

and in the engrossing way the story is told.

The story, of course, is not a new one. Boys come of age everywhere. But in Grossman's *Jerusalem*, they do so with a reluctant carnality.

The book is beautifully translated by Betsy Rosenberg.

— Esther Cohen

**The Shoemaker's Tale.** By Mark Ari. Somerville, MA: The Zephyr Press, 245 pages, \$10 (paper).

Isaac Bashevis Singer has made it quite clear: "A fiction writer has the right to invent things which never happened..." he said. "If I wanted to be accurate, I would have become an historian, not a novelist. Actually, that is what fiction is — to get rid of responsibility."

Mark Ari, in his first novel *The Shoemaker's Tale*, has taken this advice to heart. And so should a reader of Ari's book. Better yet, the ideal reader should imagine that this story takes place in an alternate universe, one that is somewhat like ours, yet quite different. There are Jews in this universe, knocking around in 18th-century Poland, but they sound like denizens of an especially demented TV sitcom.

So, when Aunt Flanka tries to drag her husband Mottle into a tub of boiling water — in order to drive out the "filthy devils," which she believes inhabit him, and, of course, just about everything else in sight — you know this isn't really happening in Warsaw, but *somewhere else*. Flanka, incidentally, falls into the tub herself and boils to death, a fate husband Mottle narrowly escapes.

This Mottle has a nephew, Meir by name, whose parents have been killed in a pogrom, and it is Meir (who becomes a shoemaker) who is the hero of this tale. In no time Meir finds himself betrothed to the beautiful Rachel, but decides to seek out the Baal Shem Tov — the founder of Hasidism — before marrying and settling down.

On his journey he will find an unhappy clay giant created by a wicked rabbi. He will also encounter a psychic fishmonger who will answer any question when a customer buys a fish: "One fish, one question," and the pair of interpreters who, for a fee, explain what the answers mean. These latter

chaps, Shmecke and Pecke, sound like Heckle and Jeckle of cartoon fame: "'Magnificent! Inspiring!' cheered Pecke (about his colleague's interpretation), applauding wildly. 'I couldn't have said it better myself. Your finest hour!' 'I could never have done it without you,' returned Shmecke.'" And there is Sarah, the candlemaker's daughter, with whom our hero will have a steamy affair. (The shoes Meir made for her brought the reluctant naked Sarah to him.) And Israel, an old duffer, who believes he's invisible and becomes Meir's traveling companion.

It is this Israel who says to our hero, "'He'll [the Baal Shem Tov] be old, what else? If I were your age, I'd be dreaming of women. In fact, I have been anyway. Hundreds of them. Beautiful fat ones with tiny bird's feet like the goyim paint and put in their churches.'"

Now, in truth, an 18th-century Jew would know as much about churches as he would about space travel. (And dreaming about women, no less!) Alas, there is even a nice quote from the New Testament, which one of the Jewish characters offers up; I will let readers seek this one out for themselves. And the story Uncle Mottle used to tell Meir about the two rabbis who engaged in a six-day fist fight (a symbolic struggle between reason and sentiment?) Certainly, an unlikely Jewish folktale.

But, as noted, we are not really in 18th-century Poland. Actually, this alternate universe — its sensibilities and shtick — originates in today's New York. There are morals galore here, but they are all modern ones. What Mark Ari has served up is a kind of literary vaudeville: serious in purpose, often quite funny, and occasionally truly annoying. All this is what a first novel ought to do. And *The Shoemaker's Tale* does it splendidly.

— Isidore Haiblum

## NON-FICTION

**Roommates: My Grandfather's Story.** By Max Apple. New York: Warner Books, 211 pages, \$19.95.

When an established writer presents a member of his family for scrutiny in memoir form, there are risks taken. How will the reading audience who knows the author well (but not intimately) deal with all the skeletons

falling out of closets? Because the writer only has words and a vivid memory to shape the character, will the resultant figure be larger than life and become a fictional or ideal version of the individual to be memorialized?

Two writers who avoid the pitfalls are Phillip Roth, whose *Patrimony* is a beautiful *kaddish* to his then ailing father, and Max Apple, who in *Roommates: My Grandfather's Story* tells an amazing and heartwarming story of his grandfather, Herman (Rocky) Goodstein.

Rocky came from Lithuania and settled in Grand Rapids, Michigan where he worked as a baker and raised a multigenerational family filled with political, cultural and religious diversity. Rocky can be loveable, caring and strong; at other times he behaves like an exasperating curmudgeon. Apple's story, a tragicomedy, is the stuff of the Yiddish stage where the audience laughs and cries during every scene, or in this case, over every page.

As a small child, Max shared his grandfather's room, and then later as a college student he shared his college apartment with his then nonagenarian grandfather. (Max's parents and sisters were part of this family scene as well.) A strange arrangement? Not really, once you get to know the ins and outs of the Apple family. The book opens with a great scene that takes place in the late '60s in the midst of various peace protests on the University of Michigan campus where Max is a student and Rocky is a "house-grandfather." Max has brought Debbie, who he just met, to his apartment with all her belongings. She was being thrown out of her "pad" and had nowhere to go. The resultant noise wakes up Rocky the "roommate" who proceeds to throw all the clothes out on the landing as he exclaims, "Get out from here." As Debbie loads her stuff into her car, listening to Max's protestations about his grandfather ("He's not always like this"), she responds with, "Even if he's paying more than half the rent...you're getting a bad deal." Any more description would spoil the scene — a hilarious juxtaposing of time, place and circumstance.

Much later, when the rebellious Debbie becomes Max's wife, Rocky refuses to attend the wedding. The flip side has Rocky, as stalwart as his name implies, ensconced with the young

## FICTION

**The Book of Intimate Grammar.** By David Grossman. Translated from the Hebrew by Betsy Rosenberg. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 343 pages, \$22.

This rich male portrait of Israeli life right before the '67 war, written by a writer considered one of the country's best (Grossman's work is now translated into ten languages), describes the reluctant passage, from childhood to something more, in the life of Aron Kleinfeld. Aron lives in Bet HaKerem, a small, middle-class neighborhood in Jerusalem, a neighborhood filled with pettiness and small ways, of gossip and jealousy, of the endless tasks of dailiness. It is a Mama and Papa novel, told from the perspective of their son.

The book begins with Aron and his friends spying on neighbors, as their way of living their own life. What interests them most is the sexuality they see, and imagine. Aron's own family, except for his older sister Yochi, a wise, all-knowing exception, is less than undistinguished.

His family is largely led by the strong and uninformed will of his dominant, close-minded mother Hinda, a woman whose life is measured by the meals she makes, and by the meals of others. Hinda was an orphan, the oldest, who raised her five brothers and sisters herself. Her husband, Moshe, too, she raised, in a way. He came to her thin and pale, and she fattened him with chickens and dumplings, with soups and slices of veal. Himself a Polish survivor, Moshe was a simple man who seemed to do Hinda's bidding. His own mother, a more complex woman named Lilly, had a life centered around her own pleasures. Unlike Hinda, she lived to laugh, to enjoy herself with her admirers, to cavort and to dance. In one of the book's most memorable scenes, Lilly, who has become senile in her 60s, is put into the hospital by her son. Lilly leaves the novel after the first third of the book. It is because of Grossman's strength as a writer that Lilly's liveliness, and her will, and her dislike of Hinda, all made so clear, persist in a way in the mind of

the reader throughout this novel. She is a character who doesn't disappear.

The plot evolves around Moshe's emerging maleness, his rough-hewn physical competence, and his sexuality, and the power this physicality holds for all the family, particularly for Aron, the novel's center. What causes this maleness to emerge is Edna Bloom, a single 40-year-old neighbor, who hired Moshe to break a wall in her apartment. Hinda does not allow Moshe and Edna to be alone, and this dictum gives their relationship a kind of charge.

"Three sounds reverberated through the air: hammer blows as the wall gave way, the rumbling of thunder after weeks of drought, and Edna's piercing shrieks.

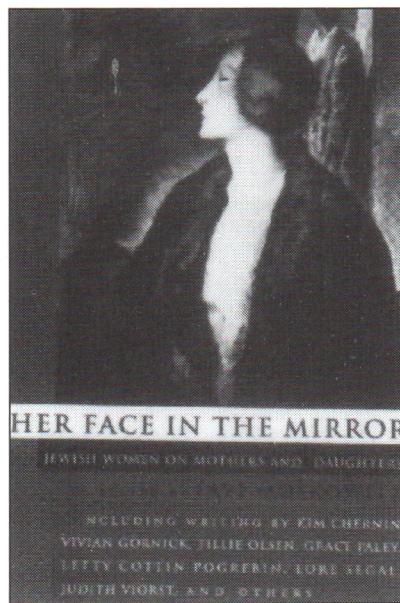
"At the age of forty, after a red-eyed birthday, she had made the rash decision to give herself this frightening gift. Again Papa struck the wall and again Edna shrieked. It meant she wouldn't have enough money for a trip abroad this year; it also meant perhaps that for the very reason she had dared to destroy something, she would have to stay in

this apartment forever; and in such an apartment, with a big salon and a single bedroom, there would be no child.

"Again and again he stormed the wall, and Edna screamed instinctively, her hands fluttering at her sides; she wanted him to stop, she tried to stall, to breathe, but there was no going back, Papa pounded mercilessly, and the three of them sat watching her with startled eyes. Mama waved to Papa, signaling him to let up, but he was hard at work now, or at least pretending to be, deaf to her wild-goose cries, and not until the wall was properly smashed did he slowly turn to Aron and the women. With the back of his hand he wiped the sweat off his brow. How agile he was: the moment he picked up the hammer he seemed to plug into a source of power and grace; he smiled at her and said, Well, that's that. And Edna bowed her head."

The novel has a kind of compelling intensity; and for so many reasons, of sensibility, of understanding, even of articulation, it seems particularly Israeli in the nature of the story it tells,

## HER FACE IN THE MIRROR



### Jewish Women on Mothers and Daughters

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—Susan Stamberg, National Public Radio

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