

Story of a brooch

Jessamyn Hope's 'Safekeeping' offers a glimpse of how modern secular Jews relate to their Jewish identity **By Janice Weizman**

ONE OF the pleasures and privileges of writing fiction about Jews is that the subject matter offers a wealth of history, anthropologically and culturally, for the writer to draw upon. It is a legacy that can only add depth and perspective to any story, setting plot against a rich, almost metaphysical canvas.

"Safekeeping," a debut novel by Jessamyn Hope, offers a compelling example of how the lives of American Jews, no matter how alienated from their religion, retain roots that reach back into a past they can scarcely imagine.

The year is 1994. Adam Soccorso, a 20something New Yorker, Jewish on his mother's side, with addiction issues, arrives fresh from the airport to Sadot Hadar, a fictional kibbutz in northern Israel. His aim is to track down an old flame of his recently deceased grandfather, whom he calls *zayde*, a Holocaust survivor who lived on the kibbutz before emigrating to New York.

Adam carries with him a rare and expensive brooch, a family heirloom of mysterious provenance that belonged to his grandfather. He has made some unfortunate mistakes in his life, and he hopes, by giving the brooch to the woman *zayde* once loved, to atone and make a fresh start.

"In the dark dorm room, the brooch seemed to stare at Adam as much as he stared at it. An uncut sapphire, the size and shape of a Milk Dud, glowed in its center, so blue. Pearls and smaller gems, also in their natural shapes, hemmed the edges of the brooch – red rubies in the corners, and, halfway between, either a purple amethyst or green garnet. It was the rich gold filigree that stirred Adam, though, far more than the precious stones; in it, he sensed the long-dead goldsmith who had painstakingly

fashioned the tangle of thin vines and little flowers that covered two of the brooch's quarters as well as the small pomegranates and leaves in the other two.

"He had no illusion that his *zayde* was up in the heaven right now, watching him. The old man would never know that his grandson had come halfway around the world to set things right with his brooch.

But he had. He was here."

It is this brooch, which draws a connection between the book's young protagonist and his European ancestors, between his rootless narcissism and their fate as a persecuted minority. Adam, the grandson of a Holocaust survivor, never knows of the brooch's harrowing origins, but Hope lets us readers in on the lost stories of its past, adding depth and historical breadth to his story.

Adam's search for the now elderly woman, whom he knows only as Dagmar, constitutes the backbone of the novel. Yet this is also a novel about a community – the kibbutz – as it struggles with issues of continuity in the face of outdated ideology. Adam has arrived on the eve of a turbulent vote on whether the kibbutz should move to salaried work, abandoning its principles of economic equality and communal livelihood. Against this background, several subplots play out.

There is Ziva, an acerbic, stubbornly idealistic old timer, who insists on working despite her deteriorating health.

"It was sickening the way people treated someone like a child as soon as they reached a certain age. She wanted to shout into their concerned little faces that she was taking on the world before their parents had even fucked, but her bluntness, a point of pride her whole life, was now shrugged off as crotchety old-ladyhood."

Her middle-aged son, Eyal, now secretary of the kibbutz, assigns Claudette, a convent-raised French-Canadian volunteer struggling with OCD, to keep an eye on her.

"Ziva found the girl beyond irritating. Not only did she inspect every lychee for a full minute before tossing it into either the good crate or the bad crate; more often than not, she would retrieve the lychee and reexamine it...

"Claudette, I hope you don't think you're above sorting fruit."

Claudette shook her head. "No. Of course not."

"Working the land is good for you. *'Build the land, and it will build you.'*"

Claudette held a lychee closer to her eyes. "It is important to keep busy. The devil finds work for idle hands."

CLAUDETTE SHARES a room with Ulya, a young Belorussian woman posing as a Jew in order to get to the US and live the American dream, a plan in which she envisions a vital role for Adam.

"Ulya asked if he was going back to Manhattan soon. "Hope so."

"You could take me with you, you know. We could get a fake marriage"

"Once upon a time...I would have jumped at the chance, as long as you paid me enough. But now I'm done with scams."

"How much do you have to pay someone to be your green-card husband? I know people who've done it, paid someone, but I don't know how much."

In the evenings Ulya puts on short skirts and high heels and conducts secret meetings with Farid, an Arab who is employed in the kibbutz fields. Claudette embarks on an affair of her own with Ofir, a 17-year-old soldier who has partially lost



COURTESY JESSAMYN HOPE

Jessamyn Hope brings an international cast of characters together

his hearing in a suicide bombing.

In bringing this international cast of characters together, Hope, who was born and raised in Montreal and lived in Israel before moving to New York City, has taken on a complex task. She succeeds in rendering each with sensitivity, authentically portraying their unique backgrounds, personalities and interactions.

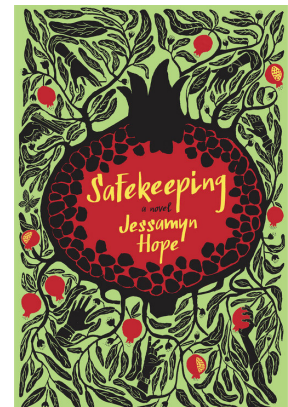
However, by some linguistic miracle, everybody speaks to each other in nearly flawless American English. While this enables the development of the stories and contributes to the readability of the book, it also casts a shadow of implausibility. It is uncertain to what extent her characters could, in reality, communicate so fluently with each other.

The story opens into multiple dimensions through brief sections and flashbacks embedded into the main narrative. Adam's brooch, it becomes clear, has a long and turbulent history. Not only has it repeatedly traded hands in its

700 years of existence, but it has survived the brutal anti-Semitism directed at its owners, many of whom were Adam's ancestors. Like the resilience of Jews and Judaism over the centuries, the brooch and Adam's possession of it are something of a miracle, a fact which very few of the book's modern-day characters can truly appreciate.

Between the lines, "Safekeeping" offers a glimpse of the way that modern secular Jews relate to their Jewish identity, even though this theme is not actively explored. Adam's Jewishness means very little to him, and the kibbutzniks have assimilated theirs into Israeliness, a contrast with some of the previous owners of the brooch.

It is interesting to note that in the final chapter, which takes place 20 years later in 2014, there is only one character about whom we are given a sense of closure. It is the brooch, the silent and beautiful witness to vicissitudes of fate and history, a mirror of sorts reflecting the hopes, dreams and values of its long chain of owners. ■



Safekeeping: A Novel

Jessamyn Hope

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