

MAGAZINE SECTION

By GILA WERTHEIMER
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

SUMMER READING DAYS AND LIGHT-FILLED evenings stretch ahead, calling out for something engaging and involving that will, right from the first page, draw a reader into its story.

Two debut novels by women authors — one about Americans in Israel, the other about women in Brooklyn — seem just about made-to-order.

Both are also likely to find a spot on the reading lists of Jewish book groups.

Themes of dysfunctional families, religious fanaticism, rejection of religion, extremist nationalism — all are part of a newly published novel, *Wherever You Go* by Joan Leegant (W.W. Norton, 253 pp., \$23.95).

The lives of the three main characters, who are strangers to each other, intersect as they grapple with relationships and seek to sort out their own Jewish lives. All come to Israel seeking answers.

It's three characters in search of a life, you might say.

Yona Stern, age 30, is a single woman living in New York, working in an art gallery, who has been estranged from her sister Dena for 10 years, since committing an act of betrayal that Dena will not forgive.

Dena, married to a leader of Israel's settler movement, is an ideologue who lives with her family on a settler outpost, Givat Baruch.

Yona comes to Israel, hoping to end the estrangement.

Michael Greenglass, in his mid-thirties, is a *ba'al teshuva*, a former druggie who was rescued by Judaism, which "stopped the terrible free fall of his life".

He has become a well-known and respected teacher in Jerusalem, but finds his new life rejected by his parents, especially his father, "who had missed the live-and-let-live Age of Aquarius sixties". Visits back to New York are strained and produce no understanding.

Now, for reasons he cannot explain even to himself, after 12 years of living a religious life, he faces a

spiritual crisis, questioning his own faith and observance while continuing to teach young students.

Then there's Aaron Blinder, son of a famous writer whose subject is always the Holocaust, a failure as a student, a disappointment to his parents, who follows a girl to Israel only to be dumped by her.

He drops out of the study program, desperately needing acknowledgement and acceptance, and vulnerable to extremist ideas.

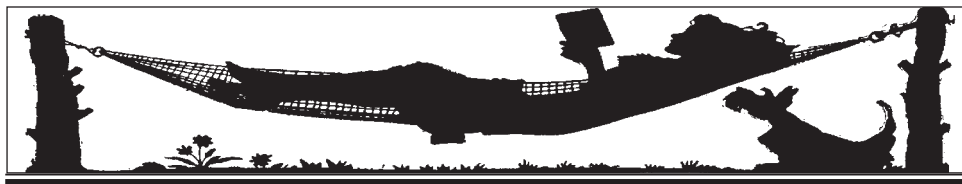
It doesn't take long — a father figure, a couple of friends who accept him, a desire to prove his commitment, the conviction that he is being guided by "the hand of the Almighty Avenger", the "fiery God of the Hebrews who thundered to them to reclaim their ancestral lands and smite their ancestral enemy".

Misjudgments, misreadings and misunderstandings, fed by an undercurrent of violence, result in faulty analysis, leading Aaron in an inevitable direction — towards destruction. And there is no one to pull him back.

The main characters are empathetic and believable. Leegant portrays them from the inside, so that we come to know them, recognizing their struggles as real. A host of secondary characters helps fill them out.

She is least successful with Aaron, and while his circumstances are recognizable, he is not as fully drawn as Yona and Michael.

At the same time, their stories, like their struggles, are real. Who today



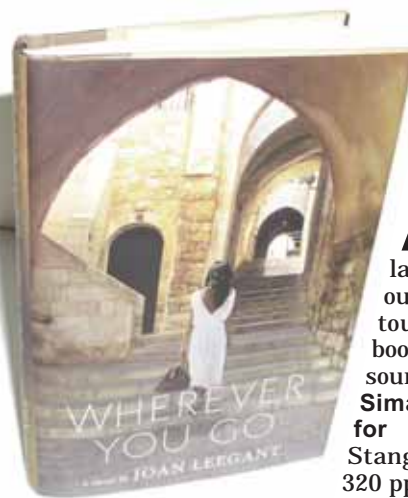
BOOK MARKS

doesn't at least know of those who have gone off to Israel in the hopes of sorting out their lives, and who, once there, have tried out other lifestyles, often flirting with extremism? Or who land at an isolated outpost, intoxicated by

hard in her descriptions, as if they are running away from her. But as a whole, she succeeds in portraying a troubling aspect of Jewish life today.

Leegant is also the author of a highly praised collection of short stories,

An Hour in Paradise, which I found "authentic" and "a pleasure to read" (JEWISH STAR, December 19, 2003).



ANOTHER DEBUT novel, published last year and now just out in paperback, is a touching and funny book that at first glance sounds oddly titled — *Sima's Undergarments for Women* by Ilana Stanger-Ross (Penguin, 320 pp., \$15).

Set in the Boro Park section of Brooklyn, Sima has been running a bra and lingerie shop in her basement for more than 30 years. It's one of many such shops, selling a variety of items, comprising a "secret downtown hidden beneath the red and orange brick two-story homes" of the area.

She named her shop "Sima's Undergarments for Women" — simple, descriptive, unadorned, much like Sima herself, a childless woman in her sixties, married for 46 years.

Her customers are "regulars". They ask her advice, they gossip, they share secrets. Her shop is a community of women, a place of trust that comes

from the intimacy of bra fittings and the purchase of underwear and lingerie.

And yet there's a degree of separation. The customers are mostly Orthodox women, while Sima is not religiously observant.

She's outside the larger community, but Boro Park has always been her home, her neighborhood.

Then one day Timna, a beautiful 21-year-old Israeli, in Brooklyn for only a week, enters the shop. She's a seamstress, it turns out, she's looking for

work and Sima needs someone to do alterations. It's a fit, and along with her sewing skills Timna brings youth, beauty and optimism. And she's wonderful with the customers — a natural.

She comes to mean more and more to Sima, resulting in an obsessive love that is a mix of envy, maternalism and desire in a life that has emptiness and disappointment at its core.

Timna remains something of an unknown, and Sima knows she cannot hold onto "the brightest joy in all her days", no matter how hard she tries.

Stanger-Ross, who was born and raised in Brooklyn and now lives in Victoria, British Columbia, writes with a naturalness that captures the nuance and complexity of women's friendship, of relationships that hide more than what is visible to the outside eye.

There's a richness here that engages and absorbs a reader, with a touch that is light but not frivolous as we enter Sima's basement shop, and her life. □

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