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THIS ISSUE: The Bristol bookworms

Heated debate, cake, wine. What more could you want from a book group? asks **David Memel**

I have been a member of the Bristol Jewish Book Group for the last five years, and this week we are discussing a book I have suggested, *Herzog* by Saul Bellow. I came across it recently when clearing out my mother's flat. It was the first Penguin edition, published in the 1960s. I remember it made a big impact on my father when I was a teenager, with him telling us about the latest chapter he had read over the dinner table.

The arrangement for our group is that the person who has chosen the book also does a short introduction. Some in the group give a mini-lecture, but that's not my style. So I jot down a few thoughts, and remember that there were a couple of good articles about Bellow in the last issue of *Jewish Renaissance*, and an interesting discussion on Radio 4's *Start the Week*.

Meetings are held at people's homes every two months, and although it was started 10 years ago by several members of Bristol Progressive Congregation, it now includes people from both Liberal and Orthodox congregations, as well as those who are more secular.

There are eight of us this evening at Ruth and Simon's house. After coffee and cake (and a glass of wine) I start my introduction and a heated discussion quickly ensues. Most of us have found the book a tough read until the last 100 pages, when dramatic events start to happen, culminating in Herzog crashing

his car and being arrested for possessing a loaded gun and a large quantity of Russian roubles. For the first 200 pages, the story goes on largely inside Herzog's head, including narrating a lot of letters to all the people that have done him wrong over the years. Simon aptly describes him as an "academic

buffoon", much better at intellectual thought than common sense.

Discussion turns to why the book does not seem to have the same appeal to us as it did to my father and many others 50 years ago. The first edition sold over 150,000 copies in hardback alone, whereas there has not been a new edition since 2001. Maybe to the children of American Jewish immigrants turning introspective does not seem fresh anymore after all those Woody Allen films? And his women are very two-dimensional.

Some of our best discussions have been when there has been a tenuous Jewish connection. Examples are *Martha Quest* by Doris Lessing, which featured as minor characters a Jewish family in the South African outback, and Sathnam Sanghera's *The Boy with the Topknot*, which looked at the immigrant experience of a Sikh family in Wolverhampton.

What about our next meeting? There is a revival of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* at the Bristol Old Vic in October. We will go and see it, and discuss it at our November meeting. So another work by an American Jewish icon. Will it have stood the test of time better than the Bellow? ■

The next Bristol Jewish Book Group meeting is on Wed 4 November, 8pm. Contact Ruth Baker at ruth.baker@btconnect.com or call 0117 9738744.

JEWISH? BOOKISH? READ ON...

JR readers wrote in to tell us about their book clubs

MENORAH BOOK CLUB

WHAT DO YOU READ? This 'term' we will be reading Linda Grant, Assaf Gavron, Ruchama Feuerman and Jeremy Gavron. The book club attracts more than a dozen booklovers (Jewish and non-Jewish) to its meetings.

Meets: The second Monday of every month at 2.30pm. **Place:** 98 Altrincham Rd, Manchester M22 4RZ. **Contact:** www.menorah.org.uk

HAMPSTEAD GARDEN SUBURB JEWISH STUDIES BOOK CLUB

WHAT DO YOU READ? Jewish academic books that are accessible to the layperson.

Meets: every two months, day agreed by members, at 8.30pm. The next meeting is some time in October. **Place:** hosted by members. Join our mailing list if you'd like to be notified. **Contact:** dan.rickman@gmail.com

WOODSIDE PARK SYNAGOGUE BOOK CLUB

WHAT DO YOU READ? Books with a Jewish connection that are agreed by voting. The next book is *Miss Garnet's Angel* by Sally Vickers. Previously we've covered everything from George Elliot's *Daniel Deronda* to *Daughters of Jerusalem* by Charlotte Mendelson.

Meets: Once a month on a Thursday evening. The next meeting is 22 October. **Place:** Woodside Park Synagogue, Woodside Park Rd, London N12 8RZ. **Contact:** phillipstelllem@gmail.com

YESHURUN BOOK CLUB

WHAT DO YOU READ? Contemporary fiction, classics, non-fiction – not always Jewish.

Meets: approximately every 6 weeks. Next meetings: 14 October, 18 November. There's a £3 donation. **Place:** South Manchester. **Contact:** Julia at julia.segar@googlemail.com for details.

WIMBLEDON BOOK CLUB

WHAT DO YOU READ? Books with a Jewish theme: our next book is *The Dove Flyer* by Eli Amir. Originally set in Baghdad in 1950 it follows the Jews of Iraq as they review their options in the face of growing oppression.

Meets: Once a 'term'. The next meeting is 27 November, 10.30am-12.30pm. The cost is £1. **Where:** Wimbledon Synagogue library, 1 Queensmere Rd, London SW19 5QD. **Contact:** raymondhart41@gmail.com

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