

## FROM THE NEW WORLD

The current state of the British Jewish novel looks healthy (see page 49) and, as usual, North American authors are producing much innovative new work. We review three books from across the pond

### *FIELDS OF EXILE*

NORA GOLD

Dundurn, 2014, pb, 424pp, \$19

Reviewed by SHOSHANA ISH-HOROWICZ

*Fields of Exile* is an ambitious new novel by Canadian author Nora Gold. Ambitious because it takes on an important and highly controversial issue: Gold has chosen to explore anti-Israel politics, ‘the new antisemitism’, specifically as it appears on university campuses. Her novel forces the reader to consider questions without giving any easy answers.

The story begins with a deathbed scene during which Judith, the protagonist, accedes to her dying father’s wish and promises to stay in Canada for a year to complete a Masters in social work. Judith’s reluctance gives a clear introduction to her character; she made aliyah a decade earlier and adores her new home. Her passion for Israel, however, is not blind; she is avowedly left-wing, highly critical of prime minister Sharon, and belongs to an extended network of peace activists, all of whom share her views. This clear political identity is

increasingly challenged during the novel as Judith is confronted with the virulent anti-Israel dogma of the non-Israeli Left.

Although this topic is typically the domain of non-fiction, Gold is comfortable bringing the debate into a new genre. An example of this is through her use of description and word play.

“‘Exile,’ she says aloud. As she says it, it sounds like Eggs Isle. Eggs on a desert isle. An island full of eggs. Eggs in Hebrew are baitzim. Baitzim means eggs, but also testicles. So broken eggs are broken testicles. No babies can come from broken testicles. So there can be no future. No future for the Jewish people. In Eggs Isle. In Exile.”

Gold’s Judith is a modern re-imagining of the biblical heroine— the beautiful and ideological saviour of the Jewish people. I don’t want to give away the ending, but loyalty, infiltration and violence are all part of the dramatic denouement. There are differences, however; this Judith is unashamedly sexual, enjoying erotic daydreams during her boring Masters seminars, and frequently behaving like the antithesis of the chaste widow in the Bible. While narrating a violent political struggle,

Gold humanises her heroine by engaging explicitly with her body and physical needs. It is a brave decision; in *Fields of Exile* political battles are fought with the gloves off, and, often, other clothes off as well.

Throughout the novel, Judith fights with herself, with her friends and with the wider academic world in her attempt to balance her own criticism of Israel while responding to the vicious anti-Israel stance of the college at which she studies. These are serious issues and, although *Fields of Exile* is a challenging, often difficult read, it has an important message, presenting arguments too seldom addressed in discussions about the State of Israel.

