



A Wolf in the Soul

Ira T. Berkowitz

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A young werewolf's "shifting" mirrors his emotional growth in this visceral and spiritual coming-of-age novel.

Let's get it out of the way: yes, this is a book about werewolves. Now, put away every expectation about muscular teens shape-shifting under the full moon, because it isn't that kind of werewolf book. In his accomplished debut novel, Ira T. Berkowitz rises way above the genre by weaving a truly multidimensional tale from the growing pains and spiritual seeking of a most unlikely character: an eighteen-year-old Jewish man from Long Island. *A Wolf in the Soul* calls on wolf mythology not only to entertain but also to provide a meaningful metaphor for a young man's coming of age.

From the dorms at Columbia University to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Berkowitz sends Greg Samstag on a journey that, while incredible on many levels, feels familiar. Berkowitz has a natural ear for conversation that seamlessly sets the scene, so when Greg is trying to console his drama-prone mother, we're immersed in the social-climbing world of East Laurel, and when he's discussing Jewish philosophy with his rabbi, we can taste the baklava they share.

The incredible parts of the story, visceral and sometimes shocking, provide clear contrast to Greg's comfortable, if conflicted, world. Even as he's overcome with strange cravings and bodily transformations, Greg's changes are always relevant to his emotional and psychological growth. Berkowitz often uses the canine world to mirror human development, as in this passage from a wolf pup's point of view: "I was deaf and blind, but did not know it. All I knew was my mother, the taste of her milk, and the sensation of my siblings jostling me." As the pup breaks away from home to form his own worldview, so must Greg.

A Wolf in the Soul is a long novel but seems much shorter. Berkowitz keeps the pace lively by alternating wild and homey scenes and serving up a good helping of humor throughout. It's in his word choice—Greg's father doesn't have faded blond hair; he's an "ex-blond" with the "cachet of blondness"—and in the quirky characters that Greg interacts with on his journey. From his exasperatingly vague homeopath's advice to his mother's kosher kitchen misadventures, Greg is surrounded by weirdness, so what's a little extra body hair?

By turns serious and spirited, modern and mythological, *A Wolf in the Soul* is a rare treat: a truly multifaceted novel that goes by quickly the first time but begs for repeat readings to catch the connections that might have been missed in the first eager pass.

SHEILA M. TRASK (Fall 2014)

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