



Gratz Insider, January 2014 - Story Continuation

[To return to the newsletter, close this page.]

One Book, One Jewish Community: *The Wanting* by Michael Lavigne

Grabbing readers from the outset and thrusting them headfirst into the struggles of his characters, Michael Lavigne opens his second novel, *The Wanting*, with a terrorist attack. As writer Malcolm Forbes says in his review in Jewish Renaissance, “*The Wanting* becomes thrilling, right up until its devastating last page, and it is a testament to Lavigne’s immense skills as a writer that we close it and still feel shock-wave reverberations for some time after.”

In *The Wanting*, Lavigne leads us on a journey through the lives of his three protagonists: Roman Guttman, a victim of the terrorist attack and a Jewish architect, who immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union; Anna, Roman’s 13-year-old daughter; and Amir, the young Palestinian suicide bomber. Struggling emotionally after the terrorist attack, Roman is awash in painful memories of his Soviet past, and is also obsessed with thoughts of Amir, driving him to seek out the dead suicide bomber’s father in the West Bank. Amir, confined to a purgatory between life and the paradise he had been promised for martyrdom, recounts the events that led to his devastating act of detonating the bomb. Meanwhile, struggling to understand decisions made long ago by the mother she never knew, Anna begins her own secretive spiritual quest with potentially catastrophic consequences.

In the hands of a less skilled writer, this novel, with its changing narrators and frequent flashbacks, could have been disjointed and difficult to follow. Instead, with well-crafted prose, Lavigne guides the reader through effortless transitions in voice and time, with rich descriptions of Israel, the Palestinian territories and the former Soviet Union. He even provides visual cues (Star of David for Roman; crescent moon and star, associated with Islam, for Amir; yin and yang symbol for Anna) so that we know in advance who will be narrating each chapter.

Particularly salient among the many themes that Lavigne explores throughout his novel is that human nature makes people more alike than different, despite all the hatred, mistrust, vitriol and violence that sometimes divides them. This theme

emerges quite strikingly in the parallels between Anna and Amir. They are both extremely sensitive kids growing up with their own problems in a volatile region, where they are exposed to opposing narratives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They both yearn to fill voids in their lives - and attempt to do so through religion. They are both influenced by religious extremists, who set them on precarious paths.

Describing an incident from his childhood, Amir says profoundly, “I am certain that what I felt that day, I also feel today: a wanting. A wanting for something I have never tasted, but without which life cannot be said to have been properly lived.” It is this same sense of longing that drives other characters in the book - and perhaps, much of human behavior.

The OBOJC author event with Michael Lavigne, which is free and open to the public, will take place at 3:30 p.m. on Sunday, January 26th, at Congregation Adath Jeshurun in Elkins Park. For more information about the event, as well as resources, such as questions for independent reflection or book club discussions, click [here](#). OBOJC is coordinated by the Jewish Learning Venture, which partners with local synagogues and Jewish organizations. Gratz College has been an OBOJC partner since the program’s inception, and Gratz staff member Mindy Blechman is an original member of the program’s implementation team.