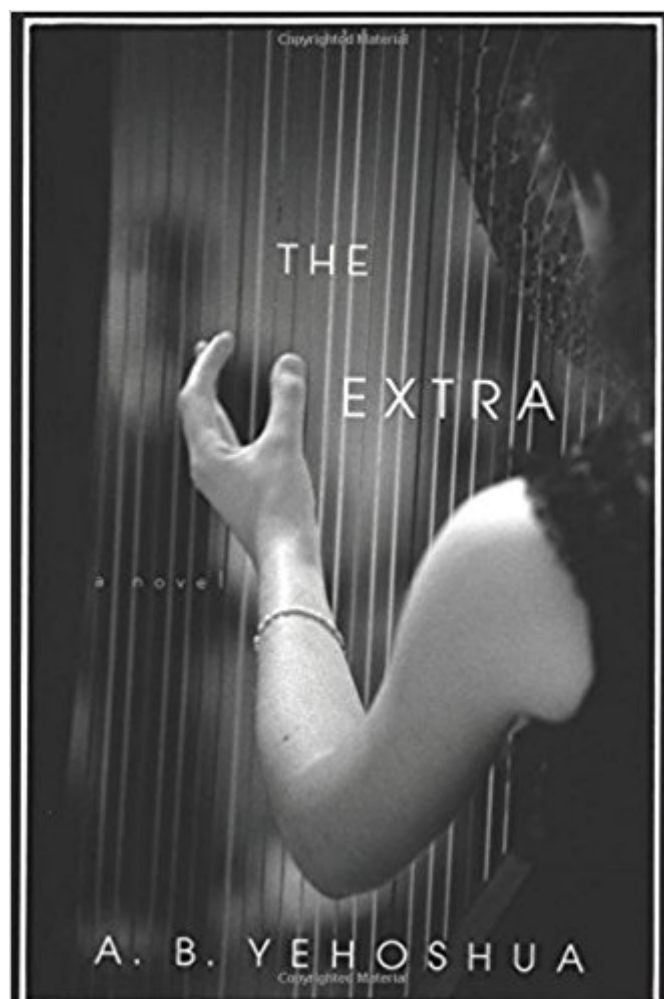


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The Extra



Synopsis

From Israel's highly acclaimed author, a novel about a musician who returns home and finds the rhythm of her life interrupted and forever changed. Noga, forty-two and a divorcee, is a harpist with an orchestra in the Netherlands. Upon the sudden death of her father, she is summoned home to Jerusalem by her brother to help make decisions in urgent family and personal matters including hanging on to a rent-controlled apartment even as they place their reluctant mother in an assisted-living facility. Returning to Israel also means facing the former husband who left her when she refused him children, but whose passion for her remains even though he is remarried and the father of two. For her imposed three-month residence in Jerusalem, the brother finds her work playing roles as an extra in movies, television, opera. These new identities undermine the firm boundaries of behavior heretofore protected by the music she plays, and Noga, always an extra in someone else's story, takes charge of the plot. The Extra is Yehoshua at his liveliest storytelling best—a bravura performance.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This elusive novel by an acclaimed and veteran Israeli author tells the story of Noga, a harpist who returns to her country for three months from the Netherlands. Her mother, recently widowed, wants to see if she would like to live in an elder community near Noga's brother in Tel Aviv but does not want to risk losing her rent-controlled apartment in Jerusalem. Noga will therefore live in the apartment for three months while her mother tries to decide what to do. In the meantime, she finds work as an extra in movies, a TV series and even a performance of the opera Carmen at the foot of

the ancient citadel of Masada. There is a dreamlike quality to this book, accentuated by the stilted prose, which I believe even in translation must reflect the tone of the Hebrew original. This is clearly the author's intent -- but it has the effect of distancing the reader from the characters and the action. We learn that Noga's marriage broke up because of her refusal to have children -- which is the central mystery of the book. Her ex-husband, now remarried with two children, is still evidently in love with her. Noga also has to interact with two children of a Hasidic neighbor who keep sneaking into her apartment to watch TV. This is a book which resists easy interpretation -- and indeed having finished it I still find myself trying to decode its meaning. Noga seems to want to drift through life as an extra. A commitment to life would mean embracing motherhood and she refuses, indeed fights against it. Does this have something to do with life in Israel -- or the life of Israel? It's not clear.

In this lean, sensuous, and meditative novel, Israeli writer A.B. Yehoshua explores themes of identity, exile, and family. Noga, at almost 42, is a harpist with a Dutch orchestra in the Netherlands. She left Israel years ago "a country that never ceases to be a threat to itself" -- when her marriage ended in divorce, because of her refusal to have children, (which is tantamount to figurative treason to a people who lost so many in the Holocaust). She was recently urged back by her brother, Honi, after the death of their father, to stay in her mother's apartment while Ima is trying a three-month "experiment" at Honi's insistence, to live near his family at an assisted living facility in Tel Aviv. He hopes that their mother will move there permanently, but Noga has her doubts. A chronic insomniac, Noga often wanders between the different beds in her mother's apartment during the night. She feels displaced, and passionately misses her musical life in the Netherlands. Here in Jerusalem, memories of her past marriage, her father, her old neighbors, and her childhood, invade her nighttime thoughts and dreams. There are issues she hasn't resolved with her ex-husband, Uriah, which continue to threaten her peace of mind. Noga seems most comfortable with her solitude, but the neighborhood has gone from secular to Ultra-Orthodox (Hasidic), a close-knit community that doesn't allow TV, are extremely religious, and have many children, often 10 or 11! Noga has to contend with the two kids who have been breaking into Ima's apartment to watch TV while she is gone every day. Her mother allowed, even encouraged this kind of behavior. Noga's eventual and inspired solution to stop the willful children is (as is much of the novel), sublimely witty.

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