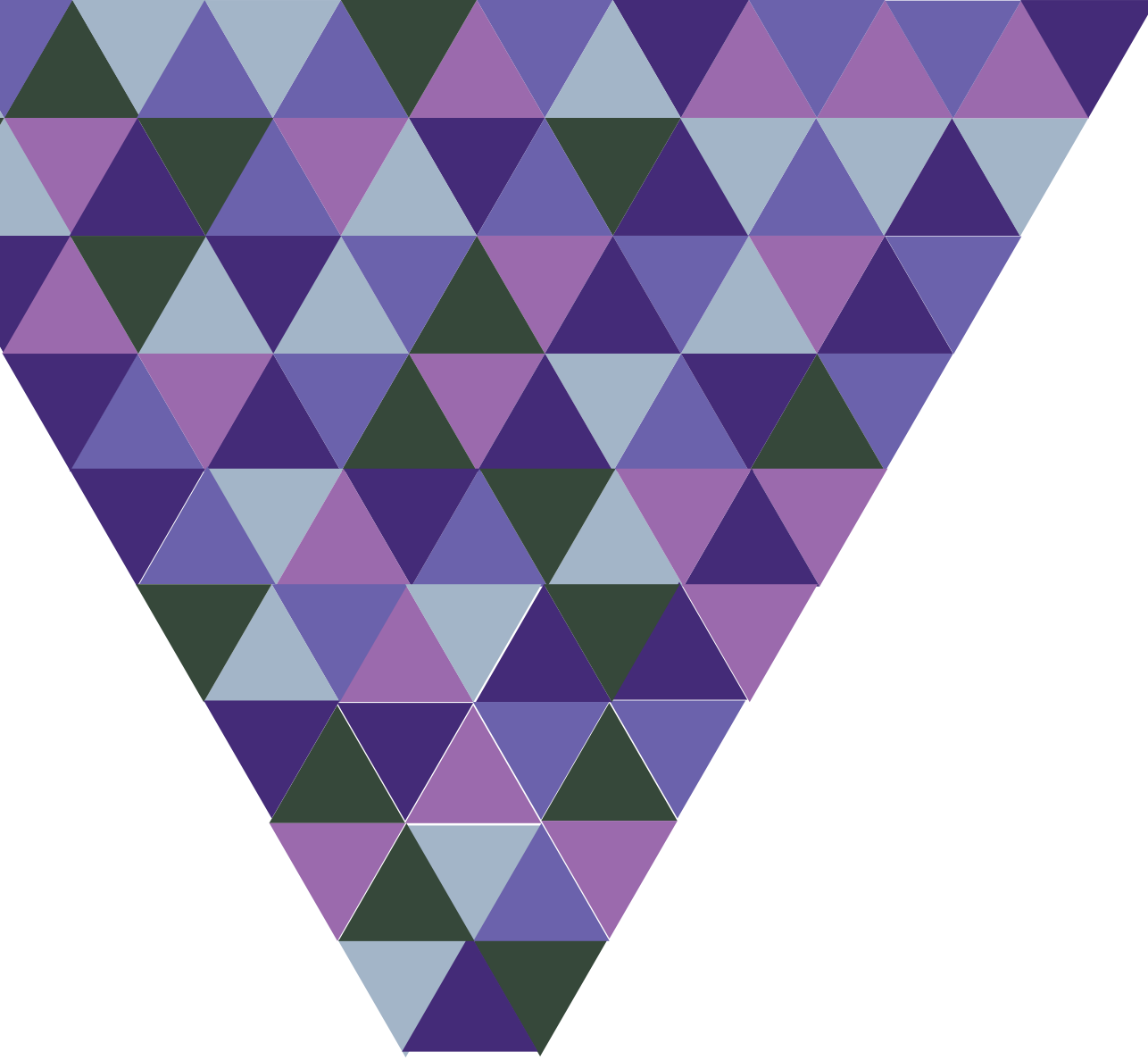
7. Do the motivations of Ester, Helen, and Aaron change as the story progresses?

8. Ester's life is shaped by wrenching choices between the life of the mind and the life of the body. Can a woman today freely choose to combine love, motherhood, and the life of the mind, without unacceptable sacrifices?

9. What story do you imagine Dror would tell about his experience with Helen?

continued





10. Ester grows up in a community of Portuguese Inquisition refugees who are fiercely focused on ensuring their safety in the “New Jerusalem” of Amsterdam; they place great importance on reviving Jewish learning and they give their harshest punishment to Spinoza for his heretical pronouncements. When Helen goes to Israel, she encounters Holocaust survivors struggling with the legacy of their losses and the need to establish safety in their new home.

In what ways are these communities similar, and in what ways are they different ?

11. What clues does the author include as to the identity of the true grandfather of the female scribe? Did Lizabeta (Constantina’s mother) make the right choice in refusing to play on his pity and beg him to keep her and her daughter in London?

12. After months of chafing at the Patricias’ strict stewardship

of the rare manuscript room, Aaron has this epiphany: “And as if his own troubles had given him new ears, Aaron understood that her terseness was love — that all of it was love: the Patricias’ world of meticulous conservation and whispering vigilance and endless policing over fucking pencils” (page 541).

What sorts of love are on display in unexpected ways in *The Weight of Ink*? In what unexpected ways does love show itself in your own world

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# non-fiction

# the grammar of god

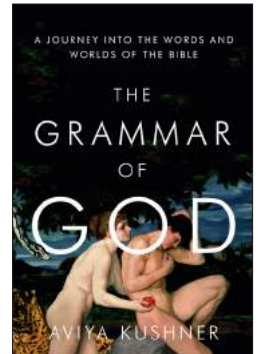
a journey into the words and worlds of the bible

AVIYA KUSHNER

Aviya Kushner grew up in a Hebrew-speaking family, reading the Bible in the original Hebrew and debating its meaning over the dinner table. She knew much of it by heart—and was therefore surprised when, while getting her MFA at the University of Iowa, she took the novelist Marilynne Robinson's class on the Old Testament and discovered she barely recognized the text she thought she knew so well. From differences in the Ten Commandments to a less ambiguous reading of the creation story to a new emphasis on the topic of slavery, the English translation often felt like another book entirely from the one she had grown up with.

Kushner began discussing the experience with Robinson, who became a mentor, and her interest in the differences between the ancient language and the modern one gradually became an obsession. She began what became a ten-year project of reading different versions of the Hebrew Bible in English and traveling the world in the footsteps of the great biblical translators, trying to understand what compelled them to take on a lifetime project that was often considered heretical and in some cases resulted in their deaths.

In this eye-opening chronicle, Kushner tells the story of her vibrant relationship to the Bible, and along the way illustrates how the differences in translation affect our understanding of our culture's most important written work. A fascinating look at language and the beliefs we hold most dear, *The Grammar of God* is also a moving tale about leaving home and returning to it, both literally and through reading.



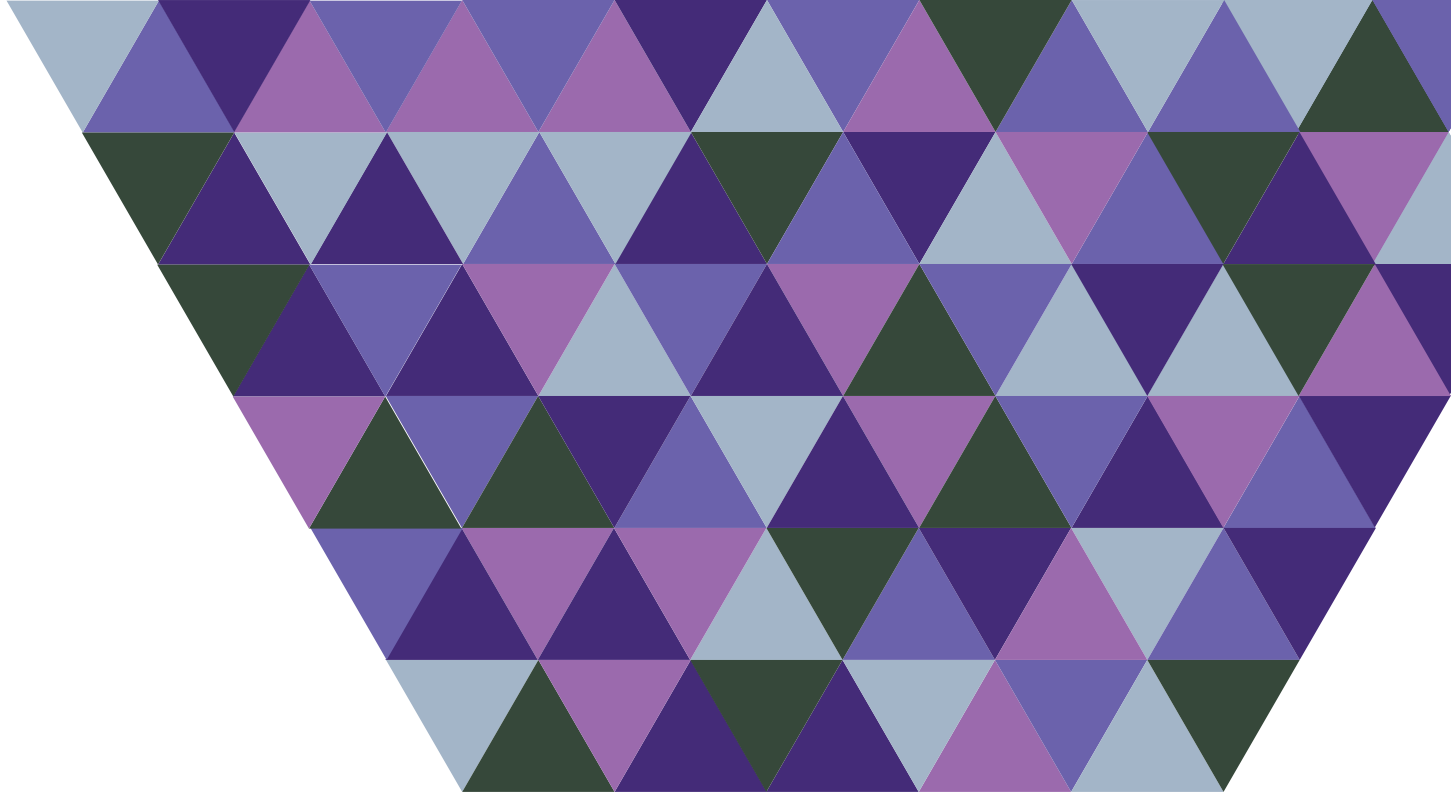
Spiegel & Grau  
2015 272 pp.



## discussion questions

1. The history of the translation of the Hebrew Bible is surprisingly violent. Were you surprised that such a scholarly endeavor could have such high stakes? *The Grammar of God* discusses the complications of translation. Did the book change your understanding of the experience of reading the Bible? Do you believe a translation can sufficiently convey the meaning of books from another language?
2. Why do you think some Jewish leaders regarded translation as an existential threat, going so far as to institute a fast on the anniversary of the publication of the first translation of the Hebrew Bible? Why do you think some Christian leaders were so wary of translation, to the point of killing translators?
3. Take a look at the translations of Genesis 1:2 on pages 6 and 7. Notice that whether it is the “Spirit of God,” the “wind from God,” “the rushing-spirit of God,” or “God’s breath” depends on the translation. The verb—moving, hovering, sweeping—also depends on the translation. How do the differences in translation affect the way you understand God—and how you read the famous start of creation?
4. In the translations of those same lines, Genesis 1:1-2, how do differences in punctuation affect your understanding?
5. Slavery and the issue of reparations for it have been central to the recent discussion of race in America. But slavery is very much a concern in the Torah too. How is the start of slavery discussed in various translations of the Hebrew Bible? See pages 82-83.  
  
What are the most notable differences in translations from different faith traditions and centuries? Do you think the Torah and its translations had an influence on American attitudes on slavery?
6. The “Ten Commandments” depend on the faith tradition—but also on translation. What most intrigued you about the differences between the Hebrew and English presentations of the Ten Commandments?
7. Looking at the different lists of commandments in the Appendix, can you see ways in which differences in translation affect our society?

continued



8. How does your sense of the Ten Commandments shape your view of God—and the individual’s obligations to the community? Does translation play a role in this understanding?

9. *The Grammar of God* melds the personal and the Biblical. Do the books you read ever become part of the narrative of your life? Can you give an example of a book you read whose resonances became part of your daily life?

10. Given the fraught history of biblical translation and the particular power of the Hebrew Bible, do you think translation of the Bible is even possible? Is it helpful to read more versions of the Bible to get closest to the original, or is it more powerful to read only one version?

Questions courtesy of Spiegel & Grau

# the house of twenty thousand books

SASHA ABRAMSKY

*The House of Twenty Thousand Books* is the story of Chimen Abramsky, an extraordinary polymath and bibliophile who amassed a vast collection of socialist literature and Jewish history. For more than fifty years Chimen and his wife, Miriam, hosted epic gatherings in their house of books that brought together many of the age's greatest thinkers.

The atheist son of one of the century's most important rabbis, Chimen was born in 1916 near Minsk, spent his early teenage years in Moscow while his father served time in a Siberian labor camp for religious proselytizing, and then immigrated to London, where he discovered the writings of Karl Marx and became involved in left-wing politics. He briefly attended the newly established Hebrew University in Jerusalem, until World War II interrupted his studies. Back in England, he married, and for many years he and Miriam ran a respected Jewish bookshop in London's East End. When the Nazis invaded Russia in June 1941, Chimen joined the Communist Party, becoming a leading figure in the party's National Jewish Committee. He remained a member until 1958, when, shockingly late in the day, he finally acknowledged the atrocities committed by Stalin. In middle age, Chimen reinvented himself once more, this time as a liberal thinker, humanist, professor, and manuscripts' expert for Sotheby's auction house.

Journalist Sasha Abramsky re-creates here a lost world, bringing to life the people, the books, and the ideas that filled his grandparents' house, from gatherings that included Eric Hobsbawm and Isaiah Berlin to books with Marx's handwritten notes, William Morris manuscripts and woodcuts, an early sixteenth-century Bomberg Bible, and a first edition of Descartes's *Meditations*. *The House of Twenty Thousand Books* is a wondrous journey through our times, from the vanished worlds of Eastern European Jewry to the cacophonous politics of modernity.



New York Review Books  
2017 (pbk) 376 pp.

## discussion questions

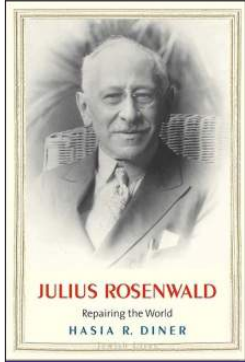
1. How can we understand the role of Jewish culture and learning, not just as a religious phenomenon but as one that has played out in important political and philosophical arena over the last two centuries?
2. Looking at the diaspora experience as Jewish populations moved west from the Russian empire and later the USSR in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, how did this mass migration impact both the Jewish community and the broader communities into which they migrated?
3. The embrace of utopian political ideas, and then the reaction against utopianism, was a central story for millions of people in the mid-twentieth century. How did that play out within the world created in the *House of Twenty Thousand Books*?
4. Chimen's extraordinarily panoramic knowledge, and his vast collection of books, allowed him an entry-point into conversations ranging from discussion of the Talmud through to the history of Europe's great revolutionary movements, from Yiddish literature to Jewish painters. Today, in our hyper-specialized world, generalists are in short supply. What gets lost when the scope of conversations becomes narrowed?
5. The great Jewish tradition of welcoming the stranger played out in Hallway for more than half a century. Obviously food and conversation are central parts of this tradition. What is the role of the dinner table in Jewish culture?
6. Mimi and Chimen dedicated their lives to social justice. They didn't always get the answers right, as they would have been the first to admit, but their goal in life was always to advance the general good. What lessons does this hold for our world today?
7. Given the values Mimi and Chimen espoused, and given the premium they placed on ideas, on rationality, on civility, how would they have navigated the current political moment?
8. There is a tension running through the book between tradition and modernity. How did this manifest itself in Hallway, and in the lives of the characters whose stories are told in this book? Or history?

Questions courtesy of Sasha Abramsky

# julius rosenwald

repairing the world

HASIA R. DINER



Yale Univ. Press  
2017 256 pp.

Julius Rosenwald (1862–1932) rose from modest means as the son of a peddler to meteoric wealth at the helm of Sears, Roebuck. Yet his most important legacy stands not upon his business acumen but on the pioneering changes he introduced to the practice of philanthropy. While few now recall Rosenwald's name—he refused to have it attached to the buildings, projects, or endowments he supported—his passionate support of Jewish and African American causes continues to influence lives to this day.

This biography of Julius Rosenwald explores his attitudes toward his own wealth and his distinct ideas about philanthropy, positing an intimate connection between his Jewish consciousness and his involvement with African-Americans. The book shines light on his belief in the importance of giving in the present to make an impact on the future, and on his encouragement of beneficiaries to become partners in community institutions and projects. Rosenwald emerges from the pages as a compassionate man whose generosity and wisdom transformed the practice of philanthropy itself.

## JBC Book Clubs discussion questions

1. Did you know anything about Julius Rosenwald prior to reading this book? What was something that you learned from reading? Were there aspects you would like to learn more about? Did reading about Rosenwald's practices change the way you view philanthropy?
2. What did you admire most about Rosenwald? What did you disagree with? What do you think the author, Hasia Diner, admired the most? least?
3. Rosenwald had a very clear view of how he wanted to engage in philanthropy. What were his guiding principles? Was he consistent in his views? What do you think of him as a philanthropist?
4. Did Rosenwald endeavor to repair the world because of Judaism or as a Jew?
5. Rosenwald believed that minorities had to be exemplary members of society to disprove any negative stereotypes that existed. Do you agree with him? Has that way of thinking changed at all since JR's time?
6. JR's view on Zionism was particularly controversial within the Jewish community. What did he object to exactly? Have any of his concerns come to pass?
7. Rosenwald declined to donate to any cause in which there was not larger donor participation. Why was this? Do you think it was effective? How does his notion of giving fit in with Maimonides' levels of *tzedakah* ([http://murals.wbtl.org/uploads/2/4/7/9/24790045/maimonides\\_ladder.pdf](http://murals.wbtl.org/uploads/2/4/7/9/24790045/maimonides_ladder.pdf))
8. In JR's time, Jews were highly involved in African-American causes and organizations, something that you see less of now. Why do you think that is? What has changed in the past century?
9. Rosenwald's interest in African-American affairs seems to have stemmed from an encounter with a book ( p. 152). Have you ever read a book that catalyzed you toward action or involvement in a cause or organization in some way?
10. Rosenwald's giving to the African-American community received much praise, but also some criticism, both from members of the Jewish community and of the Black community. What do you think of the complaints leveled against him? Why do you think he did not actively work to end segregation?
11. In a speech, Rosenwald stated, "a Jew must be the one... who is militant for the right, the ethical, the spiritual, the best in national life. If he falls short of this standard, he will himself have brought into being the monster which will one day destroy him and unseat him from his position of safety in America" (p. 218). Do you agree with his statement? Is it still relevant to our society today?

Questions courtesy of Jewish Book Council

# my jewish year

18 holidays, one wondering jew

ABIGAIL POGREBIN

The much-dissected Pew Research Center study of 2013, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” revealed that most U.S. Jews locate their Jewishness in their ancestry and culture not in religion. Abigail Pogrebin wondered if perhaps that’s because we haven’t all looked at religion closely enough.

Although she grew up following some holiday rituals, Pogrebin realized how little she knew about their foundational purpose and current relevance. She wanted to understand what had kept these holidays alive and vibrant, in some cases for thousands of years. Her curiosity led her to embark on an entire year of intensive research, observation, and writing about the milestones on the Jewish calendar.

*My Jewish Year* travels through this calendar’s signposts with candor, humor, and a trove of information, capturing the arc of Jewish observance through the eyes of a relatable, wandering and wondering Jew. The chapters are interspersed with brief reflections from prominent rabbis and Jewish thinkers.

Maybe you’re seeking an accessible, digestible roadmap for Jewish life. Maybe you’d appreciate a fresh exploration of what you’ve mastered. Whatever your motivation, you’ll be educated, entertained, and inspired by Pogrebin’s unusual journey and by *My Jewish Year*.

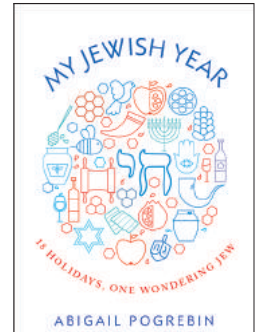


Fig Tree Books  
2017 336 pp.



## JBC Book Clubs discussion questions

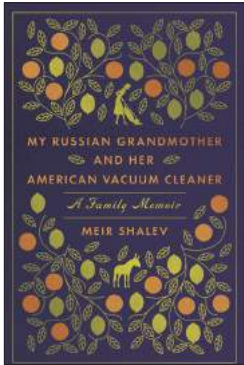
1. While interviewing celebrities for her first book, *Stars of David*, Abigail realized that she hadn’t asked herself the questions that she was asking others, a realization that helped bring about this book (p. 10). How would you answer her questions?
2. Which holiday did you enjoy reading about the most? Which one did you learn the most about? Is there something that you found in this book that you hope to bring into your own life?
3. The subtitle of the book is a play on the term “wandering Jew.” What is the difference between being a wandering Jew and a wondering one? Do you think the author is more wondering or wandering? Are there ways in which either of these terms applies to you?
4. Was there a quote or an explanation from one of the rabbis that stayed with you? What did you highlight or note while reading? Which rabbi would you most want to learn with?
5. Did you learn something that surprised you or was unexpected? Was there something that personalized a holiday for you in a new way or a new interpretation with which you connected? What was the most provocative idea that you read?
6. What was your initial reaction to the premise of this book? Did it change over the course of reading? Are you surprised by where the author ended up?
7. Pogrebin writes that her son’s bris was the impetus for writing her first book, because she had a sense that she was just “checking the box” (p. 9). Are there things that you do “to check the box”?
8. Judith Shulevitz tells the author that “the doing comes first” (p. 138), causing Pogrebin to reflect, “Do it and you will feel it. That’s another theme of this year.” This sentiment is echoed by Rabbi Lauren Berkun who points out that the Israelites receive the Torah saying, “*na’aseh v’nishmah*”, we will do and we will listen (p. 139). What do you think of this approach? Do you think action leads to engagement or just checking the box?
9. On page 99, Judaism is described as the “biggest book club in the world.” Do you think that’s an apt description? In what ways?
10. In his book, *God in Search of Man*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says that, “A Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought [or faith].” How do you think that statement applies to this book? Do you agree with it? Which parts of the book are leaps of action, which are leaps of thought, and which are leaps of faith?
11. During his interview, Leon Wieseltier says, “We have no right to allow our passivity to destroy this tradition that miraculously has made it across two thousand years of hardship right into our laps....Like it or not, we are stewards of something precious” (p. 10). Do you agree with this? Similarly, Abigail writes about her children’s b’nai mitzvah, “This is about you and also beyond you. None of this lasts without you” (p. 13). What responsibility do individual Jews have to the larger community? How is this book a reflection of Wieseltier’s statement?

Courtesy of Jewish Book Council,  
from JBC Book Clubs’ discussion guide on *My Jewish Year*, available  
at [www.jewishbookcouncil.org/bookclub/discussion-questions](http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/bookclub/discussion-questions)

# my russian grandmother and her american vacuum cleaner

a family memoir

MEIR SHALEV;  
EVAN FALLENBERG, trans.



Schocken  
2018 (pbk)

224 pp.

From the author of the acclaimed novel *A Pigeon and a Boy* comes a charming tale of family ties, over-the-top housekeeping, and the sport of storytelling in Nahalal, the village of Meir Shalev's birth. Here we meet Shalev's amazing Grandma Tonia, who arrived in Palestine by boat from Russia in 1923 and lived in a constant state of battle with what she viewed as the family's biggest enemy in their new land: dirt.

Grandma Tonia was never seen without a cleaning rag over her shoulder. She received visitors outdoors. She allowed only the most privileged guests to enter her spotless house. Hilarious and touching, Grandma Tonia and her regulations come richly to life in a narrative that circles around the arrival into the family's dusty agricultural midst of the big, shiny American sweeper sent as a gift by Great-uncle Yeshayahu (he who had shockingly emigrated to the sinful capitalist heaven of Los Angeles!). America, to little Meir and to his forebears, was a land of hedonism and enchanting progress; of tempting luxuries, dangerous music, and degenerate gum-chewing; and of women with painted fingernails. The sweeper, a stealth weapon from Grandpa Aharon's American brother meant to beguile the hardworking socialist household with a bit of American ease, was symbolic of the conflicts and visions of the family in every respect.

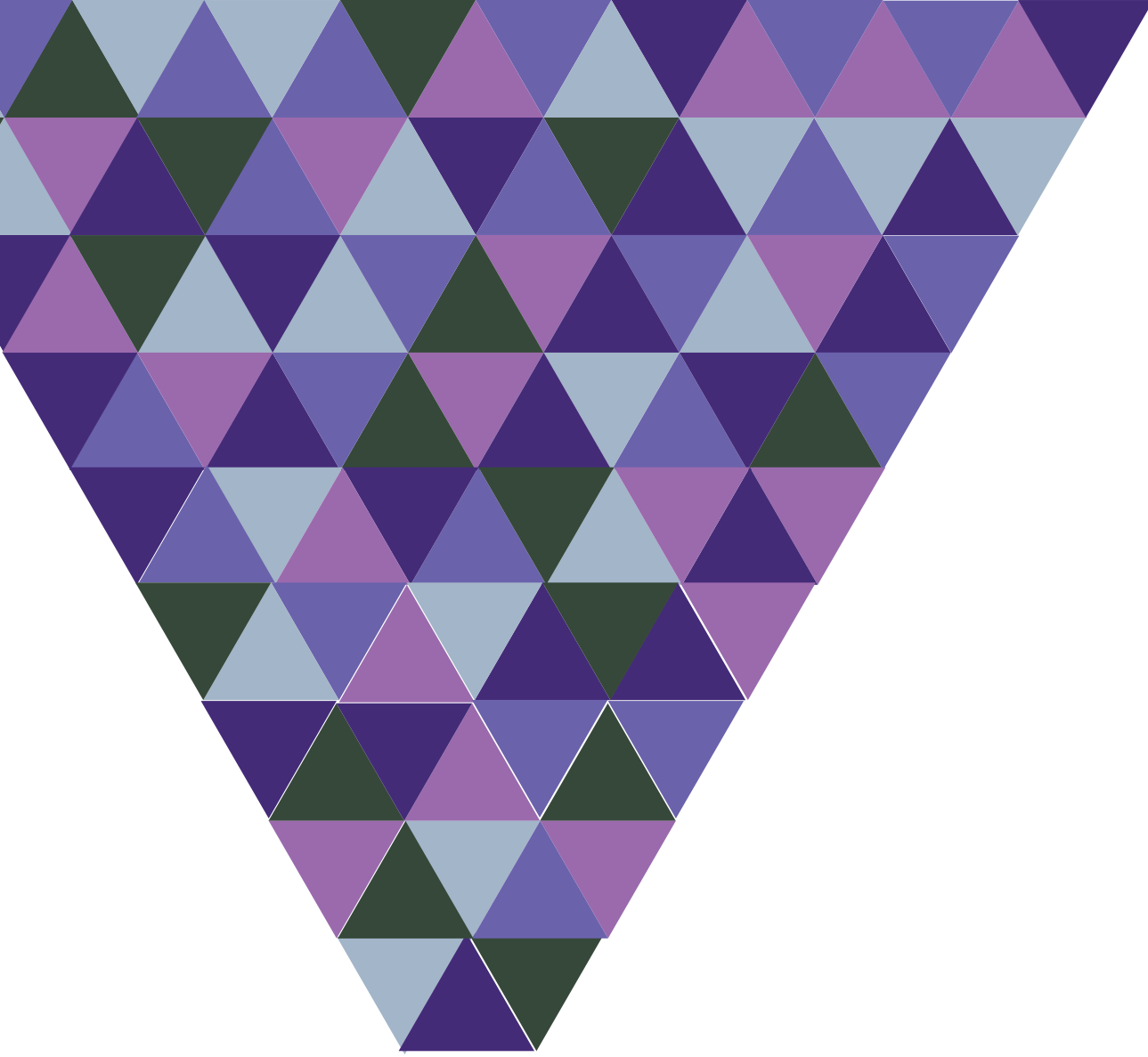
The fate of Tonia's "svieeperrr"—hidden away for decades in a spotless closed-off bathroom after its initial use—is a family mystery that Shalev determines to solve. The result, in this cheerful translation by Evan Fallenberg, is pure delight, as Shalev brings to life the obsessive but loving Tonia, the pioneers who gave his childhood its spirit of wonder, and the grit and humor of people building ever-new lives.

## JBC Book Clubs discussion questions

1. What was your favorite expression of Grandma Tonia's? Why?
2. Grandma Tonia had her own expressions and very particular way of speaking. What is the role of language in this book? What are its effects? How is it passed along, and what happens when it spreads? Is there an added dimension reading the book in translation?
3. Is this an Israeli story or a universal one? How does the setting influence this story?
4. Shalev writes, "if a certain story has many versions that sound correct, in our family we adopt the most beautiful of them" (p. 167). What does this mean? What do you think of this practice? How has it affected the book or your reading? Is Shalev a reliable narrator? In this age of "fake news", how does the "most beautiful" version of a story fit in?
5. The book opens with an oft-repeated phrase, "this is how it was" What does this mean? Looking back, does that phrase color how you read the book? What does it mean when, upon seeing the vacuum cleaner, Shalev admits to suspicions that perhaps some of the family stories were not "this is how it was" (p. 185)?
6. Shalev ends the book saying, "Because this is what is important: to be loyal to the truth, even if it is not loyal to you; to wring it out wisely, not like a man but like a woman; to tell it in stories and to examine them good good in the light, again and again, until they are as they should be— clear and truly, truly clean" (p. 212). What do you think this means? What does it mean in the context of the book?

continued





7. The pride that goes along with being a son of Nahalal is apparent throughout the book, and the moshav is described as a haven, a place that Shalev loved. At the same time, he laments his grandfather's fate as a moshavnik (p. 59), and when the vacuum is unveiled, Shalev writes about the villagers' unspoken envy (p. 135). Does this book romanticize the image of Israel's early pioneers or lay it bare?

8. What is this a book about? What drives the narrative of this story? If the book captured you as a reader, what was it that engaged you?

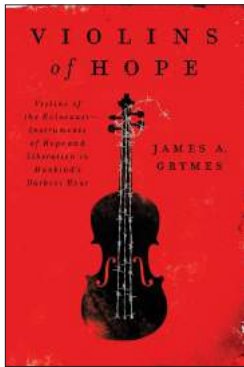
9. What do you think happened to the vacuum cleaner in the end?

Questions courtesy of Jewish Book Council

# violins of hope

violins of the holocaust—instruments of hope and liberation in mankind's darkest hour

JAMES A. GRYMES



Harper Perennial  
2014 (pbk) 336 pp

A stirring testament to the strength of the human spirit and the power of music, *Violins of Hope* tells the remarkable stories of violins played by Jewish musicians during the Holocaust, and the Israeli violin maker dedicated to bringing these inspirational instruments back to life.

The violin has formed an important aspect of Jewish culture for centuries, both as a popular instrument with classical Jewish musicians and as a central factor of social life, as in the Klezmer tradition. But during the Holocaust, the violin assumed extraordinary roles within the Jewish community. For some musicians, the instrument was a liberator; for others, it was a savior that spared their lives. For many, the violin provided comfort in mankind's darkest hour, and, in at least one case, helped avenge murdered family members. Above all, the violins of the Holocaust represented strength and optimism for the future.

Today, these instruments serve as powerful reminders of an unimaginable experience—they are memorials to those who perished and testaments to those who survived. In this spirit, renowned Israeli violinmaker Amnon Weinstein has devoted the past twenty years to restoring the violins of the Holocaust as a tribute to those who were lost, including four hundred of his own relatives. Behind each of these violins is a uniquely fascinating and inspiring story. Juxtaposing these narratives against



one man's harrowing struggle to reconcile his own family's history and the history of his people, this insightful, moving, and achingly human book presents a new way of understanding the Holocaust.

## discussion questions

1. Do you or members of your family sing or play an instrument? In what ways do people find making music to be meaningful?
2. The violin has formed an important aspect of Jewish culture for centuries. Why do you think this specific instrument has maintained such an appeal within the Jewish community?
3. Several figures discussed in *Violins of Hope* included their violins among the few personal belongings they brought with them when fleeing their homes. Why do you think the instruments were so important to them?
4. What items might you choose to take with you if you were suddenly forced to leave your home? What would safeguarding those particular objects say about you and what you value the most?
5. The first violin from the Holocaust that Amnon Weinstein worked on was once played in Auschwitz, but Amnon was not ready to confront that instrument's history. Why did he later change his mind and start to actively seek out instruments with connections to the Holocaust?
6. Did you discover anything new about the Holocaust in Nazi Germany by reading the first three chapters of *Violins of Hope*? What did you learn about the Holocaust in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe in the next three chapters?
7. Shimon Krongold's violin and the photo of him holding it are the only mementos his family has of him. What types of objects has your family retained from departed relatives? What does the decision to keep those particular items say about your family?
8. Amnon describes the *Violins of Hope* as tombstones for relatives he never knew. What does he mean by that?
9. Amnon could have simply restored the outer surfaces of the *Violins of Hope* for exhibitions, but instead chose to completely refurbish the instruments so they can be played in the world's finest concert halls. Why do you think it is so important to him that the instruments be part of performances?
10. After reading all of the stories in *Violins of Hope*, do you have a new understanding of the essential roles that music played in fostering hope and survival during the Holocaust?

Questions courtesy of James A. Grymes

# about us



JBC Book Clubs, the book club division of the Jewish Book Council, has all of the resources that a book club needs, at the click of a finger. With a dedicated staff person available to answer questions and tailor book/author selections to your book club's needs, JBC Book Clubs is a one-stop-shop to build and enhance a book club's conversations!

Through book clubs, the ideas and questions of literature come off the page and into living rooms, connecting people to each other, to authors, and to an exploration of Jewish identity and community.

JBC Book Clubs offers:

- book recommendations
- discussion questions
- in-depth reader's guides
- reviews
- weekly book picks
- video chat with authors through JBC Live Chat
- special features from authors
- assistance with starting a new book club
- online discussions
- an active Facebook group to share ideas and questions with other book club readers

Visit us at [www.jewishbookcouncil.org/bookclub](http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/bookclub).



## Jewish Book Council

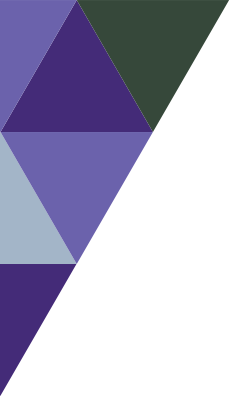
The Jewish Book Council, founded in 1940, is a not-for-profit organization that promotes the reading, writing, publication and public awareness of books that reflect the rich variety of the Jewish experience. It is the only organization in the organized American Jewish community whose sole focus is the promotion of Jewish literature. The goal of its many programs is to heighten awareness of Jewish books, to facilitate connections to the ideas and conversations found in and around books, and to raise the overall level of discourse and knowledge in the Jewish community.

Operating informally since 1925, and formally since the early 1940s, the organization facilitates over 1,100 author events across N. America annually, works with over 1,400 book clubs, produces a literary journal, and gives out several literary awards, including the National Jewish Book Awards, now in its 67th year.

Jewish Book Council's programs include:

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- JBC Network Author Tours
- Paper Brigade Literary Journal
- Natan Book Award at Jewish Book Council
- Jewish Book Month
- Jewish Writers Seminars
- Author Programs for National Conferences
- Jewish Book Council Blog, the ProsenPeople
- JBC Book Clubs
- Unpacking the Book: Jewish Writers in Conversation
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For more information, see [www.jewishbookcouncil.org](http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org).



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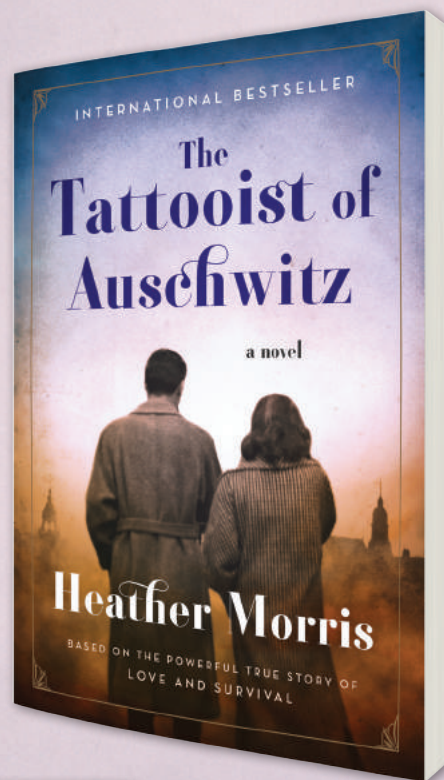
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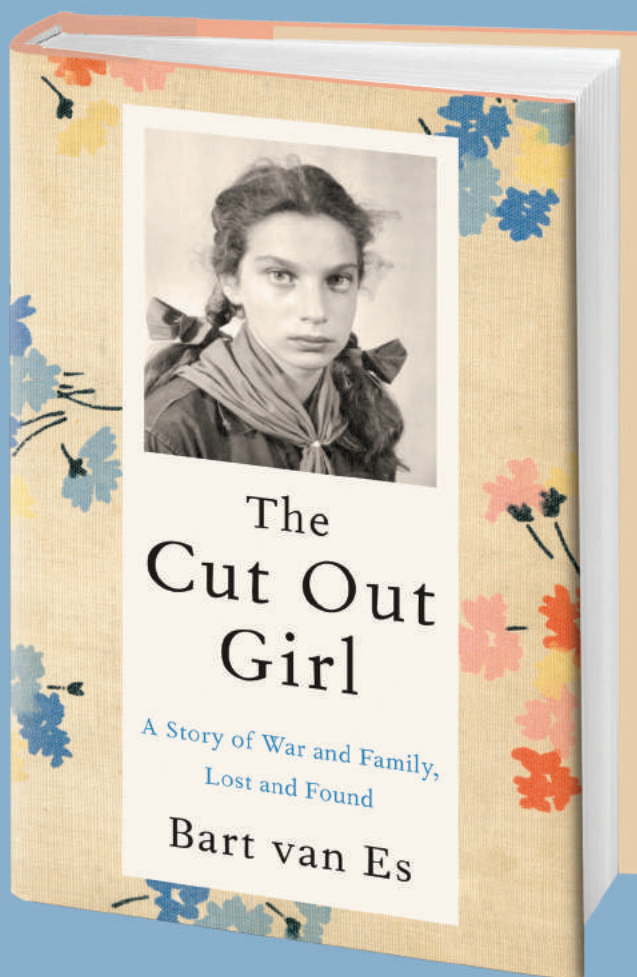


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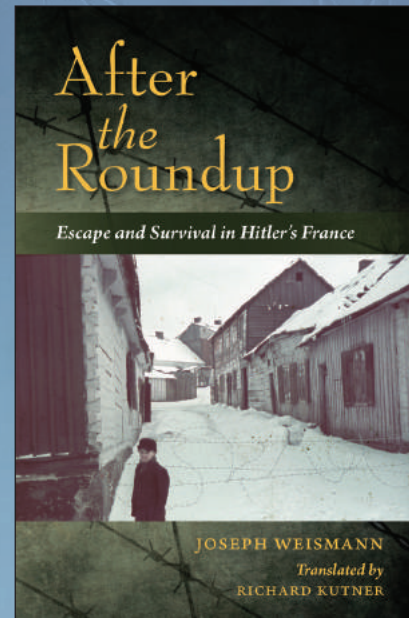
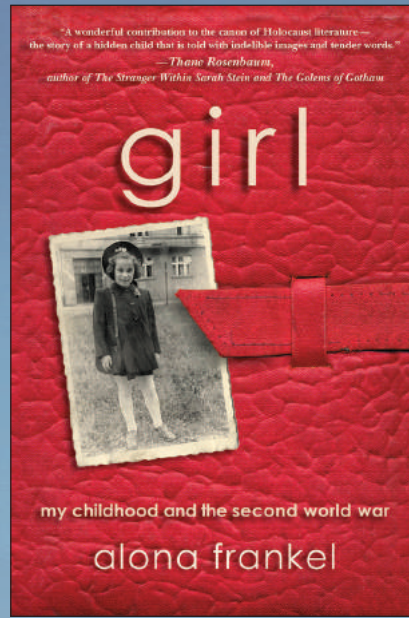


The extraordinary true story of a young girl’s struggle for survival during World War II.

 PenguinPress

**Girl**  
My Childhood and the  
Second World War  
“What remains by the  
book’s end isn’t the horror  
of human evil but the good  
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—ForeWord Reviews

“One of the qualities  
that makes this book so  
remarkable is its author’s  
honesty, her remembrance  
of terrible things past  
which, despite everything,  
did not destroy her.”  
—The Washington Times



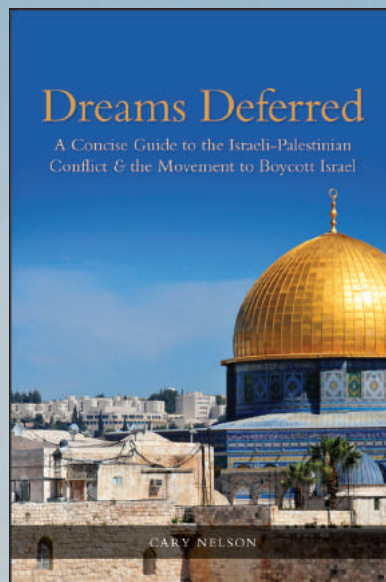
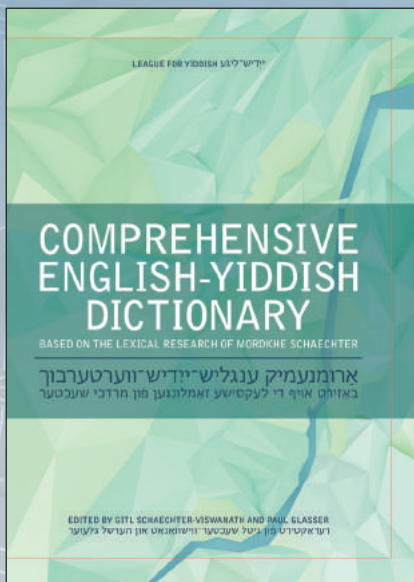
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# המתנת הפרידה

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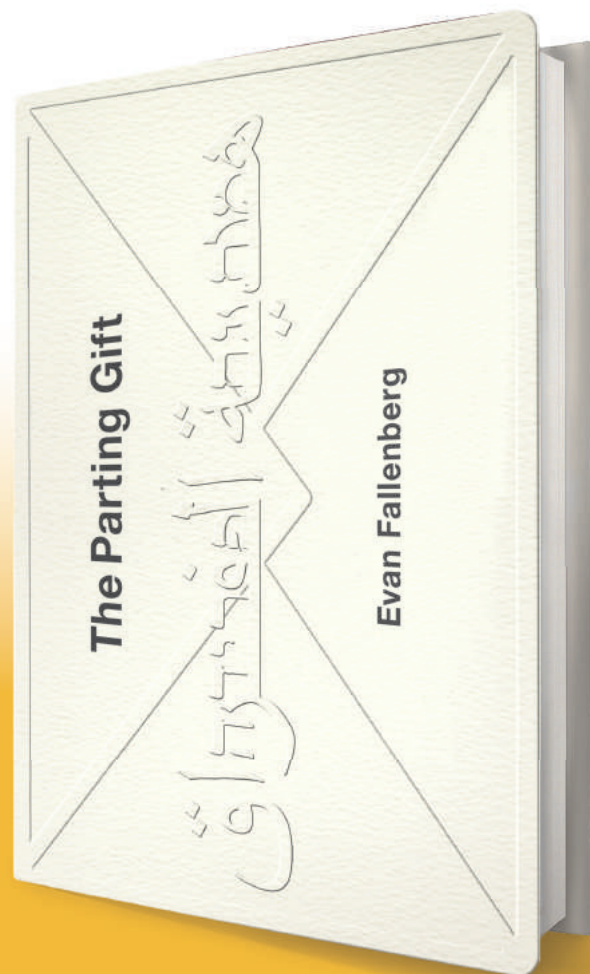
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**The Parting Gift  
by Evan Fallenberg**



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# Extreme Measures



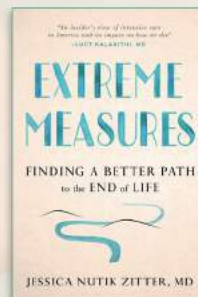
[jessicazitter.com](http://jessicazitter.com)

“Passionately and poignantly, Dr. Zitter reminds us that ‘conveyor belts, regardless of their destination, are not meant for human beings.’ Sometimes less is more.”

*Susan Gubar, New York Times*

## Jessica Zitter

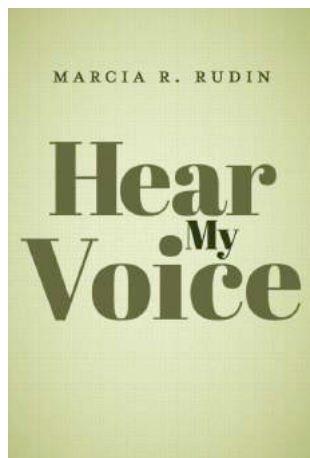
became a doctor because she wanted to be a hero. She elected to specialize in Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine, intent on rescuing patients from the brink of death.



**Extreme Measures** charts her two-decade journey through intensive care units across the country. Over that time, Dr. Zitter was dismayed to see how the dying are treated in our current medical culture, where mechanization and protocol override patient-centered care. The resulting moral distress led her to the burgeoning Palliative Care movement, which focuses on the overall well-being of the patient, rather than just the disease. And over time, she came to a new understanding of what heroism is really all about.

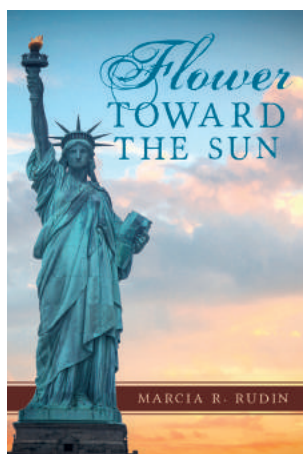
**Extreme Measures** shares the stories of patients, families and healthcare providers on the frontlines of this issue. It offers an insider's perspective on a public health crisis that touches us all. Bringing each reader into a world that most will only enter during crisis, the book offers guidance to help us navigate this rocky terrain, and live the best life we can right up until the last moments.

## TWO NOVELS BY MARCIA R. RUDIN



**HEAR MY VOICE**

A Catholic sister wants to become a priest, but if she chooses this path she must renounce her vows and leave her beloved Church. One of the first women rabbis and one of the first women Presbyterian pastors must choose between their lovers and their careers. When the three attend a dinner to receive an award for their professional accomplishments, each recalls fifty years of her life and struggle to forge a path breaking career and find her voice, and as the evening draws to a close, each makes the decision that will forever change her life. Set between 1940 and 1990, real events and figures lend the novel authenticity and relevance, making it a must-read for people of all faiths.



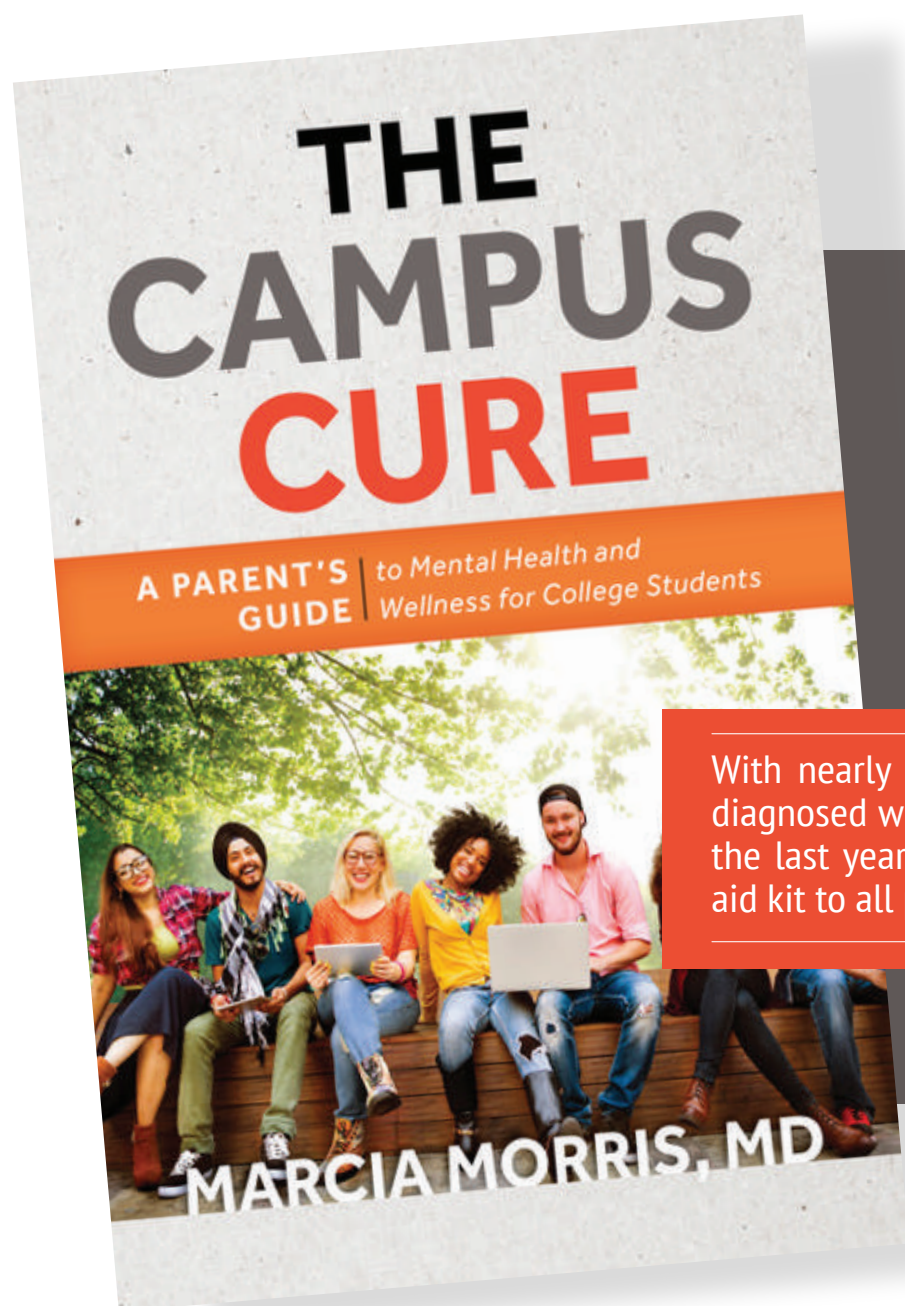
**FLOWER TOWARD THE SUN**

In 1905, Rebecca leaves her Jewish *shtetl* in Ukraine to join her fiancé Samuel in Milwaukee, and Ingrid leaves Norway to become a Picture Bride of Lars, a widowed Norwegian farmer homesteading in North Dakota. But as they are processed together at Ellis Island, immigration officials put them on the wrong trains, and each is sent to the other's destination. Alone in a strange country, living amid alien cultures, the bewildered women struggle to return to their rightful new homes. However, when the mix-up is finally resolved, will the love that has blossomed between Rebecca and Lars threaten to destroy everything?

**Order both novels in paperback or kindle version at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) or by visiting <http://www.marciarudin.com>.**

**Marcia R. Rudin** is co-author of *Why Me? Why Anyone?* and *Prison or Paradise? The New Religious Cults*. Her articles and book reviews have appeared in such publications as *The New York Times*, *The New York Daily News*, *The Congressional Quarterly Researcher*, and *Encyclopedia Judaica*. A resident in screenwriting at The MacDowell Colony of the Arts, seven of her plays have received twelve productions. For more information, visit [www.marciarudin.com](http://www.marciarudin.com).

# A must read guide for parents of college students



With nearly one of three college students diagnosed with a mental health disorder in the last year, this book is an essential first aid kit to all parents.

“Never mind warnings about helicopter parenting; Morris tells mothers and fathers to get more involved in their children’s mental health and convincingly argues that it’s their duty to be their kids’ mentor, guide, coach, and cheerleader”

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# PAPER BRIGADE

A PUBLICATION OF THE JEWISH BOOK COUNCIL

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- Gary Shtenygart on his latest novel

- An examination of Jewish life in rural America in three parts

- Adeena Sussman on tahini

- Poetry by Alicia Jo Rabins

- A *Portnoy's Complaint* advice column

- A brief history of the first Jewish women's book club in America

- A nostalgic look at Jewish teen fiction of the '90s

- A Jewish literary map of Italy

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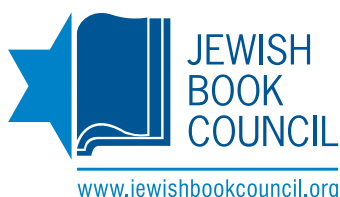


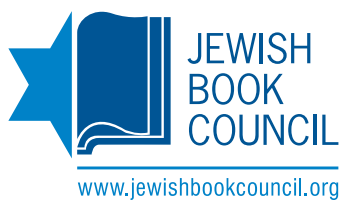
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