

Next year in Jerusalem

AKIN AJAYI

Joan Leegant

WHEREVER YOU GO

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Moving between Jerusalem and New York, Joan Leegant's novel *Wherever You Go* is an exploration of different aspects of modern Jewish identity. The story of three American Jews who are brought together by an act of unexpected violence, it is a thoughtful consideration of what Jewishness means among the generation for whom the statement "next year in Jerusalem" is not just wishful thinking. It is also a cautionary tale about the danger of a narrow ideology.

All three main characters struggle with the challenges of resolving contradictory notions of Jewishness with personal dilemmas. Yona, who is struggling to escape an emotionally abusive relationship, returns to Jerusalem

for the first time in a decade to become reconciled with her older sister, Dina. After her sister's painful betrayal, Dina abandoned metropolitan Israeli comfort for a radical settlement in the West Bank, far removed from Yona's liberal New York life. Mark, an earnest scholar and teacher of the Talmud, is battling against a crisis of faith. Religion once gave his life a sense of purpose; now he must try to reconcile his waning faith with a seemingly contradictory humanism. And then there is Aaron, the son of a well-known writer of "emotionally inflammatory" Holocaust-based fiction, who drops out of college while on a semester in Jerusalem and drifts into a fringe extremist movement committed to the politically charged notion of a "greater" Israel. His belief is that his new-found commitment to Israel – or, at least, to a version of Israel – will earn him his father's respect. Instead, his naivety sets off a chain of events that changes all their lives.

Set largely among the English-speaking "Anglo" community of Jerusalem, *Wherever You Go* is an ambitious attempt to depict

competing notions of Jewish identity. Leegant doesn't always succeed; Aaron and Yona, in their different ways, seem more like composites of the worlds they represent than individuals in their own right. However, this does not seriously weaken what is confident and well-observed fiction. Jewish identity – as opposed to Israeli identity, which is as untidy as one might expect in a country populated largely by second- and third-generation immigrants – is often presented as a single homogenous concept. The novel's nuanced picture is at odds with the narrow certitude with which American Jewry is often understood.

Leegant, who is the author of a collection of short stories, *A Hour in Paradise*, which won the Edward Lewis Wallant Award for Jewish American Fiction, does not reject the notion of a common ideal to which all Jews can subscribe. But unlike Aaron, whose struggle to define himself becomes entangled within a limiting and limited construct, she uses Mark's crisis of faith as a channel for a pluralistic concept of hope and optimism, founded in the Jewish scriptures but available to all. "It's not all black and white, goodness or sin, Torah or bars", Mark is reminded. "There are lots of ways to be a holy person."

act, courageously though not without vanity, arises from a question he put to his students in a lecture about Orwell: "Would Orwell have believed it possible that the same overfed voices which had haunted him in the 1930s, the same crippling incompetence, addiction to foreign wars and assumptions of entitlement, were happily in place in 2009?". Finding the students' faces blank, he supplies his own answer: no, Orwell would not have believed it. "Or if he had, he would have taken to the streets. He would have smashed some serious glass." Presumably, that would be if the Territorial Support Group G didn't find him first.

Even by Le Carré's standards, *Our Kind of Traitor* is sternly pessimistic. It makes Edward Porter's *The Dying of the Light*, which deals with efforts to save democracy from the state, look as sentimental as the film of Alan Moore's graphic novel *V for Vendetta*. Certainly, the City will not in the near future be successfully besieged by an army of libertarians in Guy Fawkes masks. But such is Le Carré's control of tension through minimal but richly menacing action that the reader is compelled to see the thing through, on the off chance that the efforts of Hector's group will be rewarded – and that there will turn out to be more at stake than money.