



Breaking boundaries:
Ayelet Tsabari

Strange new worlds

Ayelet Tsabari's short stories break all moulds of Israeli fiction, says **Lyn Julius**, on the reissue of the author's award-winning debut collection

The vast open spaces and forests of Canada beckon. British Columbia bills itself 'The best place on earth'. It is where Jerusalemite Tamar has escaped to live with her non-Jewish boyfriend. But is she ready to plunge into total assimilation, and start a family? And isn't 'the best place on earth' – the antithesis of the crazy intensity of the 'holiest place on earth' – really rather boring?

Dysfunctional families, friendships and tensions abound in Ayelet Tsabari's collection of short stories. Worlds collide. A Moroccan girl soldier in Casualties, who forges medical forms, verges on the criminal. Strangers fall in love, have wild, washroom flings or exchange shy kisses – the newly-religious with the secular, the Yemeni with the Russian, the Filipina carer with the Israeli next door, the hippy Israeli with the Bedouin Arab.

Tsabari's book is peopled with young Israelis trapped in the stifling reality of war, suicide bombings and missile attacks. The world outside is seductive to free spirits: pacifist India, where young Israelis go after their army service, is swathed in pot smoke and incense. As much as she tries to invent herself, Maya, an Israeli dark enough to pass for an Indian, is made to confront the harsh reality: she does not really belong there. Neither, for that matter, does her half-Indian, half-British boyfriend.

In another story, Reuma visits her daughter and new grandson in Canada. She is shocked to discover that the new parents have adamantly refused to give

their baby boy a brit mila. Can Reuma ever forgive her daughter? Or can Jewish identity be passed on in other ways?

As Israeli writers go, Tsabari has broken the mould. She is from a traditional Yemenite family, not from the Ashkenazi elite. Her habitat is a tawdry city suburb, not a kibbutz. The writing is light, sharp and sensual, capturing the banal, the heat and the dust. Tsabari puts herself in the shoes of young and old, male and female.

One character, a budding teenage poet, had always thought that real poetry was written by old Ashkenazi men: "...it had to be about good and important things like the land and the people who died for it." He never knew he could write about everyday things – such as the No. 61 bus.

Some critics have mistakenly tried to politicise Tsabari's work as the expression of 'Mizrahi alienation'. But Tsabari cannot be pigeon-holed as an angry young writer. Whether as the voice of the poet of the No. 61 bus, of sexually-liberated youth who are made or broken by the army, or of all those caught between tradition and modernity, she is one of the most exciting writers to emerge from Israel today. ■



The Best Place on Earth by Ayelet Tsabari, Harper Collins, £8.99. Lyn Julius is the co-founder of Harif, an association of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa. www.harif.org



LAST CHANCE TO SEE!

Yeshiva kid to fashion king

New York's Jewish Museum is celebrating the work of fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi. It's stunning – but leaves some questions unanswered, reports **Rebecca Taylor**

How did a Sephardi 'yeshiva bocher' from Brooklyn end up heading a multi-million pound fashion house? While New York's Jewish Museum doesn't quite answer that question, its show on US fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi is an enjoyable romp through recent fashion history.

Born in 1961 and raised in Brooklyn's tight-knit Sephardi community, Mizrahi's tailor father helped him buy his first sewing machine. At 13, he made his first garment: a wool skirt for his mother to wear for the High Holidays, and he went on to study performing arts and design. His career took off in the 1980s, coinciding with the rise of supermodels such as Naomi Campbell who wore his idiosyncratic designs that blended couture fashion with sportswear.

The exhibition shows his colourful creations alongside fabric swatches and storyboards. A collection of his costume designs includes those for the Magic Flute production that Mizrahi also directed, at the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in 2014. There is also a beautiful video installation made up of clips from television, film and the catwalk. Some commentators have noted that, apart from featuring a belt buckle in the shape of a Star of David and referring to his attendance at the Yeshivah of Flatbush elementary school, where pupils are drawn from the local Syrian community, there is little that explores the Jewish influences on his work.

This is strange given the distinctive cultural background he emerged from, the Jewish relationship to the garment trade (as illustrated by the recent exhibition on the subject at London's Jewish Museum), and interviews with Mizrahi in which he acknowledges the importance of his background on his work. Still, if you are in New York, it's a delightful show to catch. ■

Isaac Mizrahi: An unruly history runs at The Jewish Museum, New York until 7 August. www.thejewishmuseum.org