

her body to be made small again, before it had curved and ballooned, grown dangerous and disappointing." Sharon's son Ben redubs himself "Benji" during his freshman year at Brandeis, in order to distinguish himself from his younger self. He is desperately searching for an identity and purpose beyond his high school jock persona, and hopes to discover it in political and social protest. In his quest for self-definition he clings to Rachel, a self-assured and zaftig campus activist.

Dennis Goldstein, paterfamilias, stands apart from this clan. The son of Russian Jews, Dennis works for the Department of Agriculture in the "Foreign Ag service," and finds himself caught up in embargo politics and conflicts with the Soviets in a way that ends much worse than he'd ever expected. His work life occupies most of his time, but at the end of the book, he and Sharon sneak away together from "Family Weekend" at Brandeis for what turns out to be a lovers' tryst. At the core of the cold war of familial conflict, Gilmore locates a heartbeat in Sharon's epiphany when the straying wife finds she still lusts after her husband: "Children... they bring you closer, yes, but they also separate you. They bring your bodies together, then they insist on their separation." This struggle, between the roles people are forced to play by their circumstance and the essence of who they are and want to become, is at the center of the book's keenly felt geopolitical and emotional dilemmas.

In one scene, Vanessa recalls the first time her brother played her Billy Joel's "Piano Man": "She'd first heard the song at camp, and the time Ben had played it for her had both ignited her memory of summer campfires—the stillness of the lake the campers learned to canoe on by day, the shadows of the evergreens rising along more distant shores—and seized her heart with what she did not yet know she would always search for in music: brokenness. The visceral feeling of ruin. In all its many guises."

That visceral feeling of ruin, and its attendant portent of nostalgia, is what Gilmore taps exquisitely in this book. *Something Red* is the depiction of a world teetering, with all the vertiginous fears that go with it.

JORDANA HORN

## Does It Cost to Reveal the Truth?

*Imagining a Holocaust experience*

*And the Rat Laughed*, by Nava Semel (Hybrid Publishers, Melbourne, \$25.00), opens with the painful, halting voice of an elderly woman in Tel Aviv in 1999.

## Trying to soften the truth of her grandmother's story.

Her granddaughter has asked her to tell her story, but she cannot find the words for her Holocaust experience of horror and abuse endured in an underground potato pit, with only a rat for company. Elements of the grandmother's story are selectively shared with the reader as she weighs the costs of revealing the truth of her suffering. Only in the next section of the novel, in which the granddaughter recounts to her teacher what she gleaned from the story, can the reader discern what the grandmother chose to tell. The grandmother has shared what she could bear to, much of it in the form of a legend, a rat-centric creation myth.

There is pathos in the granddaughter's attempt to imagine her grandmother's suffering as somewhat less awful. She cannot face the fact that her grandmother was left in a pit, so she desperately tries to soften the truth. "I mean, it must have been something special that the farmer and his wife prepared in advance. Maybe they even planned it together with her parents to make it look just like her room at home..." To the reader, who imagines the pain the grandmother suffered, the granddaughter's naivete and unreliable narration highlight the tragedy of the story.

The novel's central conceit is that the legend about the girl and the rat inspires a website of poems that in the second decade of the 21st century sparks a global phenomenon. It takes some work for the reader to believe that these poems, which comprise the third part of the novel, could have led to a movement that nearly deifies the rat. And the fourth section is also a challenge to embrace, a communique from 2099 from an anthropologist who is so moved by the story that he decides to leave the confines of his virtual society on

a quest for the roots of the myth. Despite detailed exposition, the futuristic world never becomes real. The last section, an authentic voice, is the diary of the person who saved the grandmother from the people who "saved" her in the pit.

The novel is less about what actually happened to a small girl during the

Holocaust than about how the memory of those events is transmitted and preserved. The grandmother's grudgingly told story, the granddaughter's imaginative and unreliable transmission of it, the poems, the anthropologist and the rediscovered diary are testament to the tenacity of the story, to its desire to be fully told even when concealed and misunderstood. It's an unsettling idea, suggesting both that the accounts we hear are mangled, as in a game of telephone, and that clarity will emerge despite those who, for malevolent or benevolent purposes, conceal the truth.

RAHEL LERNER

## A Novel of the Street of Ghosts

*Three Americans in Jerusalem*

*Wherever You Go*, a new novel by Joan Leegant (Norton, \$23.95), offers a vivid and accurate depiction of Anglo Jerusalem, particularly the diverse group of Americans who pass through the city or make it their home. In alternating chapters, Leegant focuses on three characters: Yona Stern is a 30-year-old American who comes to Israel to try to make amends with her older sister Dena, a zealous and uncompromising mother of five who lives in a West Bank settlement. Then there is Mark Greenglass, a teacher of Jewish studies undergoing a crisis of faith as he splits his time between Jerusalem (where he lives) and New York (where he earns most of his money). And finally, Aaron Blinder is an unstable college dropout involved in Adamah, an organization housed on a former kibbutz, whose members are united by their

conviction that, "there was no line, green, blue, purple, or any other color, because the land was all theirs."

The lives of these three intersect on Emek Refaim, "the Valley of the Ghosts," a busy street lined with Arab-style buildings housing shops and cafes that cater to a largely American clientele. It is here that Yona runs into a high school classmate at Holy Bagel: "Yona? Yona Stern? Oh my God!"; and it is here that she sips Boz (mud-black coffee) in art galleries and finds her way into the apartment of a former boyfriend, thanks to a neighbor who becomes her new flame. It is on this street, too, that Mark Greenglass is offered a teaching position at the Olive

Branch International College, an institution founded by the Scandinavian governments and enclosed by a tranquil garden. It is also here that Aaron Blinder and his friends from Adamah plot a terrifyingly misguided mission that is to alter the destinies of all of all three.

Leegant's novel is strongest in those sections featuring the aptly-named Yona (dove, in Hebrew) and her efforts to extend the olive branch of peace to her estranged sister. Against Dena's wishes, Yona makes several trips by bus and "tremper" (hitchhiking) to visit her sister and atone for stealing away Dena's boyfriend 10 years earlier. By the end of the story, Yona, who initially describes herself

as a "soft American, no appetite for zealotry," realizes the lengths to which she is willing to go to defend her principles; and Dena (whose name is Hebrew for judgment) is challenged to yield some of her staunch idealism for what is perhaps a higher end. In contrast to Yona, whom the reader yearns to know better, Mark and especially Aaron are less fully realized; Aaron's story ultimately strains the limits of credibility and becomes little more than a flimsy plot device to bring these three narratives together. One cannot help wondering if it is the publishing industry's insistence that "short stories do not sell" that inspired Leegant to attempt to braid together these three tales in a

## Fiction in Real Times

**Twenty-first century Hasidic life in Brooklyn. The 1994 bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) in Buenos Aires. Civil rights activism in Illinois in the 1960s. Crusades and plague in eleventh-century France. Famine in the ancient Middle East. In vivid new novels for young teen readers, smart and brave young female protagonists take center stage.**



Set in a contemporary cloistered Hasidic sect in Borough Park, Brooklyn, *Hush* (Bloomsbury, \$16.99) is the debut novel by the pseudonymous Eishes Chayil. At age 10, Gittel, witnesses her best friend, Devory, being molested by Devory's older brother. Gittel goes on to watch helplessly Devory's unsuccessful attempts to escape repeated abuse, while all the grown-ups—parents and teachers—insist she's just misbehaving and difficult. The chapters alternate between Gittel at age 10 and at 18, when, along with the other graduates of her all-girls high school, she enters the exciting and anxious period of getting married, haunted by guilt that she did not do what she should have to save her friend.

The book describes the terrible travesty of sexual assault and the compounded betrayal from a silence motivated by a fierce wish to protect a family's good name and its children's marriage prospects. The story is leavened with humor, often born of the misunderstandings of a sheltered and parochial upbringing, as when Gittel insists to her gentile neighbor, whom she has surreptitiously befriended, that only hat-wearing Jews are allowed to enter heaven. Or when, as a new bride, she calls her relatives to let them know that her practically-still-a-stranger new husband (despite their terrified and unromantic procreative act) has taken out the garbage and is heartily congratulated by all but one aunt who asks her, "Did you want to marry a king or a garbage man? Don't be so happy!" This book overall gives a complex but not unsympathetic portrait of Hasidic life, despite

its enforced isolation and alienation from mainstream American culture. One only wishes that the novel's author didn't herself feel so constrained that she conceals her own identity.



Also told with compassion and leavened with humor (trademarks of this author's other novels—*Purge*, and *Confessions of a Closet Catholic*) *Life, After* by Sarah Darer Littman is narrated by Dani, a girl whose father lost his livelihood in Argentina's 2001 economic crisis after his sister was killed in the terrorist bombing of the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires. Her father, in a deep and angry depression, refuses to allow the family to accept food given away at a church though they don't have enough to eat at home. At the same time he insists they must not leave Argentina for better opportunities elsewhere. The situation challenges Dani's youthful sense of hope as she needs to become more responsible than her father, though she would rather be enjoying the attentions of her boyfriend and the pleasures of summer. Eventually the family makes its way to North America, where a boy with Asperger's syndrome is the only friend in her new high school who knows about the southern hemisphere she left behind. The easy flowing Spanish salutations and slang sprinkled throughout are a treat, and almost make the reader feel bilingual in this novel which depicts communities and chapters in Jewish history that young North American readers seldom have a chance to meet.

“greater novel” set in “Greater Israel.”

Still, Leegant is to be applauded for showing us Israeli society as seen from the outside, a perspective she knows all too well: “The country was addicted, broadcasts an astounding 36 times a day, always introduced with those insistent beeps. *Beep beep beep beep, kol Yisrael m'Yerushalayim! The voice of Israel from Jerusalem!* As if everything were always an emergency. The finance minister indicted. A shooting outside a synagogue in Paris. A fact-finding visit from former American president Jimmy Carter.” With Leegant as our newscaster and narrator, we would all do well to tune in.

ILANA KURSHAN

## Sex Today

*Dating ethics, sexual negotiation and their complications now*

As someone who has worked on sex education in the Orthodox world, I was fascinated by *Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices: Sex and Intimacy* edited by Elliot N. Dorff and Danya Ruttenberg (Jewish Publication Society, \$16.00), on issues many would be surprised to learn Judaism has a say about, including dating ethics, sexual negotiation and ethical issues around birth control and STDs.

Each section begins with open-ended questions raised by a deliberately vague case study, followed by Jewish sources

which can shed light on the questions, and by a series of brief contemporary responses to the case study. Unfortunately, most contributors do not relate seriously to the sources (which themselves are far from comprehensive), and there is a lack of diversity amongst the contributors who often echo the same liberal message.

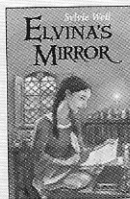
In the section on sex workers—including prostitutes, strip club dancers, phone sex operators, and pornography actors—the contemporary voices most succeed in opening up the issues and presenting multiple perspectives (though not necessarily Jewish perspectives, except inasmuch as the writer is Jewish). A case study describes a 23-year-old woman with



*My Life with the Lincolns* (Holt, \$16.99) is a sweet, hilarious and serious debut novel by Gayle Brandeis set in Downers Grove, Illinois during the summer of 1966. Twelve-year-old Mina Edelman edits *The Lincoln Log*, her dad's furniture store newsletter, filling it with chatty items like: “When Mary Lincoln was

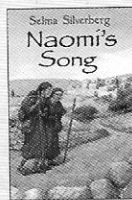
taken off to the nuthouse, she packed up a bag full of footstools, but no one knows why. I guess she really was crazy. Just like you'll be crazy about our furniture! ABE's might even have a footstool for all of your foot-resting (or nuthouse) needs.” Mina describes her family's adventures and misadventures as her dad, Abe, inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr., takes Mina along to speeches and equal-housing demonstrations, when her mother believes they're at furniture conventions. Through her fascination with trivia about the Lincoln family, Mina seizes on a series of coincidences, and is convinced—though she confides this notion only to the reader—that her family is the presidential family reincarnated. She feels burdened by the dreadful self-imposed responsibility of preventing her father's assassination, and her own and her sister's early deaths, as well as keeping her mother from going insane. This is a humorously told and nuanced story with an unusual angle on race relations and social justice that ends with an “unofficial” celebration of Mina's bat mitzvah.

Set in eleventh-century France during the Crusades, *Elvina's Mirror* is the second volume of a trilogy by Sylvie Weil (Jewish Publication Society, \$14). Originally published in French, it tells about the generous, brave, learned, respected and beloved granddaughter of the medieval Bible and Talmud commentator Rashi.



Elvina keeps her own counsel, loves her cousins and girlfriends, and is admired by a diverse and interesting cast of male characters. In the first volume, *My Guardian Angel* (Scholastic), Elvina saved the life of a frightened young Christian man who went AWOL as a conscientious objector to a Crusade. In *Elvina's Mirror*, which

Weil herself translated into English, the Jews of Troyes are besides themselves with contempt and fear when, they experience the plague and other mysterious misfortunes just as a family returning to Judaism after forced baptism moves into town. Elvina is determined—eventually with grandfather Rashi's help—to rescue the new family's traumatized nephew whose scholarly family was killed because they refused to be baptized. Elvina's naive but wise attempts to help this crazed young man heal and to mend a rift in the community make this psychologically insightful novel immensely satisfying.



And, finally, a historical novel set in the era of the Book of Judges, about three millennia ago. Selma Kritzer Silverberg wrote *Naomi's Song* (Jewish Publication Society, \$14) in the 1950s for her own daughter; the manuscript was re-discovered on her shelf by a hospice worker after Silverberg's death. It's a gripping

story of the enormously difficult life of lone women in fortified Bethlehem and the mountains of Moab, complete with remarkably graphic details of the agrarian and shepherd life. This gritty and engaging story serves to remind us we come from a very long line of resourceful, plucky and resilient women.

NAOMI DANIS