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Strangers with the Same Dream explores important ideas of identity



By Brock Weir

?Reading.?
It was Alison Pick's answer to this writer's question, ?Where do you find your inspiration?? and an answer she freely admits ?might sound like a boring response? but that is often the case for the Man Booker Prize nominated author.
But, although reading undoubtedly played a significant part in inspiring her latest novel, Strangers with the Same Dream, this year's One Book One Aurora selection, further inspiration came very close to home.
Strangers with the Same Dream follows the story of a diverse group of individuals in the 1920s who travel to what is now Israel to lay the foundations of a new life, an exercise in communal living. Through these disparate characters, Ms. Pick weaves a tapestry on the early foundations of Israel itself.
It sheds light on the power of identity in a complex struggle, one that is still fraught today, but it also helped answer identity questions of her own.
Ms. Pick only discovered her own Jewish roots as an adolescent and converted to the faith later in life.
Her father, she says, was Jewish but this is something she did not know until well into her formative years.
His parents escaped Europe in 1939, with their own forebears dying in concentration camps, but those who escaped to the safety of North America faced different challenges.
?When [my father's] parents got to Canada, the story I grew up with was they had been non-practicing, but one branch was non-practicing and the other quite practicing,? says Ms. Pick. ?But, in any case, Canada was anti-Semitic and they decided they would raise my dad and his brother as Christians. He only found out when he was 20 and touring a Jewish cemetery in Prague. In my family, there was almost no conversation about it. He knew, my mum knew, I grew up going to church and I found out by accident as an adolescent.?
The revelation was something of a game-changer for Ms. Pick but before it impacted her worldview, she says it had a more immediate impact on her personal identity.
?In a sense, my whole life made sense in a way it didn't before,? she says about understanding things in a new family context.
?There was so much secrecy in my family about it and it was a long process. There were lots of fraught conversations and my dad didn't want us to really talk about it while his mother was still alive because she was the one who was very adamant we were going to keep it a secret. Both her parents died in Auschwitz, she was a young woman when she came to Canada, and she just dealt with it by shutting down, I think.
?After she passed away, the atmosphere in the family changed and there were years of struggling to understand who I was, my identity, and feeling very drawn to Judaism before actually converting. All of that happened before anything changed with my world view, and it was all very internal at first.?
Alison Pick did not grow up with any burning desire to be a writer, opting to take an elective in creative writing during her

undergraduate studies. She always loved reading, however, but eventually she was hit by a ?thunderbolt? that she wanted to be a writer and never looked back.
She eventually secured a grant and, with that money, took some time off from her job to write poetry. Luckily, she won a prestigious award for her efforts quite early on which extended her leave by a further six months.
This question of identity is something Ms. Pick explored in her 2010 book, Far to Go, the Booker Prize-nominated novel inspired by her grandparents' fleeing of Czechoslovakia in 1939. It was explored further in her own memoir Between Gods.
?Having done both recently, the line between memoir and fiction is thinner than we like to think, the categories are not as distinct,? she says, comparing the writing process between the two genres. ?I was prepared to find them extremely different for various reasons, but you're using the same toolkit.?
Early on in the exploration of her identity, Ms. Pick says she was told that one couldn't fully understand what it means to be Jewish until one visited Israel, an idea she brushed off as ?silly? at first blush.
That was then, but after several trips to Israel since that conversation, she sees the wisdom in the statement.
?It was a way for me to understand the psychology of the early Zionists and the seeds of what is happening in the Middle East today,? she says. ?That said, the main thing I am interested in is the characters. I think if you're writing historical fiction, if it is set in a time and place that is very dramatic, that is the backdrop and the reader will bring a sense of foreboding, or dread to that, or curiosity. As the writer, you're focusing on what is happening between the characters.
?The reader brings themselves [to a book] and that is one of the exciting things about art in general, and literature in particular, to me: the diversity of things people come away with. I like to read a book without reading the back cover if I can because I think the less you know the deeper your reading experience might be.?

To find your own experience, look for copies of Strangers with the Same Dream. The book is available for purchase now from all booksellers, with paperbacks set to appear in small pop-up lending libraries all around Aurora starting this summer. For more information on One Book One Aurora 2018, including the growing list of activities and discussions surrounding the themes of the book, visit www.onebookoneaurora.com.