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FORTHCOMING BOOKS THROUGH SEPTEMBER 2017

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remaking history

ERIC FLINT



THOMAS OLDE HEUVELT

color of language



Sheri S. Tepper (1929-2016)
World Fantasy Awards & Convention
ICon Report: Israel
Spotlight on: Brooks Peck, MoPOP Curator

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49th Year of Publication • 30-Time Hugo Winner
Cover and Interview Designs by Francesca Myman



To the ongoing list of SF and fantasy tropes that are turning into mainstream literary devices, we might as well add alternate history to time travel, zombies, and franchise dystopias. Several years ago, Philip Roth seemed to think he'd invented the form with **The Plot**

Against America, but a few years after that Michael Chabon was well aware he was adapting a tradition with **The Yiddish Policeman's Union**. That novel posited that a briefly proposed settlement of WWII Jewish refugees in Sitka AK, had become a reality. Now the distinguished Israeli author Nava Semel reaches even further back into the unrealized history of Jewish settlements with **Isra Isle**, originally published in Israel in 2005 and sometimes referred to (prior to Jessica Cohen's skillful new translation) as **IsraIsland**. Like Chabon, Semel begins by borrowing elements from the mystery genre and offers interesting speculations about relations between Jewish immigrants and Native Americans, but unlike him, she partitions her novel into three parts, with the alternate history scenario (clearly labeled "An Alternate Story") only showing up in the final part. The *idea* of the possible malleability of history haunts the whole novel, though, which forges ingenious character-based links between its three narratives.



The historical incident behind **Isra Isle** is at least as odd as the Harold Ickes Sitka proposal. In 1825, a writer and part-time diplomat named Mordecai Manuel Noah bought an island in the Niagara River downstream from Niagara Falls, with the idea of creating a refuge for Jews worldwide, and possibly even joining the

US as a Jewish state called Ararat. Apparently, absolutely no one else was interested, refugee or not, and Noah himself never even got around to visiting his island. Semel's novel begins – not insignificantly, in September 2001 – with a descendant of Noah's arriving in New York from Tel Aviv and promptly disappearing without a trace. The case is assigned to Simon T. Lenox, a detective of Native American descent with a taste for Jack Daniels, who enlists the aid of a Yiddish-speaking Jewish accountant named Jackie Winona Brendel (whose Indian middle name turns out to be one of the wires that knit the parts of the novel together). He eventually learns that the descendant's quixotic plan is to reclaim his heritage, which leads to the novel's second part, set in 1825, narrated by a native guide who brings Noah to Grand Island. At first, the narrator can't quite understand why the Jews need a refuge – “Were they shot at with musket rifles? Were their tepees and wigwams and longhouses burned?” – but he eventually comes to accept it as a kind of vision, reinforced by his own vision that the

“children of Ararat,” whom he calls Isra Islers, will be named Simon, Winona, and Jacqueline.

In part three, we're in a different 2001 in which Isra Isle is now a prosperous US state, dominated by three huge towers of a hundred floors each, and which had indeed served as a refuge for Jews during WWII. Its governor, Emanuella Winona Noah – a direct descendant of the original Mordecai – is now favored in the presidential election as the first Jewish woman candidate, and the narrator is an African-American journalist named Simon, who had been raised on a Native American reservation – and who has a penchant for Jack Daniels, just like the Simon in the first part. Semel doesn't oversell her historical shifts – mostly they are presented as tantalizing allusions, with occasional pointed ironies such as a reference to Theodor Herzl as an obscure Viennese playwright who “came up with the madcap idea of establishing another Jewish state, in the Middle East”. Mostly, though, Semel

deploys the notion as a way of exploring the malleability of identity, essentially an alternate iteration of character as much as history, with the variations on Simon, Lenox, Winona, and others creating a growing web: was the historical interlude in the middle of the novel meant to prefigure the familiar 2001 of the first part, or the alternate 2001 of the third part, or both? Semel has other ways of uniting her narratives as well, such as the repeated motif of the *boyden*, a Yiddish term defined as “a hidden opening” in a house where “one can seek refuge.” Refuge may well be the central theme of **Isra Isle**, which ambitiously touches upon not only Zionism, but feminism, African-American and Native American issues, and contemporary real-life politics in ways that are both sophisticated and surprisingly witty.

