

JBC BOOK CLUBS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

a grand debut

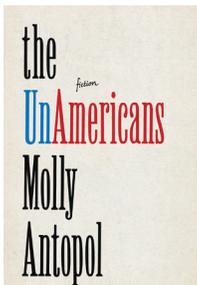
UNPACKING THE BOOK

JEWISH WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



THE UNAMERICANS

MOLLY ANTOPOL



1) What do you think of the title of the book? What does UnAmerican mean to you? In which ways are these stories and characters “unAmerican”? Is there a single meaning of “unAmerican” or does it shift? Does it mean something different in the stories that are set in other countries?

2) What do you think the title of the first story, “The Old World”, refers to?

3) In the stories, older generations look forward and not back, while younger generations look back in order to understand the present. Do you think these two outlooks can be reconciled? Why do you think this is? Is it surprising or unexpected? Do you think either view is more correct or productive than the other?

4) In the story “The Unknown Soldier”, Katherine tells Alexi that the most hurtful of his offences is that he “kept a life from me” (p. 199). Which other characters are guilty of this? Do you agree that, of all their transgressions, it is the most grave?

5) Some of the characters turn to an external organization—

Orthodox Judaism or the Communist party, for example. What is it about these groups that appeals to them? Do you think these groups are helpful to the characters?

6) At the end of “A Difficult Phase”, Talia says that the only thing she knows for certain is that soon, poison would numb the places that hurt the most. Is this comforting? Is it positive or destructive?

7) In “The Quietest Man” and “My Grandmother Tells Me This Story”, an older generation recounts a story from their past at the bequest of a younger generation. What are the different approaches of the two storytellers? Which do you think is more damaging?

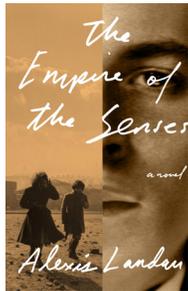
8) Are there themes that unite this story collection, aside from the title?

9) Does the order of the stories create a narrative for the collection? What do you think about the last sentence in the book? Is it the ending of that story or the book as a whole?



THE EMPIRE OF THE SENSES

ALEXIS LANDAU



1) *The Empire of the Senses* is a multi-perspective novel that, at some point, gives a voice to each of the four members of the Pearlmitter family. Having experienced the voice of each character, did you feel sympathy or empathy for some characters more than others? Why do you think that is?

2) What role does intermarriage play in the novel? Do you think the marital problems between Lev and Josephine stem from a clash

of cultures, as Lev's mother believes? How does Lev and Leah's relationship compare? While they have a shared heritage, they live in very different places and have completely different connections to Judaism. What about Vicki and Geza? Vicki, raised as a wealthy Christian in urban Berlin, comes from a background that is even more foreign to Geza than Lev and Josephine, and yet, their relationship remains strong.

3) Were you surprised at the degree to which Lev was assimilated into German culture? Despite his successful career, his family's position in Berlin society, etc., do you think Lev is constantly paying a price as Rabbi Landauer says about German Jews on p. 376?

4) What do you think of the characters' reactions to the incident in Nuremberg? Given what they knew at the time (as opposed to what we know now), do you think they were being shortsighted and naive or reasonable?

5) Lev and Josephine both blame themselves for not interfering in Franz's involvement with the SA. Do you think that they are to be held responsible? Was there something that they could have done to alter Franz's course?

6) What does the novel say about past and present? At what point does adherence to "the old ways" stunt one's character? What are those who rush to embrace modernity and current trends losing?

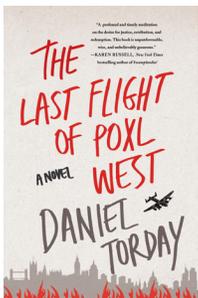
7) There are two rabbis who come into Lev's life over the course of novel, both of whom remind him of an El Greco painting — the rabbi who visits Mitau and Rabbi Landauer. What affect do these men have on him?



Photo Credit: Philip Westgren

THE LAST FLIGHT OF POXL WEST

DANIEL TORDAY



1) Who is the main character in the novel?

2) What happens when someone has suffered/lost/accomplished, but just not quite enough or in the "right" way to receive reparations or acknowledgment?

3) How is this story different from other Holocaust stories? Eli says that Poxl, as "a Jew who had killed Germans, who had sought the fight when others fled" was a "master of his own narrative," unlike other writers (p 68).

Do you think this is a fair assessment? Is Poxl, as an RAF fighter, in a different category than the ghetto or resistance fighters?

4) Would you consider Poxl to be a Holocaust survivor?

5) What is Rabbi Ben's role in Eli's story?

6) Poxl writes about how he and Percy Smith recalled the Hamburg bombings, and how Schlic's story of the burning women altered their perspective as men "more sinned against than sinning" (p 215). Poxl's response is to tell Percy the story of his parents and how he came to be an RAF pilot, of how his losses at the hands of Germans drove him to fight--though Percy asks if any of it changes anything for them. Do you think revenge ever provides a

justification for an action? What does it mean that Shakespeare's line from *The Merchant of Venice*, "If you wrong us, shall we not revenge?", was spoken by a villain, not a hero?

7) When Eli's father buys him a baseball card, he realized that he had been gifted something that he didn't know he wanted (p 143), that, "We don't eat because there is food. We eat because there is hunger." What do you think about that statement? Eli later comes to understand that Poxl had been doing that as a surrogate for Eli's grandfather as well. What other gifts does Poxl give to Eli?

8) At Poxl's reading in Boston, a graduate student asks the question "Mr. West, with all due respect, isn't it possible we've reached a point of saturation with all of the first-person accounts of this particular war?" (p 68). Do you agree? Eli, looking back, says that he now understands that they all fought their own battles. Does every Holocaust story stand on its own or can they be grouped together as a genre with a "finite number of stories to tell"?



Photo Credit: Matt Barrick

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