

NVHC BOOK CLUB

SELECTIONS 2019



January 5. ***Khirbet Khizeh*** by S. Yizhar, translated from the Hebrew by Nicholas de Lange and Yaacob Dweck. 127 pp. Fiction. In this novel, an Israeli soldier wrestles with his conscience as Palestinians are driven from their homes. Under orders from above, a unit of Israeli soldiers expels the Palestinian inhabitants of Khirbet Khizeh. The story is told in the first person, by an Israeli soldier who participates in the operation. Over the course of the day he is swamped by feelings of ambivalence, revulsion, complacency and resignation – even as the soldiers around him carry out their jobs without, apparently, feeling much of anything. The book, published in Hebrew in 1949, became a landmark of Israeli literature, sparking debate over successive generations about the events that attended the formation of the Jewish state.

February 2. ***The First Love Story: Adam, Eve, and Us*** by Bruce Feiler. Relig. 306 pp. Feiler's mission is to redeem the ancient story, free it from the sexist taint of the original phrasing (“In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee”) and give us a new parable and a new Eve for the current moment. He regards the story as a celebration of Eve's curiosity and the ups and downs of any healthy marriage. “Eve is the first teacher, the first to trust her eyes, the first who wants to know. In so doing, she becomes the first to commit the ultimate modern act of not accepting the meaning of others but insisting on making meaning herself. She writes her own story.”

March 2. ***(((Semitism)))*: Being Jewish in the Age of Trump** by Jonathan Weisman. 238 pp. For all of the website bile and the tiki-torch marches, “the threat of violence against Jews,” Weisman writes, “has not materialized into actual violence. But the advent of Trumpian politics has rung Weisman's alarm bells. More sinister for him than the foaming lunacies of the neo-Nazis is the alt-right's embrace of conspiracy theorists; the routine mutation of fantasy into fact; the appetite for seeing secret hands (George Soros for instance) at work in plots to undermine America — all of which have a whiff of late Weimar about them, not to mention the long history of populist anti-Semitism in the United States. Better, Weisman believes, to be fretfully vigilant than torpidly complacent.

April 6. ***The Radetsky March*** by Joseph Roth, translated from the German by Joachim Neugroschel. Fiction. Paperback 330 pp. By the author of *The Hotel Years*, this is a classic saga of the privileged von Trotta family, encompassing the entire social fabric of the Austro-Hungarian Empire just before World War I. The book presents an unparalleled portrait of a civilization in decline, and as such a universal story for our times.

May 4. ***The Exodus*** by Richard Elliott Friedman. Biblical Scholarship. 282 pp. The Exodus has become a core tradition of Western civilization. Millions read it, retell it, and celebrate it. But did it happen? Biblical scholars, Egyptologists, archaeologists, historians, literary scholars, anthropologists, and filmmakers are drawn to it. Unable to find physical evidence until now, many archaeologists and scholars claim this mass migration is just a story, not history. Others oppose this conclusion, defending the biblical account. Friedman brings real evidence of a historical basis for the exodus — the history behind the story. The biblical account of millions fleeing Egypt may be an exaggeration, but the exodus itself is not a myth.

June 1. ***Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations*** by Ronen Bergman. Middle Eastern World History/Military History/Domestic Politics. 750 pp. The Talmud says: "If someone comes to kill you, rise up and kill him first." This instinct to take every measure, even the most aggressive, to defend the Jewish people is hardwired into Israel's DNA. From the very beginning of its statehood in 1948, protecting the nation from harm has been the responsibility of its intelligence community and armed services, and there is one weapon in their vast arsenal that they have relied upon to thwart the most serious threats: Targeted assassinations have been used countless times, on enemies large and small, in response to attacks against the Israeli people and preemptively.

July 6. ***Safekeeping*** by Jessamyn Hope. Fiction. 377 pp. Few social institutions have undergone more radical change than have Israeli kibbutzim during the past 100 years. Many, now deprived of government subsidies, have become privatized and evolved into rural or suburban communities. In a society where work and self-sufficiency were two of the highest ideals, hiring outside laborers was forbidden. But by the 1990s, the fictional Sadot Hadar, like real kibbutzim, is forced to do just that. A divergence of opinion among the residents gives rise to many unanswered questions about the future.

August 3. ***Katalin Street*** by Magda Szabo, translated by Len Rix. Fiction. 235 pp. Three families, whose lives are inextricably linked by the street they inhabit, grapple with love and morality amid political upheaval. In prewar Budapest three families live side by side on gracious Katalin Street, their lives closely intertwined. Their lives are torn apart in 1944 by the German occupation as they struggle to come to terms with social and political change, personal loss, and unstated feelings of guilt. *Katalin Street*, which won the 2007 Prix Cévennes for Best European novel, is a poignant, somber, at times harrowing book, but beautifully conceived and truly unforgettable.

September 7 ***Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*** by Yossi Klein Halevi. Mid-East Relationships. 204 pp. Halevi is an Israeli writer, journalist, scholar and public intellectual who ventured into disputed territory a few years ago. He was looking for common themes that Jews, Christians and Muslims share – a spiritual language that defies the language that separates them. Listening to people in the West Bank and Gaza, he had hoped to find some answers to the questions that bedevil his small area of the world. It's an area smaller than Vancouver Island that occupies world news.

October 5. ***Judas*** by Amos Oz. Fiction. In Jerusalem in the winter of 1959 and 1960, a young graduate student takes a job as a companion to an elderly intellectual. In exchange for room and board and a modest paycheck, he agrees to talk and argue with the old man from 5 to 11 o'clock every evening. Beyond that, he must only feed the fish, bring in a cup of tea and swear never to reveal anything he hears within these walls. This novel of ideas presents Judas as misguided idealist who inadvertently triggered the salvation of mankind. That idea that -- not original to the character or to the author -- has a certain appeal regardless of its theological complications..

November 2. ***Dinner at the Center of the Earth*** by Nathan Englander. Short Stories. 252 pp. A prisoner in a secret cell. The guard who has watched over him a dozen years. An American waitress in Paris. A young Palestinian man in Berlin who strikes up an odd friendship with a wealthy Canadian businessman. The General, Israel's most controversial leader, who lies dying in a hospital, the only man who knows of the prisoner's existence. From these vastly different lives Nathan Englander has woven a powerful, intensely suspenseful portrait of a nation riven by insoluble conflict, even as the lives of its citizens become fatefully and inextricably entwined--a political thriller of the highest order that interrogates the anguished, violent division between Israelis and Palestinians, and dramatizes the immense moral ambiguities haunting both sides.

December 7. ***The Genius of Judaism*** by Bernard-Henri Levy. Relig. 230 pp. This breathtaking new vision and understanding of what it means to be a Jew is rooted in the Talmudic traditions of argument and conflict, rather than biblical commandments, borne out in struggle and study, not in blind observance. At the very heart of the matter is an obligation to the other, to the dispossessed, and to the forgotten, an obligation that Levy has sought to embody over decades of champions "lost causes," from Bosnia to Africa's forgotten wars, from Libya to the Kurdish Peshmerga's desperate fight against the Islamic State.

The Book Club meets on the first Saturday of the month at 9:00 a.m. in the NVHC Library. For more information, please contact Marjina Kaplan, marjina2@yahoo.com.