

Into the Heart of the Settler World

Ina Friedman

Wherever You Go

By Joan Leegant
W.W. Norton
2010, \$23.95, pp. 253

In her debut novel (preceded in 2003 by the story collection *An Hour in Paradise*), Joan Leegant has fashioned a hybrid work that begins as a sensitive exploration of the emotional plights of three troubled but otherwise disparate American Jews who happen to be in Israel and slowly evolves into a kind of action thriller in which their lives intersect. The Israeli setting is initially incidental, as the plot focuses on each protagonist's deeply flawed familial relationships and consequent feelings of alienation, inadequacy and guilt. Yet as the story proceeds, far from using Israel merely as a backdrop, Leegant tackles one of the most sensitive problems plaguing its society: the extremism of a certain brand of Israeli settlers in the West Bank—and the appeal their hyper-nationalist views and vigilante style hold for a certain stripe of American Jew.

The story opens with Yona Stern, a 30-year-old assistant in a New York art gallery, arriving in Israel to mend fences with her estranged older sister, Dena. A decade earlier, after their relationship was rent during an earlier stay in Israel, Dena married a firebrand settler leader and cut herself off completely from her only sibling. Yona, back in New York, meanwhile gave herself over to a series of arid affairs with married men, falling into the pattern of “a bad girl making sure she never got more than what she deserved.”

Mark Greenglass, the book's most sympathetic and complex character, is a 36-year-old bachelor who has been living in Jerusalem for three years, teaching newly religious American youngsters. He became a practicing Orthodox Jew a decade earlier as a means of climbing out of the drug-dominated life he shared

with a girlfriend who proved unable to escape addiction. As he travels to New York for a brief but lucrative teaching gig, his relationship with his shallow, secular parents remains strained, even as Greenglass loses his passion and commitment to religious practice. Just before returning to Israel, he abandons his Orthodox lifestyle, accepts a job teaching a Judaism course at a small,



Scandinavian-run arts college for women in Jerusalem, and once again embarks on a new life.

At the same time Aaron Blinder, a 21-year-old college student, has dropped out of a semester-abroad program in Jerusalem and found his way to Adamah, a deserted kibbutz taken over by a radical settler ideologue, Naftali Shroeder, and turned into a base for recruiting young Israelis and Diaspora Jews to settle in the West Bank. Abandoned by his mother in childhood, the strikingly immature Blinder is seething with anger toward his self-absorbed father—the author of bestsellers about the Holocaust in which Jews ultimately prevail over

their persecutors—and also craves the validation of father-figure Shroeder. Blinder's mind is so addled by childish fantasies that he derides the Israeli army's measures to ensure the security of West Bank settlers as born of a cowardly “shtetl mentality” and advocates “direct action” by civilians to defend themselves against threats—real or imagined—from their Palestinian neighbors. Worse yet, Blinder draws two equally callow American friends at Adamah into a disastrous misadventure conceived in this warped spirit—the event that leads the paths of the book's protagonists to cross.

Leegant is a talented writer with a sharp eye for detail, a good ear for dialogue (and interior monologue), and a knack for drawing characters that engage our interest and empathy. Her descriptions of settings and mores in Manhattan, Jerusalem and the West Bank settlement where Yona's sister lives struck this American-Israeli as pitch perfect. She succeeds at building suspense with a variety of literary strategies and executes a clever twist in the plot's denouement to prolong the tension until almost the very end.

Yet despite her flair for detail, Leegant is also capable of reducing characters to caricatures, especially among the novel's supporting cast. I can't recall in any other novel, for example, such a concentrated collection of obnoxious and/or physically repulsive Jewish men—from Greenglass' rigid, materialistic father and Blinder's carping, callous one, to the gruff, foul-mouthed Shroeder, who also reeks of tobacco and body odor. Occasionally she ignores subtlety in other ways, as well. Though the portraits of Blinder and one of his cohorts leave no doubt on this point, Leegant spells out—literally, as part of a lecture delivered by a security official—that some young Americans go to Israel not in search of ideological or religious fulfillment, but simply to flee their problems at home.

The choice to meld a novel propelled by psychological and ideological themes

with an action thriller confronted Leegant with special challenges. Unfortunately, the further the narrative advances into the thriller mode, the more contrived some of the plot elements seem. And at the conclusion, not only does Blinder escape the wrath of law enforcement, for less than convincing reasons, but both Greenglass and Yona acquire love interests that hold promise of providing what's most lacking in their lives. It's all rather a neater than real-life ending, especially as things go in this thoroughly messy country.

Wherever You Go is nonetheless an absorbing and important addition to the canon of fiction about the interaction of American Jews—in this case, the generation born after the 1967 war—with Israel. And Leegant (who lives six months a year in Israel and six in Massachusetts) deserves kudos for the courage to spotlight a dark side of Israeli life at a time when anything that smacks of criticism of things Israeli is considered, in some quarters, as tantamount to delegitimizing the existence of the Jewish state. Make no mistake: This is a novel with attitude—

especially vis-à-vis the Israeli religious right—which might put some readers off. But it also provides insights generated with the benefits of both intimacy and distance that are becoming harder and more painful for Israelis and their American supporters to ignore.

Ina Friedman, Israel correspondent for the Dutch daily Trouw, also reviews books for Haaretz and is co-author of Murder in the Name of God: The Plot to Kill Yitzhak Rabin.

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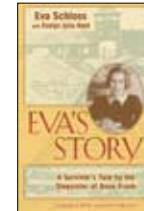
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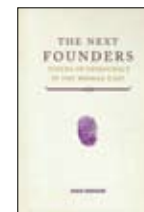
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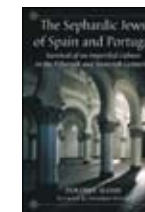
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