

NVHC Book Club 2021

SELECTIONS



January 9, 2021 (one week late; New Year's holiday). *House on Endless Waters: A Novel* by Emuna Elon. 305 pp. At the behest of his agent, renowned author Yoel Blum reluctantly agrees to visit his birthplace of Amsterdam to promote his books, despite promising his late mother that he would never return to that city. While touring the Jewish Historical Museum with his wife, Yoel stumbles upon footage portraying prewar Dutch Jewry and is astonished to see the youthful face of his beloved mother staring back at him, posing with his father, his older sister...and an infant he doesn't recognize.

February 6, 2021. *When We Were Arabs: A Jewish Family's Forgotten History* by Massoud Hayoun. Memoir. There was a time when being an Arab didn't mean you were necessarily Muslim. It was a time when Oscar Hayoun, a Jewish Arab, strode along the Nile in a fashionable suit, long before he and his father arrived at the port of Haifa to join the Zionist state only to find themselves hosed down with DDT and then left unemployed on the margins of society. In that time, *Arabness* was a mark of cosmopolitanism, of intellectualism. Today, Oscar's son, the Jewish Arab journalist Massoud Hayoun whom Oscar raised in Los Angeles, finds his voice by telling his family's story. To reclaim a worldly, nuanced Arab identity is, for Hayoun, to recall a time before ethnic identity was mangled for political ends. It is also a journey deep into a lost age of sophisticated innocence in the Arab world; an age that is now nearly lost. *When We Were Arabs* showcases the gorgeous prose of the Eppy Award-winning writer Massoud Hayoun, bringing the worlds of his grandparents alive, vividly shattering our contemporary understanding of what makes an Arab, what makes a Jew, and how we draw the lines over which we do battle.

March 6, 2021. *Apeirogon* by Colum McCann. 450 pp. This novel, whose title means “a shape with a countably infinite number of sides,” tells the story of an unlikely friendship amid the Israel-Palestine conflict. Bassam Aramin, a Palestinian who served a prison sentence for throwing a grenade, and Rami Elhanan, a former Israeli soldier, each lost a child to the violence. Drawn together by grief, they now work to educate people about the conflict’s human cost. Blending fiction and nonfiction in more than a thousand mini-chapters, McCann’s account includes tales about the history, people, and weapons involved in the occupation of Palestine as well as interviews with Rami and Bassam.

April 3, 2021. *Irving Berlin: New York Genius* by James Kaplan. Biog. 398 pp. He lived forever – the only major American popular songwriter to become a centenarian. He never stopped working; though his glory days were long behind him, he was still penning lyrics and planning songs in 1988, his 100th year. Through sheer amplitude, Irving Berlin presents a forbidding subject to biographers. He wasn’t yet 40 when his first life story appeared.

May 1, 2021. *Print to Fit: The New York Times, Zionism and Israel (1896-2016)* by Jerold S. Auerbach. After Adolph Ochs purchased The New York Times in 1896, Zionism and the eventual reality of the State of Israel were framed within his guiding principle, embraced by his Sulzberger family successor, that Judaism is a religion and not a national identity. Apprehensive lest the loyalty of American Jews to the United States be undermined by the existence of a Jewish state, they adopted an anti-Zionist critique that remained embedded in its editorials, on the Opinion page and in its news coverage. Through the examination of evidence drawn from its own pages, this book analyzes how all the news “fit to print” became news that fit the Times’ discomfort with the idea, and since 1948 the reality, of a thriving democratic Jewish state in the historic homeland of the Jewish people.

June 5, 2021. *Panther in the Basement: A Novel* by Amos Oz. The year is 1947: the last days of the British mandate in Palestine. Twelve-year-old Proffi, indoctrinated by his patriotic father and a zealous Bible teacher, dreams of dying heroically in battle, fighting for the creation of a Jewish state. But then he meets and befriends a kindly British soldier, who shares with Proffi a love of language and of the Bible. Accused of treason for the friendship, Proffi must learn the true nature of loyalty and betrayal. Once again Amos Oz displays his mastery of human nature in this rich tapestry of character and political intrigue set against the birth of modern Israel.

July 10, 2021 (one week late; July 4th holiday). *The Sun and Her Stars: Salka Viertel and Hitler’s Exiles in the Golden Age of Hollywood* by Donna Rifkind. Hist. Illustrated. 550 pp. As a remarkable crew of European artists and intellectuals fled Nazism and streamed toward Southern California in the 1930s, Salka Viertel – Galician-born actress turned American screenwriter -- worked behind the scenes to help these desperate gifted people. She arranged visas and raised money on their behalf, later offering introductions, companionship, housing, wedges of superior chocolate cake and

much more. Her Sunday afternoon gatherings became the stuff of local legend. The history of Hollywood is incomplete without an appreciation of Viertel's distinct talent for human relationships.

August 7, 2021. *Abigail* by Magda Szabo, translated by Len Rix. 333 pp. When we first encounter 14-year-old Gina Vitay, “the change that came about in her life robbed her of so much it was as if a bomb had destroyed her home.” The change in question – the sudden dismissal of her beloved governess – is just one of many upheavals soon to launch a cosseted teenager into an abrupt adulthood. Gina is sent to a boarding school in a remote village. *Abigail*, a sculpture in the school garden, is said to come to the aid of students who drop handwritten pleas into her urn. Originally published in 1970, this is Szabo's most popular book in her native Hungary, where it has been adapted into a TV series and a musical – and where it is even more widely read than *The Door*, the 1987 novel that may be her best-known work outside her country.

September 11 (one week late; Labor Day, Rosh Hashanah holidays). *Abraham Joshua Heschel* by Edward K. Kaplan. 444 pp. Biog. The most prominent rabbi in postwar America, Heschel turned out to be uniquely gifted at bringing the authority of Jewish tradition to bear on the country's problems – from spiritual apathy and conformism to the civil-rights movement and the Vietnam War. Starting in the 1950s, he was an eager partner in interfaith dialogues; in 1964 he had an audience with Pope Paul VI, offering advice on the Second Vatican Council's effort to change Catholic teaching on Judaism. This meeting provoked criticism from both conservative Catholics and Orthodox Jews, but for Heschel there was no contradiction between devotion to his own faith and engagement with the faiths of others. His mission was to restore man's sense of the holiness of life by insisting on the biblical truth that human beings are created in the image of God.

October 2, 2021. *Family Papers: A Sephardic Journey Through the Twentieth Century* by Sarah Abrevaya Stein. History/Biog. 300 pp. For centuries, the bustling port city of Salonica was home to the sprawling Levy family. As leading publishers and editors, they helped chronicle modernity as it was experienced by Sephardic Jews across the Ottoman Empire. The wars of the twentieth century, however, redrew borders around them, in the process transforming the Levys from Ottomans to Greeks. Family members soon moved across boundaries and hemispheres, stretching the familial diaspora from Greece to Western Europe, Israel, Brazil, and India. Stein uses the family's correspondence to tell the story of their journey across the arc of a century and the vastness of the globe.

November 6, 2021. *The Tunnel* by A.B. Yehoshua. Translated by Stuart Schoffman. 324 pp. At the center of the story is a tender 48-year marriage between Zvi Luria, a retired engineer, and his wife, Dina, a pediatrician who cares for both Israeli and Palestinian children. Zvi has been diagnosed with the harbinger of dementia, but his neurologist advises the couple not to run from life – from any aspect of it – even in the face of this news. Eventually Zvi comes to see, in large measure because of his

struggle with the disease, that to exist among people, all people, is to open oneself to the menace but also the glory of human entanglement.

December 4, 2021.

To the Edge of Sorrow: A Novel by Aharon Appelfeld. 290 pp. Four dozen resistance fighters – escapees from a nearby ghetto – hide in a Ukrainian forest, determined to survive the war, sabotage the German war effort, and rescue as many Jews as they can from the trains taking them to concentration camps. Their leader is relentless in his efforts to turn his ragtag band of men and boys into a disciplined force that accomplishes its goals without losing its moral compass. The partisans read books of faith and philosophy that they have rescued from abandoned Jewish homes, and they draw strength from the people they are protecting.

The Book Club meets via Zoom on the first Saturday of the month (except where noted) at 11:00 a.m. For more information, please contact Marjina Kaplan, marjina2@yahoo.com.

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