

Publishers Weekly, July 21, 2003

AN HOUR IN PARADISE

Joan Leegant, Norton, \$23.95 (222 p)

ISBN 0-393-05439-X

Leegant's slim first collection offers 10 sharply written stories about Jewish characters both young and old, secular and Orthodox, as they address questions of faith, love and change. In "How to Comfort the Sick and Dying," a yeshiva student struggling to leave behind his drug-dealing, womanizing ways is sent by his rabbi to visit a man dying of AIDS, but guilt about his past and his inability to comfort the dying man spark a crisis of faith. "Accounting" is the sad tale of an aging father and a willfully optimistic mother forced to face yet another betrayal by their handsome, profligate son: "Cleaning up after Eliot had become for them not only an act of penitence but an attempt to correct the balance, an effort to ensure that the world did not suffer a net loss on account of their son. For every debit inflicted by him they were obliged to provide, in the other column, a credit." In "Henny's Wedding," it is 1943, and a young bride stumbles through her wedding ceremony nearly incapacitated by morning sickness. Younger sister Shirley, far from being embarrassed or ashamed, vows to make daring choices of her own, and quickly finds herself in the arms of a charming cad – the groom's brother. The collection's heart-warming finale, "The Diviners of Desire: A Modern Fable," describes a different kind of courtship; set in Jerusalem, it pokes gentle fun at the labors of matchmakers. Throughout these stories, Leegant reveals herself to be an empathic, gifted creator of people and worlds. Thought-provoking and funny, touching and disturbing, this is an auspicious debut.

Forecast: Fans of Allegra Goodman will particularly enjoy Leegant's stories, which bridge the worlds of secular and religious Judaism.