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Book Review



Chaim Potok

THE BOOK OF LIGHTS
by Chaim Potok
Knopf; 370 pages; \$13.50

Albert Einstein ponders the young rabbi's last name: "Loran. That is, I believe, also the name of a navigational instrument, is it not?" As usual, the physicist is correct: the acronym for long-range navigation also describes the hero of Chaim Potok's fifth and most ambitious novel. Although the author has retained a strong narrative drive, he has abandoned the matzo-barrel homilies that marked such early works as *The Chosen* and *The Promise*. Once again his themes are ethnic, but his concerns are universal.

Orphaned in the late 30's, when his parents were killed in a now forgotten Arab-Israeli battle, Gershon Loran is raised by an uncle in a Brooklyn ghetto. Surrounded by squalor, the teen-ager refuses to succumb to despair. One summer night, he watches a mongrel bitch give birth to

a litter of puppies. In a sudden rush of insight, resting on the roof of a tenement he is seized by the miraculous: "He felt all caught up in the life of heaven and earth, in the mystery of creation, in the pain and inexhaustible glory of this single moment." *The Book of Lights* charts Loran's search to recreate that epiphany.

In college and later the seminary, Loran retreats from humanity, abandoning the generous philosophy of the Talmud for the magical pronouncements of the Kabbalah. A fellow student wonders: "Do you transform yourself in the night? Do you become a Rabbi Hyde?" No; Loran remains Rabbi Jekyll, a self-described *Zwischenmensch*, a between-man, traversing the border between reality and self-delusion. His girlfriend acutely observes, "Your eyes go somewhere else."

Certainly they are not focused on her, or on his roommate Arthur Leiden, one of Potok's most complex and compelling characters. Leiden's father was a parent of the atomic bomb. The son's heritage is a lifelong nightmare of incinerated birds in his Los Alamos backyard. But if Leiden Jr. is damned at night, he distributes blessings by day; he induces his family to aid Gershon with a scholarship; later Leiden prevails upon "Uncle Albert" Einstein to make

the journey from Princeton to the graduation. The favors are not returned; Loran is too busy probing his own psyche. He has plenty of company. In '50s America, the Holocaust is not yet an obsession. Instead, Topic A in synagogues and cafeterias is the sins committed by Jews. The elder Leiden reflects, "We tinker with light and atomic bombs...No one is on more familiar terms with the heart of the insanity in the universe than is the Jew, and no one is more frenetic and untidy in the search for an answer...We offer apocalypses in a pushcart."

And in starch khaki. Still searching for transcendence, Loran enlists in the Army to become the only rabbi in post-truce Korea. As the young chaplain ministers to occupation troops, he wrestles less with the Kabbalah than with morale reports and charts of the VD rate for enlisted men.

On leave, he wanders around Japan, ill at ease in the crowded cities and out of place in the temples of Kyoto. In Hiroshima, where "all the darkness and light of the species" lurks in the ruins, he is joined by Leiden, now a fellow chaplain.

The novelist's prose may be excessively plain, but neither his text nor his cast is simple, Potok knows that personal illuminations like those of physics, are transitory: the glow of a Brooklyn coal furnace, the sunshine on Mount Fuji, the ambiguous light of the atom and the consolations of philosophy do not stay. They must be discovered again and again, generation after generation. Ironically, it is a sense of impermanence that grants the novel its sense of durability and makes it, literally, a book of lights.

-By J.D. Reed

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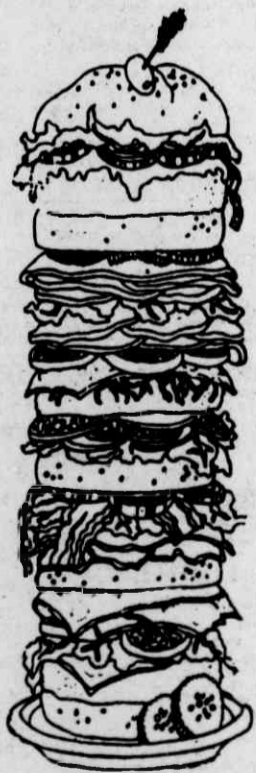
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