

SYNOPSIS

BOOK ONE : BEGINNINGS

The book opens in Bethlehem. The second J, John, is the one who introduces the book from Jerusalem beginning on Christmas and the first day of Chanukkah. His archetype is John the Baptist, in search of spirit...pointing the way. In several aspects, he is a revolutionary shift from the playful, punning world of the flesh that Johannes inhabits. His diary entry type-style is normal. John is in distress, and on p. 19 he makes a decision to give life one more chance: to review his past to see if he can understand where he fell off the "tracks" of his joyous privileged existence. He knows he can't return to that past, but to him, life is not worth living unless he can re-form his shattered self and envision a different future.

The first J, Johannes the seducer, is named for the archetype in Kierkegaard's Either. He is the youngest chronologically. His diary entry is set off by underlining, and begins at Stanford nine months earlier, around Purim, though he is unaware of the holiday. April. His journal entry sets the stage for his goals, his romances, and his meeting with Mery, who is to change his life.

The third J is Jacob, in the mystical city of Safed, in the fall, nine months after John begins writing. He's a scribe to a group of wise elders. His voice is more similar to John's than Johannes, and this is reflected in his type-style being the same as John's, only bold. He is an evolution of John, a little wiser, with a little larger perspective, a bit more humor. He is still trying to formulate the "new tracks" on which to go forward, as well as to explore the possibility of deepening love.

BOOK TWO: PARTINGS

Johannes, who met Mery in Book One, continues to deepen his relationship with her over the next month. On the Saturday of Passover week, he writes from the Crown Room of the Fairmont Hotel about the last twenty four hours, and also overviews the past month. During that month, he--Junior-- has visited his family in Kansas City, which was a disaster.

The visit with the family was such a disaster that John, nine months later, decides he needs to go into therapy. His therapists are a Rebbe, Reb Jonathan, and a psychologist, Dr. Lisbet. (It's fun for me to both be the person in therapy and the one doing the counseling--as male and female). *John also begins to write about the two months during which he went to Eilat and Sinai. During that time he was unable to write because of his injured fingers, and therefore the type is italicized to reflect that period.*

Jacob continues to evolve and share his insights into the ongoing process of learning, healing, growing.

BOOK THREE: SEEKINGS

For the first half of Book 3, Johannes' relationship with Mery continues to deepen and spiral upward, with only minor blips. He decides she's the one with whom he wants to make a long-term commitment. Ovid's Art of Loving, Part II becomes his advisor. He plans to take Mery to Carmel the following weekend and propose.

In the second half of Book 3, however, there is a slight shift in trajectory. Some problems emerge--he realizes how much easier it is to play music alone, rather than as a duet, with different styles and rhythm. Mery is spiritual, but he finds her Jesus-focus divisive; and her sexual fantasies confuse and threaten him. They go dancing at the Fillmore to Janis Joplin. They attend church where they hear Stokely Carmichael and meet one of Mery's former lovers.

John, who is becoming increasingly Orthodox and spirit focused, is celibate and anti-relationship. He continues to write in his journal while living in Jerusalem, and recalls the time he spent in Eilat during the prior months, after he had left the Kibbutz because of his injured finger. His journal entries about Eilat are written *in italics*. *He recalls spending nearly a month in this community, lolling on the beach, drinking wine, singing around a campfire with a diverse group of peaceful, pot-smoking mellow (perhaps too much so) people, who initially remind him of a model United Nations.*

Events happen, however, which make him realize it's time to move on. He goes to the desert, where he climbs Mt. Sinai. He has different, but powerful experiences both at the top of the Mountain, and, once he climbs down, in the room of skulls at the St. Catherine Monastery. He decides to return to Jerusalem to study the law of God, seeking out the most Orthodox group possible.

John joins a teaching group run by Dr. Lisbet and Reb Jonathan. There he is introduced to a darling long legged girl, who is somewhat rebellious and asks provocative questions. She has a feisty grandmother who lives in Israel, and a socialist rebel Rumanian great-grandfather. He is annoyed with himself at how attracted he is to her, but realizes that she is just one more obstacle to his spiritual search.

John has a falling out with the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet, who have become his therapists, over money, and stops therapy. He gets a job cleaning pots of beans at the King David Hotel, while continuing to read Johannes' journal, and catch up on the time when he wasn't able to write. He's feeling discouraged in the progress of his self-exploration. Rather than being more whole, he now feels estranged both from his Johannes self, and is becoming increasingly estranged from his spiritually intoxicated Ortho John self

Jacob is still a quiet commentator in Safed, who occasionally shares his insights into the ongoing process of learning, healing, growing, as he reads the journals of Johannes and John.

BOOK FOUR: IN THE WILDERNESS

The book opens on a Sunday in May, in church, with Johannes meeting one of Mery's former lovers, and later her former art teacher. He feels threatened and confused, but decides a long weekend in Carmel with just the two of them will re-cement their relationship. During the week, in

preparation, he buys her an engagement and wedding ring, studies up on Passover and Judaism, continues his creative writing class, and plays tennis with his buddies, where they engage in a ribald punning fest.

In Carmel he proposes and she accepts. He plays golf, she paints and Friday night they have a Passover Seder to celebrate their life together and escape from past bondages. The order of the Seder unravels; spiritually, psychologically, and sexually. The book ends with the two of them at the ocean, listening to the sounds of congas around a multi-racial campfire, as Johannes continues to disintegrate and, bleeding from a cut on his foot, has a mental and physical collapse.

Ortho-John, the week before Chanukah, continues his searching in the Mea Shearim for spiritual guidance and certainty among the ultra-Orthodox. He desperately wants their truth and certitude, but finds he's increasingly contorting himself to try to fit; even then they find him not reaching their standards. He leaves and goes to the Sanhedrin Park, the burial place of the judges of the Israeli Supreme Court. Nature calls. In Reb Jonathan's class, he argues the very Orthodox positions he's just felt uncomfortable with. The new girl, Joie, invites him to hear her sing on Shabbat. He decides to visit Yad Va Shem.

John celebrates Tu Bishvat, the festival of trees and growth and newness, while continuing to comment both on Johannes' and on Ortho-John's explorations. He sees both of them sinking, and fears his efforts to re-find himself are not leading anywhere. "No new self will emerge from this wilderness and I will be a stillborn birth."

Jacob, in Safed during Elul, the month before Rosh Hashanah, starts to give increasing glimpses into his life, though his main focus is still the commentary on Johannes' and John's journals.

BOOK FIVE: WORDS

Book 5 opens with Johannes waking up in a dream-like state on Sunday, two days after being pulled, nearly unconscious, from the roiling waters the night of the Second Passover. He is cared for and nursed back to physical health by Asiya, his landlady. But it appears we are witnessing the seeming final death throes and end of Johannes, and the birth pains of a new self seeking to be born. Who may emerge from the waters? We see his Jonah-like hiding in the darkness, in a kind of cocoon, and his Job-like struggles in the wilderness. He goes to San Francisco to try to rediscover his way, and ends up on Sixth Street, coming down the mountain from the Fairmont, and seeking to heal, even preach to the homeless people below, even as he continues to struggle to find himself. He has one last encounter with Mery, and then realizes his life as he knows it is done, and he needs to find a new path, a new birth. He leaves for Israel, to recover and try to find a new life on a kibbutz by the Sea of Galilee.

John, as Passover nears almost a year after Johannes' misadventures, is a relatively quiet commentator while Johannes thrashes in his last throes. Once Johannes arrives in Israel, John feels he's now reading about the beginning of his own self. John returns to and deepens his therapy sessions with Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe, who have said they will be leaving Israel after the upcoming Passover. He feels this is a critical time in his life, a final chance to emerge from his bondage, and point the way to his new, wiser,

evolving self. He realizes he is the only hope, as Johannes cuts his fingers on the kibbutz and is in a dark place

Jacob, is still in Safed during Elul, the month before Rosh Hashanah, but only infrequently comments on Johannes' and John's journal writing.

Book 5 ends with Ortho-John, visits Yad Va Shem, where he is engulfed by the darkness of the experience, his faith in God and humans shattered. ends with Ortho-John, at Chanukah, reflecting on Johannes' last days on the kibbutz, at Simchat Torah, where the last part of the last book of the Torah, Deuteronomy, is read, telling of the glimpse of the Promised land, and Moses' death. Though Simchat Torah is a time of dancing and celebrating, Johannes sits quietly alone, as Book 5 reaches its conclusion with his saying: "I open my eyes, stand up, lower my head and begin my final walk further into the lawless wilderness: lost, languid, lamed."

(Note: Lamed is the last letter—in Hebrew-- of book five of the Torah).

BOOK SIX : THE PROMISED LAND?

The last Book begins on Palm Sunday, with John working on the final act of his play, Devarim. This third act is the story of the Grandmother's death, and the narrator coming from behind the curtain to wrestle with God. As the play ends, the story continues on Good Friday in Jerusalem on the Via De La Rosa, with John's pointing to that which he is to become.

The final chapters of Book Six alternate between John's experiences in Jerusalem on Easter Sunday, at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and the Mount of Olives, where he is meditating and praying; **and as Jacob in the mystical city of Safed, surrounded by individuals who have gathered to share and discuss the deepest philosophical. and spiritual wisdom of which they are capable, the Zen master Akishige, the Tai Chi player, Wang Lin Zscho, Reverend David Noel, a Christian mystic, the Sufi whirling dervish Said al Hazrmi, the Hindu bhakti master Shakti Prem Devi, and the existential philosopher Jacques Sorenson.**

John is joined in the Mount of Olives by Joie, and, as she sings and talks of second chances, he wonders if there might be the possibility of relationship again in his life. As the day ends, he watches her walk over the crest of the hill on which they are sitting, and her shadow disappears, contemplating whether he has the courage to follow. While their story is unfolding on Easter, **Jacob's is unfolding during the Days of Awe: Rosh Hashanah, with its new beginnings; Yom Kippur with facing death and asking and offering forgiveness; and Succot and Simchat Torah, a time of facing vulnerability and impermanence, reaping the harvest, and dancing.**

John's story from Easter onward is intertwined with and evolves into **Jacob's story in Safed, where is continues his relationship with Joie and is a scribe among this group of wise elders meditating on, dialoguing about the questions regarding life's meaning and the nature of the universe--the questions with which the book began with John wrestling in Jerusalem at**

Chanukah and Christmas. Jacob also receives a letter from the Rebbe, transmitting the Rebbe's final wisdom and guidance to him. As the gathered scholars, mystics, and philosophers talk and pray about the nature of evil, death, the messianic age, the last part of the book is also a love story, a wrestling with how and if to commit to a beloved.

All these questions reach their culmination while Jacob sits at the grave of Reb Luria, high in the hills of Safed. Below, in the Succah, Joie and the guests are gathered on Simchat Torah, to say their final good-byes. On Simchat Torah, the last part of the Torah, Deuteronomy, is read and comes to an end with Moses dying and the Promised Land glimpsed, but not entered. The first part of the book of Genesis is also read, beginning with the word Bereshit, in the beginning. As one phase ends, the cycle continues anew. But even as the cycle circles back to the beginning, it also goes forward. The first part of the book of Joshua is also read, in which Joshua enters the promised Land.

Jacob hears the song of Jacob's ladder in his head. "Every Step climbing higher, higher." He looks toward the heavens and laughs. He knows what he must do. He must climb Jacob's ladder not by continuing upward, but by walking back toward and entering the world below. He leaves the grave of Reb Luria, and begins to walk down the mountain toward the succah and the dancing and celebration of Simchat Torah, while accompanied by the sound of angel's wings whooshing in Safed.

★ ★ ★
★ ★ ★