

# Book Review // The Extra by A.B. Yehoshua

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## The Extra

A. B. Yehoshua

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There is a tradition, more prominent in theater than in fiction, of the unwanted guest. One thinks of such works as Kaufman and Hart's 1939 play *The Man Who Came to Dinner*; the 1967 Stanley Kramer-directed *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, starring Sidney Poitier; the 1981 farce *The Nerd*, by Larry Shue; and the classic Bernard Malamud short story "The Jewbird" from 1963. The uninvited guest is often the source of cruel, hilarious mockery; he is the engine of a grand and poignant melancholy, with political undertones—the wandering, homeless Jewish bird in Malamud, Poitier's black man engaged to a white woman.

Israeli fiction is due for a contribution to the uninvited-guest genre. The idea of the lost, well-meaning, malignantly clueless or even indifferent guest who drops in, hoping for the best, ending up with the worst, knocking over every nice vase of flowers on every antique table in the room—yes, this is a plot that may resonate, depending on one's politics, with Israeli Jews, Israeli Arabs, Palestinians and just about anybody else who sets foot in the Promised Land.

Nobody could be better suited to update the story of Malamud's "Jewbird" dropping in uninvited than the great fiction writer A.B. Yehoshua. Born in 1936 in prewar Palestine, descended from a long line of Sephardi Israelis, Yehoshua is not only a superb writer—Harold Bloom once placed him in the company of poet Yehuda Amichai—but also a major, if sometimes simplistic, theorist of Zionism. In 2006, Yehoshua famously declared at a forum at the Library of Congress that American Jews are merely "playing with Jewishness." Only in Israel, Yehoshua proclaimed, could one live an authentically Jewish life. Yet Yehoshua is, along with Amos Oz and David Grossman, one of the great literary peaceniks of contemporary Israel. He thinks Judaism is impossible without Israel—yet he sees that Israel is impossible as is. Jews are uninvited guests who cannot possibly leave—for they are also among the hosts.

Such complexities suffuse *The Extra*, Yehoshua's new novel. It's the story of Noga, an Israeli expatriate now playing harp in a Dutch orchestra, who has returned to Jerusalem to apartment-sit for her widowed mother as she spends a trial period in a Tel Aviv assisted-living facility. Noga thought she would be living in her childhood home by herself, but she soon discovers otherwise: Two haredi children—cousins—accustomed to visiting her mother to watch the television forbidden to them at home are frequent callers.

Locking her door and refusing the boys entry doesn't work; they somehow have a key. Ordering them not to return is just as fruitless. They have become masters of the house, *ba'alei* in adverse possession. The younger boy, a toddler who seems developmentally delayed and is apparently the scion of some unspecified Hasidic dynasty, may not be destined to read but already knows how to operate the remote control. The TV is also the only thing that soothes his anxious crying. His parents can't care for him during the day, so he spends time with his grandparents, who live in the apartment upstairs. But his

grandmother is senile and his grandfather, a moderate Orthodox man, works all day teaching yeshiva to support the indigent lifestyle of his son, the older boy's father, who learns all day and can't support his children.

The secular Noga's ongoing, ever more futile attempts to rid her apartment of the little haredi boys, in a neighborhood that has "turned black" with observant families, are quite comic—Kaufman and Hart-worthy, even. Noga changes the locks and gets a heavy bolt for the apartment, but the boys just shimmy down the building from outside and break in through windows. She eventually heads to the Arab quarter of Jerusalem to buy a Bedouin whip, the kind that one can crack in the air, hoping to terrify the boys. Nothing works. In the midst of her failure, Noga, who never wanted children, develops, in spite of herself, a reluctant compassion for the boys. The scene in which she removes the soiled diaper of the younger boy and bathes him is among the most tender I have read in eons.

What a pity, then, that this moving absurdist fable, which ought to have been a long short story or a novella, is but a minnow in the sea of this preposterously unbelievable book, whose larger plot I will do my duty to summarize: Noga, as we have learned, never had children, and in fact her first husband, Uriah, ultimately left her so that he could remarry and reproduce. Everybody in Noga's secular world is inexplicably judgmental of her for this decision: Her parents seemed to side with Uriah, with whom they stay in touch. Her brother, Honi, thinks her less of a woman. When Noga and Uriah bump into each other—as the gods of plotting dictate they must—Uriah develops the hots for her again, despite being happily remarried. He stalks and tries to seduce her because even though he has children now, he still regrets the one she never gave him.

This is a book in which Noga's mother thinks Noga should have a baby with her remarried ex-husband, telling her: "Listen to what a wise woman has to say to a beloved daughter, hear me out and don't interrupt. Give him that child, give it to him, and that way something real from you will stay in the world, not just musical notes that vanish into thin air. Make an effort, then go back to your music. Give birth to a child, and I will help him raise it."

If it seems plausible to you that an elderly secular Israeli mother would commute from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem to help her ex-son-in-law raise her absent daughter's baby while she returns to Europe to play harp (and resume her casual affair with a genial flutist), then this may be the book for you. If not, then you just might join me in wondering why the editors of a distinguished novelist like A.B. Yehoshua didn't send him back to his word processor for another go. As it comes to us, via Stuart Schoffman's valiant translation, it's a book more puzzling than memorable.

One wonders if, at 79, Yehoshua did not have the energy for the rewrite that would have preserved this book as an incisive and witty commentary on the tensions and divides that have riven contemporary Israel. It's a shame. This is a book that contains multitudes: Behind its haredim and secularists, there are the shadows of Jews and Arabs. There are even echoes of Yehoshua's fierce diaspora politics: It won't be lost on any reader that Noga, in leaving Israel, has become barren in more way than one. A bit heavy-handed? Sure. But there are so few writers with the capaciousness, the compassion, to attempt all these points of view. Yehoshua somehow seems greater in failure than most of us in placid success.

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