

BOOK REVIEW

'As Close to Us as Breathing,' by Elizabeth Poliner

By ELI GOTTLIEB MARCH 25, 2016

AS CLOSE TO US AS BREATHING

By Elizabeth Poliner

358 pp. A Lee Boudreaux Book/Little, Brown & Company. \$27.

In "As Close to Us as Breathing," her novel about a sprawling but close-knit Jewish family, Elizabeth Poliner sets herself a dual challenge: to tell a story in a first-person voice that omnisciently inhabits the minds of its many participants while also using a recursive narrating style that flows back and forth across a nearly hundred-year span of time. The result is a resonant, sensitively observed but slightly florid book that ends up blunting its own narrative drive.

Molly Syrkin, the narrator, is 12 at the novel's opening, and swiftly lays out the single complicating event for all that will follow: "The summer of 1948 my brother Davy was killed in an accident." The details of the tragedy are withheld until the very end, in what is presumably an attempt to inject suspense into the story line. What we learn immediately is that the particular summer in question, like most summers for this family, was spent in and around that great democratizing solace of American Jews: the ocean. Coney Island is probably the historically best-known American Jewish summer beach, but Poliner shines a light on a lesser known attraction, the so-called Bagel Beach along the Connecticut shore, where for a few months each summer, a kind of Catskills-by-the-Sea sprang up, replete with

Jewish-only shops, cottages and the usual rainbow of Semite-specific anxieties.

The narrator herself, a shy, somewhat passive girl, is also a sharp observer of “the unwanted afterlife we’d all been thrust into,” following the death of her brother, and of the continuing dramas of her two aunts Vivie and Bec, and her mother, Ada, a volatile character who is also the family beauty. It is the lives of these three older women, along with the branching tributaries of their parents, relatives, lovers, spouses and children, that constitute the narrative of the book — though it is the children, perhaps, who are portrayed most empathically. Much of the action takes place in childhood, and Poliner has a keen eye for the awkwardness and sudden leaping insights of adolescents on the brink of adulthood.

Because Molly’s family is religious, the book also dwells on domestic Jewish rituals, lavishing special attention on the Sabbath, “the Queen of Days,” that stretch of 24 hours ingeniously engineered by the ancient rabbis to honor God, and while doing so, lasso the family into relaxed togetherness. For the Syrkin brood, the Sabbath cuts two ways, because it also signals the moment when the women and their children must clean house after a few low-key seaside days together and brace themselves for the arrival of needy husbands returning from the city in a weekend quest for food, rest, sex and succor: “Shabbos was soon to arrive, which meant the men would be returning, and the sisters, so entwined with each other during the week, would unravel and split, like branches on a tree.”

Poliner is an effective chronicler of that fraught interspace where ancient Jewish custom butts up against the shiny modernity of American life. In the words of Saul Bellow, “The Jews were strange to the world for a great length of time, and now the world is being strange to them in return.” It’s clear that right outside the Jewish enclave of Bagel Beach, the Other begins, and that Other, particularly with the acrid taint of the Holocaust still lingering in the air, is a source both of temptation and of threat.

The book has a loose, digressive structure, and its specific plot details — struggling business ventures, intercultural love interests, betrayals, lesbian affairs,

end-of-life regrets and, of course, the central, resonating tragedy — can sound a bit soapy in summary, as if the author were trying to cover all the dramatic bases. Yet Poliner also deserves kudos for the warm, particularized light in which she dresses her many characters. “As Close to Us as Breathing” is a big-hearted roundelay of a novel that, among other things, performs the invaluable service of recovering a lost world.

Eli Gottlieb’s most recent novel, “Best Boy,” will be out in paperback in May.

A version of this review appears in print on March 27, 2016, on page BR15 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Catskills-by-the-Sea.

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