

The Shiva

by Michael Tregebov

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Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Back in the 1950s, when the House Unamerican Activities Committee led by Joe McCarthy was at its witch-hunting peak, many North American newspapers, including the *New York Times*, were sending reporters to Winnipeg to report on a seemingly innocuous civic election. The reason for this international interest was that a Communist, Joe Zuken, was running for a position as city councillor. Zuken had emerged from the centre of Winnipeg's Jewish intellectual and cultural life – the Seven Oaks/St. John's area of Winnipeg's North End, which had also produced the entertainer Monty Hall and the Governor General's Award-winning author Adele Wiseman.

Since then, the Jewish community has dispersed, some moving to the south end, to River Heights and Tuxedo, and others further north in West Kildonan and to Garden City. It is in this contemporary schism of Jewish culture that Michael Tregebov has set *The Shiva*.

As he does in his first novel, *The Briss*, Tregebov explores his roots in Winnipeg's Jewish community to create a delightful novel. He takes advantage of this splitting of the community to create a great deal of humour in the rivalry between the two groups.

It is easy to compare Tregebov to Mordecai Richler, and many reviewers have done so. Although both wrote about being Jewish, Richler's main theme in that regard was the difficulty of the Montreal Jew in the 1930s and 40s in being accepted and assimilated by and into the general population, one he developed in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. Richler also addressed the French/English divide. Neither of these topics enters Tregebov's work. He uses a number of Yiddish words and phrases to add colour to his work, but his theme is the jealousy of the North End Jew as opposed to the arrogance and snobbishness of the south-ender. (Incidentally, for the general reader, this book could use a glossary.)

Tregebov knocks down a number of shibboleths. Through the character of Dennis, an Indian financial wizard, he points out that there have been a number of holocausts, including one far worse than that of the Jewish people – the North American Aboriginal one. This comes up in his critique against the troubled Canadian Museum of Human Rights being erected in Winnipeg, which appears to have been taken over by Conservative propaganda. Oz, a Jewish millionaire who adheres to a Marxist philosophy, says in response to Sammy's statement "You mean Nazi holocaust denial," that "Maybe worse, Sammy . . . Because although there are Nazi holocaust deniers, they need a holocaust to deny. But who knows about the Indian residential schools?" (87) Tregebov also has Dennis say, "If exterminating six million people is a holocaust, then what do you call exterminating one hundred million people?" (171)

He uses the Aboriginal holocaust in a critique against Israel, another Canadian shibboleth these days. The Jewish movement to address the wrongs perpetrated by the Israelis against the Palestinians – a movement with sizable support here in Canada as well as in the US and Israel itself – has been largely ignored by the mainstream press, so that people are generally unaware of its existence. Tregebov seeks to rectify this when he has Dennis state, "The way I see it . . . , the Palestinians are the Indians and the Israelis are the Europeans who came to take their land" (83).

The plot revolves around a group of aging Jews who are considered to be losers by the general Jewish population of Winnipeg. Given the close-knit Jewish community, everyone knows everyone

else and so these characters are held in general derision. There's Mooney, whose brother David is a successful businessman and has become a millionaire. Mooney is an intellectual who, as a result of sibling rivalry, decides to follow in and better David's business success. Mooney fails at this, gets divorced, and is committed to an insane asylum from which, at the start of the novel, he has recently been released.

Then there's Suddy, who has never amounted to much. Suddy has a deceased brother named Duddy, which seems to be a reference to Richler's character Duddy Kravitz. Suddy is known as the soup mensch.

Oz, the millionaire Marxist, has already been mentioned.

Rounding out this quartet is Sammy, Oz's best friend, whom Tregebov uses as a foil against Dennis's (legitimate) rants about the Aboriginal holocaust by stressing his concern that Dennis's ideas will diminish the importance of the Jewish holocaust.

The inciting incident of the novel takes place when Mooney, who is on welfare, much to the embarrassment of his brother David, moves out of the tiny space he is permitted to occupy and into his mother's house. Tregebov does a great job painting the mother as the stereotypical Jewish mother. She hounds David about giving Mooney a job, which eventually leads to David lending Mooney a quarter million dollars to invest.

Mooney gets together with his cronies at the casino, where they discuss investing this money. Dennis enters the picture at this point. All this takes place just before the recent American housing collapse. Dennis recommends shorting the market on margin.

The quartet, along with Dennis, decides to form an investment consortium. For several months it appears that they are going to take a huge beating but, suddenly, Dennis's predictions prove accurate. They begin to make huge profits, something that becomes widely known in the Jewish community.

Everyone wants to get on board this gravy train by meeting the Indian financial guru. One of the south-end matrons decides to host a dinner party in Dennis's honour. She hires a couple of Tamil cooks to prepare an authentic curry, only to discover that the Indian is not an Indian. You will have to read the book to discover the hilarious fallout of this faux pas.

The Shiva is sure to become a classic of Jewish Canadian literature. ♣

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for *The Malahat Review*, *Arc*, *The Antigonish Review*, *The Fiddlehead* and *The Danforth Review*, in the US for *Quarterly Conversations*, *Rain Taxi*, *Rattle*, *Big Bridge* and *Galatea Revisits*, and in Australia for *Jacket*.

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