

Visible City

By Tova Mirvis

New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
249 pages, \$24

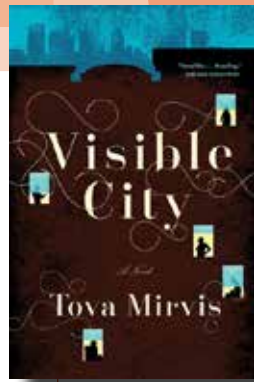
As Tova Mirvis's new book *Visible City* opens, a woman stands alone in the living room of a New York Upper West Side apartment, training her son's toy binoculars on the windows of the classic prewar building across the street. While her husband, Jeremy (a lawyer who is involved in urban development), works late and her children sleep, Nina watches her neighbors and tries to piece together the story of their lives from her distant vantage point.

The apartment into which she peers is occupied by Leon (a psychotherapist), his wife, Charlotte (an art history professor), their grown daughter, Emma, and — on occasion — Emma's fiancé, Steven. It is around the lives of these three couples, as well as other colorful characters intrinsic to the neighborhood, that the novel revolves.

While Mirvis skillfully weaves a story in which the once separate lives of her cast of characters begin to connect, the reader witnesses the paradoxical undoing of the intimate relationships that seemed so harmonious in Nina's imagination — and the book becomes a tale of alienation and estrangement.

Readers of Mirvis's previous two books may be surprised to find that, unlike them, in this novel Judaism plays a very small part. Jeremy recalls briefly the Orthodox religious upbringing of his youth when he lies awake in fear and his father comforts him by reading aloud a psalm "the Lord is my light, whom shall I fear." As a child he repeated the psalm, but notes that what really comforted him were not the words but his father sitting next to him. Otherwise, this is the secular Upper West Side.

In *Visible City*, the characters each long for connection, which seems largely absent as they go about their



daily lives cluttered with the minutiae of work, child care and alternate side of the street parking. They feel emptiness as passions languish, and the old roles they filled as part-

ners, spouses, parents and professionals no longer hold enough meaning.

Parenthetically, Mirvis published a personal essay in *The New York Times* earlier this year about her own divorce from her husband of 20 years and from the Orthodox Jewish world. One wonders to what extent the grappling of her characters mirrors the events of her own life.

As the title *Visible City* suggests, the theme of what is visible and what is hidden (or just out of sight) permeates the book. The chapters are narrated by different characters, and the reader can't help but be drawn in, as often the same events are described from very disparate points of view, providing different windows into the story. The apartment windows through which the characters are seen both hide and reveal different aspects of their lives. Several characters become entranced by the luminous windows of the historical stained glass artist John LaFarge, some of which may be hidden deep within the architecture of the city.

The characters often employ subterfuge about details of their own lives, and one character even adopts the name of his son's invisible friend when he wants to withhold his identity. The redevelopment of a neighborhood where old buildings are rapidly being replaced by new skyscrapers provides not only a plot element, but also a metaphor for the changing landscape of the lives of its inhabitants.

One character observes that most people live their lives "perched between acceptance and resignation." It may be Mirvis's wish not to leave the reader in

that despondent place that leads her to take on a tone of magical realism in the last chapter. While I respect the author's desire to leave the reader with a sense of hope, well-being and connection, I found the book's sudden change in tone disconcerting. Even after a re-reading, I was unsure of what events were going on in the minds of her characters and which events they were actually experiencing.

In spite of its flawed ending, *Visible City* is thought provoking. After finishing it, I found myself walking through the streets of the city with a new feeling that perhaps I also had connections with the people around me, yet to be discovered.

— Marilyn Rose

Marilyn Rose is an artist, designer and writer living in New Jersey. Her website is www.marilynroseart.com.

Suddenly, Love

By Aharon Appelfeld

Translated from the Hebrew

by Jeffrey M. Green

New York: Schocken Books

225 pages, \$25

“You were born in Israel, isn't that right?” Ernst surprises her again the next day.

“No. I was born in a displaced persons' camp near Frankfurt.”

“I was sure, for some reason, you were born in Israel.”

“I don't remember anything about it,” Irena says, and immediately regrets it. Her parents had nurtured the memory of that camp to the point where sometimes it seemed to her that she remembered the smallest details.”

There are many, many novels and books of all kinds about Israel, about

the Holocaust and about what we do and don't remember of that impossible horrible time, but no one can write with the understated simplicity, the clear eyed and heartbreaking emotion as Aharon Appelfeld, author of more than 40 works of fiction and nonfiction.

I was lucky enough to meet him once. Some years ago I was a partner in a small book publishing company called Adama in English and Adam in Hebrew. One of my partners, based in Jerusalem, gave me a novel by Appelfeld, an author we were publishing in Hebrew. (Appelfeld lives in Jerusalem.) It was called *Badenbeim 1939*. "This book," said my partner, Aryeh, a wise Romanian Jew who was both cynical and optimistic, "has the ability to change the way you think about books, writing and story telling. He's truly a great writer, with an original way of seeing."

This time Aryeh was right. I read Appelfeld holding my breath, in awe of how simply and powerfully he told a difficult complicated story — with understatement and silence.

Most novels, including mine, are noisy. We writers tend to talk a lot in our pages. Not so Appelfeld, a product of the Holocaust, who grew up in one of those countries that kept changing hands and allegiances until it became a part of the Ukraine. I heard him tell the story once of how, when he came to Palestine after a DP camp in Italy, he had a hard time finding his father. And when he did it was an experience so large he knew he could never ever write about it. He never did.

Appelfeld's books, including *Suddenly, Love*, are a wonderful example of



what a master he truly is. These novels talk about silence, about the Holocaust, about loss and about how we continue — with prayers and with dreams.

Suddenly, Love is a nontraditional love story that is centered on the unspoken question of what love actually looks like — how it shows itself in life. Ernst is a 70-year-old retired investment broker, who lost his daughter and his first wife to the Nazis. A native of Central Europe, he wants, more than he's ever wanted anything, to be a writer. And writing is what he does. He is unpublished and impossibly critical. And still, he writes.

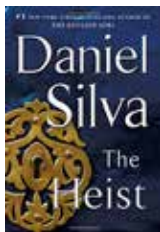
Because he has a debilitating illness, Ernst hires a housekeeper who also acts

Jewish Mysteries and Thrillers

by JUDITH A. SOKOLOFF

Some old pros and some new Jewish crime writers entangle readers in suspenseful tales.

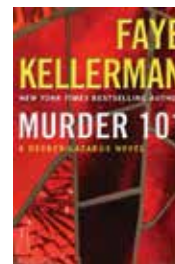
It's hard to believe that *The Heist* (Harper) is my first venture into Daniel Silva's lengthy oeuvre of thrillers, his 14th in the Gabriel Allon series. Thrown into the mix of interesting places and people are a dead British spy who has been dealing in stolen art, a missing-for-decades Caravaggio masterpiece, billions of dollars belonging to the "monster" Syrian leader, a brave female survivor of the 1982 Hama massacre in Syria, tight-lipped Austrian bankers and the denizens of Israeli secret service headquarters. Hero Allon, the soon-to-



be head of Israeli intelligence, does double duty as a master art restorer in Venice — somewhat odd, but then Superman was Clark Kent by day. Sometimes fast, sometimes slow, Silva takes readers on the highways and through the alleys of European and Middle East cities, the plot twisting and turning on an exciting canvas.

Since the last Faye Kellerman crime drama I read, hero Peter Decker,

detective lieutenant in the LAPD, has moved to an upstate New York college town with his sage and charming wife, Rina Lazarus. In *Murder 101* (William Morrow), he's working for a local police force, suffering from lack of excitement. Decker is not adjusting as well as his wife, who has involved herself with the local Hillel, making Shabbat dinners for those in need and teaching Torah. Fortunately, for Detective Decker and for readers, a couple of Tiffany glass panels are stolen from a local mausoleum followed by two murders. Several police forces become involved along with trips to New York and Boston antique galleries,



research at rare book libraries and interference from the CIA and some ruthless Russians. And, of course, there are Rina Lazarus' invaluable insights. All of this comes to a fairly satisfying conclusion, though the best parts are the investigation and the chase.

You'll whiz through *Norwegian by Night* (Mariner Books), a thriller by Derek B. Miller, where you'll be barely able to keep up with Grandpa Sheldon Horowitz. A widower and former Marine sniper in the Korean War, he has reluctantly left his beloved New York City to move in with his granddaughter and her new husband in Norway, home of some 1,000 Jews. Horowitz gets involved in protecting a young

as his nurse, a 36-year-old woman named Irena who is more or less his opposite. Ernst is a sort of intellectual, a man who takes his thoughts very seriously. Irena is a simpler person, more silent and dutiful. She is nearly silent much of the time. She has lived with her parents all her life, where her existence has been contained. When she worked in an old age home, her life was about them. She loved them. They loved her. Their life together was uncomplicated. Extremely shy, nearly illiterate, still she is a kind of visionary, a person who had a gift all her life.

“Since childhood Irena has had the ability to imagine things from afar, to describe places and people even though she had never seen them. Her mother had been frightened by that ability, and she used to say to her: ‘You mustn’t imagine things. People who imagine things end up being liars.’”

Ernst grew up in Eastern Europe, hating religious Jews because he was a young communist. His parents were unhappy and grim, and he escaped them by reading — reading his way out of their life. Through Irena, he is able to consider his own past, and to understand the tragedy of his own parents’ lives. Irena, who does not really read, helps Ernst to write in a new way, to begin to tell the story he truly wanted to tell, a story of humanity and life.

Ernst is in pain, and Irena helps him by being present in a way that he’s never experienced before. She brings him flowers, fruit and vegetables. She cooks him meals and believes that food and her loyalty will help him. She’s right. She helps him in life and with his writing, which becomes, for the first time, about his ancestors, his family who lived in the Carpathians for generations. For

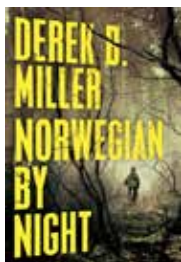
the first time, he is able to describe his family’s life, and writing frees him from an oppression he’d never before voiced.

Ernst reads to Irena, who understands. He grows sicker. His pain becomes more and more intense. Death enters into their house. Irena watches over Ernst like a bodyguard. “No one is happier than Irena. She makes breakfast and sits at Ernst’s side for a long time.” Ernst dreams and dreams — about his relatives, about his parents, about a life he didn’t realize he knew so well.

They remain together. Ernst writing. Irena nearby, making sure he has all he needs. For the first time in his life, he does.

Esther Cohen writes, teaches and sends a poem a day to her subscribers at esthercohen.com.

boy after his mother is murdered, and they flee Oslo for the wilderness. The chase is on – and it is riveting.



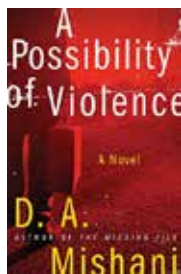
The story is touching, too, as Horowitz’s mind takes him back to painful moments of the war and his relationships with his son and wife. The author is the director of the Policy Lab, which develops evidence-based policy design, and is a senior fellow at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research.

In *A Possibility of Violence* (HarperCollins), the sequel to *The Missing File*, D.A. Mishani is well on his way to writing a crime series. The books feature the intriguing Tel Aviv police inspector Avraham Avraham. In this novel, we find him investigating a bomb threat

at a day care center. Then, a person of interest in the case disappears. The missing father of two young sons also has a missing wife, and Avraham fears the boys are in danger. Mishani, a literary scholar specializing in the history of detective literature (and the editor of Israeli fiction and crime literature at Keter Books in Israel), goes deep into the minds of both Avraham and the suspicious father, adding a dimension of psychological complexity to the plot.

Also from Israel is Ruth Shidlo’s *The Rosebush Murders: A Helen Mirkin Novel* (Hoopoe Publishing).

Narrated by Jerusalem homicide detective Helen Mirkin, the story begins with the murder of a psychologist, partner of a



renowned opera singer. The two moms have a young daughter. Many smart, strong women are involved in a case that involves in vitro fertilization treatment, a second murder, a fake doctor and clandestine medical research. Mirkin is an engaging character — a smart detective who sings arias, speaks Spanish, quotes T.S. Eliot and is keenly self-aware. I hear that the author, a Tel Aviv psychologist, is working on a second Mirkin mystery and look forward to reading it.

In *City of the Sun* (Greenleaf Book Group Press), Egyptian-born Juliana Maio has created an enlightening historical novel, thriller and love story. Expelled from Egypt as a young child during the Suez Crisis of 1956, the author has done extensive research

on the Jews of Egypt, especially during and after World War II. The history in the novel is what I found most interesting. The love angle and story of the covert mission of an American journalist who must infiltrate Cairo’s Jewish community are engaging, but the dialogue often seems scripted for an action movie. A young Sadat plays a part, as do members of the early Muslim Brotherhood. There’s a nefarious German spy and a

host of Brits causing trouble for everyone. The author practices entertainment law in Los Angeles.

Judith A. Sokoloff is the editor of Na’amat Woman.

