

A haunted farm family shattered by tragedy

Reviewed by
Denise Gess

Summer Long-a-coming is a weak title for Barbara Finkelstein's electrifying first novel, a title that evokes only the laconic, gray towns scattered along South Jersey's White Horse Pike — a highway I've traveled endless times since childhood en route to the Jersey shore.

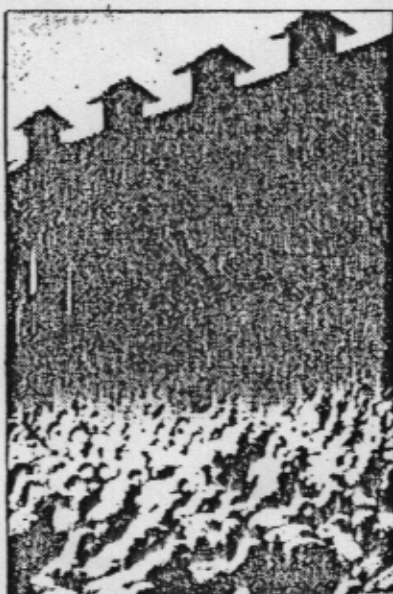
Just as I never suspected that anything sinister lay at the heart of those shingled houses — some obscured by thick trees, others set back on wide sun-singed lawns — I also had reservations about Finkelstein's ability to transform *Summer Long-a-coming* or its people into anything but a regional folk tale. In the mind and artistry of an exceptional writer, however, anything is possible. Thirty or so pages into the book, I found myself flipping to the back cover, expecting to find a list of the author's prior publications in prestigious literary magazines. That there were none left me astonished and disappointed.

Astonished because Finkelstein is so accomplished a writer. Disappointed because I knew I'd want to continue my association by reading anything else she may have written. We will have to wait.

In the meantime, the Szuster family that Finkelstein has rendered in aching detail will captivate you.

Brantzche Szuster is the narrator and the eldest girl of the three Szuster children. Early on, she informs us that "scraping my nails on the past, testing my foothold in the future, was habit with me by the time I was 10. All I needed was a personal holocaust to twirl around in my mind, and then I could carry my parents' obsession with me into my generation."

Mama and Papa's obsession is the Holocaust, the intractable memory of the Nazi death camps they survived. Although they escaped to America, to the bland and seemingly non-threatening South Jersey town where they own and run Jake's Poultry Farm (a slaughterhouse for kosher chickens), nei-



From the book jacket

SUMMER LONG-A-COMING

Barbara Finkelstein

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ther their flight from murderers nor their desire to create a quarantined rural life for their children spares them the tragedy that shatters the family in the humid summer of 1968.

As Brantzche sees it, her parents' "maniacal review of the past" (which is incessantly retraced at the kitchen table with fellow survivors) and their steadfast adherence to the laws and languages of Orthodox Judaism both separate them from society outside the farm and provide the smoke screen that permits them to deny their children's boiling unrest.

While Mama and Papa reverently remember agonies that are two decades old, Brantzche; her (See FINKELSTEIN on Page 8)

Denise Gess is the author of "Good Deeds," a novel about a Philadelphia family. She is completing her second novel, "Red Whiskey Blues."

dy shatters a family on a S. Jersey farm

FINKELSTEIN, from Page 1

younger sister, Perel, and the eldest child, their brother, Sheiye, struggle to infuse their isolated, humdrum existence with drama. For Brantzche and Perel, who are not required to work summers on the farm because of Mama's belief that they should have a "childhood," their amusement takes two forms. They invent comic characters and voices to keep them company, to stretch their vast imaginations and taunt the sociopathic Sheiye — who at 18 still derives his profoundest pleasure from beating up his sisters and teasing them mercilessly.

The siblings have invented and locked themselves into a cycle of play and loathing that never ceases and is, finally, their undoing. It is Brantzche, the intelligent, wry, sympathetic narrator, who suffers these cycles the most: "Mother love,

like father love, was too subtle to sustain me, too whimsical, and not always apparent. Only this fraternal hatred, steady and plentiful, made me feel brilliantly alive, put me in the same league with suffering human beings like Mama and Papa."

Brantzche's hatred for her brother is not unfounded, and Finkelstein's portrayal of the remorseless Sheiye is scaring. He runs down one of the family dogs with the pickup truck, but claims the gas pedal "got stuck" — he just couldn't brake in time. In a scene reminiscent of Garp's coasting-car trick, Sheiye's driving tricks lead to sinister tragedy.

It is that death, 15 years later, that Brantzche cannot let go. *Summer Long-a-coming* is the story of a 30-year-old woman's return to the summer of her 15th year. For most of us, adolescence was the rickety spring-

board to the future, but for Brantzche, who loves her younger sister, Perel, and sees her as her one ally, adolescence becomes an indictment. The violence that erupts in the summer of '68 makes her wonder bitterly why her life, "barely begun, had already implicated her in the crimes of the world."

To Finkelstein's credit, she never grandstands for her readers, never injures them to tears or shock with easy reliance on a subject that automatically registers shame and sorrow in everyone but the addled. Amid impeccable prose and careful pacing, her one contrivance in an otherwise taut novel is the interweaving of Mama and Papa's oral histories of their captivity in the Nazi camps. While the insertion of the histories sometimes interrupts the flow of the storytelling, it also provides a glimpse of Mama and

Papa that the reader would otherwise miss.

In reliving their horror, the reader comes to understand, as Brantzche does, that "when you are cornered in a family you didn't choose, you balance anger and forgiveness, or else perish." Surprisingly, for all of the suffering the characters endure, the novel is never morose. Finkelstein has informed Brantzche's voice with self-irony and dark humor, two qualities that make her an unforgettable heroine.

"Mama told me now and again . . . that I could walk into any room and know in a flash what was going on," Brantzche says. Likewise, Barbara Finkelstein can walk into the black heart of history and family and emerge with gold. *Summer Long-a-coming* is a wonderful debut.

