



Among the Living

Jonathan Rabb

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A moving novel about a Holocaust survivor's unconventional journey back to a new normal in 1940s Savannah, Georgia.

In late summer 1947, thirty-one-year-old Yitzhak Goldah, a camp survivor, arrives in Savannah to live with his only remaining relatives. They are Abe and Pearl Jesler, older, childless, and an integral part of the thriving Jewish community that has been in Georgia since the founding of the colony. There, Yitzhak discovers a fractured world, where Reform and Conservative Jews live separate lives--distinctions, to him, that are meaningless given what he has been through. He further complicates things when, much to the Jeslers' dismay, he falls in love with Eva, a young widow within the Reform community. When a woman from Yitzhak's past suddenly appears--one who is even more shattered than he is--Yitzhak must choose between a dark and tortured familiarity and the promise of a bright new life.

Set amid the backdrop of America's postwar south, *Among the Living* grapples with questions of identity and belonging, and steps beyond the Jewish experience as it situates Yitzhak's story during the last gasp of the Jim Crow era. Yitzhak begins to find echoes of his own experience in the lives of the black family who work for the Jeslers--an affinity he does not share with the Jeslers themselves. This realization both surprises and convinces Yitzhak that his choices are not as clear-cut as he might have thought.

Among the Living Details

Date : Published October 4th 2016 by Other Press

ISBN :

Author : Jonathan Rabb

Format : Kindle Edition 321 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, World War II, Holocaust, Literature, Jewish, Adult Fiction

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From Reader Review Among the Living for online ebook

Aimee (Book It Forward) says

In exchange for an honest review, I was given a copy of this book by NetGalley and the Publisher. Thank You.

A fresh, new, and unique addition to the WWII fiction genre! On the outside, this book is a heartbreaking tale of a concentration camp survivor's journey returning to the world after the horrors he faced at the hands of the Nazis. But this story has so much more to it! Not only does the book follow Mr. Goldah along the way, it also dives into America's problems with racism against African Americans during this time period as well as issues with American Jews working with the Unions. Mr.. Goldah, renamed Ike Goldah by his American family (in order to fit in better they say), is trying to adjust to the normal world which he has not been a part of in many years. He has survivor's guilt that he is trying to rise above all the while he is being presented to his family's friends like a pet or trained performer. Ike meets and falls in love with a beautiful widow named Eva which of course causes a stir among the community. He and Eva are two outcasts and while both are Jewish, Eva's "Jews" are of a different sort according the Ike's cousin Pearl. While this is all taking place, Pearl's husband Abe Jesler is facing financial and business difficulties because of crooked union workers at the loading docks where he receives imported women's shoes for his store. The stories of the African American store clerks Calvin and Raymond plus Pearl's live in housekeeper Mary Royal mirror what Ike has seen and been through in his home country. These people have faced hardships that are different, but one in the same and the level of respect they have for each is much higher than the respect others have for them. They have a bond that remains unsaid in so many words, but is a silent understanding. I don't want to add any spoilers here, but a complication occurs with Ike and Eva that is quite challenging. It is a battle of good conscious versus the will to find their own happiness and move forward. This is a fantastic book! Please go out and read it. You will really enjoy it. The writing here is so beautiful and if you check out my blog page, you can read all of the quotes I highlighted.

See this review and others at:
www.BookItForward.WordPress.com

Sharyn says

I rarely give 5 stars, but this is an excellent, well written, involving story. Although it is only Jan. 21st, this may be my favorite 2018 book. Yitzhak Goldah, a holocaust survivor is on his way to Savannah in 1947. There have been Jews in Savannah since 1733, and Yitzhak has been sponsored by his cousin Abe. Yitzhak's story unfolds slowly. There are 2 parallel stories running through the book. Abe owns a shoe store and he has somehow gotten involved in some sort of illegal dock corruption. The 2nd story is something that can't be ignored in a story about the south, the relationships with the black employees. Also, the relationships between the Conservative and Reform Jews are surprisingly fraught with tension. Temple vs Shul, with a ridiculous confrontation over tashlikh at the ocean, creates an almost tragic aftermath. And then there is a love story, which also has an almost tragic aftermath. Rabb' s writing brings all these seemingly disparate pieces together to form a perfect story with a perfect ending.

Betty says

I requested a galley of this book because it revolves around the Jewish community in Savannah, Georgia. Since the main character is a Holocaust survivor you may think the book is about the Holocaust. Well, not really... It is about a survivor who has to adapt to a culture so vastly different than what he knew.

Yitzhak Goldah (Ike), the survivor, comes to Savannah to live with his distant cousins, the Jeslers. Trained as a journalist he is a keen observer. While he is immediately accepted into the Jewish community, he learns that the Jews of Savannah have mostly assimilated into the culture around them. But there is still a sharp divide between the Reform and Conservative congregations. This is a major issue as the Jeslers are Conservative, and Ike falls in love with a Reform lady. Ike also learns the fine distinction of privately being friendly and caring about the African-Americans who work for the Jeslers, but keeping them at a distance in public. This story takes place about 20 years before the Civil Rights Movement.

Mr. Rabb expertly took me into the mind of Ike, making me feel like I was seeing through Ike's eyes. I could feel Ike's reactions to the drama, the fear, the love, the confusion, the uneasiness. I was happy because things seemed to be going so well for him, but then devastated when someone from his past threatened his new life.

This book made me think about attitudes in general. When you have been through a devastating event, it shapes your outlook on life. Previously serious issues now seem so petty, so trivial. This is what Ike wrestled with. I was impressed with the strength to be on his emotional rollercoaster yet to outwardly remain calm.

The book has no "action scenes"; rather it is a look at day-to-day life. It was certainly a different read – in a good way.

Thank you to Net Galley, and Edelweiss for the advance galley in exchange for an unbiased review.

Joanne Lessner says

Rabb's engrossing novel illuminates the life of Jews in Savannah after World War II as three distinct points of view collide: the assimilated Reform "temple" Jews of German and Sephardic descent, the Conservative Eastern-European "shul" Jews, and the protagonist, Yitzhak Goldah, a Czech refugee and Holocaust survivor, to whom such distinctions are meaningless. As Goldah reclaims his humanity, he struggles against ingrained prejudices within his community that threaten to derail his romance with a sympathetic young widow, as well as with the easy racism of the South, which aligns him uncomfortably with the oppressors.

In addition to the vivid, evocative setting, one of the best things about the book is the way Rabb keeps his characters refreshingly free from saintliness. Goldah survives the Holocaust with his flaws, foibles and analytical self-awareness intact. As a result, he is relatable, neither pitiable nor self-righteous, and his choices and actions ring true. Similarly, the distant cousins who take him in, Abe and Pearl, are fighting their own demons, and although their attentions to Goldah are rooted in selflessness, they can't resist using him for private purposes. A compelling and enlightening read.

Beverly says

After great pain, a formal feeling comes – (Dickinson)

In post-Holocaust Savannah, GA a survivor arrives. A cousin of some sort, a man in his 30s, sponsored by a shoe store owner and his wife Pearl. Yitzak Goldah will try to build a new life, a stranger in a strange land. He is stiff, formal, fluent in English--a writer from Prague who has no idea what or who he is now, 'safe' in the American segregated South who will now work in a shoe store until he finds his way.

The story of Savannah is complicated and for Jewish readers, even more so. Its Jews were assimilated, yet apart. The oldest temple in the South began in 1733 as a Sephardic congregation that ultimately became a Reformed branch. Later, European Jews arrived then founded Conservative and Orthodox shuls. Socially, the two did not seem to mix. Goldah, drags his memories, trying to dull them in order to survive yet another upheaval (this one well-meaning) into the local world of commerce, a newspaper job, and allow for the possibility of love mixing in with his survivor's guilt.

The novel is a lot about honor (Goldah) temptation (his sponsor's business dealings) and betrayal. The book never slides into predictability and the twists are subtle. Someone from his past appears. "Goldah felt nothing at hearing her story. This was his lingering horror. To feel nothing for such things. And if this atrocity could stir nothing in him...was all feeling just a shadow?" (pg. 267)

The book explores what is left after the unthinkable happens.

Alena says

3.5 stars

I've read a lot of WWII and post-war fiction, but this was a new setting/twist for me. I knew nothing about the Jewish population in Savannah so I enjoyed this historic background. I also appreciated the parallels between the victimization of Jews in Europe and of blacks in the south. It's handled well.

The interpersonal storylines were a little less successful for me. I didn't quite believe all the transitions, but I still liked this novel.

John Findlay says

I became aware of this book because Jonathan Rabb was doing a book signing at a local bookstore. The topic seemed intriguing, so I decided to read it. I'm glad I did. The story is set in Savannah in 1947. A Holocaust survivor arrives in town and attempts to resume/recover his life, staying with his cousins, and working at their shoe store. He has lost his immediate family and is trying to move forward. While received warmly by most of the city, he encounters bigotry amongst the various Jewish sects in town. He also sees firsthand the racism towards blacks, and their position as far less than equal in society. Adding suspense to the story is a reappearance from his past, and a conflicting love interest. I found the book hard to put down; wanted to see how things were eventually resolved. But I also loved the historical context, knowing nothing about the history of Jews in Savannah. All in all, I would highly recommend *Among the Living*.

Erin says

Find this and other reviews at: <http://flashlightcommentary.blogspot....>

Jonathan Rabb's *Among the Living* is a difficult book to review. The material is poignant, but it is also deeply sobering and I find the combination difficult to describe. I appreciate the perspective the novel affords, but it should be understood that the narrative is a bittersweet and introspective tale that challenges the perceptions of both the characters of the novel and those who read it.

I'd love to say I fell in love with Rabb's characters, but his themes took center stage as I made my way through Yitzhak's story. Holocaust lit tends to treat Jews as a single entity and I was captivated by the contrast Rabb created between these pages. His approach felt more authentic and I think he delved into some really interesting concepts in portraying Yitzhak's post war experiences and emotional recovery.

The book is slow paced and isn't an easy read. I don't think it has enough action and movement to appeal to mainstream readers, but I found it quite satisfying and would definitely recommend it to those looking for something a little different.

Steven Z. says

Jonathan Rabb's new novel, *AMONG THE LIVING* begins as a feel good story. Holocaust survivor and former Prague journalist, Yitzhak Goldah arrives in Savannah in July, 1947 sponsored by his cousins Abe and Pearl Jesler. The Jesler's are very sensitive to Ike, the nickname Pearl creates, and his situation. They invite him into their home and take care of all of his needs. Ike has lost his entire family to the Nazi genocide and his mindset grows confused as he tries to adapt to new surroundings at the same time dealing with flashbacks from the camps. It appears to be the making of a wonderful story, until different layers of the novel unravel. Abe Jesler owns a shoe store in the Savannah business district and he invites Ike to learn the trade and work for him. Along with Ike, Abe has a number of "negro" workers that include Calvin and Raymond. As the story progresses, Abe who grew up in one of Savannah's poorer sections needs to make a significant amount of money to satisfy his overly neurotic and loving spouse, Pearl. Unbeknownst to Ike, Abe is involved with smuggling shoes from Italy through a southern organized syndicate, and over time he is drawn deeper and deeper into the mob's machinations that call for increasing monetary payments and cooperation. When Abe falls behind in his obligations a message is sent resulting in the brutal beating of Raymond.

The smuggling component is just one storyline. Ike will meet a World War II widow, Eva De La Parra, and against her mother's wishes they begin a relationship. Both Ike, the survivor, and Eva, the mother of a five year old boy, whose husband was killed in Germany in 1945 suffer from a deep emotional void and seem meant for each other. As their relationship progresses a number of fissures emerge in Savannah society. Then we learn that a person from Ike's past seems to return from the dead. Malke Posner, who survived Theresienstadt, the Nazi "model" concentration camp, turns up at the Jesler's doorstep claiming to be Ike's fiancée.

What dominates Rabb's fine novel is social class inequality and prejudice. At a time when "Jim Crow"

dominates the Deep South we find a Jewish community where social circles seem to form around the type of Judaism that religious adherents aspire to. First, are the somewhat religious conservatives that the Jeslers exemplify. The second are Eva's parents, the Weiss's whose father is the editor of the town newspaper who are seen as "Temple Jews," or as they are called, reformed. This "ideological" conflict forms part of the background for a story that takes place at a time when Jews are finally leaving the displaced persons camps in Europe following their liberation from Hitler's death camps, and in the Middle East Palestine is about to explode into a war between Jews and Arabs. To highlight this, Rabb creates a scene during the Jewish New Year where both groups of Jews confront each other at the beach as they are about to engage in a Jewish cleansing tradition. Another fissure centers on race relations in the south. The Jeslers, as do most wealthy members of the Savannah community employ Negro maids, in this case Mary Royal. Her actions act out the subservient stereotypical maid as does the common language spoken by Raymond and Calvin. In addition, Raymond confronts Abe Jesler concerning his rightful place in a business that he has worked in for over twenty years.

Rabb develops his plot through these dynamics and integrates well developed characters and a story whose highs and lows provoke many compelling questions. This is Rabb's sixth novel, and perhaps his best.

Jen says

****I received this as an e-galley through Edelweiss in return for an honest review.****

When I first read the summary for this novel, I was mildly intrigued and decided to give it a try. While it wasn't a story that had me constantly intrigued, I did find it easy to read and follow, and interesting enough for the most part.

I think that of everything in this novel, the characters are the most compelling and realistic in the way they are portrayed. Rabb does an excellent job of painting with words the atmosphere of a southern town as well as the characters themselves as Conservative and Reform Jews. I do wish Rabb had gone more in depth into the relations between the two denominations of Jews as well as the Jews and the African Americans who live in Savannah at that time. While he made some interesting points about it at times, I felt that that part of the story got side-skirted in preference to an unnecessary storyline about some illegal dealings on the part of Jesler, a storyline which I felt never even really got a decent conclusion.

Overall, the story is interesting, giving the reader a different perspective on the years post-Holocaust, and the relationships between the different people who were discovering and rediscovering themselves and their place in the world after the war. There was a lot of subtext to read through, unfortunately. So much so that at times I felt like I was having trouble understanding some parts of the story completely, but for the most part it was a decent read with some compelling ideas about the 'us vs. them' stigma and many other issues that are still present today. I give it 3.5 stars only because I was not overly wowed by it in any way, but am sure others might find it more interesting than I did.

Angela M says

The unimaginable happened to millions of Jews in Europe, forced into concentration and death camps and as so many others, I strongly believe how important it is to never forget this or the people who perished . I know I say that every time I review a book about the Holocaust, but it's why I read these stories. Millions were killed but I don't know how many survived. This novel is the story of a survivor's journey from the living death of the camps to a new life with relatives in Savannah, Georgia in 1947. There are some flashbacks to the time that Yitzhak Goldah was in a concentration camp and the heart wrenching story of how he lost his family, his memories and dreams are powerful and horrific. "The guards had made his father dig his own grave. They had told him to fill it with water, to stand in the freezing out, drenched and shaking, before shooting him. It was nothing his father had done or said. It was simply to show it could be done." While the focus of the book is on his new life, it is not lost on this reader that this is a Holocaust story, the effect on Yitzhak and someone from his past who appears on the scene.

There are a few other layers here. I was unaware that so many Jews had settled in Savannah and there is a tension between the Reform and Conservative Jews. Perhaps because I am not Jewish, this element of the story didn't seem to me to be the thing that causes ambivalence for Yitzhak on how to move forward. The comparison in some ways between Black people in this Jim Crow south and the plight of the Jews was a thread that certainly was thought provoking. The love story between Yitzhak and a widow in the Reform Community is also central to the story. While at times, I thought it was a little slow moving, I found this to be a worthwhile read and I would recommend it.

I received an advanced copy of this book from Other Press through Edelweiss.

Stephanie Crowe says

Great story! A fresh perspective on prejudice and injustice.

Janet Schneider says

A fresh and deeply thoughtful look at the layers of Southern Jewish life in the Jim Crow era. In *Among the Living*, Ike, as well as the other major and minor characters, drew me in from page one. As Ike navigates post DP-camp-life in postwar Savannah, finding a new family among distant cousins, he processes the vast differences between where he has ended up and the heartbreaking journey which took him away from the life of a working journalist in prewar Prague. Highly recommended.

Rachel says

I nearly put this book down after about 10 pages, I am so glad I read it. WWII and the horrors it produced are well documented and I have read many books with that subject matter. So much so I don't want to read anymore. The framework for this book is a Holocaust survivor who is relocated to Savannah to live with cousins he has never met. Mr. Rabb's story successfully combines the story of the Jews of the American South with the plight of the African Americans living in Jim Crow south with a sensitive and masterly touch. Some of the twists and turns of the narrative are not quite believable but the book really touched me.

Rachel Pollock says

I absolutely loved this book, though it's not without its narrative issues.

I'm giving it five stars because I truly did think it was a memorable experience reading it, but I'll tell you what I wish was present in it which is not: equal time given to the characters of Calvin, Mary Royal, and Raymond.

Granted, it would've made the book twice as long, but I felt like the nature of the experience of the Jewish camp survivors and their empathy with the southern black characters in the time of Jim Crow could have been elaborated upon so much further if those characters had been given equal time on the page. As it is, that's definitely present but I just wished it had been further explored.

Nevertheless the experience of reading the book is one I will carry with me for a long time.
