

bookshelf

Modern family, Jewish style

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

Harold Silver, the protagonist of A.M. Homes' novel **"May We Be Forgiven"** (Viking, \$27.95), hesitates when filling out the forms required to enter a nudist laser tag party he's been invited to by a woman he met online. "Not sure who you want to be tonight?" the man at the table asks. "Come as yourself, it keeps things simple. Once, we had a guy who bumped his head at a roller rink, and it took three days to figure out who he was."

In fact, it will take Harold a year to figure out who he is, and it's a year that begins with a stolen kiss from his brother's wife at Thanksgiving dinner and goes on to feature a terrible car accident, adultery, a murder, a stroke and many smaller catastrophes. Tossed out of his marriage, his home and his job (he is a Nixon scholar and a professor), the once disconnected Harold amasses myriad other relationships and responsibilities. Foremost among his new charges are his brother's children, Nate, 13, and Ashley, 11, who've been warehoused in prep

schools. His bizarre 21st century pilgrim's progress teaches Harold something quite old-fashioned: how to form bonds with other people, and how to honor those bonds with dependability and care.

Homes is a ruthless yet tender and funny observer of American moral vacuity in all shapes and sizes, and this 10th novel is among her best. Founded on the Old Testament theme of rage and responsibility between brothers, it follows a contemporary Jewish family very far off the deep end. On the way, it gets all the details hilariously right, from the canister of cookies served by Harold's Aunt Lillian — "when the Jews left Egypt, they took with them the tins of Danish Butter Cookies" — to the buttons supplied by the party coordinator for NATE's BIG BM, a full-bore bar-mitzvah celebration held in a South African village.

Things get crazier and crazier, with Julie Nixon Eisenhower, a wilderness penal colony, a family of Chinese restaurateurs and an incarcerated Israeli arms dealer coming into the mix. While some developments at the end of the book start to strain its seams,

crazy from it. Her daughter-in-law and daughter try desperately to control her, her son loses his beautiful head of hair, her granddaughter jumps out a window and her hideously henpecked husband infuriates everyone by leaving her just as she is going in for surgery. Yet, somehow, the novel never lets you feel sorry for Edie. She is smart, feisty and six

Another modern Jewish family and another over-the-top bar mitzvah are at the center of Jami Attenberg's **"The Middlesteins"** (Grand Central, \$24.99), the fourth and likely the breakout work from this author. At the center of her warmhearted dramedy is Edie Middlestein, a woman who can't stop eating, whose expansive personality and body are chronicled in vignettes ranging from "Edie, 62 pounds" to "Edie, 332 pounds." These are interleaved with chapters focusing on Edie's husband, Richard; her daughter, Robin; her son and his wife; and their soon-to-be bar-and-bat-mitzvah twins.

Edie is killing herself with her eating, and her family is going



A.M. Homes

Homes stops short of losing us and repays our investment in her characters, in the tense and tentative relationships they have begun to build.

admirer, a master Chinese chef at a nearby restaurant. Attenberg describes his dishes with such luscious intensity, addiction seems a rational response.

Everyone in this book is hungry for something, and almost everyone is caught up in the current obsession with food and diet. The book's climax, the b'nai mitzvah party itself, is narrated in the second person plural, the "we" of four older couples who are longtime family friends. Befuddled by the decor, the break-dancing, the protocol of the separated grandparents, one thing seems perfectly right to them: "We are happy to inform you we were not disappointed with the food. The salmon — obviously we all ordered the salmon over the chicken, because (a) we just knew that chicken was going to be covered in cream sauce, and boy, was it ever, and (b) you can't get enough omega-3 these days — was delicious."

Attenberg perfectly captures the spoken and internal voices of her three generations of Midwestern Jews, in love and at odds, and delivers a bittersweet ending that ties them together in a hopeful new way.



Jami Attenberg

PHOTO BY MICHAEL SHARKEY

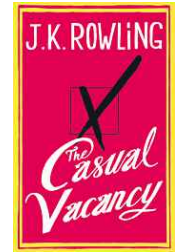
bestsellers

Publishers Weekly's list of national bestsellers powered by Nielsen BookScan

hardcover

FICTION

- 1. THE CASUAL VACANCY**, by J.K. Rowling (Little, Brown)
- 2. MAD RIVER**, by John Sandford (Putnam)
- 3. WINTER OF THE WORLD**, by Ken Follett (Dutton)
- 4. GONE GIRL**, by Gillian Flynn (Crown)
- 5. THE TIME KEEPER**, by Mitch Albom (Hyperion)
- 6. A WANTED MAN**, by Lee Child (Delacorte)
- 7. LIVE BY NIGHT**, by Dennis Lehane (William Morrow)
- 8. DARK STORM**, by Christine Feehan (Berkley)
- 9. PHANTOM**, by Jo Nesbø (Knopf)
- 10. LOW PRESSURE**, by Sandra Brown (Grand Central)



NONFICTION

- 1. KILLING KENNEDY**, by Bill O'Reilly (Henry Holt)
- 2. NO EASY DAY**, by Mark Owen (Dutton)
- 3. TOTAL RECALL**, by Arnold Schwarzenegger (Simon & Schuster)
- 4. AMERICA AGAIN**, by Stephen Colbert (Grand Central)
- 5. GOD LOVES YOU**, by David Jeremiah (FaithWords)
- 6. THE AMERICA'S TEST KITCHEN QUICK FAMILY COOKBOOK** (America's Test Kitchen)
- 7. I DECLARE**, by Joel Osteen (FaithWords)
- 8. WAGING HEAVY PEACE**, by Neil Young (Blue Rider Press)
- 9. GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS** (Guinness World Records)
- 10. MUGGED**, by Ann Coulter (Sentinel)

paperback

- 1. FIFTY SHADES OF GREY**, by E.L. James (Vintage)
- 2. FIFTY SHADES DARKER**, by E.L. James (Vintage)
- 3. FIFTY SHADES FREED**, by E.L. James (Vintage)
- 4. BARED TO YOU**, by Sylvia Day (Berkley)
- 5. GUILTY WIVES**, by James Patterson and David Ellis (Grand Central)
- 6. HOLD**, by Gary Keller (McGraw-Hill)
- 7. THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER**, by Stephen Chbosky (MTV Books)
- 8. THE CHEW: FOOD. LIFE. FUN**, by The Chew Kitchen (Hyperion)
- 9. THE BEST OF ME**, by Nicholas Sparks (Grand Central)
- 10. ALMOST HOME**, by Kevin Ryan (John Wiley & Sons)