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Book Review - Among the Living

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Off the SHELF

Among the Living by Jonathan Rabb (Other Press, New York, 2016: ISBN 978-1-59051-803-8, \$26.95)

Among the Living is an historical fiction novel about a Holocaust survivor who immigrates to the United States to live with his distant, older, and childless relatives, Abe and Pearl Jesler, in Savannah, Georgia during the late summer of 1947. Rabb's flowing and descriptive style transports the reader to the humid summer of sweet tea, white-aproned Negro servants, and the upper-class wealth of this historical and long-established port city.

From the harsh world of Jewish concentration camps enters thirty-one-year-old Yitzhak Goldah, a Holocaust survivor, to live in a unique and thriving Southern community that historically is traceable to the founding of the Savannah colony. In this Jewish society, Yitzhak, who is renamed Ike to become more "American" by his cousins, arrives to live with his only remaining relatives in the world. Although Yitzhak Goldah is renamed Ike by his cousins, the main character is referred to as Goldah throughout the work.

Goldah quickly discovers that Savannah is a forced and fractured society where the different Conservative and Reform Jews are expected to live distinctive and separate lives. Golda finds this to be similar to the forced and fractured lives that whites and blacks are

expected to live, especially in the South, during the Jim Crow era.

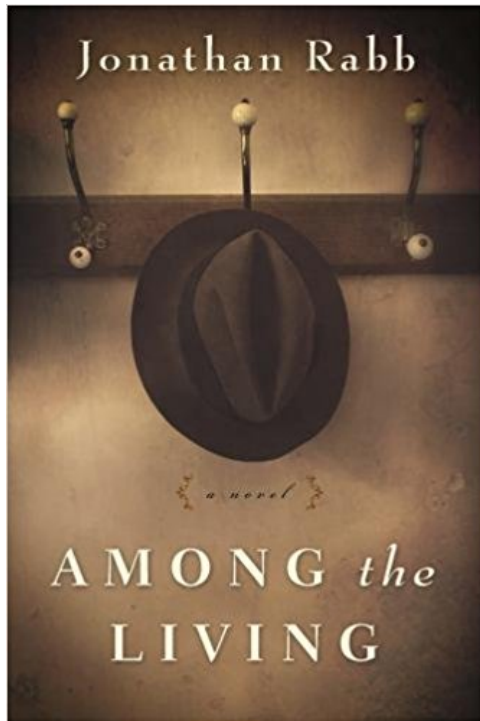
This is a meaningless world of Jewish separation to Goldah, a Holocaust survivor who recently experienced a life where all Jews were equally reviled. Goldah, who is assumed a member of the local Conservative community because of his cousin's affiliations, becomes confused and annoyed by his family and by his new community. He wishes to express his devotions for a young Reformed widow and does not

understand why he should not associate with a member from the Reformed community. Jewish Savannah society considers Eva a righteous woman because her husband died bravely in the war effort. However, she is also considered rebellious because she is breaking the strict code of conduct by crossing the societal divide between Reformed and Conservative Jew in Savannah.

Goldah's life becomes even further complicated when a woman from his past life during the Holocaust suddenly appears in Savannah. Malke is also a

Holocaust survivor who was his fiancé in Europe but was assumed dead. Like Goldah, she has a dark and tortured past. Unlike Goldah, she chooses to remain in this familiar miserable land while Goldah is striving to begin a new life.

While Goldah is adjusting to life in America and dealing with his various trials of the heart, Rabb also includes an additional subplot with Goldah



stumbling upon an illegal conspiracy of shoe smuggling by his cousin's business. In this plot, we learn how the lingering issues of slavery and prejudice among African Americans and their relationships with their employers still loiter in the late 1940s. This includes the legacy that the black help will stay silent and keep the deepest secrets of their employers, even when keeping those secrets come at a steep economic or emotional disadvantage to the black family.

Rabb's story telling introduces delightful subplots within plots, and the reader learns about the historical development of the Savannah Jewish society, where stained glass synagogue masterpieces still are throughout the great city. The story telling magic by Jonathan Rabb is simply exquisite. You feel the sweet beads on your neck as the flies swarm around the freshly starched linen napkins stained with honey. You can see the angel faces of the infants pushed in the black and white perambulators by the nannies in the beautifully landscapes squares in Savannah on a humid afternoon. You can feel the pain on Goldah's face as he tries to explain why there should be no divides between Reform and Conservative Jews in Savannah and why he should be free to move towards a new beginning and new life in Savannah. *Among the Living* is another book that makes the reader want to come and

explore the city of Savannah for all of its hidden charms.

Jonathan Rabb is an American novelist, essayist, actor, and writer who previously completed five historical novels. His works are well-researched powerful stories that quickly capture the reader's attention while bringing lesser-known historical facts into contemporary knowledge. He has a special talent with developing character narratives that bring regionalism, story intimacy, and historical context among the people and plots that he creates. He attracts a following within Goodreads and other book review sources. Currently he is a professor in the writing department at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) located in Savannah, Georgia, and previously taught writing at Columbia University, New York University, and at the 92nd Street Y. Rabb wrote *Among the Living* after his Berlin Trilogy (*Rosa, Shadow and Light*, and *The Second Son*), a critically acclaimed series of historical thrillers, with the work *Rosa* winning the 2006 Director's Special Prize at Spain's Semana Negra Festival where it was named one of *January Magazine's* Best Books for 2005.

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