

Sima's Undergarments for Women

Ilana Stanger-Ross

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A good story—like those written by Lorraine Hansbury or Amy Tan—invites the reader into an unfamiliar world. Ilana Stanger-Ross grew up in Brooklyn, which is also the location of her novel. Sima Goldner, a not-very-practicing Jewish woman in a Hasidic neighborhood, owns a shop in her basement and sells bras, panties, bustiers, robes—everything a woman needs for support and beauty. Able to recognize sizes 28A to 52K, Sima knows what her customers (almost all of them Orthodox women) need. But in a culture that values children more than almost anything else on earth, Sima is barren. Flashbacks reveal how she and her husband Lev, a retired teacher, tried to have children, and how Sima went through countless fertility tests. She failed, the marriage began to fail, and love dried up. Sima isn't even polite to Lev anymore. He hides in the newspaper.

And now Timna walks into Sima's shop. Timna is a beautiful Israeli tourist who is engaged to an Israeli soldier. Sima needs an assistant, and Timna needs a job. Sima falls head over heels in love. This is in no way lesbian love, however; it's the love of a lonely, meddlesome woman for beauty, life, and a surrogate child. Obsessed, Sima begins following Timna after she leaves the shop. For the first time in decades, she walks into other neighborhoods. She crosses the bridge into Manhattan and discovers that there's a whole world outside her basement. "Such a little shop," the author writes toward the end of the book. "Linoleum floor, polyester curtain, wooden shelves....A hidden space, inconsequential, not even a pinprick on the borough map, but for [Sima], standing behind the counter with light coming through the one window, a whole world." Sima is stepping into a brave new world.

Stanger-Ross has received prizes for her fiction, including a Timothy Findley Fellowship, and is currently a student-midwife on the University of British Columbia faculty. Her writing goes far beyond this Jewish neighborhood. It captures the universality of women's longing, of painful truths, of gossip and betrayal, of forgiveness, of youth and age. This novel, which takes place over the course of nine months, is hard to put down. At the beginning, Sima is bitter and Lev is silent. At the end, Timna is on her way to Los Angeles and Sima and Lev are on their way to a new beginning.

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