

Book Notes - Rabbi Steven Rubenstein

Two She-Bears by Meir Shalev

I've read several of Meir Shalev's books—and I'm planning to read more. Looking at the page that lists all of his works near the front of the book though, I think I won't get to them all. It lists 7 novels, 5 books of non-fiction, and 8 children's books. Another Israeli writer that deserves a broad readership among anyone interested in Israeli society.

Leaving aside the story itself, it is wonderful reading Shalev. The bond between the characters in the book and the Land of Israel is worth reading even without the plot. The descriptions of the land, the plants, flowers, trees, and animals make the reader feel connected to the land.

I had a challenging time describing the novel after reading it. It is certainly a story about several generations of Ruta Tavori's family. And it is also a story of terrible family tragedy and the various ways tragedy changes the course of people's lives.

We hear most of this story in the voice (and from the perspective) of Ruta Tavori. She is being interviewed in her home by a graduate student about gender roles in the world of the Israeli moshav (a communal settlement but without the socialist underpinnings of the kibbutz.) It isn't always easy sticking with Ruta as she goes off on tangents (or directions that seem to be tangential,) but she is a great story-teller and you want her to keep talking as the story unfolds.

The framework of having Ruta tell her story to a student studying gender is not coincidental. Much of the book deals with gender roles and ultimately, what it means to be a man. Through Ruta's eyes, we get to know her grandfather, her husband, her brother, and her son. Of course, as we learn about the men in Ruta's life, we also come to know Ruta's (largely absent) mother, her grandmother, her sister-in-law, and Ruta herself.

As I mentioned, Shalev's descriptions of the moshav and the desert are worth the time spent reading the book. Bringing Ruta and her family into your life is a bonus. She will be hard to forget.