



The Lawgiver

Herman Wouk

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For more than fifty years, legendary author Herman Wouk has dreamed of writing a novel about the life of Moses. Finally, at age ninety-seven, he has found an ingeniously witty way to tell the tale in *The Lawgiver*, a romantic and suspenseful epistolary novel about a group of people trying to make a movie about Moses in the present day. The story emerges from letters, memos, e-mails, journals, news articles, recorded talk, Skype transcripts, and text messages.

At the center of *The Lawgiver* is Margo Solovei, a brilliant young writer-director who has rejected her rabbinical father's strict Jewish upbringing to pursue a career in the arts. When an Australian multibillionaire promises to finance a movie about Moses if the script meets certain standards, Margo does everything she can to land the job, including a reunion with her estranged first love, an influential lawyer with whom she still has unfinished business.

Two other key characters in the novel are Herman Wouk himself and his wife of more than sixty years, Betty Sarah, who, almost against their will, find themselves entangled in the Moses movie when the Australian billionaire insists on Wouk's stamp of approval.

As Wouk and his characters contend with Moses and marriage, and the force of tradition, rebellion, and reunion, *The Lawgiver* reflects the wisdom of a lifetime. Inspired by the great nineteenth-century novelists, one of America's most beloved twentieth-century authors has now written a remarkable twenty-first-century work of fiction.

The Lawgiver Details

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From Reader Review The Lawgiver for online ebook

Skylar Burris says

I didn't realize Herman Wouk was still alive: not only still alive, but still writing, producing *The Lawgiver* at the age of ninety-seven. I devoured many of his books when I was in high school, so when I saw this one on the bargain rack, I had to snatch it up. The format was a little difficult for me to get used to; I've never been a fan of the epistolary novel, and this combined letters, e-mails, texts, memos, faxes, and transcripts of Skype and in-person conferences. I suspended my disbelief with regard to format, as I believe virtually no one texts in paragraph upon paragraph, sends letters by fax, or writes e-mails with such flair. There is something a little self-indulgent about the book; it seemed Wouk was using it and the characters as a vehicle for communicating his own opinions about various things and perhaps even subtly praising himself from time to time. I had trouble keeping some of the secondary characters straight. Despite these flaws, I was able to immerse myself in the tale, which is, at its heart, a romance. I found the book to be a surprisingly quick read, and one that made me smile from time to time. I think it would be hard to appreciate this book without some basic familiarity with Wouk's other works and with Jewish culture. I was especially touched by his note in the epilogue regarding his late wife.

MJ Nicholls says

This 98-year-old man is the Future of Fiction: "It is an epistolary novel, composed of traditional communications such as letters, memos, and articles, as well as utilizing more contemporary means like e-mails, text messages, and Skype transcripts."

Rick F. says

Magnificent and highly originally written book by the 97..yes 97 year old icon!!!

Nancy McKibben says

The Lawgiver by Herman Wouk

I read and loved *Majorie Morningstar* years ago - so many years ago that I was startled to hear its author, Herman Wouk, recently interviewed on NPR, as I had assumed that he must have long since died. He is indeed 97, but as evidenced in the interview about his most recent novel, he is still very much on top of his game.

That novel is *The Lawgiver*, which proceeds from the abiding enigma of Wouk's life - the desire and the inability to write a novel about the life of Moses. To wit, the author becomes a character in his own novel, playing himself - a noted author working with limited success on a book about Moses. The fictional Wouk is being hounded by an engaging array of producers, directors, financiers, and the odd Australian billionaire Leo Gluck, who will has said that he will finance a film about Moses provided that Wouk, whose work he

admires, acts as a consultant. Wouk resists, then capitulates on his own terms, while the other characters gossip, scheme, reconcile and fall in love around him.

Wouk is no slouch. *The Lawgiver* is an epistolary novel that includes, as the flyleaf notes, “letters, memos, e-mails, journals, news articles, recorded talk, Skype transcripts, and text messages.” He treats heavy themes - tradition, religion, love, rebellion, greed - with the lightest of touches. Indeed, the most melancholy note of the novel is the death of Wouk’s wife Betty Sarah, also his wife and lifelong muse in the novel, who passed away suddenly from a stroke during the writing. Wouk salutes her tenderly in the epilogue.

But despite his age and recent bereavement, Wouk appears from the sprightly author’s photo that graces the novel to have had a wonderful time imagining his characters, concocting his plot, and writing his book. I certainly had a wonderful time reading it.

Marjorie Morningstar

Leah says

The problem with epistolary novels is that they are generally more fun to write than to read – which is why, as a writer, I’ve given up on them. Thanks to Mr. Wouk, the world may be subjected to my efforts again – but first I’m going to study this book to figure out how he did it. Somehow, despite the format, all the characters come through as real 3-dimensional people you care about: from Mr. Wouk himself, who is trying to write a book about Moses and is not too happy to be told that “People don’t read books anymore, they watch movies”; to the ex-Hasidic screenwriter tapped to write the screenplay; to the bit-player actor she wants to play Moses just as he’s decided to give up on Hollywood and go home to raise sheep in Australia. I admit I couldn’t keep most of the Hollywood people straight, but that didn’t stop their antics from being amusing. There are a few comments about Moses and the Bible sprinkled through the book, some of them remarkably astute, but mostly it’s a light-hearted, humorous novel with just enough of a plot to make you care what happens. It reminded me of John Scalzi’s *Redshirts* (and yes, I know that’s an out-there comparison, but I’m going with it).

Velma says

It makes me sad giving an elderly (97!) and venerable author such a poor rating, but there you have it. **This book did not work for me at all.**

I expected to enjoy this **tale of the process by which a re-telling of the story of Moses (yes, *that* Moses) was made into a movie**; I *did* enjoy the bits that are a critique of DeMille's *Ten Commandments*, but **overall Wouk's attempt at what I assume was supposed to be a witty, light read was a flop**. Maybe if I wasn't an agnostic gentile I would have found it funny, but most of the characters seemed to me like Jewish stereotypes. And the female characters, OY!, don't get me started. No grown woman that *I* know talks like that; **these women come off like overgrown teenagers exchanging notes about boys in class, or hyperbolic besotted soap opera caricatures**.

And by "talk", in this instance I mean "correspond". *The Lawgiver* is structured as an epistolary novel, with all the "conversations" recorded in various media: letters, email, text messages, notes, faxes, transcripts of phone and Skype conversations, etc. **Kudos to Wouk for including modern modes of communication, but**

the fact that a substantial amount (maybe a third or more?) of the exposition takes place via good, old-fashioned snail mail felt very anachronistic. I love sending and receiving letters myself, but found it hard to believe in even fictional attorneys, film executives, and billionaires that send time-sensitive documents through the postal system.

Oh, and I *hated* the Epilogue.*

I only lost one day to this stinker, as it was a very fast read, and I won't let it sour me on Herman Wouk, and **I suppose I should cut the guy a little slack seeing as how it's astonishing that he can even hold a pen at at his age** (or type, or dictate, or whatever). But I'm not holding out much hope for any (unlikely?) future offerings. **I fear his best days as an author are behind him.**

*Except for the bit about Mrs. Wouk. I might have teared up a bit while reading about her.

Simon & Schuster sent me a gratis copy through the GR First Reads program, & no money or other venal remunerations were given in exchange for a favorable review, so you can just eff off, FCC.

Ashley says

"No one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel." —Deuteronomy

A while back, I happened across this verse and it sparked in me an urge to revisit the life of Moses. After all, "No one has ever ..." is a pretty strong phrase, particularly in the Bible. And given some of the people he was up against, it says a lot that Moses came out on top of the heap. So off I went through Exodus and Leviticus, searching for insight on what made this man worthy of such praise. (Somewhere in Numbers with all of those tribes being listed and counted, my enthusiasm waned and my reading petered off, but I felt I'd covered good ground by then anyway.)

So when Pulitzer Prize-winner Herman Wouk, at age 97, finally writes his long-dreamt-of book on Moses, I'm all ears. Wouk, the son of Jewish immigrants from Russia, lived a fairly secular lifestyle as a young man, but in his mid-20s he decided to return to a more traditional Jewish way of life, like the one his grandfather had. He's begun each day with a reading of Scripture in Hebrew ever since. This sounds like a good man to teach me a thing or two about Moses.

Rather than tackle the Lawgiver's life head-on, Wouk has written a story of a group of people attempting to make an epic film about it. And what a fun way he's chosen to deliver this story—entirely through letters, emails, text messages, memos, and transcripts, plus a page or two of the proposed screen treatment. It gives you the effect of standing in a file room, in your hands a thick manila folder of correspondence that you've stumbled upon. You sift through the pages, piecing together a story with a bit of everything—tumultuous business plans, transcontinental travel, unfolding romance, family rifts and reconciliations, and a budding pen-pal friendship, all set against the backdrop of the multibillion-dollar film-making industry.

Just what does Wouk tell us about Moses that he's yearned for so long to say? Well, chiefly, that no one can do his story justice, because nobody really understands him. Perhaps this is why I found myself thinking that Moses—the supposed subject of the novel—wasn't actually *in* this book so much as hovering around its edges. Only every now and then does he dart fleetingly into center stage, and by the time the camera lens

sharpens its focus on him, he's off once again to the sidelines. In the end, this is not so much a novel about Moses himself as it is one about the impossibility of writing a novel about Moses.

But we do glean a few things about him here and there. According to the character Herman Wouk (for yes, the author has written himself into the story, with a sly wink at the reader), Moses is "Atlas—Western world resting on his shoulders, Christianity and Islam meaningless without him."

According to the screenwriter, Margo, "He's at once holy and pathetically human and yet formidable as Caesar." And though Margo has forsaken her strict Jewish upbringing, her supposedly unorthodox take on that famous burning bush scenario is one of my favorite passages:

"'Here I am,' he says to thin air, and the epic begins. How? With his pleading unfitness for the task God wants him to do. ... Five times he tries to beg off, hardly a hero in the ancient mold of Homer or Plutarch. In a later scene the Torah will say of him, 'The man Moses was humbler than all men on earth.' Moses the self-doubting Deliverer, believing in God but never in himself, from this first moment to the climax ... that's the face of the Lawgiver I see and was never taught."

I'd say she saw him quite clearly.

On a side note, it was charming to see Wouk's late wife, Betty Sarah, drift in and out of the story. I love the way he wrote her—not sentimentally, but with the unblinking accuracy of the man who was her husband for 60-some years and who loved her wholly, quirks and all. So I'll let her have the last line.

HW: "What attempt at Moses wouldn't be shallow?"

BSW: "Yours, if you'd ever write it."

Received through a GoodReads First Reads giveaway

Susan Tunis says

Hollywood, Jews, & Hollywood Jews

Ninety-seven-year-old Herman Wouk (or a fictionalized version of him) is minding his own business. And his business, as you know, is writing novels. He's finally tackling the ambitious project he's wanted to write for decades, the story of Moses. It is a huge coincidence, therefore, when a hot Hollywood producer finagles a meeting insisting that he's the only man for the job of writing a Moses screenplay.

Well, Mr. Wouk wants nothing to do with this. Meetings are refused until a rabbi intervenes. Ultimately, it is revealed that the epic film's funding—through unconventional sources—rests upon Wouk's participation. Under duress, he agrees to act as a consultant to the film, with final script approval. A screenwriter for this all-but-unwritable film must be found. Enter Margo Solovei, a young, independent film auteur who has eschewed her orthodox Jewish upbringing. And it is actually Margo who is at the novel's heart, as she pursues this project while dealing with producers, directors, actors, Herman Wouk, and any number of people tying her to her roots.

I doubt I can express how much I loved this novel! Oh, how I laughed! It's true that I am Jewish, and that I have worked in the film industry, so it's possible that the tale "spoke" to me more than it might to some, but Wouk's satire is dead on. Not just of an industry, but of human nature. I guess nearly a century of life gives a man some perspective. Also, as the Booklist reviewer astutely pointed out, there are subtle reflections of Wouk's classic 1955 coming of age novel, *Marjorie Morningstar*, adding an additional layer of pleasure for fans such as myself. It's really quite amazing the various themes and commentaries that Mr. Wouk manages to work into this slender novel. It's playful as hell, but still whip smart.

Oh, yeah, I should mention that this is an epistolary novel, always a fun and inventive way to tell a tale. It's comprised of letters, emails, faxes, IMs, Skypes, transcripts, voicemails, and so forth. Through the correspondence of the characters' personal and professional lives, a web of connections is formed. And in the end, *The Lawgiver* is a romantic comedy. I rooted for lovers to find their way. I rooted for unsavory characters to get their comeuppance. And I rooted for Mr. Wouk, who has proved that at 97 he is as sharp as he ever was. I was moved by the novel's epilogue, and I shall be waiting with anticipation for his next two novels.

K says

I love Herman Wouk and love the fact that he's still publishing books at 98. This book was surprisingly modern, too, with e-mails and facebook references and whatnot. Maybe a little too modern for me. I find the new trend of epistolary novels written in sound bytes (see *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* for another example) a bit too gimmicky and ADD-inducing. I guess I'm old-fashioned in that way; the novels that made me fall in love with Herman Wouk read more like long, sprawling sagas with characters I felt I knew inside and out. Here it felt more like superficial glimpses.

At the same time, some of the old charm was still there. In spite of myself the central love story grew on me gradually, and I loved the meta aspect of Herman Wouk's including himself as a character. I liked the way Herman wrote this as someone who'd always had a dream of writing a novel about Moses but couldn't realize that dream, and instead, wrote a novel about the making of a Moses screenplay which also needed to be written by someone other than him. It was clever, it had shades of the old Wouk charm, and let's give it to the guy -- he's 98, for heaven's sake. A role model for all of us, I say. It also read fast, so I can't complain about having wasted lots of reading time on it.

So, three stars. If you're a die-hard fan of Herman Wouk's like I am, you probably won't regret spending an afternoon or two with this book.

Marcie Lovett says

Mr. Wouk allegedly set out to write a book about Moses. This is not a book about Moses, but a book about a book about Moses. My criteria for a good read are that it keep me up long past my bedtime and that I engage with the characters. This book met both.

This book probably is not for those looking for another "Winds of War." The style is light, presented in a series of emails, letters, notes, FAXes and recorded phone calls. Although it is a pretty quick read, it does take some concentration. You have to fill in the blanks between the communications and keep track of all the

characters, including minor and ancillary players.

Having some knowledge of the Bible is helpful, but not necessary, to enjoy this book. Reading during Passover only added to my enjoyment of the story.

Don't skip the Epilogue. I wasn't satisfied with the way the story ended and the Epilogue wraps everything up. Sort of. I thought the book was great fun and I recommend it, whether you're a reader of Wouk's or not.

Philip says

Gotta hand it to Herman Wouk for moving along with the times - this epistolary novel is made up of emails, Skype transcripts, memos, notes, and even just plain old letters, all about bringing to the screen a life of Moses, something Wouk has been wanting to write about for decades but couldn't find a way to do it that satisfied him. The result is an entertaining read that mixes contemporary show business with biblical history. Wouk also includes himself and his late wife (who was also his agent) as characters in the novel, and the book's last page is a touching tribute to their more than sixty years together. Along the way Wouk even manages to reference two of his own classic novels, *THE CAINE MUTINY* and *MARJORIE MORNINGSTAR*.

Bettie? says

[BLURB:*At the center of The Lawgiver is Margo Solovei, a brilliant young writer-director who has rejected her rabbinical father's strict Jewish upbringing to pursue a career in the arts. When an Australian multibillionaire promises to finance a movie about Moses if the script meets certain standards, Margo does everything she can to land the job, including a reunion with her estranged first love, an influential lawyer with whom she still has unfinished business.*

Carolyn says

Wouk is now 97 and still has two books planned! For fifty years he has wanted to write a book about Moses but hasn't been able to get it going. Here it is, finally: a lighthearted story about the making of a movie about Moses, composed of diary notes, letters, emails, faxes, phone call transcripts, memos, etc. between the primary people involved in producing and financing the movie, especially the screenwriter, a Jewish woman who abandoned Judaism and her rabbi father, but still retains a deep knowledge of the Bible and the traditions. Wouk and his wife are also characters in the novel. It's a short book with a lot of white space because each note, email, etc. starts on a new page, and thus a very quick read. It's very entertaining and a lot of fun.

Olga says

I am a long-term fan of Wouk, have read or seen or listened to tons of his historic novels. So when I saw this new book, I did not do my usual "due diligence" (read reviews etc.). All I saw "Herman Wouk" and "Moses".

I immediately downloaded it on my brand new Samsung Galaxy, and went to it. To my surprise, this was not at all what I expected. No deep religious/historic analysis, re-imagining of the iconic figure of 3 world religions. Instead, this is a very entertaining, light, almost chick-lit very contemporary (Wouk is 97 years old!) epistolary novel about ... Hollywood shenanigans while attempting to make a movie about Moses! The form is tech-y: e-mails, Skype call transcripts, business memos etc. Throw in a couple of romances involving frum Hassid or ex-hasid women, business moguls in the US and Israel, Aussie sheep farmers, geneticists at the edge of high tech discoveries, lawyers who enjoy trekking through the exotic locales (Australian outback) etc etc, all this in a very short novel (I was a bit miffed that on B&N it cost more than \$12). It is fast paced, fun, easy reading. Of course, some familiarity with the movie business and/or orthodox Judaism may be helpful, but everything is explained in a very easily digested form. In addition, this book is a sort of a love poem/memorial to Wouk's recently deceased wife of 66 years, who was his collaborator, throughout their lives.

All in all, it was an unexpected small gem, not at all what I had bargained for, but well worth it.

Quinby6696 Frank says

Growing up I always loved Herman Wouk novels - The Winds of War and War and Remembrance being special favorites. Wouk is now 97 and I was excited to hear him on NPR talking about his latest book, The Lawgiver. Apparently he'd always wanted to write a book about Moses and at 97 "always" is a long time. The Lawgiver is a clever end run around a huge subject. Young, brilliant Margo Solovei, an untried screenwriter is tasked with writing a script for a new Moses movie to be financed by an eccentric Australian billionaire. Wouk is in the background struggling to write his Moses novel and the billionaire wants him to approve Margo's script before he'll pay up. Margo has rejected her rabbinic upbringing and is estranged from her rabbi father so she has her own struggles with the subject matter, but her deep knowledge of the religion she has rejected carries the day with her script. Poor old Charlton Heston and Cecile B. DeMille are given short shrift. Well, The Caine Mutiny this ain't, but it's clever and the romance between Margo and her erstwhile handsome, brilliant young Jewish lawyer ex beau gives it some life. I guess I'm just not all that interested in the machinations of Hollywood and film making in general and all those emails and skypes gave me a bit of a headache.
