

Beloved Comrades: A Novel in Stories

Yermiyahu Ahron Taub

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Beloved Comrades is a moving novel about a religious community that's formed to welcome a variety of members.

In the stories of Yermiyahu Ahron Taub's novel *Beloved Comrades*, a new Orthodox synagogue brings a sense of comfort and community to three generations, but also hides troubling secrets and sorrows within its walls.

Arnold finds that his reserved seat at the yeshiva is often taken by others, so he decides to establish his own synagogue nearby. All are welcome, but Arnold makes it clear that he's in charge: there will be no rabbi. Prospective members are quick to remark that Arnold, though well-known for his successes in business, gives the synagogue a name with socialist ring to it. His dream of a community of beloved comrades helps to ease the burden of the synagogue members' brutal memories, though those who are different are still treated with "kindness just short of pity."

Probing, sensitive character development reveals strong relationships among the cast, whose members are understood in stages. The book moves from their public personas to more intimate revelations, all leading to legacies of hurt and shame. Strong, forthright writing shows how the synagogue's members are either blessed or restricted within it. Astute physical depictions help in understanding the natures of both the observed and their observers, as when a woman speaks of a potential suitor as being "handsome, in a blurry kind of way."

Complex issues are introduced with intensity that's tempered by compassion, as when a young boy who's just discovering the pleasure of his forbidden attraction to his black, Muslim friend is discovered by a community member who keeps her knowledge secret. Synagogue members, aware that the boy is "different" and cannot be "fixed," pity him and his family while praying that their own sons will be spared his curse. Meanwhile, a first grader, Mindl, is called "Mandy" by her non-Jewish teacher, the trauma of whose past blinds her to the importance of names within Mindl's community. This has a devastating effect on Mindl and her family, and is made worse when no one stands up for the child's right to her name.

Each story is compelling. Though restrictions and loss have a major presence in many of them, there are also experiences of fulfillment and joy; the total effect is satisfying. The book's Aramaic, Hebrew, and Yiddish words are an authentic feature and are clarified in the glossary.

Beloved Comrades is a sensitive novel about a religious community's relationships and its wide spectrum of dreams, hopes, and desires.

KRISTINE MORRIS (May 12, 2020)

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