

Leo Rosen drags his daughters, ten year old Emma and thirteen year old May, to the beach on Rosh-Hashanah just to parade in bathing suits his contempt for the other Jews in the projects, perched on benches following synagogue on a crisp October day. "...All Leo sees is a huddled group of nameless, faceless men and women...frightened of pain, death, and sorrow—as are we all—foolishly and desperately turn to the supernatural, wrong-headedly calling their fears, "faith," despite all the empirical evidence to the contrary, too weak to acknowledge their own frailties." This is 1965 and some of those nameless, faceless people have numbers tattooed to their wrists, Holocaust survivors with terror-struck pasts that Leo barely registers.

He's a commie, a lower middle class atheist who still believes Communism, given half a chance, could solve humanity's woes, certain in particular that religion is the root of most evil. Steinbeck is his hero, but Leo's dreams of writing the greatest American novel since *The Grapes of Wrath* have crumpled into a candy store in The Bronx. From Leo's Candies he dispenses "Truth with a Capitol T" to anyone willing to listen,

Charismatic on a small stage, he'll slap around even a child who doubts him, as Emma does when she dares to venture into a nearby church. "Individuals shape their own lives,' he's fond of saying to his wife and two daughters, in the stirring, theatrical tones he'd perfected as captain of his Brooklyn high school's debating team." Yet Leo is haunted by nightmares of his own father's beatings, and his mother's coldness. His wife, frumpy pessimist Annette, is a socialist, a weak-kneed position according to her husband. Leo's certainty, while stamping out subtly, and free choice, is hard ballast against the storms of life. That is, until May becomes sick with a tumor, a situation to test faith in anything. Where is certainty in the face of such personal suffering? This question is the crux of Janice Eidus's heartfelt, searching fourth novel "The War of the Rosens" (Behler Publications).

At times the cruelty is visceral: Leo's violent temper, May's jealous hatred of Emma, Emma wishing her older sister dead. Annette, afraid and harried, defrosts the fridge rather than deal with daughters she loves but is not certain she likes. If you've ever had a stinging sibling rivalry this book will throw you back into the fray. With me it was shoelaces demarking the territory. I don't remember

who started it, but I was younger and I laid down the map, once the terms were dictated. It wasn't fair either because, like Emma, the closets were on my side of the room. A chalk line, scratched onto the floor by May in a fit of rage, yields the first of two defining crescendos that shape the story.

It's not all dark. A wickedly absurdist humor catches at just the right moments. Emma's behind her father's back quest for meaning is drawn with poignant hilarity. A Catholic classmate, Rosmary Mammano is envied for her ease with swear words, and her sure faith, though not the bigotry that comes with it (Leo successfully passed on his liberal egalitarianism). Emma secretly prays to a statue of Mary poised serenely in a church garden across from the projects. She convinces her best friend Shelley to sneak into a Sunday service—using the ploy of their being a Jewish James Gang infiltrating the enemy camp. But once her hand touches Holy Water, Emma panics, runs home, horrified, to bathe for an hour in “Jewish water” out of the tap, just in case there is a god of the Jews.

Ignorant of her daughter's passionate search for answers, Annette fantasizes running away from home. Not needing a constant audience, as Leo does, she would like once in a while to be thanked for endless cooking and scrubbing. She goes all out for Thanksgiving, which only adds to Emma's confusion. “‘The one holiday,’ her mother says every year, ‘we celebrate because we have things to be thankful for, even if we don't attribute them to God.’ She never says what it is that she believes the supposedly cursed Rosens...have to be thankful for, and Emma never asks, because she suspects that her mother would probably just shrug and say something like, ‘Now that you ask, absolutely nothing.’” This year there isn't even turkey. The Rosen world has been flipped inside out by May's diagnosis.

The journey back to the Gun Hill Projects reflects a time that now seems innocent. Uniformly bland brick buildings are alive with an ethnic mix, sixties songs fill the background, and chance meetings at the elevator serve as a telegraph system; in the projects people are not strangers. And there are the candies Leo sells, names called out like mantras running through the book: Good 'n Plenty, Raisinettes, Milk Duds, Junior Mints, Pez, Chunkies...manna to the neighborhood kids.

The story is ultimately Emma's, as she grows increasingly independent. Shelly more than once protests her friend's new bossiness (Leo's gene pool rising?). He won't for long control the daughter he blatantly favors. He reads Shakespeare and Steinbeck to Emma, telling May this isn't for her; she's good with numbers, he says, unwittingly dismissing his first born. Ashamed of her parents and "uncouth" sister, May retaliates, dreams of a mannered life in California once she is grown up and married to Marvin Ludwig, the boy she is "destined" for, though he barely notices her.

There is a fairy tale moment near the end of the book involving May and Marvin that edges the sentimental, a sudden turn around when Marvin unexpectedly pays a visit. It's Valentine's Day, too, and Leo surprises his girls with boxes of chocolates. No one is sure what to do as the milk of human kindness suddenly pours over the warring Rosens. The moment encompasses a family drawn in around illness, despair hovering like rotten fruit on a summer afternoon. The ready to implode status quo has to shift and shift seismically; Leo adjusts. If he can't change the world, he can at least try to change himself. In the face of impossible suffering, clarity of self might be all there is to go on.

The Rosens begin in The Bronx, living cramped lives in close quarters, and expand to a larger world. The perennially repeated family dynamic is rephrased here in pitch perfect tones: life caught acutely at its most stubborn worst, communication shot to hell. It takes a catastrophe to shake the mix and what flushes out is not a fairy tale.