



**‘Here I Am’ review: Jonathan Safran Foer returns with first novel in a decade**

September 6, 2016

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Special to Newsday

The Jewish novel lives. Bellow, Elkin, Heller, Malamud, Ozick, Roth and their ilk, an exclusive club that, in the admiring view of Martin Amis, admitted only John Updike as a gentile equal, have mostly shuffled off the scene. The focus of American literary culture has shifted to other minorities, and to immigrants.

Yet like Yiddish, which has always been dying and always will be, Jewish fiction powers on, crackling with energy and wit, learning and invention. The latest evidence of its stubborn vitality comes in the form of Jonathan Safran Foer’s hilarious and heart-rending new novel. “Here I Am” is the meticulous portrait of a family’s disintegration, but the “portrait” in this case is far more cinematic than painterly, hopping back and forth in time and from consciousness to consciousness to create a dynamic narrative full of painfully real characters.

The Blochs are Jacob, a TV writer, and Julia, an architect, along with their three boys, and all of them are afflicted with extravagant gifts: brains, health, money, and of course one another. But Julia’s discovery of Jacob’s second, secret cellphone precipitates a domestic crisis that parallels a much larger crisis in Israel — a catastrophic earthquake which grants an opening to Israel’s enemies as well as to its own worst impulses.

The tragedy of the adult Blochs is that they manage to be such blockheads despite their coruscating intelligence. Agnostic about God, they seem to believe instead in the promise of heaven on earth, which of course is even more far-fetched. Julia’s indiscriminate perfectionism in particular is boundless; she obsesses about the color of their Volvo (knowing the second it was too late that she’s chosen wrong) and insists they sleep on a \$7,000 organic kelp and pony hair mattress (on which they never make love).

When her flabby and neurotic husband announces that he’s going to fight for Israel in its hour of need, she objects: “And then what? I’ll single-handedly take care of the kids for however long your paintball adventure lasts? That shouldn’t be any problem: preparing three meals a day for them — make that nine meals, as no two will ever eat the same thing — and chauffeuring to cello lessons, and speech therapy, and soccer, and soccer, and Hebrew school, and various health professionals? Yeah. I want to be a hero, too. I think being a hero would be awesome. But first, before we get measured for capes, let’s see if we can maintain what we already have.”

Julia’s follies are nothing compared with those of Jacob, whose cravenness and self-absorption doom the family. He doesn’t even have the guts to have a full-blown extramarital affair, and he sacrifices his libido to his need to forestall baldness (the

medication he takes is known to suppress sex drive). Most of all, he gnaws at everyday life as if it were a dry bone, envying the bravado and self-possession of his tough Israeli cousin.

The Blochs are supremely irritating, and at times so is this novel; it's painful and exhausting to immerse yourself in the existence of people so blessed and so brilliant, yet too dense — and perhaps too far removed from their own tradition — to feel gratitude for the peace and richness of their lives. But the Blochs are also wonderful. They care so very much (Julia suffers “immense guilt about being human”), and they are so very, very funny, as when Jacob observes, in discussing some slight loss of face at a long-ago seder, that “embarrassment is the Parmalat of emotions.” Foer's portrait of Jacob's father is particularly sly; Irv is an incendiary neoconservative intellectual whose blogging at one point requires police protection for his home. The caustic details of his contempt for NPR, which he listens to “because Irv sought confrontations with what he loathed,” are as refreshing as a stiff, icy gimlet at the end of a long, hot day.

One of Foer's many achievements with “Here I Am” (the title is from Abraham's response to God's summons) is invigorating such a well-worn genre. All the familiar tropes appear: guilt, wisecracks, baseball, cancer, Chinese food, crazy relatives, complex feelings about Israel, the whole schmear. Yet the Blochs and their “issues” are relentlessly contemporary — and perhaps even universal, for those equally lucky in life. Irv's warnings notwithstanding, their troubles are not those of the gas chambers but of the shopping mall, to say nothing of the analyst's couch. The best diagnosis, ultimately, comes from Jacob's Israeli cousin. “The problem,” Tamir explains, “is that you don't have nearly enough problems.”

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