



Hope: A Tragedy

Shalom Auslander

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FROM THE CREATOR OF SHOWTIME'S "HAPPYISH"

The bestselling debut novel from Shalom Auslander, the darkly comic author of *Foreskin's Lament* and *Beware of God*.

A New York Times Notable Book 2012

The rural town of Stockton, New York, is famous for nothing: no one was born there, no one died there, nothing of any historical import at all has ever happened there, which is why Solomon Kugel, like other urbanites fleeing their pasts and histories, decided to move his wife and young son there.

To begin again. To start anew. But it isn't quite working out that way for Kugel...

His ailing mother stubbornly holds on to life, and won't stop reminiscing about the Nazi concentration camps she never actually suffered through. To complicate matters further, some lunatic is burning down farmhouses just like the one Kugel bought, and when, one night, he discovers history—a living, breathing, thought-to-be-dead specimen of history—hiding upstairs in his attic, bad quickly becomes worse.

Hope: A Tragedy is a hilarious and haunting examination of the burdens and abuse of history, propelled with unstoppable rhythm and filled with existential musings and mordant wit. It is a comic and compelling story of the hopeless longing to be free of those pasts that haunt our every present.

Hope: A Tragedy Details

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Author : Shalom Auslander

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From Reader Review Hope: A Tragedy for online ebook

Licha says

It pays off to go library shelf browsing. I've picked up some fantastic books this way. This one had me laughing out loud several times, the unexpected type of humor that would make you spit out your drink if you were drinking while reading.

Kugel is a neurotic worrywart of a man. He has just moved into a new farmhouse. His wife is upset that his mother is living with them and not dying fast enough (I was never able to tell what exactly was wrong with mom as she seemed quite spunky and it was also never mentioned why the wife wanted her out so bad.) He worries about his son growing up in a world filled with cruelty, wishing he had dropped him on his head as a baby so perhaps the harsh realities of life will pass by him unaware. As if that weren't enough to worry him there's someone burning down the farmhouses in the community.

Then Kugel starts to hear a tap, tap in his attic.

The absurdity of him finding that Anne Frank has been living in his attic and will not leave until she finishes writing a book that must surpass the 32 million sold had me laughing and following my daughter around, begging her to let me share passages in the book with her. (Like a typical teenager she will usually wave me off. No, mom. I'm busy. I'm doing homework.)

His mother is hilarious and those are some of the funniest sections of the book.

Great ending that wrapped up the story well.

Jessica says

Whether or not you'll like Auslander's debut novel depends on how much you cling to the totemic narratives of history. If you're not afraid to wrestle down those figures and interrogate the validity of their martyr status, then you'll relish this supremely dark and twisty comedy of faith and modern life. If you bristle at reconsidering why you worship the surviving narratives of history's darkest time, then you won't like it at all. Ultimately it's a novel that will speak to the most revisionist of us, but provoke plenty of conversation either way. I wanted to hate it, but ultimately realized that it left me haunted with questions for days after finishing it. So I only urge you to read it if you'll come and tell me what you thought afterwards...

Read my full review of this book at The Millions: <http://www.themillions.com/2012/01/so...>

Vio says

O carte excelent?, care mi-a amintit pe alocuri de Dostoievski, Kafka ?i Beckett. În ap?rarea mea, chestia asta am gîndit-o în englez? ?i m? gîndeam s? scriu Dostoievski meets Kafka meets Beckett, dar mi-a fost lene s? v?d cum se scrie Dostoievski în englez?. Bun.

Pentru mine, cu cât ?tiam mai pu?in despre cartea asta în special, cu atât mai bine. Nu o s? m? intereseze vreodat? o carte care "î?i face reclam?" cu "Hitler a fost un optimist". Plus c? m? intrigase teribil o recenzie care con?inea pi*dam?sii, phii, ce stres.

Pîn? la urm?, am constatat întâmpl?tor, am citit toate c?r?ile lui Shalom Auslander, în ordinea apari?iei, neinten?ionat? ordine, dar foarte interesant?.

Traducerea e splendid?, bravo, Carmen Scarlat! Cîteva gre?elu?e, a fost ok.

Recomand cu mare drag. Zero spoilere de la mine. ;)

Lisa says

This book did not work for me.

It should have.

It is a satire, reportedly funny. I love satire. But I didn't think it was funny. At all. I did not laugh once.

Its thesis statement is dethroning of heroes and reevaluation of historical events. I love those topics. I hated the way it was handled in this book, though.

What went wrong? I have tried to put my finger on it, and the only thing I can come up with is that the humour was slapstick, immature vulgarity, which I despise. Instead of making me smile, it made me cringe at the effect-seeking bluntness and lack of finesse. I don't mind strong or simplistic language per se, if it makes sense, but a whole novel with a long line of basic dialogues, spiced up with godammits and fucks, isn't exactly what I want to waste my time on.

As for the dethroning of heroes: It was the wrong person. To me, Anne Frank never was a hero, just a human, childlike voice in the darkest hour of history. There is no need to dethrone her, because she never aspired to be put on a throne. Her diary, consisting of reflections and thoughts on a much more mature level than this so-called satire, has a place in my heart that I do not want to see trashed. If the post-war hero cult is to be made fun of, I would rather see the people who put her on a pedestal ridiculed than her. She was an innocent victim of the Holocaust. Period.

There is a tendency in contemporary literature to make fun of everything, to buy an audience with cheap jokes. I am not thrilled. Maybe there is something wrong with my sense of humour.

Not recommended.

Mircalla64 says

quando il postmodernismo impatta con l'umorismo ebraico...

Auslander è ormai un personaggio con caratteristiche precise, il suo io narrante è un ebreo nevrotico, che si odia un po' e un altro po' si compatisce, ha molta paura, vive di sensi di colpa e sotto sotto teme tutto quel

che lo circonda e teme anche che il suo Dio sia davvero la persona vendicativa e irosa del Vecchio Testamento

per cui prima di fare qualsiasi cosa deve pensarci bene, ponderare le possibili conseguenze e evitare ogni forma di conflitto

a questo punto dell'introduzione il nostro scopre che nella sua soffitta abita niente meno che Anna Frank, scampata all'Olocausto e un tantino sbroccata...che fare?

in tutto questo bailamme si notano delle leggere modifiche allo stile asciutto che ha caratterizzato i precedenti libri, qui abbiamo l'inserimento di uno dei cardini della letteratura postmoderna: il tormentone quello di Prove per un incendio è un tormentone che somiglia più a quelli di Palahniuk, che a quelli di Leyner, è un semplice, ma efficacissimo elenco di Ultime Parole di personaggi famosi...

il tutto condito da grandi riferimenti alla cultura americana del post undici settembre e alla tendenza ebraica a rannicchiarsi intorno al proprio passato...

finale fulminante e anche un pochino cinico

ma tutto sommato efficace

Ryan says

A recent Facebook post of mine had read "I can't wait until they release a 3D IMAX version of 'Schindler's List'". Someone with whom I have a tenuous Facebook relationship declared that I "was in poor taste." I can't help but think how he would have felt about Auslander's novel.

Personally, I found this novel saturated with biting sarcasm, scathing bitterness, and caustic cynicism...and I loved every word. There is no question that Auslander can write. He's quick and vivid, but that's not why this novel should be praised.

There is a brutal honesty to his story that I would imagine many have already responded with a disgusted "how could he exploit the Jewish plight like that?".

Well, for a number of reasons.

To begin with, this novel isn't just about the Holocaust. Certainly that is one of the many layers to Auslander's story, but I think the overarching theme is "shit hanging over our heads and how to deal with it."

For those who walked away disgusted would, I would argue, take the place of Kugel's mother. It's always about the Holocaust, according to her, and she'll be damned if anyone argues differently. But, as Kugel so aptly diagnoses his mother in the novel, people love to revel in their misery.

Relax. It's not always about you. And when it's not, we need to find a way to make it so. "This lamp is your grandmother." I have to say, I loved the mother's bitterness towards her relatively peaceful youth which mutates into this jealousy at having not suffered the Holocaust.

Relax. It's not always about the Holocaust.

I think the brilliance of this novel is that it stands as a big middle finger who have, in the wake of the shit hitting the fan over the past decade, become ultra-sensitive to the point of becoming obnoxious twits. "Don't run that Mad Men ad, it reminds us too much of 9/11." "Don't write about fires in books with Jews. It reminds us of the Holocaust." Don't this. Don't that. It's shit hanging over my head.

Deal with it, says Auslander. Destroy it if you have to. Stop hoping that people will don't this and don't that.

As dark and scathing as it is, Auslander shows us that hope really is tragic. Hope is just quainter way of saying "I'd really like this to happen, but it's easier to gripe about it and playing the victim is far too entertaining. Plus, wtf would I do if this utopia actually came to fruition?"

Hope, he shows us, segues into paranoia. Kugel spends the bulk of his time painfully preoccupied with the 'what if's' which turn into the 'i hope that sound isn't this,' or 'i hope that smell isn't that'. Ultimately, it's the hope that 'i don't have to deal with the shit hanging over my head'.

Maybe I completely misread this novel. I suspect Auslander would hope I didn't read it expecting to find any specific moral or theme. I hope you do the same.

K says

Whatever you want to say about Auslander as a Jew, he is a talented writer. As a novelist, though, he leaves a lot to be desired.

Assuming you can tolerate Holocaust irreverence, the concept behind this book was actually clever. A Woody Allen-esque neurotic Jew (Solomon Kugel) moves his wife, child, and mother to a farmhouse in the country only to discover a decrepit Anne Frank living in his attic. There's a lot here. The age-old literary trope of discovering a crazy lady living in your attic and the symbolism there. The idea that, for many American Jews, the crazy lady in the attic is the ghost of the Holocaust that's so difficult to shake no matter how comfortable we may get in America. The irony of juxtaposing Kugel's mother, a very much alive woman with an illusory (though intense) claim on Holocaust experiences, with Anne Frank, a supposedly dead woman with genuine Holocaust associations. And what that means in terms of whether the Holocaust is alive or dead, and the people trying to claim the Holocaust for themselves for their own ends.

I've said a lot, but you may notice that I haven't mentioned plot. Or characters. You know, the things most of us read novels for. That's because there wasn't much of either in this novel. We get a lot of Solomon Kugel's neurotic and nihilistic inner life, ruminating on the concept of hope as something that brings us down. Kugel's wife, Bree, is understandably frustrated with Kugel and his histrionic mother; Anne Frank is foul-mouthed and demanding. So much for characters. I can't even say anything about plot, because the situation was the plot. Kugel feels he has to keep Anne Frank's existence a secret from his family members (why? This was never quite clear to me) while he struggles with the dilemma of what to do about her presence. Kugel fears an arsonist burning down farmhouses in the neighborhood. That about sums it up.

It was a fast read but not fast enough, actually, as I found myself skimming the last half of the book. So it's possible I missed something. But I would say, unless you're morbidly curious about what outrageous thing Auslander may have written (in which case you'll probably be disappointed), don't waste your time on this one.

Elizabeth says

This book annoyed me to death. I hated the characters. I gave the book one star, and the reason I did so was that I don't have a lot of patience for characters like Kugel and his mother. He was too Woody Allen-like for me. I hate Woody Allen movies for the same reason: stop being so introspective and neurotic and start acting

like a grownup. That's what I want to scream at the characters.

Also, the entire premise that he couldn't kick Anne Frank out because it would look bad on him was ridiculous to me. Why didn't he just bring her to the Jewish organization that he called to check on her? Why did he see it as "kicking her out" rather than "placing her in a more comfortable environment" where she wouldn't have to poop down the heating vents? That was just ridiculous to me.

Also ridiculous was his indulgence of his mother. I didn't find that funny, which I know I was supposed to, I just found it outrageously annoying. Putting the vegetables out in the garden for her to find, and letting her poop in the heating vents, and letting her insult the tenant? Not funny to me. I don't find that movie "What About Bob?" funny either, and I felt like this was similar: one character's neuroses and annoying habits are destroying another character's life. I just don't find that funny at all.

So, that's why I gave it one star. The whole Holocaust thing, I can understand why Kugel was sick of it, after his mother pretending to be a victim of it and bringing it up constantly over the years, and I thought the author wasn't disrespectful of the Holocaust, I thought the mother was by pretending to be part of it. But that didn't annoy me nearly as much as her unreasonableness.

Jason Furman says

Outrageously funny, so wildly original you forgive a certain amount of repetitiveness, a rude offspring of Philip Roth and Franz Kafka. The sort of book where you constantly want to put it down and call everyone you know to read them the passages you just read.

Solomon Kugel is a neurotic obsessed with death who recently moved with his family to a farmhouse in upstate New York. One night he hears noise coming from the attic, goes up to investigate, and discovers Anne Frank living up there. But not just any Anne Frank, but a cranky, old, foul-mouthed one who is trying to write a book but laboring under the weight of her previous book which, as she constantly reminds us, sold 32 million copies.

Meanwhile, downstairs Kugel's Mother is obsessed with the Holocaust, constantly invents stories about being a survivor, along with bizarre claims (like: see this lamp it's your uncle, but the sticker on it says "Made in Taiwan." Well they wouldn't put Made in Auschwitz on it would they. This then gets repeated with a bar of ivory soap).

The book explores optimism vs. pessimism, the former being personified in Kugel's brother-in-law (Pinckus, who appears to be a stand in for Stephen Pinker) and the later in Kugel and his hilarious psychiatrist Professor Jove.

I don't want to spoil any more, you should just read it.

David says

The title of *Hope: A Tragedy* alludes to the philosophy of a radically cynical character in the novel named Professor Jove. In lieu of malice and misfortune, Jove blames human misery simply on hope: despite continual evidence to the contrary, humans still foolishly hope for the best and believe a good, reasonably

happy life is somehow attainable. In this theory of hope, Hitler becomes an optimist. Although his methods strike us as cruel and—yes—certainly draconian, he believed a better life was in fact possible (i.e., by the elimination of the Jews and other undesirables and a subordination of inferior cultures to the German way). Hope begets disappointment; recurring disappointment begets misery. Had Hitler survived, we wouldn't expect him to be happy. At least, not without meds.

The inside jacket plot description of Shalom Auslander's *Hope: A Tragedy* is somewhat misleading. It seems to suggest that the main thread of the novel is about a maniacal arsonist who terrorizes the town of Stockton, New York, and its environs by setting farmhouses ablaze. But no. The central plot is about Solomon Kugel, an exurban who moves his family to this bucolic setting only to discover that the aged, decrepit, cantankerous Anne Frank is living in the attic of his new home—defecating in his forced air registers and writing a smutty novel. (This is not a spoiler. The revelation occurs on page 25.)

In other words, the novel is a tragical farce. Now, some people aren't able to deal with farce—and I understand that—in so far as it traffics in the most implausible and outlandish plot points imaginable. (Anne Frank in the attic is really only the tip of the iceberg.) Many contemporary readers are willing to suspend disbelief, but only to a point. Once that line is crossed, they shut down and begin an adversarial relationship with the book. If this is you, avoid this book. Please. I don't want to read your whiny, idiotic review about how completely unrealistic this book is. It's a farce! Farce is not Stephen Crane.

Shalom Auslander is obviously a funny, highly irreverent (read: wonderfully offensive), and witty writer, but it's not all just for laughs. There are some hard truths about life, death, and the burden of history here. The second chapter, for example, is a profound monument, scaffolded in humor, to the death neurosis. Maybe part of my appreciation of the novel is my strong identification with its fixations:

Should I be worried? Kugel asked.

You should only worry, said Sergeant Frankel, about the things you can control.

If I could control them, said Kugel, they wouldn't worry me.

Exactly, said Sergeant Frankel.

Exactly, said I. People who don't worry about death disturb me. There's something defective about them. There. I've said it. I've judged. There is something wrong with those who cling to its inevitability as a *reason* not to worry about it. No, that's *precisely* the reason to worry about it, idiots! Anyway, Kugel is an extreme exaggeration of many of my thoughts and feelings. Distorted though they may be, I recognize them easily here. And yes, I laugh at them. What else can you do? (I mean, when you're not hyperventilating into a paper bag.)

Stela says

The idea that hope is the hugest misfortune humanity was cursed with is not at all new. It is sadly revealed in the myth of Pandora's box, it is thoroughly proved by the Buddhist equivalence between life and suffering, it is only apparently reversed by the Dantesque inscription on the hell gates "Lasciate ogni speranza..."

New in this disturbing book is the way Shalom Auslander chooses to interpret the theme. To prove, without doubt, that hope is a tragedy in a book that reads as a comedy is a masterstroke. The main tool, although not

the only one, is the double entendre, that starts with the very title: is “tragedy” a synonym for hope, or simply a subtitle of the book (instead of the usual specification “a novel”) or is it a little of both?

The answer to this question is not as simple as it seems, because it may lead to different interpretations in interesting contrast with the light, comic tone, from the idea that the laughter is meant to be only another form of crying, to the opposite one, that happiness is as meaningless as suffering. In which case the only reality, the only way to escape is death. I remember Cioran, in his essay, “The Trouble with Being Born”, develops the same theme, although in another register. The most striking similarity of the two books concerns procreation – only that whereas the Romanian author congratulates himself for resisting the atavistic impulse of being a father, Solomon Kugel, in his own bizarre way of thinking, feels guilty he didn’t try and make an imbecile of his son:

A truly good father, a caring father, a protective father, would sit that child in front of the television set all day and let that sharp, curious mind turn to spongy, uncomprehending, witless mush. It would have been the least I could do. I brought him into this world, didn’t I? I should at least have the courtesy to ensure he go through it in a mindless, drooling stupor like the rest of the goddamned species.

The main character’s name Solomon Kugel, is a precious clue for this key of lecture. The association of his first name with biblical resonances suggesting wisdom with the second, Kugel, which apparently means a bland, puddingy Jewish potato dish, is comical enough. But what else is man that the caricature of some otiose God who, bored of this resemblance of His creation with Himself often tricks man into loving life and forgetting the only reality is death? Since Kugel somehow had become aware of his puppet condition, he became obsessed not with death, but paradoxically, with his own attitude towards death in the very moment of dying. He keeps remembering the last not-so-memorable words of some memorable artists, and he keeps writing epitaphs for his tombstone. No wonder that book begins with the hero fear of dying by fire and it ends, for there is no flying from fate with him dying by fire. In between, he gradually acknowledges the Kafkaian character of the world, inhabited by unfortunate monsters that the others keep alive because of a wrong sense of pity and of course hope:

Exactly how long were the poor Samsas obligated to keep that arthropodan pain in the ass in their home? A year? Two? Ten? Sixty? Were they supposed to find him a giant bug wife, and let them have giant bug children before they could finally, without judgment, move on with their already miserable lives? (...) Gregor’s sister could have saved the whole family—not the least of whom was Gregor himself—a world of anguish and trouble if she’d just gone into his room, day one, with a giant can of Raid and gotten it over with.

His attitude is fuelled by a whole Jewish history of suffering whose symbol is Anne Frank. Anne Frank who rose from the dead and hid in his attic, forcing his epiphany. One of the most poignant pages in the novel shows our (anti?)hero wandering between the supermarket ranges to buy some food for her, while noticing that nowadays you pay more for the things you don’t get in food (“no sodium, no fructose, no corn syrup, no MSG, fat-free, carb-free, dye-free, wheatless, flourless, sugarless”) and dreaming of the departure of his unwanted guest in alimentary clichés:

*... one morning he would awaken and go up to the attic, and Anne Frank would be gone, and he could go on with his life, Anne-free.
One hundred percent Frankless.
Now with Less Genocide.*

Kugel is a strange mixture of hero and antihero, a modern Don Quixote who chose to mock instead of honouring sacred images: “I’m sick of this Holocaust shit” This amazing ability to scorn taboo subjects has not the purpose of making you laugh – this is only a secondary effect, that sometimes successfully hides the grave tone of the message – the absurdity and futility of a life in a world where everything concerts to make

you suffer: your body, your psychic and of course, your neighbour, the man. The world keeps going only because it is wrongly decoded: hope, optimism, life itself are valueless. Therefore Kugel prepares himself for his own tragic-less end by consciously making absurd choices. First he gives up society, by losing his job while trying to get rid of Anne. Then he gives up family, by refusing to evacuate the same Anne, who scared his boy and his wife. And finally he gives up life (both metaphorically and literally), by choosing to rescue Anne and not his mother from the fire.

There is an epilogue to emphasize even more the title. A young couple, on the verge of buying the house of their dreams notice, like the Kugels did once, that it smells funny. Of course it does – their own Anne Frank is waiting for them in the attic. For:

Hope springs eternal, Kugel once said to Professor Jove.
It doesn't have to, Professor Jove had replied.

Rebecca says

My top novel of 2012. In Auslander's absurdist battle between optimism and pessimism, momentous tragedy and mundaneness, nothing is sacred – not the presidentially mandated virtue of hope; certainly not those Jewish “heroes” Anne Frank and Alan Dershowitz; not even the aesthetic guidelines for metaphorical language (“the sun was in the sky like a something. The breeze blew like a whatever”).

This debut novel is ferociously funny. It takes the sarcasm and blasphemy of Auslander's memoir (*Foreskin's Lament*) to a whole new level of mordant wit. There is something to make the reader laugh out loud on every page, from the audacity and ridiculousness of some of his plot construction, down to the twisted allusions to Genesis or Poe's “The Raven”: “It was evening, it was morning, it sucked”; “A tapping. As if some mouse were gently crapping, crapping on his attic floor.”

The plot is simple enough, based on two facts: the small suburban town of Stockton, New York is experiencing a spate of arson attacks; and Anne Frank is alive and dwelling in Solomon Kugel's attic, where she is frantically tapping out her endless magnum opus, a novel. Kugel is a deliciously clichéd Jewish sad schmuck, exasperated with his Holocaust-obsessed mother who just won't die, falling behind in his job as a compost system salesman, and trying to provide some semblance of a sane household for his longsuffering wife and three-year-old son.

Kugel's psychiatric ‘help’ is provided by über-pessimist Professor Jove (the voice of the Almighty himself?), who blames all the world's problems on an excess of hope – hope that life will improve, that humans can do anything to alter their fate. The voice of Jove is contradicted by Kugel's brother-in-law, ‘Pinkus Stephenor’ – here Auslander makes no attempt to mask his caricature of Harvard professor Steven Pinker, whose latest theory is that humanity has naturally evolved to become better, i.e. less violent than in the bad old days when wars lasted a hundred years. Auslander's lampoonery might be a bit too facile, but it is wickedly funny.

This was my most memorable book of the year – almost every individual scene has stayed in my mind. Coming back to it months later, I still remember all the outrageous things that made me laugh, or made me shake my head in confusion. *Hope: A Tragedy* is an iconoclastic marvel, as hilarious as it is horrific, and a damn good read to boot.

(Recommended reading: as a pair with the short stories in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank* by Nathan Englander.)

Also enjoyably apposite is the following (apparently real-life!) dialogue:

Customer: Hi, I just wanted to ask: did Anne Frank ever write a sequel?

Bookseller: ...

Customer: I really enjoyed her first book.

Bookseller: Her diary?

Customer: Yes, the diary.

Bookseller: Her diary wasn't fictional.

Customer: Really?

Bookseller: Yes...She really dies at the end – that's why the diary finishes. She was taken to a concentration camp.

Customer: Oh...that's terrible.

Bookseller: Yes, it was awful –

Customer: I mean, it's such a shame, you know? She was such a good writer.

(From *Weird Things Customers Say in Bookshops* by Jen Campbell)

Elyse Walters says

Update: a good friend of mind just read this ...and reminded me how much I enjoyed this comic/tragic GEM. I still own my book!!

You can't have my copy - It makes me laugh too much. But ... I've give this book to others many times. (I bought stacks when it went on sale years ago at Barnes and Noble)

I really don't understand why some readers were offended- or didn't care for it...

I know some 'Jewish' people from my temple who felt it was in bad taste ...

Maybe? I absolutely loved it..., so sue me?

AND.. I believe many readers will like this book.

It's for when you're in the mood for a 'good' comic/tragic book!

Hilarious writing! (burst-out-laughing -over and over again!)---And...then 'again'!!! You won't NOT be able to share the 'hot' lines with your close family and friends.

--Twisted -- some of the lines are you'll want to remember!

Note: (this is taken out of context --won't make much sense without reading more):but I died laughing at "His stomach was anti-semitic".

Dozen of other funny quotes:

or...

"why did childrfen always draw the sun smiling? Its a giant ball of fire, kids. Its rage and fury. Whatever its doing, it isn't f***ing smiling."

"Hope, A tragedy" is a contemporary comedic Jewish-tragedy ---[a book of this type does not get much better].

This young author has just met his match with *Jonathan Tropper* and *Philip Roth* (if you don't believe me...'blow me'). Sorry, couldn't help myself! ha ha--. The "blow-me" just sounds like something the character Soloman Kugel might say!

Soloman Kugel is one heck of a funny protagonist --- (add the supporting characters: his mother, his wife, the "old bag" in the attic, etc. --- and this is one book filled with characters and great funny writing you don't want to miss!!!!

NOTE: My good friend started reading this along with me -- (he ordered the audio). I got excited and wanted to hear his the audio voice. ----

However, maybe because I had already read a decent amount of the book, in my imagination I heard a 'different' and 'older' voice than what was on the audio.

Then I soon come to learn that the author is just a KID, (a talented young man under the age of 35), WOW! --- but in my 'head' I was hearing a different type of voice for Solomon (Jewish Grummy sounding guy... and older!). The audio voice (the author I suppose) --- was of a calm man -- as in just 'reading' a story. I didn't 'feel' the flavor of his writing as much as I did from the 'reading-of-the-book-itself'.

I'll have to ask my friend (I suppose he's almost done with the book now) --- if the voice/audio added or took away from the story for him).

..... This book was a surprise *gem*..
Twisted-humor at its best!!!

M says

3.5, at times.

Despite your personal feelings toward Auslander's outrageousness, I don't think anyone can deny that he has talent. And while this talent shines through in his first novel, it also wears thin, because there really is such a thing as too much of a good thing.

Auslander writes this book as a cross between Philip Roth and Dave Barry, by which I mean you have a dead on, clearly 'been there done that' and resented it depiction of whiny wanna be Holocaust people - ie, ones who capitalize on it and turn it into its own religion and, all the more fittingly, don't even actually have any association with the war - done in a satirical, holds no punches witty style. This is a big pet peeve of mine so while genuine survivors and feelers might find this book offensive, I really enjoyed that, especially because Auslander did, I feel, take pains to keep it restricted to people who weren't even there.

Anyway, the book centers around Kugel, a neurotic figure much like the guy in one of the John Irving books, the one where the dad is terrified that something will happen to his kids and so of course something horrible does, and his recent purchase of a farm house appealing because it's in a nondescript town that feels like a relief after the city.

Well, non descript except that one day he discovers Anne Frank, very much alive, in his attic, working on her second book. This creates tension in an already tense home because Kugel has allowed his ailing (though not quickly enough) Holocaust wanna be mother live with them, and an indignant tenant whose rent they need and would like to have another were it not for the fact that the mother (and Anne) are there, and then their little son Jonah, and Kugel's angry wife Bree.

From a 'good read' perspective, this is a smart and funny book, and a pleasant outpouring of witty observations of the crazies around us. From a craft perspective, this book left a lot to be desired - it often 'outfunned' itself by which I mean Auslander got a little carried away - it got ridiculous and absurd, and the writing often suffered for his unchecked whimsy. It also wore thin given that there wasn't much here but an attempt to spin the paranoia of post Holocaust in a funny way, which it did, but one does not need a novel for that.

Auslander is a talented guy and this book did not disappoint, per se, but that is also because I wasn't expecting anything great, which it is not.

Kim says

I've been called a Pollyanna. Seriously. I know, right? Funny. Granted, Pollyanna is from Vermont... and she does tend to look at the bright side of life...and I do agree with the statement '*Just breathing isn't living!*' but, I draw the line at believing in stupid 'glad' games. And this song is really irritating and doesn't at all describe me. I much prefer this version... and it's not like I ALWAYS find the good in things... I mean, there is absolutely nothing good about that song 'I've got the moves like Mick Jagger' or baby seal clubbing... but, I digress... of course.

Anyway, I can still enjoy a good neurosis, I am catholic after all... I can look at a character like Solomon Kugel and totally get where his head is at. He's F U C K E D U P and I think I might just want to hug him. He reminds me of a certain goodreader that I *have* hugged (much to his chagrin).

"Kugel loved life... and so he expected far too much of it; hell-bent on life, he was terrified that someone would cause, by violence or accident, his untimely death. Kugel, in his own defense, pointed out that he didn't think anyone was actually trying to kill him, he simply thought it well within the realm of possibility that somebody, unbeknownst to him, and for reasons yet to be revealed, might be; there is a line, he argued, thin as it may be, between paranoia and pragmatism."

See? (((HUG)))

Kugel thought specifically about the experience of dying. He thought about the pain, about the fear. Most of all, he thought about what he would say at the final moment; his ultima verba; his last words. They should be wise, he decided, which is not to say morose or obtuse; simply that they should mean something, amount to something. They should reveal, illuminate. He didn't want to be caught by surprise, speechless, gasping, not knowing at the very last moment what to say.

*No, wait, I *oof**

*I haven't really given it much *splat**

*If I could just *ka-blammo**

We are all mankind a story, collectively and individually, and Kugel didn't want his individual story to end in an ellipsis. A period, sure, if you're lucky. An exclamation mark, okay. A question mark, probably; that seemed the punctuation all stories, collectively and individually, should end with after all.

Not an ellipsis, though.

Anything but an ellipsis.

Here, I disagree... I am a huge fan of ellipses... I would love it if I ended in one. That would be mysterious, that would give someone, if they wanted to, a chance to continue the story. Ellipses are infinity... they are beautiful.

Anyway...

Kugel was raised on the Holocaust. It was his mother's 'go to'... it gave her a reason to go on... she found that if she just muttered 'Ever since the war...' and then 'those sons of bitches' that a whole new world would open up. People were nicer, commiserated, stopped bothering her. It didn't matter that she was born in 1945 and grew up in Brooklyn, happy, healthy, etc. She was a victim. She passed this on to her children... *'One evening, when Kugel was eight years old, Mother came to his bedroom, brushed the hair from his brow, and told him that it was time he learned about a terrible place known as Buchenwald. She had a large book with her called The Holocaust, and she showed him the photographs inside: mass graves, starved*

prisoners, piles of naked corpses. That's your uncle, she would say. That's your grandfather's sister. That's your cousin's father. What's that? Kugel asked, pointing to the lamp shade she had placed beside him on the bed. That, she said with a sigh. That's your grandfather. Then she buried her face in her hands and wept.'

Okay... so you can see the foundation, right? Guilt ridden Jew raised by crazy mom. It's Woody Allen you say? Yes, I would agree.. but, I actually like Kugel more.

So, imagine Kugel, and his pragmatism, buying an old farmhouse and trying to raise his son in a non-hostile, non Holocaust, environment. Seems the right thing to do... Except... he encounters a slight um.. glitch. He finds an elderly woman... *"she was hideous, horribly disfigured, and terribly old—yellowed with age, the left eye clouded with cataracts, dead, unseeing. Her skin, sallow and gray, was thin, almost transparent; the hair on her head, what there was of it, was sparse in some places, bare in others. Her shoulders hunched up around her ears, and a massive hump on her back forced her skull forward so that she faced the ground, head bowed, even when looking straight ahead."*

Kugel.. meet Anne Frank...

Okay, so the story goes... and I won't tell you more... you should read it. It would make me happy if you read it... but don't get all defiant and uppity and crap. Just read and enjoy. Have a laugh, and a cry... eat a piece of Ezekial bread... call your mom.

Just breathing isn't living...
