The Miami Herald
Posted on Sunday, July 4, 2010

Review | Three characters seek salvation in 'Wherever You Go'

BY RANEN OMER-SHERMAN

WHEREVER YOU GO. Joan Leegant. Norton. 253 pages. $23.95.

There has been much memorable fiction written by diaspora writers about American Jews adrift, or sometimes dangerously rooted, in Israel. Some of those forays have grappled with the issues of identity, faith and violence. Consider the heartbreaking rift between mother and daughter in Anne Roiphe's *Lovingkindness*, Tova Reich's edgy satire of West Bank fundamentalists in *The Jewish War* or the messianic conspiracy at the heart of Robert Stone's *Damascus Gate*).

Such issues permeate Joan Leegant's *Wherever You Go*. But her timely and brave first novel plunges its cast of vivid characters into the violent world of Israel's extreme right-wing fringe with rare insight and mesmerizing detail that equals, and even surpasses, the best of this tradition.

Wherever You Go is tautly structured around the alternating and distinct perspectives of Yona Stern, who travels from New York hoping to reconcile with her estranged sister who lives in one of the more radicalized West Bank settlements; Mark Greenglass, a successful Talmud teacher suddenly seized by an agonizing loss of faith; and Aaron Blinder, a shiftless youth burdened with a famous father whose novels featuring sentimentalized Holocaust victims and vengeful heroes inspire Aaron's horrific choices.

Though Leegant successfully takes us deep into the fabric of all her characters' lives, the story is ultimately Yona's. Through her uneasy gaze, we experience the feverishly messianic community of Givat Baruch, led by zealous patriarchs committed to the ``immutable truth'' that their land was given by ``divine edict 4,000 years before,'' whose wives and mothers (including Yona's sister) are willing to sacrifice their children should God demand that.

In the sections devoted to Greenglass, Leegant empathetically evokes his spiritual crisis: ``[T]he language of devotion lost to him, as if someone were slowly erasing it from his mind, wiping the slate clean. A silence moved into him. Something inside was dying, a fire that had blazed in him for twelve years going out. He felt like he had a hole in his heart.''

Later, this goodhearted man struggles to reorient his intellectual passion to living fully

in ``this world.'' In sharp contrast, Leegant adroitly inhabits the younger Aaron's fanatic awakening into certitude, which endangers the lives of others. Rejecting the deity ``neutered and sanitized'' for liberal American Jews, he embraces ``[t]he true God -- the fiery God of the Hebrews who thundered to them to reclaim their ancestral lands and smite their ancestral enemy. . . . They were afraid of this God in America. He embarrassed the Jews there who wanted . . . for everyone to just get along. . . . [T]he real God was here in this place, and Aaron knew it. He felt the hand of the Almighty Avenger guiding him.''

Even readers who anticipate the act of violence at the novel's heart may be surprised by its devastating reverberations, and they will marvel at the skillful ways Leegant brings her disparate characters together. In the end, her far-reaching exploration of responsibility reaches a scathing indictment of the blissful complacency of Jewish Americans lulled by the distortions of their ``fact-finding missions.''

Most provocatively, she skewers even writers of popular fiction (anyone whose life was changed by reading Leon Uris' *Exodus* knows this power). In a quietly powerful reckoning, Aaron's father, the famous bestselling writer, is forced to confront the real-world consequences of his inflammatory stereotypes, which one Israeli official acidly rejects as ``fearmongering propaganda.''

Notwithstanding Leegant's suspenseful and emotionally wrenching indictment of the ruinous seduction of politico-religious fanaticism, her pitch-perfect renderings of individuals torn between earthly and heavenly Jerusalems are the true source of the novel's lingering power. Author of an acclaimed short-story collection, *An Hour in Paradise*, Leegant is a masterful weaver whose deft storytelling brings her diverse cast of conflicted characters and fraught themes into a powerful emotional and spiritual whole. *Wherever You Go* is a lively, full novel by an elegant, ironic writer who handles the topics of terror and messianic violence as agilely as she does love and redemption.

Ranen Omer-Sherman is author of Israel in Exile: Jewish Writing & the Desert.

© 2010 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
http://www.miamiherald.com