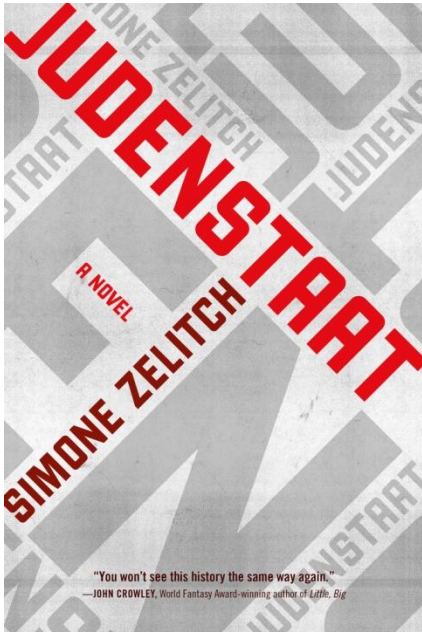


Uncovering a Jewish State

Kayla Lipson



Judenstaat, the novel written by Simone Zelitch, imagines an alternative history in a world where a Jewish state took root in Germany post world war two. Judenstaat was proposed as an answer to the “Jewish question” (what to do with the Jews?) which was popularized by fascists, but also Theodore Herzl, a Jewish activist and writer who was a major contributor to the Zionist movement. Herzl’s publication, *Der Judenstaat*, inspired Simone Zelitch to pen a novel of the same name, literally translating to “the Jewish state”. Herzl hoped to placate the antisemitism faced by Jews by creating a state to house them, and his musings were of great contribution to the founding of the state of Israel. Zelitch draws cultural inspiration from both Israel and East Germany in this historic thriller.

Publisher: Tor Books

Pages: 320

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The backdrop of this still newly minted state approaching its fortieth anniversary seemed like provoking idea, because the state is trying to maintain an identity and send a message to the rest of the world. Main character Judit is a widowed museum archivist who spends her time working, hunting for old film and photographs that piece together the creation of her state, and outline the lives of the people who risked everything for a Jewish home. Those people have long since disappeared or died, and Judit cannot understand how seemingly people are willing to sweep history under the carpet, never speaking allowed of the past. In fact, Judit’s employers seem only to urge her forward, discouraging detail from the past.

This hits Judit at the same time as another mystery. Judit has been haunted by the specter of her deceased husband since he was publicly killed by “fascists”. He appears to her in the archives, saying nothing, but judging her all the same. She feels he is finally trying to tell her something, but won’t let herself hope that his assassination may not be as black and white as it had seemed. Then there’s a stranger, and a life-changing note that simply reads, “They lied about the murder.” Given her employment, Judit is unable to tell whether this is in reference to the assassination of her dear husband, or some hint towards the disillusioned history of the state she calls home.

“We declare that from this moment, the 14th of May 1948, under the establishment of the Allied Forces, that the German territory once designated as Saxony will henceforth be JUDENSTAAT.”

The plot of Judenstaat is solid on paper, however Zelitch strays from the plot line considerably to fit in the extensive explanation required for a historically sound state that never existed. The historical validity of Judenstaat’s legitimacy as a state is not questionable, however its complexity does cause for a long read, and a strong attention span. The amount of information that needs to be covered, and understood, to gain a full understanding of the story with its historical backdrop and subtext however is heavy. Readers will find themselves flipping back to remember the significance of each character or briefly mentioned politician. The plot is slightly difficult to follow through the lengthy explanations and detail, which has additional complexity due to time and character jumps.

The idea of a Jewish state was well thought out and Zelitch produces a historically rich and technically believable story. The cultural struggles detailed add another level of depth, and

readers might find that issues in this time period line up with many modern cultural issues today. I did however feel naive in reading this publication without having read any other theories considering a Jewish state, of which there are many. A rough timeline is offered at the end of the book which may have done well to be at the beginning instead; the book needs no further complication of time. I would recommend the book to those who have interest and possibly background in history and the influence on Judaism, yet have no qualms with heavy reading and attention to detail.

Simone Zelitch has published five novels. She has traveled to both Israel and Europe to research her books. She is currently a creative writing teacher in Philadelphia.



About the reviewer and writer: Kayla Lipson is a sophomore studying creative writing at Oswego state university. An aspiring author, she also does editorial work for the schools literary magazine and hopes to one day publish a novel of her own.