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FEATURES

### AN INTERVIEW WITH JESSAMYN HOPE

There are so many things to love about Jessamyn Hope's debut novel, *Safekeeping*. There's the beautiful writing, of course. There's also the story itself, which is both unique and fascinating, and, though it spans generations, never feels too far removed to be relatable. There are the unreliable characters, who constantly make you seasaw between rooting for them and hating them, thus making them feel like full, real people you could be passing on the street; the well-defined history of Jews and their never-ending plight; the beautiful setting, a kibbutz in Israel, a place where everyone is given second chances, all while living under a microscope of public judgment -- a place that is old and complicated and beautiful, much like the gold brooch at the heart of the story.

But beyond all that, what makes *Safekeeping* truly special is what goes on beneath the story: the dual themes of connection and disconnection, history and forgetting, technology and agelessness. These are the things that stay with you after you've finished reading the last page. A book this special comes along only rarely, and I'm happy to have discovered it. It's full of surprises, wisdom, and beauty. There's nothing cliché or redundant about it.

I was very excited to have the chance to speak with Jessamyn about *Safekeeping*. You can read our interview below:

#### First of all, I just love your name. It's like you were born to be a writer. Is there a story behind it?

When I was born, I was actually named Colene, but three weeks into my life, my mother received a congratulatory card from a distant family friend, and the friend had included in the signature the name of her young daughter, Jessamyn. According to family lore, my mother started ripping out the "Colene" she was knitting into a sweater for me; it's an odd flourish since I never once saw my mother with knitting needles. But she did set about changing my name.

Five years ago, I googled my mother's name: Annette Hope, née Soccorso. My mother had died of breast cancer twenty years earlier, on a cold January afternoon in 1990, when I was fifteen. I knew my mom had never heard of the Internet, but I was curious if the Internet had heard of her. One thing came up: the birth announcement in *The Montreal Gazette* for Colene Tara Hope.

#### So, you were born in Montreal. Where did your interest in Israel come from?

My twentieth summer was spent on Kibbutz Geshet HaZiv, a relative's kibbutz in northern Israel, about four miles from Lebanon. Growing up, my father loved to travel and would save all year to take the family to the US or overseas, but this was my first time traveling outside of North America on my own, and I fell in love with both Israel and backpacking.

A number of motives sent me off to Israel that first summer -- I was looking for adventure, exploring my Jewish identity -- but one of them was to escape my father's house, which was an unhappy place for several reasons after my mother's death. When I arrived in Israel, I found inspiration in the story of the country, which was only forty-six years old at the time, not much older than I am today. It awed me that people walking out of the death camps, stripped of everything and everyone they had ever loved, who had all the reason in the world to give up on existence, to give up on humanity, somehow found the hope and strength to start again, to fight for their own country. It exemplified the thing that amazes me the most about all human beings: our ability to persevere after tragedy.

In addition to spending time in Israel, I have since traveled in over forty countries -- by public bus in Rajasthan, in a third-class car on the Trans-Siberian railway, by bicycle from Istanbul to Gibraltar -- and all of these experiences helped inform *Safekeeping*, which features an international cast of characters.

#### How long did you stay in Israel? Do you ever go back?

I went back the next summer, after I graduated from Lawrence University, and lived on Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan, another relative's kibbutz near Haifa. There, I fell for a young kibbutznik who used to sit on his windowsill at night. Like the character of Ofir, he had recently lost his eardrums and some of his eyesight in a bus bombing. We were together for a couple of years, which kept me returning to the kibbutz. Today Israel remains a part of my life. My husband, Yoav, was born in Tel Aviv, and we love going back for visits.

#### Does a kibbutz like this really exist?

Although I spent time on four kibbutzim and one in particular, the kibbutz in the novel -- Kibbutz Sadot Hadar -- is completely fictional. And now, after working on the novel for eight years, it is the kibbutz on which I have spent the most time. Members of Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan will recognize the stepping stones into the volunteers section and the silhouette of Mount Carmel in the distance, but they won't know any of the characters or stories. All the characters have a detail or two inspired by real people, but they long ago metamorphosed into unique individuals. For instance, the character of Claudette suffers from OCD, as I have, but unlike me, she's a religious and painfully shy woman raised in a Catholic orphanage.

#### What was the spark from which this story was born? Or were there a few?

*Safekeeping* is a sweeping novel with multiple protagonists and storylines, born from many sparks. The main reason I'm a writer is that I've always felt this powerful compulsion to try to capture existence, to distill it into a story that I could share with someone else, so we could together mourn and celebrate life. So perhaps the original motivation behind writing *Safekeeping* was to simply capture a certain place at a certain time -- a summer on a kibbutz in 1994 -- and to give it to others. When I started to write about the kibbutz and the diverse collection of people living there, I found that to capture the essence of that place and time required going beyond the borders of the commune and farther back and forward in history. Eventually the novel became what it is today, a story that spans several countries and seven centuries.

#### How long did it take you to write?

It took eight years. For a lot of that time, I had a day job, which can make writing slow going. But on top of that, I am a very slow writer. And the scope of the book is large.

#### Now that you've been through the entire publishing process, if, back when you started this book, you could tell your past self something, what would it be?

I would tell my young, suffering writer self to relax. When I was twenty-six years old, I finished a novel titled *Coming Down*. My MFA thesis advisor at Sarah Lawrence loved it and took it to his agent. It ended up with another agent and came close to finding a publisher, but only close. While the book was still on submission, my aunt Valerie, calling from Toronto, left an excited message on my Brooklyn answering machine in her charming South-African-English accent: "Jessamyn! This year is the yeeeeeeear of the book!" My roommate, Taylor from Texas, who had her own accent, replayed the message, imitating my aunt: "The yeeeeeeear of the book!" That was 2002. And every year after that, I would wonder *is this* the year of the book? And every year, for thirteen years, it wasn't. I felt more and more like a failure. So if I could go back, I would say, "Jessamyn! It isn't going to be the yeeeeeeear of the book anytime soon. So calm down and enjoy writing and your life." But who knows? Maybe a writer needs that sense of urgency.

#### How much research into Israel's history and conflicts did you have to do for this book? I assume it was a lot.

I knew a lot going in, so I was able to write the story confident I had the broader parameters right. It was important to me that the story take primacy, that it not be a vehicle for a history lesson. So only after I had worked out the story did I go back and do extensive research to make sure it all aligned with history. One thing that kept me careful was that I knew my father-in-law, who was a thirteen-year-old boy on a kibbutz in 1948, would be reading the book, and maybe his sister, who, like the character of Ziva, was a member of the underground Jewish army during the British Mandate of Palestine.

#### What other kinds of research did you end up having to do?

So much. Again, first came the story, then an enormous amount of research. I read up on Jewish life in medieval Europe, the history of the gem trade, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Chernobyl disaster, the Duplessis Orphan scandal in Quebec, Catholic ideas about sin, Jewish thoughts on mourning, Muslim rules of marriage, swing dancing, concentration camps, 1980s Lower East Side, crack addiction, and much more. The research needed to shed light on larger historical questions -- What exactly precipitated the pogroms in medieval Europe? -- as well as finer details: Did mailboxes in 1940s Germany have surnames on them? What did Manhattan's Bryant Park look like in 1984?

#### The last chapter, which jumps ahead twenty years to 2014, had to have been one of the most succinct, perfectly executed reflections on modern society that I've ever read. Isaac's thoughts on social media (for example, the line "Why he had paid witness to everything this woman had eaten for the last three years was a mystery") are both humorous and poignant, but also, in a way, reflect back onto the running theme I saw in your book: that every human interaction is ripe with consequence and meaning. Is this why you chose to end it so far removed from the rest of the story, which takes place in 1994?

The three "brooch stories" that divide the book are set both in space and time far from the main story that takes place on a kibbutz in 1994. These stories, which follow the history of the brooch, allow the reader to know things about that object that the characters interacting with it in 1994 never get to find out. Among my intentions with these brooch stories was to show how events from the past, events we don't even know about, affect who we are today. I think the following metaphor can be traced back to Faulkner, but I once heard events in the past likened to a stone thrown into a pool of water; long after the stone is gone, the concentric ripples it created are expanding. I do believe something that happened to my great-grandparents in Lithuania might have affected the way they brought up my grandmother, which shaped the way she raised my father in South Africa, which influenced the worldview my father taught me in Canada, so that today I am in part the way I am because of an event I don't even know about in nineteenth-century Vilnius. The brooch chapters were a way to show the reader the stone at the bottom of the pool.

#### I love how the history of the brooch is at once the driving force of the narrative, but also, like Ziva says towards the end of the book, "Just an object. And not even a useful one." What's even more interesting is that, while the reader knows its history, no one in the book does, because every time it's brought up to various characters, they are too distracted with their own day-to-day turmoil to listen. Eventually they do want to know, but by then it's too late. Is this something you thought about when writing those scenes, or was it more of a coincidence that they all have the same uninterested reaction to their parents?

It is not a coincidence, and I'm really happy you picked up on it. The idea is that sometimes we do get a chance to know about that stone thrown into the water, but we are too self-absorbed in our youth to listen.

When I was twenty-six years old, I traveled to Kenya and Tanzania with my sister and the boyfriend from the kibbutz. In preparation for the trip, I went to my favorite store -- the Mountain Equipment Co-op in Toronto -- to buy a new backpack. I had plans with my *zaida*, my grandfather, for later that afternoon; he was going to tell me about his service in WWII, about traveling from his home in Pretoria across the African continent to fight in Libya on behalf of the British. But I was so excited about my own trip to Africa, I spent a long time at the store, followed by another store, and I didn't go to my grandfather until late in the evening, by which time he was so hurt and angry that I had stood him up that he refused to tell me his stories. Or, even worse, maybe he did tell them to me, and I, continuing to daydream about my upcoming trip, didn't listen.

While in Nairobi, my sister and I visited an old hotel where my *zaida* stayed on his way to Libya, but I have no idea what might have happened to him there. It was that sort of missed opportunity that I wanted to capture by showing each generation ignoring the previous generation's stories about the brooch.

#### Let's end on a more lighthearted note: if you could choose one fictional world to live in, what would it be?

This question brings me back to my childhood, when I would become obsessed with a story, and then pray at night to a God I didn't believe in to please let me wake up in the morning in that story's world. For a long time, it was *Annie's* depression-era New York City, followed by a brief fling with *Tom Sawyer's* Missouri, then *Heidi's* Swiss Alps, before coming to the character and the book that likely changed my life: *Anne of Green Gables*. My diary from that time is filled with a longing to be in late Victorian Prince Edward Island.

Today, as an adult, the books I love have so much physical and psychological conflict, that it would be like wishing to live in a war zone, but if there were the promise that I could come back to the wonders and conflicts of my own world, I would like to spend a month in the *The House of Mirth's* New York City. How amazing it would be to walk down the city streets I love and see them as they were when New York City was just starting to come into itself, when the first of the trains were rattling over 9th Avenue, when Central Park was a brand-new park, and Ellis Island a new inspection station for immigrants.



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