



Bearing the Body

Ehud Havazelet

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Growing up, Daniel seemed like a model son: a student activist blessed with easy charm and a fluid intelligence, who believed that he was heir to a better and brighter future. When that dream faded, he drifted from his family and into a rootless life, marked by wasted possibility." "Bearing the Body "begins when Daniel's younger brother, Nathan, a medical resident in Boston, learns that Daniel has died in San Francisco. The circumstances are unclear, and the police are involved. Nathan, who suffers from chronic anger and uncontrollable compulsions, travels to New York to inform their father, Sol, of Daniel's death. Sol is an Auschwitz survivor who has spent most of his adult energy compiling an archive of the fates of Hitler's victims. Due in part to this obsessive research, he has lost touch with his sons. He nevertheless decides to join Nathan on a trip to the West Coast, where both men hope to learn more about Daniel's untimely death. In San Francisco they meet Abby and her son, Ben, who were Daniel's companions in a life that his family never knew about or shared. A moving study of isolation and its costs, "Bearing the Body "is a book about history and memory, about family and loss. Most of all, it is a book about the past, which, far from receding quietly, weighs ever more heavily on those who hope to leave it behind.

Bearing the Body Details

Date : Published August 7th 2007 by Farrar Straus Giroux (first published 2007)

ISBN : 9780374299729

Author : Ehud Havazelet

Format : Hardcover 296 pages

Genre : Fiction, Contemporary

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From Reader Review Bearing the Body for online ebook

Danica Lyming says

This book was confusing at times and the font style used was not consistent throughout which made it harder. It's about the grieving process but had a lot of substories that made it feel pulled in too many directions. I would read others from this author, I just didn't connect with this book in particular.

Brittany says

It took me over a month to get through this book, and for good reason. It did not flow smoothly at all. The plot synopsis mentioned that the main character's father, Sol, is a Holocaust survivor, and I expected that to come into play much more in the novel. There was one incredibly haunting and painfully vivid passage to read of Sol's memories from a camp near the end of the novel that definitely moved me.

However, most of the rest of the book was unenjoyable. The characters all seemed stilted and incredibly self-absorbed (the few times they seemed "real", that is). There were several random, unexplained Latin phrases and Yiddish words, the meaning of which I could not fully glean through context, which frustrated me. I felt like throughout much of the book, the author was speaking over the reader, in an elitist voice, and much of the tone was incredibly depressing. If this was the author's intent, he clearly has succeeded. Another Goodreads reviewer said "Havazelet has a pronounced literary tic: he repeatedly creates an ambiguous situation using indirect references and a mystifying lack of pronouns only to neatly resolve said situation a chapter or two later", and this is something that thoroughly bothered me but I couldn't put into words until having read this review.

Perhaps I'm too harsh, but if I have to force myself to get through a book and consider abandoning it more than once, even a two-star rating is generous.

Margot says

A lot of the reviewers used the word "tedious" and that sums it up for me. A book of huge misopportunity.

Ruth says

What does a father do when his memories, his youth, are too horrendous to share with his sons? When in order to function, to take care of the physical needs of his family he must shut off his past behind walls of steely resolve? When shutting off that past also means he shuts off any kind of expression of love and caring leaving him with only an endless reserve of anger? And what of the sons? Which would be more terrible for them, the feeling that their father does not love them or the nightmare that their father's memories would evoke?

In this story Nathan, Daniel and Sol, two sons and a father, revolve around each other like triple planets,

observing each other, but never touching. Daniel is dead after a life that could only lead to this end. Nathan and Sol have come west to discover what they can about Daniel's end. Sol is suffering, his son is gone, his wounded shoulder is infected, but he cannot even communicate with Nathan on that level. Nathan is struggling to make sense of his life and of his brother's.

Slowly, slowly Nathan and Sol discover secrets about themselves and each other, each in his own orbit around the streets of San Francisco, still not communicating.

Karl says

This is a very sad book. The characters are all hopelessly miserable. The writing is very, very good, but I found that I could not read too much at a time because I had to come up for air, out from the despairing darkness. The atmosphere is extremely well developed, details, thoughts, emotions, are all there. I found it slightly irritating that the author would change the place, or the time, or the viewpoint, without any clear clues, so it would sometimes be a couple of paragraphs before I worked out where or who or when it was, but the unfolding of history, relationships, and events, is very effective.

Mbreaden says

I'm torn between two stars and three. I just can't can't can't stand Sol (the father character). I've read too too many books with the delightfully-childlike-rapidly-deteriorating-distant father to find the character of this one original.

On the other hand, I'm very interested in the story of the two brothers, Daniel and Nathan, and I think that both of them are depicted pretty realistically. The girlfriend of Daniel, Abby, is also pretty interesting.

His writing style is pretty good, too.

In conclusion, after reading:
Boring and trite.

Lorri says

Bearing the Body, by Ehud Havazelet, is an intense look at family dynamics and the after-effects of the Holocaust in relation to the silence of the survivors, survivors trying to quietly assimilate in a new environment. Often times the events of the past are so horrific and traumatic, that they are difficult for one to bear. Havazelet has a deep comprehension of this.

Dysfunction reigns, and rains, heavily, through the clouds of family dynamics. Silence resounds loudly, echoing fragments of the past, of the Holocaust. Assimilation and trying to forget one's past affects the children of survivors, in more ways than one can imagine.

There are no right answers to the questions that the Havazelet's writing evokes. He writes with sensitivity, ever aware of the frailty of humans, ever conscious of the Holocaust and of the repercussions and consequences of the survivors' choices. He is not judgmental, doesn't force blame on anyone, but at the same time, he writes with clarity, not sugar-coating the situations and scenarios that Sol and Nathan find themselves in.

Grandparents and parents must find a way to tell their grandchildren and children about the Holocaust. Their experiences must be carried down through the generations. Their stories shouldn't be left in the caves within the mind and soul to fester, causing unhealthy and extreme emotional outlets. In my opinion, that is Ehud Havazelet's message, and he delivers it through intense word images, and through masterful writing.

Alison says

I love books that make me change my mind about characters. I love stories in which good and evil sit side by side in people. I like to read books that explore relationships and families in all their clumsiness and imperfection. I also have a soft spot for stories that accurately portray the inner world of children. So, yes, I loved this book.

Sometimes I wanted the men in Ehud's novel to be more likable, and I couldn't help but wish that they would tell each other the secrets we, the readers, knew, the secrets that made their behavior explicable-- but fine. I'm surprised by the opinions of so many readers here who thought the book was unrelentingly sad. Did we read the same (SPOILER ALERT, kind of) ending? I liked the thought I was left with, which is: if we knew enough about each other, we'd know enough to go easy.

Naomi says

2.5 stars, really. The book had flashes of brilliance in the writing, and the premise of the story-- an estranged brother/son who had become a drug addict found murdered, the remaining son and father going out to collect the remains-- had great potential, but for me the book fell short. I found the characters rather two dimensional, and none likable. I have nothing against unlikable characters (Chekhov and Nabokov come to mind), but even so, I have to have some reason to commit to them, to follow the story. That was sadly not the case here, and the worst of it is, I felt I was supposed to empathize, especially with Nathan, the remaining son who has an addiction to sex. Now, Humbert Humbert is creepy, but there is a certain mad charm about him, and he is such an unreliable narrator that I MUST keep reading. In the case of Nathan, I merely disliked him, and the only reason I kept reading was a mulish persistence to finish what I had started. The father, a Holocaust survivor, was similarly two dimensional and unpleasant, and Daniel, the deceased son, whom we see in flashback, comes off as the archetype of the misunderstood hero.

The book was ambitious in what it attempted - multiple POVs and a story told in fractured, nonlinear time - but this is not a feat easily realized. For me, the attempt fell short and left a bad taste in my mouth.

Caren says

Havazelet has a pronounced literary tic: he repeatedly creates an ambiguous situation using indirect

references and a mystifying lack of pronouns only to neatly resolve said situation a chapter or two later. It happened so many times that I finally gave up in surrender. That said, there is nothing about the family dynamic that begs credulity.

Kristine Brancolini says

I read *Bearing the Body* for my Jewish Book Group. Last Sunday, about 30 of us met with the director of our Jewish Studies Program, who is also a professor of English literature, to discuss the book. Many people had a strong reaction to it -- positive and negative. Obviously, I occupy the positive camp but I believe that after the discussion, some who really didn't like the book came to admire it.

Bearing the Body is Ehud Havazelet's third book and first novel. He spent ten years writing it. And it shows. Despite its relative short length -- about 300 pages -- it is beautifully written and carefully structured. The book gives the impression that each word and sentence was carefully chosen and that the text was rewritten and reorganized to achieve the desired effect. It was a magical reading experience and one of my favorite books of the year.

Set in the mid-1990s when the protagonist Nathan Mirsky is 39-years-old and a medical resident, the book tells the story of Nathan's journey with his father Sol from the East Coast to San Francisco in the aftermath of the murder of Nathan's older brother Daniel. From the beginning Nathan emerges as a damaged man -- abusive to his girlfriend and irresponsible on the job. His mother Freda has been dead about a year and Sol is struggling to cope with her loss. The book is told primarily from the perspective of Nathan, but Sol and other characters also narrate. We soon learn that Sol and Freda are Holocaust survivors, the sole survivors from their families. This information begins to illuminate our understanding of the Mirsky family. Havazelet slowly reveals their stories through flashbacks and through Sol and Nathan's attempts to understand what happened to Daniel. Daniel was the golden boy destined for greatness. A student and anti-war activist at Columbia University, he began to abuse drugs, which he fought his entire life, and ended up living on the fringes of society with his girlfriend Abby and her young son Ben.

This is one of those books that I read slowly on purpose. I wanted to race to the end but I made myself slow down, to savor the writing and inhabit the world of the Mirsky family -- past and present. It is a heartbreaking story of the ways in which the Holocaust continued to wreck havoc many decades later, affecting the survivors and their descendants in unimaginable ways. Although Daniel is dead when the book begins, he wrote voluminous letters to Nathan, which Nathan stopped reading over the years. But he receives one final letter after he learns that Daniel has died and it is one of the ways we meet and grow to love Daniel. Despite his fall from grace, he is still a charismatic man who is trying to care for Abby and Ben, but failing to care for himself. Daniel seeks the meaning in Daniel's death and realizes that there is none. And yet the book ends on a hopeful note, with Sol and Nathan and Abby and Ben enjoying a beautiful day at the beach under the Golden Gate Bridge. Until this time, the city had been portrayed as dirty and dangerous. But now Sol notices the color of the bridge against the blue sky. Nathan takes his arm and instead of shrugging him off, Sol lets Nathan hold his arm. It seems insignificant, but it's not. It's a connection and maybe a new beginning.

Lee says

I debated between 2 and 3 stars on this one. I guess there's a sad inevitability that the holocaust survivor parents want the All American wonderful life for their two sons, yet by keeping their family history from the kids, they've done them a huge disservice and don't understand the boys' lack of humanity in actions later in their life. It's so tragic, these stories about fathers and sons especially not being open and honest with each other to the detriment of both sides.

Timothy OConnor says

Not recommended. Too many dysfunctional characters with little resolution by the end of the novel.

Jenny says

I really really enjoyed this book. Although "enjoyed" might not be the proper way to describe such a sad novel. Each character has suffered through loss, heartache, and the confusion of their past. The story shows how if you don't talk about your past or what is on your mind it can hurt you and the people you love. As you go through life and the simplest things remind you of loss, but if you aren't willing to talk about it then no one can understand you or get close to you. How a pile of shoes can be a memory of a concentration camp during the Holocaust or it can be a labor strike at a shoe factory; but it's the pain of the memory that is most important to share. The author is a professor at the University of Oregon and based on this first novel I would enjoy one of his classes.

Paola says

Questo libro lo comprai forse più di un anno fa in una scampagnata libreria a Varese. Non mi ricordavo nemmeno di averlo. Poi poche sere fa il titolo accalappa, quali configurazioni associative si siano messe in atto restano per il momento inconse, e magari continueranno a restarlo. Credo che il libro lo comprai perché l'autore, a me allora sconosciuto, è israeliano e io nutro interesse per la letteratura israeliana.

La scrittura è molto densa, pastosa, immaginifica, la storia è di quelle che scorticano e conduce a molto riflettere.

È un romanzo con un peso specifico simile al piombo.

Narra della Shoah e del sopravvivere alla Shoah.

Delle scelte obbligate dal contesto concentrazionario.

Del vissuto di chi queste "scelte" ha dovuto, come ha potuto, farle.

Di come questa scelta accompagnerà tutta la vita, la inquinerà, la sporcherà, e farà ombra alla vita dei figli.

È un romanzo che narra anche del rapporto padre/figlio, ma anche della relazione fra fratelli.

È un romanzo che narra della difficoltà dell'espressione dei sentimenti e delle emozioni.

Ma, e soprattutto, è un romanzo che parla della rabbia, sorda, potente, profonda, primordiale verso un destino, o un dio, che hanno plasmato una vita imprimendogli una direzione alla quale non è possibile nessuna ribellione né redenzione, né perdono.

Anche se EA nel finale lascia intravedere uno spiraglio, una piccola luce che forse permetterà a chi è sopravvissuto di convivere con il dolore, la perdita di persone amate e di, in un qualche modo, potersi permettere di perdonare e perdonarsi, e venire a patti con la vita.

Da leggere.

