

matchmaker, may a plague take him..."

It is hard to uproot, even when it is the logical, desirable, or even the safe option. Yet we have also resisted Aliyah for reasons other than apathy or fear of change. One defensive argument posed by Hillel Halkin's American correspondent is that a diaspora Jew's life can be more creative and fulfilling outside Israel. Halkin dismisses that, insisting we will all eventually make Aliyah because the diaspora is doomed to disappear. It is just a question of when.

But one of the most striking threads

running through our armchair Zionism is Zangwill's voice, echoing down the generations saying that we don't want to belong, we don't know how to belong. We cannot imagine belonging.

British-born Jonathan Wilson tells his affectionate and turbulent tale of attempting to find his niche in Israeli society in *Kibbutz Love* (Toby Press, 2005). Learning how to live there seems to take forever. But eventually he learns to buy his challah from Menachem's, vegetables from Mahane Yehuda:

"My Jerusalem shopping and walking credentials were in order. Everything was

perfect. I was intoxicated by the lilac heart of the city even when it was rocked by explosions. All the anxieties of the self-hating Jew had fallen away from me, that knife-flash from the past no more than a raindrop on Freud's windshield. Aside from my Hebrew language problem, I felt completely at home. So, naturally, I left".

Marrano syndrome, in all its illogicality, it seems, runs very deep.

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## PROMISING DEBUTS

### THE CREDIT DRAPER

J. DAVID SIMONS

Two Ravens Press, 2008, pb, 309pp, £9.99

Two Ravens Press is a new publishing house set up in the Scottish highlands in 2006 to bring out the kind of books that its founders couldn't find anywhere else. It has specialised in literature, poetry and local subjects and this promising first novel is firmly in the Scottish category.

It tells the story of a young Russian, Avram Escovitz, who disembarks on the Clyde in 1911 in the care of a seaman. In a grim precursor of the Kindertransport, his mother has sent him on alone at the age of 11 to avoid conscription into the Tsar's army. He walks from the dock to the Gorbals, then the centre of the Glasgow Jewish community. He carries his mother's letter to Herschel Kahn, a former friend.

How Avram adapts to a new life with the Kahns, a new language and a new country forms the core of this novel. Glasgow was in the grip of sectarian Catholic/Protestant conflict, as typified by the rivalry between Celtic and Rangers football clubs. Unlike most of his Jewish friends, Avram turns out to have a natural gift for footie, but the prohibition against playing on the Sabbath nips his football ambitions in the bud.

On the whole the Jews have an easy time in Glasgow. As one big macher puts it, "There is so much hatred between the Protestants and the Catholics, and when they are not hating each other they combine to hate the English. What a wonderful city

Glasgow is. No-one has any hatred left over for us Jews."

When Papa Kahn falls ill, there is no more money for school, and Avram becomes the credit draper of the title, travelling the Highlands selling clothes and textiles. He is under the tutelage of Uncle Mendel who lives in a remote croft but still keeps all the Jewish customs, managing to stay kosher on his travels by storing crockery and cutlery at every house where he stays over. Avram however takes to bacon for breakfast and gets very close to a blonde lassie.

In one of several poetic sequences in the book, uncle and apprentice go outside on Friday night to look for the first star to appear so that they know that the Sabbath has started. In another, Avram reaches a transcendental moment during his Barmitzvah, imagining his voice reaching out to his lost mother. J. David Simons remains rooted, however, in the ordinary lives of his characters, bringing in the suffragettes, the loss of the Titanic and the Trades Union movement, and of course the effects of the World War.

What makes his book so attractive is that it is not the usual thinly disguised recreation of the writer's Jewish childhood amongst domineering relations, but a genuinely imagined construction of what life was like for Scottish Jews nearly a century ago. And it closes with an unexpected theatrical coup that shows this former journalist has transformed himself into a real novelist.

JUDITH MIRZOEFF

### DANCE TO YOUR DADDY

GAIL LEVY

Elliot and Thompson, 2008, 286pp, £9.99

This debut novel uses a bold mix of styles, including grisly descriptions. The plot has very strong echoes of Hamlet – in this case North London Susan as the troubled protagonist – with her murdered father's ghost demanding that she seek vengeance. An extra twist is that this must be done before his stone-setting, otherwise he will be condemned to be a *ruach*, a wandering spirit, forever doomed to Limbo. Susan's doubts, fears and agonised introspections are interlarded with conversations with a variety of unpleasant friends, boy-friends and relatives, which tend to hold up the thriller side of the action. Her uncle, who is her father's younger brother (remember Claudius?), is particularly odious.

The plot takes some ingenious turns, interrupted by appropriate quotes, including extracts from Brenner Smith's *Jewish Traditions* and from the works of Sigmund Freud and Theodore Reik. The author fully understands the difficulties of 'suspending disbelief' in ghosts – and ends the book with a philosophical postscript on *The Dispositional Theory of Ghosts*. This turns out to have been 'penned' by the dead father, now in a better place presumably (which he names as 'Nothing'), since he was fully reprieved in the nick of time by his daughter's dramatic act of vengeance, supported by a Horatio-like male friend. This being closer to Elstree than Elsinore, Susan does not die, nor is she found out.

Gail Levy shows her lively gift for detailed observation and clever suspense. It is no surprise that she has taught philosophy for many years.

MARGE CLOUTS