

Book Reviews by Sybil Kaplan

Miriam's Song, A Book for Mother's Day

Miriam's Song by Smadar Shir, Gefen Publishing House, \$34.95 paperback, 350 pp., February 15, 2016

Those of us who live and work in Israel as journalists and book reviewers often have to wait until an Israeli best seller is translated from the Hebrew into English. I, for one, am very excited when this occurs, as is the case with this biography. *The Shirat Miriam, The Song of Miriam*, the story of Miriam Peretz, was published in 2011, was a bestseller in Israel and sold over 20,000 copies.

To read this book is to know and understand what it is like to be an exemplary mother in Israel.

Miriam was born in Casablanca where her family lived until she was 10 years old. In 1963, the family immigrated to Israel, was very poor, and initially lived in an immigrant camp in Beersheva. After graduating high school, Miriam went to Ben-Gurion University and became a teacher.

When she was 21, she met Eliezer, who was 31, also Moroccan. They married, and he returned to his work in Sharm el Sheikh. At some point, she moved there until Sharm was evacuated. Meanwhile she began teaching, and they started their family.

In November 1988, Uriel, their 22-year-old son, a Golani (special forces) officer was killed in Lebanon, while in the army. Miriam kept going.

"My husband was overcome with sadness and wouldn't go to work, but I had no choice but to continue functioning." She subsequently sat for her Master's degree in educational administration. Her second son joined the army, and she and her husband continued processing the grief for Uriel. Miriam began to visit schools and military bases to talk about her son.

In 2005, her husband died. In March 2010, her son, Eliraz, married with four children, was killed while in the army. Now Miriam, the widow, had had two sons killed in Israel's wars.

In December 2010, IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi awarded her a medal of appreciation. He said: "Miriam's ability to continue to express her deep pain and channel it into a contribution to the education and formation of future generations, serves as an example and model of inspiration for us all."

The next group of chapters is narrated by the four younger siblings. Miriam left her principal position after 27 years to become a Jerusalem district supervisor of value education.

Miriam's Song was published in Hebrew, and she began to travel to the US for Friends of the Israel Defense Forces.

In 2014, Miriam was a torch bearer for Israel Independence Day.

For a feature for International Women's Day, March 8, 2016, in *The Jerusalem Post*, Miriam was interviewed and photographed along with two other mothers who had each lost a son. In the article by Tal Ariel Amir, he writes, "these three courageous women have risen from the ashes of their despair."

People ask what it is like to live in Israel. Although Miriam's book is one replete with courage and faith and commitment, it is also a symbol of what living here can be like for some people, some women, some mothers, some wives. It is a book to read and understand what it means to be a woman, a wife, a mother in Israel today.

Smadar Shir is a prolific Israeli author who has published 400 children's books as well as seven novels. She has also written hundreds of children's songs which were composed and recorded for CDs and DVDs. Many of her stories are included in kindergarten and elementary school anthologies. Some of her other books are part of the annual curriculum in middle schools as well as high schools. Along with her personal work in writing, Smadar Shir works as a senior journalist at a daily newspaper, *Yediot Ahronot*. ✪

For Yom HaShoah, A Novel: The Nightingale

The Nightingale by Kristin Hannah, St. Martin's Press, \$27.99 hardcover, 330 pp., February 3, 2015

This is one of those books in which you cannot wait to turn the page, or you would like to stay up and just read and read.

Kristin Hannah, according to her publisher, is the New York Times bestselling author of 21 novels. Lawyer turned writer, she and her family live in the Pacific Northwest and Hawaii.

In *The Nightingale*, the first chapter and several along the way are narrated by one of two sisters who has lived in Oregon for 50 years, has received a sad "diagnosis." She is being moved to a senior citizen residence by her son. She utters a statement which is one of the major themes of the book — "If I have learned anything in this long life of mine, it is this: In love we find out who we want to be; in war we find out who we are."

The narrator's identity is, thus, a secret in the beginning and remains so until the end of the novel.

The rest of the chapters alternate between the two sisters, Vianne Mauriac, a teacher, who

lives in Carriveau, France with her husband and daughter and her sister, Isabelle Rossignol, an 18-year-old rebellious young woman. Their father disowned them when their mother died, and each young woman went a different way. Now he is cold and distant, still unwilling to be a parent.

It is 1939 German-occupied France when Vianne's husband is called to war. Soon after, a German captain requisitions their house and begins to live there. With each action, each day, Vianne is faced with new challenges.

Isabelle seeks a way to deal with the Nazi takeover, characteristic of her behavior.

We see how each of the sisters responds to war — Vianne with caution and fear and Isabelle with anger and defiance.

Each sister experiences love — Vianne as a mature married woman; Isabelle as an impulsive and immature young woman.

The issue of Vianne's Jewish neighbor does not enter the book until one quarter of the way through, but from then on, it is a moving situation and a different take on the Holocaust World War II period.

In *The Nightingale*, we see two courageous women confronted by powerful challenges.

If I have avoided the details of the plot, suffice to say you will probably want to pull out the tissues. If you can help it, don't put the book down until you finish. ✪

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