

Helen

Anita Mishook

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Helen focuses on a woman whose street smarts and innate talents led her to a vital, off-screen California role.

Anita Mishook's *Helen* is an intriguing novel about a young Jewish woman who travels from New York to California seeking a warmer climate, a change of scenery, and proximity to her sister, Sarah.

The year is 1936, and America is going through some anxious economic and social times. Sarah and Helen, who emigrated to the United States from Poland, share a very close bond. Sarah is now married, with two small children, and has insisted that Helen leave the "cold city" of Manhattan to make a fresh start in the Golden State.

Soon after Helen's arrival, however, the novel hints that Glendale is not all oranges and sunshine. Sarah's husband, Harry, though he is a good provider, seems to be using his liquor store as a front for dubious operations. Helen's blond beauty attracts Joe, a man in the movie industry, but the Los Angeles parties he escorts her to have an unnerving, pro-Nazi element. Joe has assumed incorrectly that Helen's good looks are Aryan and therefore link her to German "superiority."

Helen carries the novel with her resilience and shrewd grace. Having learned as a girl to adapt to American culture and lingo, Helen's gift for assimilation helps her to hide her Jewishness and become a spy for the Anti-Defamation League. Her ultimate goal is to infiltrate a powerful group of Nazi supporters who plan to build a Pacific Coast headquarters for Adolf Hitler. Helen is troubled by the challenge, but accepts it nonetheless.

Though its scope broadens into espionage and adventure, the book's smaller details offer a firm fictional grounding. The plot is peppered by a curious range of characters: crooked cops, mobsters, bodyguards, a drug-addicted heiress, and even the brilliant real-life film producer Irving Thalberg. Helen and Sarah's relationship is warmly developed, as is Sarah's love for her children and her immigrant's pride in her comfortable American home.

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