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# Not Your Grandmother's *Fiddler On the Roof*

*Elizabeth Rubin*

*Amy Bloom*

*Away*

Random House, 2007, 256 pages.

**D**isturbingly vulgar, and shockingly raw, Amy Bloom, a writer and independent journalist, reinvents the traditional “finding yourself” story with her novel *Away*. Following her unyieldingly resilient heroine, Lillian Leyb, on her quest to find her lost daughter, Bloom reveals the loss and survival that characterizes the life of American immigrants in the 1920s.

Bloom's talents and extensive writing experiences are fully realized in this latest endeavor. In the beginning of the novel, Lillian travels to America to restart her life after her family – father, mother, husband – were murdered in a Russian pogrom. Haunted by nightmares, she never really escapes her past. She remembers the horrific night: the blood, the screams, the panic. She remembers hoping the door would hold fast, pushing her daughter out of the window, watching her run towards safety. She remembers walking over her dead husband, pulling the axe from her father's neck, finding an empty chicken coop with her little girl nowhere to be found.

Her missing daughter is the thread that weaves the story together. After her aunt tells Lillian that she saw the little girl floating down the river, Lillian goes to America to begin a new life. When another relative arrives in her New York apartment, she brings back a tale from Russia that hints at the daughter's survival. Lillian's shaky new world is turned upside down, and she decides to

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embark on a perilous journey to find her beloved child.

Her story is not one of obvious success. Absent are convenient miracles to help her along the way. Bloom gives her protagonist no guardian angel to clear her path. There are no violins playing in the background. As she makes her way across America, there is no reprieve from ache and struggle. Bloom tells a story of a fascinating reality, using dark humor and references to the rough starkness of real life.

While there is no pinnacle of triumph or scene of well-deserved elation, Lillian ultimately settles into her new life, emerging as an acquiescent individual in a world that, while geographically not too distant from her home, is eons away culturally. Bloom, in her direct, matter-of-fact descriptive style, ends the story with a brief run-down on the developments of Lillian's life after the end of her journey. Her goal is never realized: she does not return to Siberia, or find her daughter. Instead, she seems to move on and accept her new life, family, and surroundings with little fanfare.

Bloom brings the reader back to the beginning of the book by repeating a recurring motif in the last scene, illustrating Lillian's full cycle of growth and development. The nightmares recounting Lillian's life-upending night of the pogrom end, consistently, with the image of a hand. Whether the severed hand of her mother or the bloodied hand of her husband, wedding ring still intact, Lillian always awakes screaming, signifying her close ties with, and continued connection to, her past. The last scene in the novel describes Lillian glimpsing her new husband's severed hand: the same horror, the same limb. Yet, the subtle difference – the identity of the hand – is paramount. Her story finally reaches completion with the affirmation of a break with her past and entrance into a new stage of her life.

Like other early twentieth-century immigration stories, themes of hard work, connection to a foreign hometown, and exploitation describe aspects of Lillian's experience. Breaking from the common mold, however, Bloom describes Lillian's apparent success and immersion, then channels the story in a

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different direction. The impact of her immigrant status is the main undercurrent running through the novel; her journey to find her daughter, in conjunction with her brazen, determined persona serves as a more overt driving source. Though the challenges of the immigrant color the novel, they do not exclusively define her experience. Bloom brilliantly tells an immigrant story behind the façade of a novel concerned with unique character development.

Bloom writes a rough story without any trappings – the plot, spurred along by Lillian’s ultimate journey to find her daughter, is a collection of cringe-inducing vignettes linked by tales of compulsory, gratuitous, forced, and elicited, sex. Sex comes in all forms in the novel, defining Lillian’s experience. She finds her footing in New York by sleeping with the closeted gay son of the owner of the Goldfadn Theatre where she works as a seamstress – her position as a mistress to the owner himself perverting the traditional father-son relationship. She gives sexual favors to a conductor on the train to pay for her passage and endures an intimate night with a fellow inmate in a female prison. She finds safety in the home of a prostitute and sleeps with the lonely telegraph operator as she traverses the bitter cold.

At times graphic, Bloom’s decision to use sex as a recurring theme is a misdirected exercise in superfluity. Many of the more vulgar scenes sound forced, unrealistic, and unnecessary. A story that otherwise sticks true to experience, the repeated sexual encounters solidify the book’s fictional aspect and make it at times needlessly obscene.

The character development and descriptive details, however, redeem the novel from becoming a collection of pornographic history. Unique and quirky, the stark language and wry humor brings each character to life. Developing a cast of unparalleled personalities, Bloom attributes individual personas to molds of generic stereotypes. She has the token mafia-style entrepreneur, the winking heartthrob, the seedy prostitute. Twisting their lives with her blunt language and ending each individual’s story with biographical detail, Bloom leaves no question unanswered and no character undeveloped. Instead of merely telling

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the story of a woman's quest to find her daughter, she brings her audience into the experience, panning out when necessary to provide a panoramic view of a third-party narrative.

Bloom does not make her readers fall in love with Lillian. She does not ask for empathy or compassion; however, as the story unfolds, despite the cynicism and crass reality, the reader will be satisfied and appreciative of the far from happily-ever-after ending.

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*Elizabeth Rubin is a freshman in the College of Arts & Sciences. She plans to study Diplomatic History and medicine.*