

The Fifth Son. Elie Wiesel. Summit, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020. 220 pp. \$15.95.

Davita's Harp. Chaim Potok. Knopf, 201 East 50th Street, New York, NY 10022. \$16.95.

Inside, Outside. Herman Wouk. Little Brown, 34 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02106. \$19.95.

Reviewed by Benjamin Nelson

The three new novels are by authors who share a commonality of Jewish outlook, tradition and sensibility. However, each writer speaks with a distinct voice out of a personal vision.

A survivor of the Holocaust and its most eloquent poet, Elie Wiesel has turned repeatedly to the issues and questions raised by the most traumatic event of our century. In his latest novel, *The Fifth Son*, Wiesel presents a stunning and disturbing image of the isolation and possible redemption of a second-generation Holocaust victim, the son of a survivor whose journey toward retribution and self-recognition is the central action of the book.

The story, told in overlapping narratives by four figures: the youth, his father, and two of the father's friends (also survivors), shuttles back and forth in time from contemporary New York to a Nazi-enslaved ghetto in Europe of the 1940s. The underlying plot involves the unnamed son's

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plan to accomplish what his father had botched after the war: the execution of the sadistic SS officer who had terrorized the ghetto and brutally murdered the father's first son. For this young man, the execution will be both an act of retributive justice as well as a means of breaking through the barrier of incomprehensibility between his father and himself.

This is the stuff of powerful drama, and in terms of plot and structure, Wiesel handles it with consummate skill. The climax and resolution is perceptive and challenging. Nonetheless, something is missing in this complex morality tale: an emotional core to the characters who move through it.

For all its poetic beauty and moral seriousness, *The Fifth Son* is a curiously detached and isolate work, a dramatization of a thesis in which characters serve more as illustrations than human beings. The thesis is pertinent and profound, but the illustrations are still illustrations.

If Elie Wiesel's characters tend to shade toward the abstract, Chaim Potok's have often been mired in one-dimensionality. In *The Chosen*,

the story was interesting enough to compensate for the lack of in-depth characterization, but in subsequent novels, in which the story became increasingly repetitive, the superficiality of the characters became increasingly obvious and, in the process, weakened the narrative. Potok was caught on a treadmill. With *Davita's Harp*, he has happily and successfully leaped off. Although the concerns in *Davita's Harp* are vintage Potok — the schism between tradition and modernism, faith and doubt, and the emotional and spiritual crises of a child moving toward adulthood — they are dramatized here with a skillful and imaginative quality that makes this his best book to date.

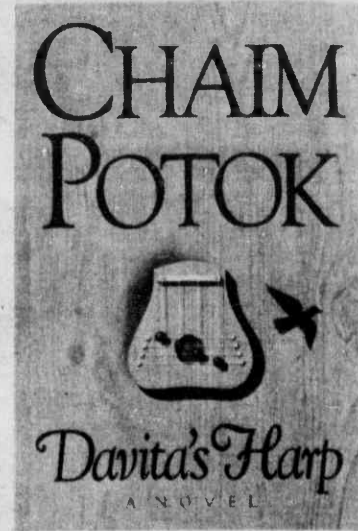
Ilana Davita Chandal is the daughter of a Christian father and Jewish mother who are both atheistic and suffused with a zealous commitment to Communist ideology and idealism so prevalent among the young intellectuals of the 1930s. The book dramatizes the young girl's loving but complex relationship with her parents, their struggles for survival and meaning, and her own process of maturation through pain, death, disillusionment and love.

In his portrayal of the girl and her mother, Potok has

created two of his finest characters. They are multifaceted, believable and deeply human. Their developments, which subtly parallel each other, are rendered with great insight and compassion.

The climactic, epiphanal moment in which Davita envisions the speech she would have given had not her yeshiva reneged (because of her sex) on awarding her a prize for Talmudic studies, is not only a gem of creative imagination, but a beautiful and wondrous synthesis of the themes of the novel in a single, poetic act of faith, courage and hope. Like the harp of its title, this novel, despite some flaws, gives off a sweet, pure and gentle sound.

On the last page of Herman Wouk's *Inside, Outside*, the first-person narrator, Israel David Goodkind, sums up the book. "It is a kaddish for my father...but in counterpoint it is also a torch song of the thirties, a sentimental Big Band number." It is that indeed — and more. It is also a kaddish, riotously and poignantly ambivalent, for Goodkind's mother, a presence in his life and memory even more dominant than Goodkind's much gentler and self-effacing



father. It is also a story about Goodkind himself and the inside/outside equilibrium of his life.

Inside, Outside is far from being a perfect novel. Like many of Wouk's previous books it bogs down into woefully clichéd situations, its language often flattens out into banalities, and some of its characters, particularly the women, remain predictable stereotypes. Ironically, the daughter of Goodkind, his "shikse" first love, and to an extent his embarrassingly indomitable mother have been treated more brilliantly and incisively in the novels of Philip Roth, a writer whom Wouk skewers hilariously in the person of a neurotic self-hating American-Jewish author who is a friend of Goodkind.

What lifts *Inside, Outside* above second-rate Philip Roth? The answer is simple:

(cont'd on page 16)

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- Soups
- Matzo Ball Mix
- Bakit
- Matzo Ball Soup
- Matzo Ball Broth
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- Whitefish & Pike
- Potato Kugel Mix
- Matzo Meal

Empire Frozen Kosher Food

- Pie Crust
- Potato Latkes
- Natural Cut Potatoes
- Challah Dough
- Chall-ettes
- Rye Bread
- Chopped Liver Spread
- Chicken
- Breaded Mushrooms
- Pot Pies
- Pizza
- Bagels
- English Muffin Mix
- Frozen Blintzes
- Bagel Pizza
- Garlic Bread

Kineret Kosher Frozen Food

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- Blintzes
- Potato Latkes

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- Wolff Groats/Kasha
- Joyva Halvah Candy
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