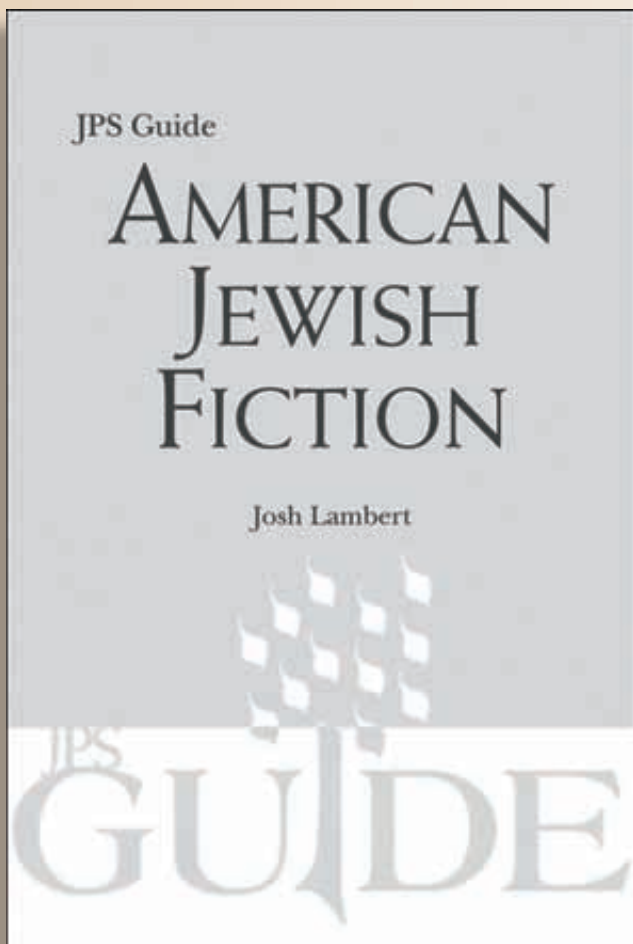


And now for something completely different:

HEEBONICS

Toronto native's guide to American Jewish fiction includes classics and forgotten gems



By SHERI SHEFA
Staff Reporter

Toronto native Josh Lambert hopes his book, a collection of short synopses meant to introduce readers to 125 American Jewish fiction titles, will help people get a better "sense of the texture of Jewish life."

Lambert, who spent two years compiling a concise handbook on works written over a span of 140 years, likes to think of his book as a Zagat guide for American Jewish fiction.

"When I was in touch with the people of the Jewish Publication Society, and I decided I would do the book, what excited me about doing it was covering a wide range of American Jewish texts and giving readers a sense of how broad that tradition is and how widely it ranges through history and subject matter," said 29-year-old Lambert, a Harvard graduate who is finishing his PhD in Jewish literature from the University of Michigan.

The works - by authors including Franz Kafka, Norman Mailer, Judy Blume, Chaim Potok, John Updike, Michael Chabon and Jonathan Safran Foer - covered in American Jewish Fiction: A JPS Guide delve into issues including immigration, assimilation, intermarriage, politics, the Holocaust and Israel.

Lambert said he hates the idea of "best 100 novels of all time" lists in any tradition.

"To me, that seems so silly because people's tastes are so different and books don't appeal to everyone in the same way. I covered some books that I actually don't even like, but are meaningful and important within the Jewish tradition," said

Lambert, who has worked as the editor of the online book review magazine, JBooks.com and contributes regularly to newspapers including the San Francisco Chronicle and the Globe and Mail.

He added that when he started working on the project in 2006, he put together a master list of about 350 books. From 350, Lambert slowly whittled the list down to 125 by eliminating books that overlapped on the themes of others.

"My real goal was to give a sense of the diversity and breadth of the field."

Lambert said it was important to him to author this guide because, having grown up in the Toronto Jewish community, and having come out of the Jewish day school system, he felt a strong connection to his heritage.

"It is something that I'm very connected to. I think what draws me to studying Jewish literature particularly is the way that literature both embraces the Jewish tradition of textual study, of scholarship, but also modern literature is open to innovation," he said.

"It's open, not just to the elite of the Jewish people, which is what you get with rabbinic texts, but you get the way that Jews of all kinds live in modern Jewish literature. You get a sense of the texture of Jewish life."

Lambert said that one issue he struggled with was whether he should include Canadian Jewish writers in his book.

"I feel bad... that I didn't include Canadian Jewish writers in my book, despite having grown up in Canada and loving Canadian Jewish writers," he said.

"I know Canadians hate when you have an American collection and there are just a few Canadians, so I hope no one is offended that I didn't include Canadians, but it's because I think the writers deserve an entire book of their own, which I may decide to write at some point."

Lambert said that writing this guide opened his eyes to new personal favourites.

"My all-time favourites are the works of Philip Roth, and he gets four entries in my book, which is more than anyone else, so I guess that's a sign of how much I like him," he said.

"But one of my advisers recommended that I include Steven Millhauser's Edwin Mullhouse, which I think is a tremendously good novel and a novel that few people think of as a Jewish book. [It's] fascinatingly subtle and intricate on the question of Jewishness, so I was really excited about that one."

Another one of Lambert's new favourites is Vera Caspary's Thicker Than Water, a novel about a Sephardi Jewish family in Chicago that covers 50 years of the family's history.

"I really made an effort to foreground those

books that don't just tell the story about immigration, working in a sweatshop, succeeding, moving to a suburb and becoming a doctor or a lawyer," Lambert said.

"Jewish Cowboy is about trying to make a living as an agricultural worker in the West. There are novels going back to the late '20s and '40s about Jewish gays and lesbians trying to make that identity work. There are stories about strong women, pushing against the strictures of a patriarchal culture."

He said that reading those stories not only gives readers a sense of the Jewish experience throughout history, but an opportunity to see ourselves in that history through our own struggles and experiences.

"There are so many new books coming out every year, and it can be easy to get wrapped up in what's happening now," he said.

"I think to connect with the classic books or with books that have been forgotten about can give a real rich sense, not just of what is happening now, but of recent Jewish history."

For more information about Lambert or his book, visit his website at www.epikores.com.

