

## I AM FORBIDDEN

by Anouk Markovits (2012)

Recently, I finished a book called "The God Argument" by University of London humanist philosopher A C Grayling, which deals with the fraught subjects of God and religion in a much more measured way than Richard Dawkins ("The God Delusion") and Christopher Hitchens ("Go is not Great") in my opinion. Often, fiction can elucidate complex ideas like faith much better than non-fiction. "I Am Forbidden" is a stunning first novel about Hasidic Jews of the ultra-orthodox Satmar sect from which the author was banished for daring to attend university.

During World War II, two children are orphaned. A young boy named Josef loses his parents and sister to storm troopers and is adopted by a peasant Christian woman in Transylvania, who renames him, baptises him to protect him from Nazis, and raises him until the age of twelve. In parallel, a young girl named Mila watches as her pregnant mother shot down mercilessly while running towards a train containing her local spiritual leader, the Rebbe. Mila is taken in by the Zalmans, a Satmar Hasidic family, where she grows up with their own daughter of similar age, Atara. The girls' father also seeks out Josef and reclaims him for Judaism by sending him to the USA to study Torah with the Rebbe, now based in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Over time, Mila embraces Satmar beliefs and Atara drifts further away from them seeking a secular life, which results in she and her offspring being 'forbidden' from her family for ten generations.

Arranged marriages are the norm for Satmar. Mila is duly matched with Josef, although it turns out to be a marriage of love despite that. Being fruitful and multiplying is very important for Hasidim. If there are no children after ten years, as in Mila and Josef's case, a husband is permitted to divorce his wife, even if his low sperm count is responsible as in Josef's case. While visiting her family in Paris, Mila falls pregnant after a one night stand in the midst of the riots of 1968. She and Josef stay together because they are b'shert, or meant for each other in the eyes of God.

The book is a poignant prose poem and the connections between characters throughout time, geography, and family are illustrated beautifully. After ten or fifteen pages, I found myself absolutely riveted, which taught me more about the nature of faith than any dry philosophical discourse. I know much more about Hasidic Jews than I ever did before too.

Four-and-a-half stars

Robert Hitchins April 2013

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