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## Tradition and tsuris

P.5

Three new books look at the lives of Jews caught in the age-old struggle between tradition and assimilation

### Spirit of S.F.

Mystery Meat on *Emperor Norton's Ghost*

P.4

### Disaster area

Mike Davis's grim portrait of southern California

P.6

Joelrod

# PIONEER TSURIS

*A trio of new books look at the lives of Jews who settle in unusual places*

**THE PROMISED LAND.**
By Ruhama Veltfort.
Milkweed Editions, 300 pages, $23.95.

**THE JEW STORE.**
By Stella Suberman. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 312 pages, $19.95.

**THE GHOST OF HANNAH MENDES.**
By Naomi Ragen. Simon and Schuster, 381 pages, $23.

By Sarah Coleman

My grandmother Jane was as skinny as a bird, but she always kept a supply of chocolate by her bed so that she could munch a little in the middle of the night. Just before she died at age 93, her childhood in London's Jewish East End began to come back to her with vivid certainty. She couldn't recall the question you'd asked her 10 minutes previously, but she could remember standing with her Yiddish-speaking father in the doorway of her family's tenement, watching bombs fall during World War I. She remembered Mrs. Brody, a stout woman who set up shop in the courtyard every morning with a tray of hot bagels that she'd string up around her chair like beads on a giant necklace.

"Please God, you should be as happy as we were," my grandmother would say, though some of her stories were about fending off tiny red bugs that lived in the walls and beds of the tenement — or more ominously, fending off the fascist Black Shirts who occasionally marched, chanting, through the neighborhood.

Her stories connect me to a world that for a long time I was eager to reject. Jewish culture is far less visible — and more vilified — in England than in the United States, and as a kid I lived in fear of Christian friends asking me to bring out my tail and cloven feet. As a matter of principle I preferred everything *goyische* to its Jewish counterpart and went out of my way to seek out the *treyf* (forbidden). In Philip Roth's novel *The Ghost Writer,* narrator Nathan Zuckerman fantasizes about proving his allegiance to his tribe by marrying Anne Frank; I fantasized about getting away from mine by marrying Prince Andrew. It took me a while to realize that the cultural quirks I found so embarrassing — the cheek-pinching uncles, Yiddish curses, and sour pickles — were exactly the kinds of details that give texture and depth to a story. My grandmother's family stories often weren't heroic (a worrying number of gamblers cropped up in them), but they were infused with humor and optimism. This seems to be at least part of the key to Jewish survival.

Perhaps more than any other ethnic group, Jews have been obliged to keep migrating across continents, remaking homes and histories in the process. But if there's generally a bit of *tsuris* (trouble) involved, there's also considerable *naches* (joy) in fusing the old and the new, discovering fresh territory while retaining links to the past. During the New Year celebration of Rosh Hashanah, Jews are instructed to recall the merits of ancestors through the prayer of *Zihronot* (memory); as this year's high holidays draw to a close, it seems apt to be considering the themes of migration and ancestry.

The journey from Old World to New, and from doubt to faith, is at the heart of Ruhama Veltfort's novel *The Promised Land,* due out in November. Veltfort, who lives in San Francisco, has a colorful biography: the granddaughter of famed psychologist Otto Rank, she hung out with Jerry Garcia in high school in Palo Alto before heading off to Barnard College to study anthropology and Sanskrit. She has written several volumes of poetry, and she brings a poetic sensibility to this lyrical and ambitious first novel, in which a 19th-century Jewish family travels from Poland to St. Louis and then strikes out on the Oregon Trail.

Narrated in alternate chapters by Yitzhak, a rabbinic scholar and visionary, and his wife, Chana, *The Promised Land* gets off to a rip-roaring start in 1820s Poland, where the young Chana's family is torn apart by a fever that leaves her older brother mentally disabled. Chana's parents subsequently reject her and she grows up a misfit, which makes her a perfect match for the passionate, slightly off-kilter Yitzhak. "One day your fire will take you to a harsh place," Yitzhak's teacher, the rebbe Shmuel Salomon, tells him. "A little like Moses, you are reluctant now, but you will lead your people over a vast desert." When Yitzhak and Chana are exiled from their village and when their fiddler friend, Chaim, gets beaten up for putting "Jewish notes in the mazurka," the three of them depart for the United States in the company of Yitzhak's sister Feigl, her husband, Asher, and assorted other followers of Yitzhak's.

The ensuing collision of cultures gives Veltfort a chance to explore how faith and culture inform the immigrant experience. For Noah Cohn, a rich German Jewish merchant with whom Yitzhak and Chana stay in St. Louis, America provides "the opportunity for the Jew to leave behind the medieval superstitions that have caused his persecution in Europe for so many centuries." But Yitzhak sees that Cohn and his kind have become amoral, worshiping only "the images graven on their golden coins." He's intrigued by the Native Americans and born-again Christians he finds on his travels, who teach him that "God was everywhere, and he himself was part of that." As Yitzhak and Chana embark on their perilous journey west, this lesson proves valuable. Songs and prayer help buoy their group's flagging spirits — and though there are deaths along the way, when the survivors eventually reach San Francisco their arrival represents a triumph of spirit over harsh conditions.

Veltfort relied on considerable research in Bay Area Jewish libraries to write *The Promised Land,* but she weaves period detail so seamlessly into her narrative that she might just as well have been channeling two ancestral spirits. Though Yitzhak and Chana seem a little exotic at the outset, they develop into compelling and inspiring characters whose journey — both physical and spiritual — comes vividly alive.

Another enigmatic pioneer can be found in Stella Suberman's *The Jew Store,* an engaging memoir of 1920s life in a Southern town resembling the Tennessee town where Suberman's family were the first Jews to settle. Aaron Bronson, the family's patriarch, comes across as a dapper, optimistic fellow who is determined to make good even if it means going where he's not welcome. Confident in the power of his salesmanship, Aaron takes his family from the Bronx to Tennessee to open the kind of discount dry goods store known to Southerners of that era as a "Jew store."

What follows is a warm, intelligent portrait of a small town and a study of how both insider and outsider prejudice can be overcome. The inhabitants of Concordia (Suberman's fictional name for the town) receive the Bronsons with a hefty measure of skepticism, and though a generous spinster called Miss Brookie takes them in, a local real estate agent speaks for many of the town's residents when he tells Aaron that "Yankee Jews spoil a town." Suberman's mother, Rivka, a rather gloomy woman who lives by the mantra that everything is "tem-po-rary," wonders why they ever left the safety of the Bronx.

But as the store becomes accepted in the community, even Rivka gets involved in the town's gossip and politics. Aaron becomes something of a town hero when he saves a local shoe factory from closure, and the local Ku Klux Klan chapter is sufficiently impressed with him that it leaves the store intact, even when he takes the unprecedented step of hiring a black clerk. The real test of the family's absorption into Concordia comes when daughter Miriam falls in love with a local boy. It's this romantic tryst that finally forces the Bronsons to examine the depth of their roots in the town, and to decide where they should draw the line when it comes to assimilation.

Suberman draws on her parents' and older siblings' memories, and occasionally her own (she remembers, for example, being paraded around the park by Miss Brookie's black housekeeper, who proudly tells people, "This here my Jew baby"). But she fleshes out characters and creates well-paced scenes that read like fiction. With a faultless ear for Southern dialect and a wry sense of humor, she shows that boundaries on the map are sometimes more easily traversed than those that lurk deep in the heart.

Today, when the majority of Jews in America regard their affiliation to Judaism as cultural rather than religious, Jewish leaders fret that those boundaries are too often traversed, and that the community will assimilate itself into extinction. They're not the only ones: Naomi Ragen's novel *The Ghost of Hannah Mendes* comes across at times as an undisguised piece of propaganda for the Woody Allen set, but is worth reading for its insight into a relatively obscure part of Jewish history.

As the novel opens, New York society woman Catherine da Costa has just received a terminal cancer diagnosis. Catherine comes from a wealthy Sephardic Jewish family, and she's busy luxuriating in self-pity in her plush apartment when she receives a visit from a ghostly ancestor.

The spirit is Dona Gracia "Hannah" Mendes, an actual historical figure (Ragen takes artistic license, giving Hannah fictional descendants). As a 16th-century businesswoman and Jewish philanthropist, Hannah Mendes was a model of resistance for Jews persecuted by the Spanish Inquisition. Naturally, this illustrious ancestor is annoyed that Catherine hasn't managed to teach her granddaughters, Suzanne and Francesca, anything about their religion or heritage.

"You thought your mother was a fool with her rituals, prayers and incantations," the ghost taunts Catherine. "And now you're going to die, and you're afraid."

Under Hannah's direction, Catherine persuades the two flighty twentysomethings to go to Europe to track down Hannah's lost diary. The girls experience some ghostly visitations of their own and — thanks to their solicitous grandmother — are introduced to two nice Jewish boys en route.

But it's Ragen's imaginative reconstruction of the diary — which turns up in bits all over Europe — that is easily the novel's most compelling material. Through it we witness Hannah's family being driven by the Inquisition from Spain to Portugal, where they are forced to convert to Christianity. Celebrating Jewish holidays in secret, the family at one point thinks it has been found out by two wealthy spice merchant brothers. The brothers are also secret Jews, however, and one of them marries Hannah.

For Hannah, a Jewish woman living under the Inquisition, things look pretty bleak when her husband dies. But she takes over the spice business and uses her smarts to smuggle money from Portugal to Venice. There, she lives openly as a Jew and establishes benevolent societies that support the translation of Hebrew prayer books into the vernacular, "so that those who had forgotten their faith might recover it." She is celebrated as a model of integrity at a time when many Jews became fawning converts and denounced other Jews to the Inquisition.

It takes chutzpah to write a contemporary ghost story, and Ragen almost pulls it off. She does well, for example, to play many of the ghost's scenes for laughs. When Hannah first appears to Catherine, Catherine assumes that the dark-skinned ghost is a relative of her Mexican housekeeper. "Have you come straight from Tijuana, then?" she asks. "Legally, I hope."

Unfortunately, Ragen doesn't always exhibit such a light touch with dialogue. At times she blurs the distinction between 16th-century formal speech and 20th-century chatter, and she obviously hasn't been hanging out with many 25-year-olds lately. On returning from Europe, Francesca tells her grandmother that "the places I saw in Spain and Venice made the past seem like the next town instead of some distant planet covered with clouds and barely visible through a telescope."

But Hannah's story makes a fascinating chunk of history digestible, and Ragen colorfully weaves facts into the granddaughters' romantic quest. Though Suzanne and Francesca might not end up embracing every aspect of their religious heritage by the end of the novel, they learn to appreciate Hannah's moxie and to see that culture and tradition have a place in their lives.

It's a message to warm the heart of any Jewish grandmother, but Jews and non-Jews alike can delight in these stories of unusual pioneers who preserve a unique cultural heritage. ■

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