

July 2007 Article for Kol HaLev Happenings
Rabbi Steve Segar
Kol HaLev – Cleveland's Reconstructionist Community

As I did last summer, I have gathered together a list of recently published books on themes related to Jews and Judaism. All of the books below have received very positive reviews and most of them were either finalists or winners in this year's National Jewish Book Award competition across a range of categories. As many of us search for titles to put on our summer readings lists, I submit the following selections as options to which we might give serious consideration.

***Emma Lazarus* by Esther Schor**

Writing with great enthusiasm, Schor confirms that the author of "The New Colossus," the sonnet ensconced in the base of the Statue of Liberty, was no one-hit wonder. Until the 1930s, "The Banner of the Jew," a rallying song for establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine, was her best-known composition. Lazarus (1849-87) was also controversially famous for the prose "Epistle to the Hebrews," expounding her ideas about Jewish identity as well as Palestine. Spurred by the crisis of the pogroms following Czar Alexander II's 1881 assassination, Lazarus set aside the gentility of her wealthy upbringing to advocate for the thousands of Jews whose flight for life left them destitute in New York. Her encounters with shtetl refugees and her trust in American freedom confirmed her belief that Judaism should be secular and universal, committed to justice, freedom, and revolution. She anticipated Zionism and, as a radical who didn't embrace socialism, much of non-Marxist Jewish politics. Moreover, Schor argues with engrossing persuasiveness, she "invented the role of the American Jewish writer."

***The Fortune Teller's Kiss* by Brenda Serotte**

Serotte's memoir tells of her growing up in the Bronx in a Sephardic Jewish family among Ashkenazi neighbors. She writes of her Turkish-born relatives, their customs and rituals, and how she came down with polio shortly before her eighth birthday. "One day I was a wild child, running and free; the next, an invalid surrounded by weeping women." She tells of the High Holy Days in the Sephardic synagogue attended by the "marginally poor." There were candy-store owners, factory workers, shoe salesmen, and the occasional professional. Descriptions of her family members are what make this memoir a joy to read. All of Serotte's parents' differences were dissolved when they were dancing, and one of her grandmother's fortune-telling abilities enabled her to determine a person's future by reading grounds left in a cup of Turkish coffee. Much of *The Fortune Teller's Kiss* chronicles the author's recovery from polio. Serotte is a marvelous storyteller, and this book, one of the American Lives Series, is a profoundly moving memoir.

***The World to Come* by Dara Horn**

Dara Horn's second novel, *The World to Come*, is an intoxicating combination of mystery, spirituality, redemption, piety, and passion. At the center of the story is Benjamin Ziskind, a

former child prodigy who now spends his days writing questions for a television trivia show. After Ben's twin sister Sara forces him to attend a singles cocktail party at a Jewish museum, Ben spots *Over Vitebsk*, a Chagall sketch that once hung in the twins' childhood home. Convinced the painting was wrongfully taken from his family, Ben steals the work of art and enlists his twin to create a forgery to replace the stolen Chagall. What follows is a series of interwoven stories that trace the life and times of the famous painting, and the fate of those who come into contact with it. From a Jewish orphanage in 1920s Soviet Russia to a junior high school in Newark, New Jersey, with a stop in the jungles of Da Nang, Vietnam, Horn takes readers on an amazing journey through the sacred and the profane elements of the human condition. It is this expertly rendered juxtaposition of the spiritual with the secular that makes *The World to Come* so profound, and so compelling to readers.

***The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon**

Reading *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is like watching a gifted athlete invent a sport using elements of every other sport there is -- balls, bats, poles, wickets, javelins and saxophones. The book begins with the introduction of a hung-over detective to a gun-shot corpse in a fleabag hotel. Classic noir, except that the detective drinks slivovitz instead of bourbon: He's Jewish, a kind of Philip Marlovsky named Meyer Landsman, though Landsman is a cop -- a "noz" in the yiddisher slang of the book -- not a PI. The whole local police force is Jewish: The book is set in a present-day alternate reality in Sitka, Alaska, a safe haven set up for Jewish refugees after World War II and the collapse of Israel. Now, after nearly 60 years, the Federal District of Sitka is about to revert to American rule. There are elements of an international terrorist thriller, complicated by religious conspiracy and a band of end-of-the-world hopefuls, and yet the book has a dimly lit 1940s vibe. The book calls to mind another recent bad-for-the-Jews speculative novel by a major writer, *The Plot Against America*. But while Philip Roth's alternate history asks, "What if?" Chabon's is an explosion that simply says, "Look here!" He sets about imagining the whole strange world of Aleyska, American-flavored but not American. The pure reach and music and weight of Chabon's imagination are extraordinary, born of brilliant ambition you don't even notice because it is so deeply entertaining.

Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism by Menachem Kellner

Maimonides' vision of Judaism was deeply elitist, but at the same time profoundly universalistic. He was highly critical of the regnant Jewish culture of his day, which he perceived as so heavily influenced by ancient Jewish mysticism as to be debased. While focusing on that critique, Kellner skillfully and accessibly demonstrates how Maimonides used philosophy in order to purify a corrupted and paganized religion, and to present distinctions fundamental to Judaism as institutional, sociological, and historical, rather than ontological. In Maimonides' hands, metaphysical distinctions are translated into moral challenges.

Rabbi Steve