

Jewish Book Club Selections Submitted for AJL Listing 2009-2010
Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation
Evelyn Pockrass, Librarian

Monthly Selections – Tuesday Club

Ackerman, Diane. *The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007. 368 p. ISBN: 9780393333060.

Jan and Antonina Zabinski were the Polish zookeepers of the Warsaw Zoo who risked their lives and that of their son, Rhys, to hide hundreds of people, mostly Jews, in empty animal cages and in their home on the zoo grounds during World War II. In a lyrical and majestic way, Diane Ackerman describes Antonina's intense connection with animals and nature, her ability to handle life threatening situations, her husband's involvement with the Polish underground which included smuggling Jews out of the ghetto, and their survival under extreme circumstances. The couple were recognized as Righteous Gentiles by the State of Israel.

Alechem, Sholom. *Marienbad*. New York: Perigee, 1982. 222 p. ISBN: 0399510133.

Using a series of letters, love notes and telegrams, Sholom Aleichem portrayed the lifestyle of certain middle class urban Jews, mostly from Warsaw, who vacationed in Marienbad to find husbands for their daughters, play cards, gossip, and philander. Just a generation before the start of the destruction of Polish Jewry, their seemingly innocuous entanglements offer a moment of levity and sadness of the world to come. References are made to the World Zionist Congress reflecting the author's interest in that group. Aliza Shevrin translated this humorous and innovative novel that was written in Yiddish almost 100 years ago.

Brooks, Geraldine. *People of the Book*. New York: Viking, 2008. 372 p. ISBN: 9780670018215.

Pulitzer Prize winning author Brooks' novel about the *Sarajevo Haggadah* starts in the present and goes back in time, fictionalizing what may have happened to this unique Haggadah during the Bosnian War, World War II, Vienna in 1894, Venice in 1609, Taragona in 1492 and Seville in 1480. The protagonist, Hanna Heath, is a young Australian conservator of rare books who unravels the mysteries of the volume based on artifacts she observes. She falls in love with the Bosnian librarian who works at the museum where it is stored. The author offers an intricate, fictionalized history of the incredible survival of the *Sarajevo Haggadah*, the effects of war and anti-Semitism, a picture of a contemporary Australian woman's life and a tragic glimpse into certain family relationships.

Etzioni-Halevy, Eva. *The Garden of Ruth*. New York: Plume, 2007. 294 p. ISBN: 9780452286733.

Narrated both by Osnath, a niece of the prophet Samuel, and the biblical Ruth, this work of biblical fiction provides insight into the periods of the Judges and the Kings. Osnath, who is literate, finds an old message to Ruth, tries to discover more about Ruth's life by probing family secrets, matures in the process, and concludes by writing a scroll about Ruth's story. In order to appreciate this well-conceived novel the book club re-read the biblical book as well: *Tanakh The Holy Scriptures, The New JPS Translation According To The Traditional Hebrew Text:*

RUTH, pages 1419-1424. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985. ISBN: 9780827603660.

Hershon, Joanna. *The German Bride*. New York: Ballantine, 2008. 302 p. ISBN: 9780345468468.

In the 1860s, a somewhat pampered but sensitive young girl in Berlin becomes the bride of a smooth-talking German merchant who is now living in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The novel provides a cameo of life both in Germany and in the Wild West as well as character explorations of Jewish business and family life as pioneers. Eva Frank Shein, her husband Abraham, his brother Morris, her Uncle Alfred (who is only referred to in the narrative and in letters), Bishop Lagrande, Beatrice Spiegelman and others remain with the reader long after the book has ended.

Lagnado, Lucette. *The Man In The White Sharkskin Suit: My Family's Exodus from Old Cairo to the New World*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007. 304.p. ISBN: 9780060822125.

The author, an award-winning journalist, recounts the charmed life she had in Cairo until the family, like many other Egyptians Jews, was forced to flee in 1963, first to Paris, then London, then the United States. Lagnado was very close to her father, nicknamed The Captain, who spoke many languages, ran a business without an office, mixed with royalty, partied at night, was not the best husband, but was a hero to his youngest daughter who adored him. Poignant in its depiction of family relationships, this memoir provides a picture of pre-Nasser Egypt as well as one immigrant family's experiences.

Leshem, Ron. *Beaufort*. New York: Bantam Delta, 2008. 357.p. ISBN: 9780553385298.

Translated from the Hebrew by Evan Falkenberg, the novel brings to life the situation that existed during the last year prior to the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Beaufort, a medieval castle located on an isolated outpost on the Lebanese-Israel border. The leader of the unit, Erez, is a twenty-two year old who attempts to get the disparate group to bond and feel that they are there for a just cause. Compelling, but in ways controversial, Leshem's description of young men under tense, life-and-death conditions is raw and powerful.

Sabar, Ariel. *My Father's Paradise: A Son's Search for His Jewish Past in Kurdish Iraq*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2008. 332 p. ISBN: 9781565124905.

The touching story of Yona Sabar, a highly regarded professor of Neo-Aramaic at UCLA, as told by Ariel, his journalist son, who for years could not understand his father's ways and customs, is revealed in this mesmerizing account. When Ariel's first child was born he began to reflect on the father-son relationship and started to research and retrace Yona's life as a child in the remote dusty village of Zakho, Kurdistan. Yona, age 10, and his family fled to Israel where Kurds found little sympathy or understanding, but later in the United States Yona earned an advanced degree at Yale before becoming a university professor. This is a spellbinding journey into ancient history, current events, religion, different cultures and family relationships.

Schein, Elyse; Bernstein, Paula. *Identical Strangers: A Memoir Of Twins Separated And Reunited*. New York: Random House, 2007. 266 p. ISBN:9781400064960.

Both Elyse and Paula knew they had been adopted, but it was not until they were in their mid-thirties that they connected with each other. What was disturbing was the fact that they were separated as infants because a group of psychiatrists theorized that being brought up as a twin

was not good for twins or their families. This theory is no longer practiced but it adds to the sadness of the separation. Their memoir reflects the lives and feelings of the sisters, each of whom is a writer. Color photographs of the women at comparable ages enhance the intensity of their memoir.

Shalev, Meir. *A Pigeon and a Boy*. New York: Schocken, 2007. 312 p. ISBN:9780805242515.

A lyrical and deeply affecting story of Yair Mendelsohn, an Israeli travel guide whose birth was related to the 1948 War of Independence, is a carefully observed and constructed commentary on Israeli society, family and friendships, as well as a tribute to the geographical and natural history of the land. Characters are well delineated and the dialogue is crisp, funny, tender and often ironic. Much is written about the care and training of homing pigeons as messengers during periods of war and peace. Shalev also uses the literary form of magical realism which gives the tale a somewhat outer-worldly flavor. Evan Falkenberg's translation flows smoothly.

Silva, Daniel. *Moscow Rules*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2008. ISBN: 9780399155017.

Art restorer and Israeli spy Gabriel Allon cuts short his honeymoon as he is unwittingly drawn into the world of Russian espionage. He attempts to save the lives of the wife and children of Ivan Kharkov, a wealthy, immoral industrialist who is in the midst of negotiating a deal to deliver deadly weapons to al-Qaeda. The mystery novel also tackles the unnerving issue of incidents of apparent poisonings of Soviet journalists. In this eighth Allon suspense thriller, Silva has written another contemporary and page-turning work.

Our new Sunday group which meets four times during the Religious School is starting with:
Malamud, Bernard. *The Fixer*. New York.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004 edition. 352 p. ISBN: 9780374529383.

Winner of the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize in 1967, Malamud's classic tale of the imprisonment of a Ukrainian handyman for a crime he did not commit depicts the anti-Semitism that existed in Tsarist Russia during the early 20th century and is based on the 1913 blood libel accusations against Mendel Beilis. In *The Fixer*, the reader becomes part of Yaakov Bok's imprisonment and lives with his innermost thoughts and aspirations. Set in Kiev, 1911, the characters and the life of Jews at that time are haunting.