

The Jew in the Novel From War with Japan to Bali Bombings

Two new novels feature Jews in wartime or other periods of turmoil. Jennifer Cody Epstein's sophomore novel, *The Gods of Heavenly Punishment* (W.W. Norton, 2013) is set in the Pacific theater of World War II, specifically the US bombing of Tokyo. (Epstein is also the author of the acclaimed book, *The Painter from Shanghai* [W.W. Norton, 2008].) Unlike in many novels set during this time, the Jews in this story are neither European refugees nor concentration camp prisoners, but peers of the men and women on the front lines of the war. These characters are sprinkled throughout the story, which doesn't feature a main protagonist but rather a number of Japanese and American individuals who cross paths mainly in Japan before, during, and after the war.

The leading Jewish character in *The Gods of Heavenly Punishment* is a co-pilot with the nickname of Midget, or just Midge. His real name is Joshua Friedman, but due to his six-foot frame, he picked up this moniker. Midge is featured throughout the story, both on the bombing raid and after he became a prisoner of war. Epstein characterizes Midge as both a comrade and an outsider because he's the only Jewish officer on the raid.

When another pilot mentions in a derogatory way that Jews don't believe in heaven, Midge affirms that and casually goes on to explain, "I learned that from the rabbi. And pretty soon after that decided to be pilot, since flying's about the closest I'm ever gonna get to heaven." Midge is especially close to Cam Richards, one of the main characters and fellow Doolittle Raid co-pilot.

Another Jewish supporting character is Erich Mendelsohn, "the German Jew who'd given the Berlin skyline much of its Expressionist mood before feeling the city in 1937." In *The Gods of Heavenly Punishment*, Mendelsohn appears in the Utah desert where he built a block of German apartments so the U.S. Army could practice bombing before they carried out these attacks on Germany. Mendelsohn is joined in Utah by the character, Anton Reynolds, an architect who worked in Japan until the war started, and who built the Japanese counterpart to Mendelsohn's model town.

Other Jewish characters appear in passing. "Your mother taught you piano too?" "No, a German Jewish lady did." Or "George Yamashita and his family had been interned at Butte

Lake up until a few months earlier, and it was only thanks to a good Jewish lawyer and Anton's significant fiscal sponsorship that they were finally free."

While the Jewish characters in *The Gods of Heavenly Punishment* all have supporting roles, they are indicative of the fact that Jews played diverse roles during the War.

Another recent novel featuring a Jewish character in a time of turmoil is Ellen Sussman's *The Paradise Guest House* (Ballantine, 2013). Jamie Hyde is a young American who travels to Bali for her job as an adventure tour guide. But days into her trip, the terrorist bombing shatters the tranquil island and forever changes the lives of those affected by the atrocity, including Jamie. A year later, Jamie returns to Bali to try to finally heal from her post-traumatic stress and to participate in a memorial ceremony in which the survivors are invited back.

It takes all her strength and energy to return to Bali, and her family back in the United States is worried, but Jamie is determined to make this trip and make it alone. Besides healing and trying to move on, she also hopes to find Gabe Winters, the man who saved her life on the night of the bombings.

Gabe moved to Bali years earlier to escape his own tragedy back in the US. After his young son dies and his marriage breaks up. He yearns for a change of scenery. Gabe moves to Bali to start over. On that fateful night when he meets Jamie, Gabe hadn't been able to open his heart to another woman. Although Gabe and Jamie never discuss religion, the reader learns in passing that Gabe is Jewish when his sister offers some healing advice from her rabbi.

After the bombing, Gabe takes Jamie out of harm's way and nurses her back to a stage where she's able to get on a plane back to the US. Just before she leaves Bali, she and Gabe have a quick fling. Now that she's back in Bali, Jamie hopes to find Gabe again.

Ellen Sussman beautifully depicts a serene yet distraught Bali a year after the bombings. Alternating between Jamie's return and the days surrounding the bombings, Sussman keeps the reader engaged and rooting for Jamie and Gabe to get back together.

These books both treat tragic events in a serious way but with sympathetic personal stories. The Jews in Jennifer Cody Epstein's novel enjoy a solid Jewish identity, whereas Gabe in Ellen Sussman's book doesn't define himself through his Judaism, but it shines through in his deeds and words. 

