

Fiction Bonanza: New Adult Jewish Fiction 2004-2005

By Merrily Hart, Julie Moss, Rosalind Reisner and Kate Wenner

Description: Back by popular demand! A panel of experts provides an extensive bibliography and suggests the best of the current crop of fiction. Bring your rants and raves and join in the discussion. Included are historical & literary fiction, mystery & thrillers and a special presentation by novelist Kate Wenner on creating believable Jewish characters. For Wenner, it's not a matter of the trappings of a cultural type, but rather what she believes is deeply embedded in Jewish identity – the moral struggle over right and wrong and the issue of one's responsibility to the world. Kate will talk about some of the characters she has created in this approach to writing a Jewish novel.

Merrily F. Hart has been a librarian at the Siegal College of Judaic Studies in Beachwood, Ohio for over 10 years. A lover of literature, she leads several ongoing book discussion groups.

Julie Moss has served as librarian of The Arthur J. Lelyveld Center for Jewish Learning at Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple in Beachwood, Ohio since 1991. She is a past Chair of the Sydney Taylor Committee and currently serves as Vice President of AJL's Greater Cleveland Chapter.

Rosalind Reisner is the Program Coordinator at Central Jersey Regional Library Cooperative and has been the librarian at Monmouth Reform Temple in Tinton Falls, NJ for the past 25 years. She is the author of the reference book *Jewish American Literature: A Guide to Reading Interests*, part of the Genreflecting Series of readers' advisory guides published by Libraries Unlimited.

Kate Wenner is the author of two novels with Jewish themes: *Setting Fires* and *Dancing With Einstein*. Before turning to fiction, she was a print and television journalist, who won many professional awards during her 14-years as a producer for ABC's 20/20. Her writing has also appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* and *The Village Voice*.

FICTION BONANZA:

NEW ADULT JEWISH FICTION 2004-2005

Presented by Merrily Hart, Julie Moss, and Rosalind Reisner

* BEST NOVELS OF THE YEAR

I. LITERARY FICTION

Abraham, Pearl. ***The Seventh Beggar***. Riverhead, 2004. Rabbi Nachman's tales provide the inspiration and core of a story of the spiritual journey of a young man in the Orthodox world and his nephew at MIT. Lots of mysticism and kabbalah, but a careful reading is very rewarding. **Compare to Chaim Potok's books, *The Outside World*, *Bee Season*. Teen appeal.**

Arkin, Frieda. ***Hedwig and Berti***. Thomas Dunne Books, 2005. A much-delayed second novel by an 87 year-old writer relates the tale of refugees fleeing Nazi Berlin and their subsequent life in England and the U.S. Satisfying and unnerving. **Compare to *The Song of Names*. HOLOCAUST.**

Auslander, Shalom. ***Beware of God: Stories***. Simon & Schuster, 2005. Fourteen humorous and sardonic short stories that explore the spiritual and mystical aspects of Judaism, with a heavy dose of satire visited on the true believers. A fresh and unique voice.

Bauman, Bruce. ***And the Word Was***. Other Press, 2005. After the tragic death of his son, Dr. Neil Downs tries to work through his grief by serving as a physician in India. A modern retelling of the Abraham and Isaac story.

* Bezmozgis, David. ***Natasha and Other Stories***. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004. Linked stories relate the experiences of an immigrant Russian family in modern Toronto as they set about reinventing their lives. The grace and sensitivity of the writing has made Bezmozgis an overnight star in the literary world. **Compare to *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, *There Are Jews in My House*. URJ Significant Jewish Book & New York Times 100 Notable Books. Teen appeal.**

Cozarinsky, Edgardo. ***The Bride from Odessa: Stories***. Translated from the Spanish by Nick Caistor. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004. Born in Buenos Aires and a long-time resident of Paris, the film-maker/author's cosmopolitan outlook and keen sense of history yield a collection of appealing, sensual stories.

Elbom, Gilad. ***Scream Queens of the Dead Sea***. Thunder's Mouth Press, 2004. The author, an Israeli now residing in North Dakota, explores an old theme: whether the inmates of the lunatic asylum are saner than those on the outside. Witty black humor.

Furman, Andrew. ***Alligators May Be Present***. University of Wisconsin Press, 2005. Matt Glassman, an academic with shaky mental health, takes a job as a book review editor at a Florida Jewish tabloid and spends healing time birding in the Everglades. Furman, a professor at Florida Atlantic University, has published several very gracefully written books on contemporary Jewish American literature.

Grossman, David. ***Her Body Knows: Two Novellas***. Translated from the Hebrew by Jessica Cohen. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005. The title story captures a daughter's angry view of her mother's failings, while the other, titled "Frenzy," focuses on adultery, real or imagined. Grossman's intense psychological stories capture the ugly side of love.

Keret, Etgar. ***The Nimrod Flip-Out***. Translated from the Hebrew by Miriam Shlesinger and Sondra Silverston. Chatto & Windus, 2005. Short, satiric, bizarre bits by Israel's hottest young writer. **Previous book is *The Bus Driver Who Wanted To Be God & Other Stories***.

Kertesz, Imre. ***Liquidation***. Translated from the Hungarian by Tim Wilkinson. Knopf, 2004. A surreal journey through the lives of a group of friends who struggled through the Holocaust and communist tyranny only to be further battered by the aftermath of the fall of communism. A short intense read, challenging but worthwhile, by the Nobel Prize winner. **HOLOCAUST**.

* Krauss, Nicole. ***The History of Love***. Norton, 2005. Alma, a 14-year-old New Yorker, searches for the story behind her name with the help of a book called *The History of Love*. Creating an intriguing book-within-a-book narrative, Krauss's novel is funny and affecting.

Lester, Julius. ***The Autobiography of God: A Novel***. St. Martin's Press, 2004. Always provocative, Lester will shock his audience with this book about a female rabbi - a blend of magic realism and intense spiritual debate set in a contemporary story of a campus murder. **Compare to *Joy Comes in the Morning***.

Neugeboren, Jay. ***News from the New American Diaspora: And Other Tales of Exile***. University of Texas Press, 2005. An evocative collection from a confident storyteller.

* Ozick, Cynthia. ***Heir to the Glimmering World***. Houghton Mifflin, 2004. With her imaginative prose and vivid imagery, Ozick paints a fascinating portrait of an impoverished, dysfunctional, depression-era German refugee family in New York. **Booklist 2004 Editors' Choice, New York Times 100 Notable Books & Koret Foundation Jewish Book Award Finalist**.

Prose, Francine. ***A Changed Man***. Harper Collins, 2005. A 32 year-old tattooed skinhead has a change of heart and arrives at the offices of the World Brotherhood Watch offering to help them "save guys like me from becoming guys like me." **Teen appeal**.

Ravel, Edeet. ***Look for Me***. Perennial, 2004. Dana Hillman's husband vanished after an accident in the Israeli army. Eleven years later, she meets a man she thinks she could love, only to receive news that her husband is still alive. Follows *10,000 Lovers*; the second in Ravel's trilogy dealing with the impact of war and conflict on the everyday lives of Israeli Jews and Arabs.

* Rosen, Jonathan. ***Joy Comes in the Morning***. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004. Explores the complex life of a rabbi attempting to balance her identities as a woman, rabbi and Jew when she becomes involved with the son of a Holocaust survivor. **URJ Significant Jewish Book & Wallant Award winner**.

* Roth, Philip. ***The Plot Against America***. Houghton Mifflin, 2004. Roth creates an eerily plausible alternate world in which anti-Semite Charles Lindbergh is elected president. A suspenseful and dramatic novel of ideas. **Booklist 2004 Editors' Choice, New York Times Ten Best Books and Koret Foundation Jewish Book Award Finalist.**

Shabtai, Yaakov. ***Uncle Peretz Takes Off: Short Stories***. Translated from the Hebrew by Dalia Bilu. Overlook Duckworth, 2004. Originally published in Hebrew in 1972, these stories capture the characters and spirit of the *Yishuv* under British rule.

* Stern, Steve. ***The Angel of Forgetfulness***. Viking, 2005. Three distinct and intertwining narratives tell the tale of a raggedy angel residing on earth, his human son - a struggling writer, Nathan - and an alienated 60s era student, Saul. Saul's elderly aunt, who was the love of Nathan's life, is the link among these fragments and it is her memories of tenement life that bring this tale to life.

Wilson, Jonathan. ***An Ambulance Is on the Way: Stories of Men in Trouble***. Pantheon, 2005. Funny, poignant stories about men - very different from his previous books, *The Palestine Affair* and *The Hiding Place*.

Yellin, Tamar. ***The Genizah at the House of Shepher***. Toby Press, 2005. Rich with historical detail, this debut novel explores a family's history through the tale of a mysterious book.

II. POPULAR FICTION

Braff, Joshua. ***The Unthinkable Thoughts of Jacob Green***. Algonquin Books, 2004. Characterized by a critic as "Kvetcher in the Rye," this hip first novel is a clever and funny coming-of-age story, but sophomoric. Consider it a bar-mitzvah level version of *Portnoy's Complaint*. Contains obscenity and graphic sexual fantasies but definite appeal for teens. **Booklist 2004 Top Ten First Novels.**

Chessman, Harriet Scott. ***Someone Not Really Her Mother***. Dutton, 2004. In this lovely and poignant story told in the voice of four family members, a nursing home resident/Holocaust survivor and her family explore memories as the present fades with her Alzheimer's disease. **HOLOCAUST.**

Cohen, Esther. ***Book Doctor***. Counterpoint Press, 2005. More than editor, less than ghost writer, Arlette Rosen counsels and assists those desiring to publish a book of their own. Intermixed with poignant and hysterically funny query letters are the details of her own unsatisfying romantic entanglements. Arlette's unwritten book is titled *Jerusalem*, and the years she spent in Israel are frequently on her mind. Minimal Jewish content, but an amusing read.

Goldreich, Gloria. ***Walking Home***. Mira, 2005. A successful, attractive PR executive seems to "have it all," but when she tries to take time off to care for her dying parents, who are Holocaust survivors, she finds she needs to reevaluate her entire life.

Goldstein, Jan. ***All That Matters***. Hyperion, 2004. In this sentimental first novel by a rabbi and self-help author, a suicidal young woman finds her bliss with the help of her grandmother, a Holocaust survivor.

Isaacs, Susan. ***Any Place I Hang My Hat***. Scribner, 2004. The author is at the top of her game with this tale of a political journalist who is provoked into rekindling her search for her own mother by the appearance of a senatorial candidate's illegitimate son.

Kurlansky, Mark. ***Boogaloo on Second Avenue: A Novel of Pastry, Guilt, and Music***. Ballantine Books, 2005. Set in the 1980s, this is the story of Nathan Seltzer, a man facing two major decisions as he struggles to cope with the changes coming to his life and to his gentrifying East Village neighborhood.

Marche, Stephen. ***Raymond and Hannah***. Harcourt, 2005. A love affair between gentile Ray and Jewish Hannah blossoms as she prepares to leave for a year in Jerusalem to discover her Jewish self. Written in a distinctive style; contains explicit sex scenes.

* Ragen, Naomi. ***The Covenant***. St. Martin's Press, 2005. When Elise Margulies' husband and daughter are abducted by terrorists in Israel, Elise turns to her grandmother Leah, who contacts the three women who swore an oath of loyalty with her in Auschwitz. A tense, emotional thriller that examines the price of facing down evil and finding the strength to continue. **Teen appeal. HOLOCAUST.**

Schwarzschild, Edward. ***Responsible Men***. Algonquin Books, 2005. When Max, an inveterate, down-at-the-heels salesman, comes to Philadelphia to attend his son's bar mitzvah, he is unable to resist running one more sales scam, but things don't happen the way he planned.

III. HISTORICAL FICTION

Charlesworth, Monique. ***The Children's War***. Knopf, 2004. A chilling and beautifully written look at a young girl left on her own in France during World War II, how she survives, comes of age, and gains wisdom born of suffering. Compare to Mary Doria Russell's *A Thread of Grace*. **Suitable for mature teens. HOLOCAUST.**

Edghill, India. ***Wisdom's Daughter: A Novel of Solomon and Sheba***. St. Martin's Press, 2004. Better than her *Queenmaker*, this story of the encounter between Solomon and Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba, should appeal to lovers of *The Red Tent*. **Teen appeal.**

Feldman, Ellen. ***The Boy Who Loved Anne Frank***. W.W. Norton, 2005. What might have happened to Peter if he had survived the war? Feldman takes Peter to America where he creates a new life until the popularity of Anne's book forces him to come to terms with his experience in the attic. **Teen appeal. HOLOCAUST.**

Hoffman, Roy. ***Chicken Dreaming Corn***. University of Georgia, 2004. Set in Mobile, Alabama, this is a standard tale of an immigrant Jewish family making their life in America in the first half of the 20th century. **Compare to *The Jew Store, Peddler's Grandson*.**

* Langer, Adam. ***Crossing California***. Riverhead Books, 2004. Set in the late 1970s, Langer examines the intersecting lives of three families and their teenage children in the Jewish neighborhoods of Chicago. A terrific novel - watch for his next book following the same set of characters in later years. The Chicago Tribune called it "the most ambitious debut since...Philip Roth's *Letting Go*." **Teen appeal. Booklist 2004 Top Ten First Novels.**

Reisman, Nancy. ***The First Desire***. Pantheon, 2004. A first novel in which Goldie, the oldest of five siblings, disappears from home, leaving her already dysfunctional family to find the resources to deal with the loss of its strongest member. Set in Buffalo, New York from the 1920s to the 1950s and told in a lyrical, introspective voice, from multiple points of view. **New York Times 100 Notable Books, Koret Foundation Jewish Book Award finalist.**

* Russell, Mary Doria. ***A Thread of Grace***. Random House, 2005. A panoramic novel that follows a group of Jews and Italian resistance fighters during the last three years of World War II. Slow moving, but ultimately engrossing and filled with historical detail. **HOLOCAUST.**

Zacharius, Walter. ***Songbird***. Atria Books, 2004. Mia's saga, from spoiled conservatory student to avenging resistance fighter, is told in this romantic, sexy, Holocaust tale. The author, a well-known publisher, wrote this first novel at the age of 80. **HOLOCAUST.**

IV. MYSTERIES & THRILLERS

Gur, Batya. ***Bethlehem Road Murder: A Michael Ohayon Mystery***. Harper, 2004. Social and political realities of Israel take center stage here as Ohayon, Gur's brooding, introspective Jerusalem police inspector, makes his fifth appearance to solve the murder of a beautiful woman found brutally murdered in the attic of an empty apartment. Gur's many fans enjoy her interweaving of atmosphere, politics, and the subtleties of relationships.

Hellman, Libby Fischer. ***An Image of Death***. Berkley Prime Crime, 2004. The third outing for Ellie Foreman finds the freelance video journalist mixed up with crooked real estate developers and exploited Russian immigrants. Ellie's boyfriend David, in searching for relatives who may have survived the Holocaust, turns up an uncle in Amsterdam.

Kahn, Sharon. ***Which Big Giver Stole the Chopped Liver?*** Scribner, 2004. Ruby Rothman, widow of the last rabbi of Temple Rita in Eternal, Texas attends a fundraising extravaganza organized by her nemesis, busybody Essie Sue Margolis. When a stranger is found dead at the buffet and Essie Sue's chopped liver mold is missing, Ruby springs into action. The fifth "kosher kozy" in the series continues the author's humorous romp through synagogue politics and personalities. **For fans of *Jane Austen in Boca*.**

Kaminsky, Stuart. ***The Last Dark Place***. Forge, 2004. In the eighth title of this realistic police procedural series, Abe Lieberman and his Irish partner Bill Hanrahan are once again cleaning up the Chicago crime scene while Abe and Bess worry over how they'll fund grandson Barry's bar mitzvah.

Kanon, Joseph. ***Alibi***. Henry Holt, 2005. An engrossing drama and brilliant evocation of postwar Venice in which an Army war crimes investigator falls in love with a Jewish woman with a troubled past. Kanon's previous novel, *The Good German*, also explored tangled lives in the aftermath of World War II.

Keizer, Gregg. ***The Longest Night***. Putnam, 2004. Leonard "Mouse" Weiss, hit man for gangster Meyer Lansky, is sent to save Dutch Jews from transport to concentration camps. Weiss intends to double-cross Lansky, but finds himself ensnared in a much more complicated situation than he bargained for. Tense and well-plotted.

Krich, Rochelle. ***Grave Endings: A Novel of Suspense***. Ballantine Books, 2004. The third Molly Blume mystery is an entertaining mix of L.A. lore and Orthodox Jewish tradition. Molly unravels the mystery of her best friend's death as she prepares for her marriage to Rabbi Zack. Less violent than Kellerman with an appealing, observant, and thoroughly modern heroine. **Teen appeal.**

Lippman, Laura. ***By a Spider's Thread***. Morrow, 2004. When the wife of an Orthodox furrier runs away with their three children, PI Tess Monaghan (nee Weinstein) is called on to find them. Despite the furrier's claims of a happy marriage, Tess discovers something very different. The eighth in this fast-paced award-winning series set in Baltimore, but the first with Jewish content.

Nadelson, Reggie. ***Disturbed Earth: An Artie Cohen Mystery***. Walker, 2005. A Russian-born detective investigates murders and missing children in post 9/11 New York in this fourth outing for Artie Cohen. Minimal Jewish content and lots of violence.

Roe, Caroline. ***Consolation for an Exile***. Berkley Prime Crime, 2004. Isaac of Girona, a blind Jewish physician in 14th century Spain, is called upon to find a replacement for his assistant and help a patient suffering from nightmares. Politics and religious controversies provide complications. This eighth title in this well-researched series is more historical novel than mystery, with minimal Jewish content.

* Silva, Daniel. ***Prince of Fire***. Putnam, 2005. In Silva's fifth outing featuring the empathetic art restorer/Mossad operative Gabriel Allon, Allon's cover is blown by Palestinian terrorists and he is called home, only to become caught up in a vicious trap. Silva's fast-paced series becomes more popular with each addition; here we learn about the fate of Allon's wife Leah.

Waldman, Ayelet. ***Murder Plays House***. Berkley Prime Crime, 2004. In her fifth well-plotted "Mommy-Track" mystery, a very pregnant Juliet searches for a new home for her growing family, stumbles upon a body, and solves a murder. Along the way, Waldman deals with the very real and deadly threats of anorexia and bulimia for LA teens and women. **Teen appeal.**

Introduction by Julie Moss

Well, here we are again – the three of us – Merrily Hart, Rosalind Reisner and I, Julie Moss, who have survived another year of working, reading books and book reviews, writing annotations, reading each other's annotations, and compiling a list which was edited, re-edited, then edited some more!! Can you believe that one of us -- Rosalind -- even found the time to finish and publish a book this year?! We applaud her receipt of the AJL Reference Award and recommend her very resourceful book to you. It's called ***Jewish American Literature: A Guide to Reading Interests***. The book received a starred review in *Library Journal* where it was called "...a timely, well-researched, well-indexed volume necessary for all public libraries." Mazel tov Roz!

We are exhausted and plan to collapse next week.

But for now, we'd like to spend the next 60 minutes sharing with you the results of our work – highlights of the list of what we feel are the 53 best Jewish books published between June, 2004 and May, 2005. We have divided the list by genre and starred the titles which we believe are the best of the best - the 11 books you need to purchase this year if you only have enough money to buy 11 books. At the end of many of the annotations, we have mentioned in bold type any critical notice or awards the books have garnered, as well as indicating if they have teen appeal or Holocaust focus. Suggested read-alikes are included when possible.

Since you probably – hopefully - know about the most popular new books, like Philip Roth's ***The Plot Against America***, Cynthia Ozick's ***Heir to the Glimmering World*** and Nicole Krauss's hot-off-the-press ***The History of Love***, and they are already circulating wildly in your libraries, we plan to go a little deeper and tell you about some of the "mid-list" titles – the ones you may not yet know about. They are newer, or less publicized, but important. We hope that you will find this session, and our list, valuable collection development tools. We encourage you to make copies to share with friends, colleagues and patrons but ask that you only take one copy today.

So, the question is bound to come up again – **What is a Jewish Book?** I can say what I said last year..."You just know...it feels Jewish..." but I'd rather quote from the introduction to Roz's book, in which she defines Jewish books like this: "For the most part, characters' awareness of their Jewishness is made plain to the reader and has an effect on their thoughts and actions. The reader perceives that it is the author's intention to explore Jewish characters, settings or themes. The range of attitudes, opinions, and religious observance reflects the lively diversity of the Jewish community today." If you want to know what many famous writers think it is, see the new book ***Who We Are: On Being (and not being) A Jewish-American Writer***, edited by Derek Rubin. It's a collection of 29 candid essays about fiction written by three generations of famous and soon-to-be famous authors.

And let me tell you right up front who's NOT on the list. Jonathan Safran Foer and Michael Chabon are both wonderful Jewish writers, but each published a new book that is not Jewish, or Jewish enough, for our list. Faye Kellerman is not here because her new book, ***Straight Into Darkness***, will not be released until August. And Isabel Rose's book, ***The JAP Chronicles*** did not make the cut, nor did any other writers of "Chick Lit."

There are several notable debut novels here: three by authors who have successfully published non-fiction – Andrew Furman's ***Alligators May be Present***, Jan Goldstein's ***All That Matters*** and Mark Kurlansky's ***Boogaloo on Second Avenue***. Award-winning first-fiction came from Joshua Braff for ***The Unthinkable Thoughts of Jacob Green***, Adam Langer for ***Crossing California*** and Nancy Reisman for ***The First Desire***. Finally, we have Walter Zacharius who was an 80 year-old publisher when his book, ***Songbird***, was released last year!

Sadly, there are three authors whose work we will not have to look forward to in the future as they have passed away in the last 12 months. They are Saul Bellow, Will Eisner and Batya Gur and we will miss their work.

Now would be a good time to distinguish between two genres – literary fiction versus popular fiction. Simply stated, popular fiction is defined as stories written with the primary goal of providing entertainment for the reader, grabbing him from the start and pulling him through a story that engages him to the end. The distinguishing characteristic of popular fiction is its single level of significance. That is, it's a story and usually nothing more than a story.

The goal of literary fiction isn't just to entertain, but to challenge the reader and, at best, to elevate her thoughts. Literary fiction writers have their gaze turned inward: they're exploring the process of writing itself, as well as exploring big questions like truth and identity and what it is to be human. It will contain multiple layers of themes, symbolism, social commentary, deep character development, subtlety of plot, or other literary devices. Popular fiction can also encompass these things, but it does so in the process of telling a great story. Think of it this way: popular fiction writers are focused on the art of *storytelling* rather than focused on the art of writing. Of course, there is plenty of crossover and several titles on our list could have easily been put into other categories.

Merrily Hart will present her choices from the first section, Literary Fiction. Then I will cover Popular Fiction with Rosalind discussing Historical Fiction, Mysteries & Thrillers. Each of us has allotted time for questions and comments at the end of our presentations; please try to wait until then to contribute to what we hope will be a worthwhile Convention session.

Our final presenter today is a real-live author of Jewish fiction, Kate Wenner. Rosalind will introduce her and I know we are going to enjoy hearing from Kate.

I. LITERARY FICTION – Comments by Merrily F. Hart

It's so much fun (but exhausting) to immerse yourself in all these new books. I'm addicted to reading! The hard part is climbing back out, analyzing what is wonderful literature, provocative, merely enjoyable, or awful. Actually, the awful I know right away, at least I think I do! For this panel we also needed to also consider not only what is good literature, but which books are "more Jewish."

Then there's all the e-mailing back and forth – and the phone calls at the end. Do we really want this title on the list? Do we want to change the category where we listed it? We moved Adam Langer's ***Crossing California*** and Frieda Arkin's ***Hedwig & Bertie*** back & forth! Which books should we honor with stars for the best books of the year?

We have categorized almost half our list, 2 ½ out of 6 pages and 23 titles out of 53, as literary fiction – too much to talk about !! Some of these, especially Philip Roth's and Cynthia Ozick's books, have been widely reviewed, debated, listed on top ten lists, and thoroughly analyzed, so you have had plenty of opportunity to decide if these are books for your library, for your book discussion group, for you. You can usually expect a book by a Nobel Prize winner to be outstanding, and Imre Kertesz' ***Liquidation*** is such a book. You should buy it, read it, and try to persuade your book discussion groups to read it. But it is not immersed in Jewish thought and action and thus is less a "Jewish book," than some of the other books on the list.

I hope to bring to your attention books that the media doesn't focus on, but that you should know. To make it easier for you to follow, I'll start with Pearl Abraham's new book. I warn you that I'll quickly lose the alphabetical approach!

The Seventh Beggar is Pearl Abraham's 3rd book. You probably remember ***The Romance Reader***. This is a much more ambitious book, suffused with mysticism, exploring issues of illusion, faith, and the divine spark. The story is set in the Orthodox world, and the rivalries and differing world views of two different Hasidic sects are played out in the life of Joel, a yeshiva student obsessed with the stories of Nahman of Bratslav. His sister, Ada, finds her independence through another venue – fashion. The second part of the book centers on Ada's son and his personal journey. The stories of Nachman propel the book and the ideas forward.

The book is not totally successful -- the link between the 2 sections doesn't quite work and the book loses its focus. The golem in the story does not capture the imagination. Nevertheless, it is fascinating, well written, and worth a careful reading. You will learn a lot reading it, about Rabbi Nachman among other things, as well as enjoy struggling with the issues raised. It's definitely a good book for discussion groups. In fact, I just discovered last week that this book is the subject of the Yiddish Book Center's new issue of the *Jewish Reader*, so you'll probably be hearing even more about it.

Hot off the press is Nicole Krauss's ***A History of Love***. It is an intriguing intertwining of distinct and quirky voices, and contains a book within the book -- of course also called the ***History of Love***. It is a flashy display of pyrotechnics, but I think it all works. I loved the bits of wisdom from the book within the book.

The literary jokes amused me. Among others, there is a parody of a New York Times obituary, and also a skewering of the kind of editor a writer would dread. The editor takes the aspiring author, Litvinoff, and his wife out to dinner, and finally tells them he regrets that he can't publish the book, gives them a present of a book he is publishing, and sticks them with the check.

You fall for the characters, octogenarian Leo and 14-year-old Alma. Perhaps Alma's little brother is so impossible that you might find him annoying. He thinks he's a *lamed vovnik*, one of the 36 righteous people who are responsible for the continuation of the world, or perhaps he's even the messiah.

But how did this 31-year-old author create Leo Gursky, the old Jewish locksmith, who is given to creating scenes in Starbucks, so people won't forget he exists? He is a once and future writer, a refugee from Poland after the Holocaust who lost both his love and his manuscript in the process of escaping Europe.

Ms Krauss pays homage to her literary idols and specifically mentions Isaac Babel, Franz Kafka and Bruno Schulz. But one has to mention a much more intimate influence. She is married to Jonathan Safran Foer, the *wunderkind* author of ***Everything Is Illuminated*** and of this year's ***Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*** and their books bear certain similarities. We did not include his very appealing and intriguing novel on our list because it is not a Jewish book.

One reviewer characterized Krauss's book as "sentimental Jewish magic realism." It's an apt phrase.

That phrase could also apply to Steve Stern's ***Angel of Forgetfulness***, with its disreputable angel, who prefers to live on earth most of the time, and the angel's son Nathan burdened with tribulations and living in New York's Lower East Side. There is also, again, the book within a book -- a device that seems in vogue, but here also is used to good effect. The story includes a 60s era hippy named Saul who resides for some time in a hippy commune in Arkansas.

All are linked by the character Keni, a lively woman who is Saul's relative, but the love of Nathan's life in the earlier time period. The scenes with Keni, and the vibrant life in the Lower East Side are really the best part of the book. It has received critical praise, but Steve Stern has received extravagant praise before, especially for ***Lazar Malkin Enters Heaven***, which was published in 1987 and even reprinted in 1995. However, he's still not well known, maybe could be labeled unknown. Try this book, even though it's a slower, more difficult read than the previously two mentioned books.

Jonathan Rosen's *Joy Comes in the Morning* captured the 2004 Edward Lewis Wallant Book Award and is featured in the URJ (the Reform Movement) "Significant Jewish Books" series. It is set in Manhattan's Upper West Side, and is the story of the courtship and love affair of Deborah Green, a Reform rabbi. The characters are on a journey of self-discovery as they attempt to work through their crises of faith.

It is an easy and enjoyable read, with very linear story telling and clear issues, but perhaps is a bit simplistic. It's a good book for discussion, but, from a literary viewpoint, this book doesn't compare to the previously mentioned books.

Jonathan Rosen is the author of the nonfiction work, *The Talmud and the Internet*, the former editor of the Arts and Letters section of the English Language *Forward* and the current editor of Nextbook's publishing series. He is a frequent essayist on Jewish issues and his position in the Jewish literary world certainly makes this book, his second novel, very visible.

However, there are two books on our list that have a woman rabbi as the protagonist, and the other is Julius Lester's *Autobiography of God*. In both books the women rabbis are involved in an agonizing spiritual search, but are also definitely fashionable and appreciate stylish clothes. Lester's rabbi, suggestively named Rebecca Nachman, who lives in a small Vermont college town, feels she has failed as a rabbi. The rabbi has welcomed into her house a torah scroll rescued from the Holocaust and with it comes a midnight congregation of dead Jews. The book struggles with the theological question of suffering. God does appear in this novel, in a most unlikely guise, and refuses to answer questions. This book is sure to offend many readers.

This book is more "sentimental Jewish magical realism," and definitely more mysticism. A rather routine campus murder mystery is added to the mix. The mystery doesn't really add to the book, although it gives it more plot, and the romantic connections seem unlikely. It's an easy read, and isn't as well written as Pearl Abraham's, or Nicole Krauss's, or Steve Stern's books, but it's provocative, interesting and I always enjoy Julius Lester. He has a unique position in Jewish letters.

I want to say a word on *A Changed Man*, by Francine Prose. It received starred reviews in *Booklist* and *Publishers Weekly*, among other rave reviews. It's a titillating & provocative concept, maybe, as they say, "ripped from the headlines." I find the tone unchanging and the characters all sound the same, whether the viewpoint is that of the Aryan Brotherhood skin head Vincent, the lightweight but evidently competent Bonnie, or the charismatic head of the foundation, Holocaust survivor, Meyer Maslow. As I dug further I found that all reviews were not raves. I agree with Blake Eskin of the *Washington Post* who writes, "By the end of *A Changed Man*, things work out for the main characters regardless of how they behave. Lacking anything that is truly at stake, this clever, cynical novel risks coming off as empty as the moral posturing it means to send up."

There are eight books of short stories in this list --oops, seven. We took off Mark Helprin's new book because only two of the 16 stories were Jewish. My friends in the public libraries tell me short stories are always a difficult proposition, hard to persuade readers to pick up, never as popular as a novel. No matter how well written, they are frequently unsatisfying. By their very nature, they lack the character development, the complex plot, and the full exploration of a theme that can make a novel so satisfying. Linked stories, or stories in which characters reappear are somewhat of an improvement.

Yet short stories are frequently the reader's introduction to a wonderful new young writer, for example Nathan Englander several years ago or David Bezmozgis on our current list.

Bezmozgis is one of "the wavelet of new Jews from the old country." Others are Gary Shteyngart, and Lara Vapnyar, recent immigrants from former Soviet countries who are writing in their 2nd language. Like his protagonist in these stories, Bezmozgis was born in Riga, Latvia and emigrated at age 7, with his parents to Toronto.

The dynamic between American Jews and their greenhorn Russian counterparts is portrayed in funny, frequently painfully funny, ways, and the coming-of-age story has a new twist. His stories have been published in high profile magazines, *The New Yorker*, *Harpers' and Zoetrope*. This book won the Reform Judaism Prize for Jewish Fiction. I just received my *AJL Newsletter* before I came to convention and it includes an excellent review article by Libby White on these authors.

To mention just a few more important short story collections – I think we always need to be aware of Jewish writing from other countries, so don't overlook Edgardo Cozarinsky's writing, translated from the Spanish. Born in Buenos Aires, now living in France, he is a citizen of the world. His stories cover a wide range of historical periods and locals. He's not young, born in 1939, a filmmaker who has acted, written and directed, besides being the author of many stories. The title story is set in 1890 in Odessa and Argentina. Other stories take place in Vienna, Lisbon, and Budapest. He has a keen sense of geography and of the transplanted persona, the wistful immigrant, and the alienated exile.

Two of the short story collections are by Israelis. Etgar Keret, is young, hip and popular. He started writing in 1992 and has published three books of short stories, one novella, three books of comics and a children's book. Bestsellers in Israel, his books have been translated into 16 languages. I find his stories a bit bizarre for my taste!

At the other end of the Israeli spectrum, is a collection of stories published in Hebrew in 1972, by the noted writer Yaakov Shabtai, and finally translated and published in English. He was born in 1934 and died in 1981. Recipient of the Agnon Prize, his novel, ***Past Continuous*** is an exemplar of contemporary Hebrew literature.

There is a wave of interest among Jews, and also among the general society, in spirituality, in mysticism and *kabbalah* and that seems to be reflected in many of the interesting titles on this years list. Pearl Abraham's ***The Seventh Beggar***, Nicole Krauss' ***A History of Love***, Steve Stern's ***Angel of Forgetfulness***, and Julius Lester's ***Autobiography of God*** reflect this trend. Tamar Yellin's ***The Genizah at the House of Shepherd*** could be considered in this category also.

II. POPULAR FICTION - Comments by Julie A. Moss

This section does not contain a particularly impressive selection of books this year, but there are some favorite authors who are back, including Gloria Goldreich with her 8th novel. Who knew she was still writing? Her previous book was *That Year of Our War*, published in 1994! I'd compare her to newcomer Jan Goldstein, a male rabbi and award-winning author of self-help books. Both authors' books are easy to read, considered fluffy by some, and probably very appealing to seniors. Susan Isaacs has published her 10th novel and Naomi Ragen's 6th book is a bit of a departure from her usual style. It's a crossover between thriller and popular fiction.

I'd like to call your attention to several less-known, mid-list titles published in the last year that you may want to add to your collections:

The first is Harriet Scott Chessman's ***Someone Not Really Her Mother***, the story of 80-something Hannah Pearl who resides in a CT nursing home and is gradually fading away with advancing Alzheimer's disease. Vivid recollections of her 1940 escape from war-torn France to England and its aftermath - so long hidden from her family and from herself – are beginning to spill like vintage wine into

her memories. As Hannah's grasp of present day events fades, her ongoing encounters with unrecognizable yet familiar relatives who are trying in vain to keep her in the present, convey a quiet, heartbreaking grace.

Chessman uses Hannah's condition as the starting place for a series of finely crafted meditations that blur the lines between past and present, between English and French. Hannah's native language is woven into her thoughts and utterances, sometimes mystifying the other characters and creating much melancholy confusion. Chessman creates a lovely world for Hannah, filled with snapshots, letters and internal dialogue. The writing flows lyrically, at times like poetry, with numerous references to colors, flowers, and other suggestions of the natural world. The scene in which Hannah is lost in a drugstore is particularly moving, as is the final scene between Hannah and her great-grandson. While this is not a memoir it reads much like one. In the end this is not a depressing tale but a poignant window into an elderly mind.

The next title is ***The Unthinkable Thoughts of Jacob Green***, Joshua Braff's heart-tugging, funny first novel – the story of a witty, sensitive boy observing the darkly humorous goings-on in his Orthodox Jewish family. Over a five-year period in 1970s NJ, things go from bad to much, much worse. Jacob's "unthinkable thoughts" center on school, being Jewish and lust for his nanny and it's only through these fantasies that he can deal with his disintegrating family life. Although Jacob is a likable, funny narrator, his keen observation and vibrant imagination falter under the weight of his dysfunctional parents. Braff's irreverent, quick brand of prose easily combines serious problems with full-blown comedy, arriving at a perfect balance between darkness and humor. ***The Unthinkable Thoughts of Jacob Green*** is a hysterical and heartbreaking look at a unique young boy in the middle of a crumbling family.

Braff credits authors Dave Eggers and JD Salinger and the film *Ordinary People* as early inspirations. "I remember seeing it at a really young age, and seeing an interview with the director Robert Redford, who said, 'this kind of trauma is everywhere in the American family.'" Braff's reaction: "at the time, it seemed so foreign to talk about this kind of sadness -- and even in a home that has wealth and Mary Tyler Moore as the mom." The book was named **A Top Ten First Novel** by *Booklist*. But BEWARE: the book contains obscenity and graphic sexual fantasies. While these give it definite teen appeal, it may offend some readers.

Last is a novel by Mark Kurlansky, the *New York Times* bestselling and James A. Beard Award-winning author of several interesting works of non-fiction, including those dedicated to the histories of salt and cod fish – I'm not kidding! Kurlansky lives in New York City and his obvious affection for it explains the East Village setting for his first novel, ***Boogaloo on Second Avenue: A Novel of Pastry, Guilt, and Music***. This is a comedy of cultures; a tzimmes of the old and the new, of Latinos, Jews, Sicilians, and

Germans. It's about struggling to hold on to life in a rapidly changing world; about sex and food, including several multicultural recipes, and about how our lives are shaped by love and guilt. With its occasional funky and entertaining scene and its erratic snapshot of an ethnic melting pot during the 1980s, this one is surely unique! Next is Rosalind with her look at historical fiction.

III. HISTORICAL FICTION AND MYSTERIES & THRILLERS – Comments by Rosalind Reisner

Mysteries and thrillers are still the most popular genre fiction. In the 1990s, there was a major boom in mysteries. Mysteries—and genre fiction in general—began to appear on bestseller lists for the first time, and publishers rushed to sign up authors like Patricia Cornwell whose books sold in huge quantity. Lots of good, mid-list authors were lost in the race for sales. The popularity of the genre enticed literary authors to write mysteries, e.g., Joyce Carol Oates, E.L.Doctorow, Jonathan Lethem, to name a few. Publishers have encouraged the growth of series, capitalizing on fans' interest in character-driven mysteries to develop a following for their authors. There are fewer mysteries being published now than in the 1990s, but the genre is still popular, with female sleuths, historical mysteries, and regional mysteries still going strong.

Jewish mystery series and stand-alone titles are still very popular, and this year saw new entrants in almost every popular mystery series. Like Sara Paretsky last year, this year Laura Lippman, a very popular series mystery author gave her protagonist Tess Monaghan a chance to explore her Jewish roots. Faye Kellerman did not have a new Decker/Lazarus title and beloved Israeli mystery writer Batya Gur, died, after providing us with one last title featuring Detective Michael Ohayon.

In the thriller category, Daniel Silva continues to improve with each title featuring the art restorer/Mossad agent Gabriel Allon. Silva's titles now regularly make the New York Times bestseller list. A new author on the scene, Gregg Keizer, provided us with an engrossing historical thriller set during the Holocaust, and Joseph Kanon's new title explores once again moral issues brought up by World War II.