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Review by [Edyt Dickstein](#)

In *The Extra*, award-winning Israeli novelist A. B. Yehoshua movingly portrays a woman's struggle for independence amid familial expectations and obligations. Torn from her idyllic, secular life as a harpist in the Netherlands, Noga is summoned to Jerusalem to maintain her childhood home. There she clashes with her brother about pressuring their mother into assisted living. While in Israel, Noga also reflects on growing up surrounded by an insular Orthodox community, and on her conversations with her neighbors about her more secular practices. Particularly challenging is seeing the man who divorced her when she refused to have children—and who, though remarried, still loves her, and is still bitter about her decision. As she attempts to reconnect with her family and past while retaining her independence, Noga begins to question her previous decisions and revisit her plans for the future.

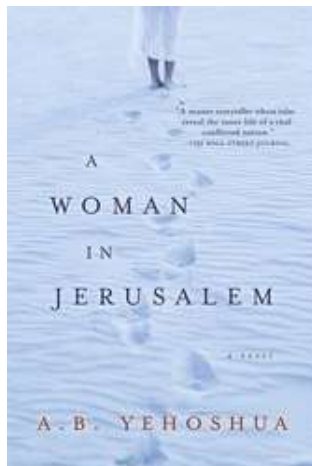
Throughout the novel, Yehoshua explores the relationship between personal agency and familial obligations. Noga's brother's extensive involvement in her life in Israel, including arranging her trip, determining its length, and providing for her a job as a movie and television extra, leaves Noga struggling to retain a sense of independence. While her discomfort is ameliorated somewhat by small changes that she makes to the apartment in Jerusalem, she only truly feels in control after she speaks to her former husband about their past and regains confidence in her previous decisions—particularly her decision not to have children, even though it meant losing the man she loved. As Noga's autonomy increases, her relationships with her family strengthen. Yehoshua indicates that the conception of familial duty as a hindrance to personal autonomy is in fact misguided, and that stronger and healthier relationships with loved ones is enhanced by a strong sense of self and confidence in one's decisions.

These themes of independence and relationships are tied together by the concept of performance. This is epitomized by the idea of people acting as performers, who must both serve as the central characters of their own narratives and as “extras” in each other's lives. Yehoshua's style of short, semi-independent and very loosely organized chapters effectively conveys this message by creating a sense of Noga's life as a series of scenes, leaving the reader feeling like an audience. Interspersed throughout the story are Noga's musings on the sound of her music and its role—and hers—in the orchestra, like interludes or the background of a show. As Noga recognizes at the end of the novel when she wants perform a specific musical piece that symbolically connects her to her mother, sometimes it is not easy to separate reality from artistic presentations.

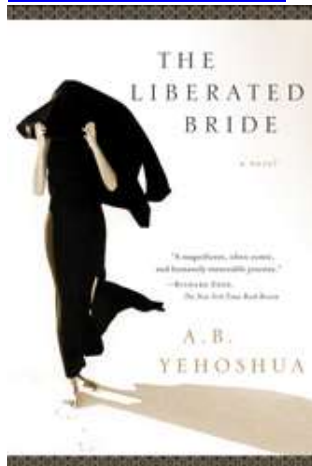
Readers who enjoy delving into the intersections of art and literature, or who are interested in the difficulties of controlling one's trajectory while simultaneously remaining responsive to friends and family, will

appreciate the ideas put forth in Yehoshua's latest piece. While some may be less gripped by the novel's loose structure and Noga's rather assuming conjectures about the motivations and natures of those around her, others may find insights about self-awareness and human relationships in Noga's experiences as a literal and figurative extra.

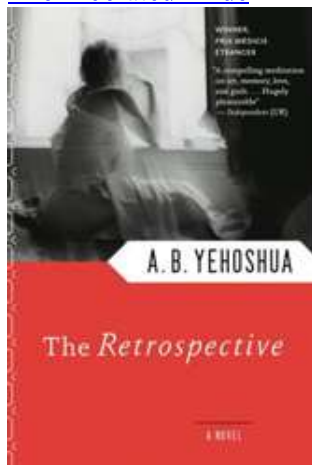
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