

Pride and prejudice

Sep. 10, 2009

GLENN C. ALTSCHULER, THE JERUSALEM POST

You Or Someone Like You

By Chandler Burr

Ecco Books

336 pp., \$24.95

Anne Hammersmith Rosenbaum, the heroine of *You or Someone Like You*, seems to have everything. The daughter of a British diplomat, she has a PhD in literature, a loving husband, who is a powerful Hollywood executive, and a bright and beautiful son. The book club she leads - a must-attend for everyone who's anyone in the entertainment industry - has made her a celebrity.

But it all comes crashing down. During a two-week trip to Israel (to honor his recently deceased grandmother), 17-year-old Sam is thrown out of a yeshiva because he's not a Jew. Anguished and ashamed, Howard Rosenbaum becomes a "*ba'al teshuva*," a Jew returned to the Orthodoxy of his parents, and decides that he must get a divorce.

The debut novel of Chandler Burr, the scent critic for *The New York Times*, *You or Someone Like You* is at once a satire of Hollywood, with its name-dropping, vanity, "wanton waste and vast and utterly boring emptiness," a learned survey of Western literature and a ferocious assault, in the name of universalism, on any and all forms of ethnic, religious or racial identity.

Burr luxuriates in word play. Why is there no egg in eggplant and no ham in hamburger, Howard asks Sam. Why does an alarm clock go off by going on? Why do fat chance and slim chance mean the same thing?

And *You or Someone Like You* is loaded with smart and sassy insights about writers and writing. In a few sentences, for example, Anne says everything worth saying about the American playwright David Mamet. The "most interesting elite democratizer around," she tells the book club, Mamet has created a "devastating, often hilarious, often vicious new idiom," with an "exhilarating helix of language that ascends, I admit, to nowhere in particular."

When Anne addresses Jewish identity, however, she's solemn and self-righteous. And the novel turns into a polemic. The issue, Anne insists, is "a simple matter." The "problem with nations" is that they "demand that identity be taken seriously." Citing W.H. Auden, who declared that his identity was "namelessness," Anne rejects all classifications of country, race and religion that are based on birth.

"What is called 'Judaism'" in religion and culture, she announces, is based on a division of human beings into two groups. The disgust for *treif*" of course is not a disgust for shrimp but a disgust for non-Jews." And in producing "the gruesome muse of separatism," anti-Semitism is the "unique genius that has through millennia kept the Jews alive as a distinct tribe."

The dream of a Jewish state, she maintains, "is poison." American Jews don't seem to realize that it's antithetical to the antiracist principles of the civil rights movement they so strongly supported. Or to acknowledge that Israeli law, with its "particularist exclusivist system of apartheid that distinguishes Jews from non-Jews in everything from immigration to public services," is "morally identical to the Nuremberg Laws of the Third Reich." Anne clears her throat: "If the Nazis were wrong about the Jews, the Jews are wrong about the rest of us."

Burr stacks the deck for his Hammersmith. Howard spends the last third of the novel avoiding eye contact, shrugging, sobbing. His decision to return to his faith "isn't very rational," he tells Anne. When she questions whether he could have longed for something "without realizing it," Howard, who isn't making much use of his PhD in literature, responds by "digging in his heels, putting his head down like a bull, his voice rising by several decibels as if sheer willpower could win the argument."

You or Someone Like You discredits Howard's ideas by discrediting him. We learn that he hates homosexuals. His prejudice, Anne concludes, is a "sincere result of his religious beliefs" and a fear "at finding it all out of his control." Even his brother believes that he's become a "nutcase." Howard was due for a midlife crisis, Stuart Rosenbaum explains. Their mother, he tells Anne, was "completely programmed" with "absurd ideas" like "God hates bacon," and planted them inside Howard. The beliefs took hold "in places he didn't know about," and a couple of decades later, when she died and Sam was asked to leave Israel, "it blew up."

In the best works of fiction, Friedrich Hebbel, the German poet and dramatist, once wrote, "everyone is right." When writers make the strongest possible cases for ideas, including those with which they disagree, through articulate, fully realized characters, allowing them to serve and volley against one another, they make good art - and help establish their point of view as more authoritative. When they don't, their novels, in all likelihood, will please and persuade only themselves - or someone like them. n

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