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Review: 'Lost Tribe' depicts the search for unity in a shifting world

By Ruth Brin

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SHORT FICTION

Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction From the Edge

Edited By: Paul Zakrzewski. Publisher: Perennial, 548, $14.95. Review: The anthology of young and new Jewish writers expresses the universal longing to belong in a shifting, modern world.

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Special to the Star Tribune

Short stories and excerpts from novels by young or new Jewish writers make up "Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge," an anthology that transcends tribalism with its universal themes of love, death, spirituality and coming of age in a shifting, modern world.

Editor Paul Zakrzewski, a writer and editor for the alternative press, tells us he was looking for stories that would daringly criticize American Jews. Even if this began when Philip Roth was characterized as a "bad Jew" by those who disliked his irony and satire, his model is followed here by several of the writers.

Many of the contributors have the typical American writer's academic credentials and list of prizes and publications in literary magazines. Many are several generations from their immigrant forebears or any family connection to the Holocaust.

But beyond those similarities, there is plenty of divergence. Some grew up in an Orthodox milieu with many years of Jewish education; others were born to families that had been completely assimilated. Many who had some Jewish background tried to leave it behind in college or soon after. A brief biography and author's statement follows each contribution.

I quickly found familiar favorites: Jonathan Safran Foer, whom I like for his humor; Nathan Englander, for his sharp tongue and wild imagination, and Aryeh Lev Stollman, for his sense of holy mystery.

And now I have some new favorites: Michael Lowenthal, whose "Ordinary Pain" depicts an all-American bar mitzvah candidate who fabricates a horrendous family history to efface his ordinariness; Ehud Havazelet, whose "Leah" surprisingly supports the Orthodox role for women, and Gloria DeVidas Kirchheimer, whose "Goodbye, Evil Eye" reflects the maddeningly funny superstitions of the Sephardim among whom she grew up.

Some topics recur in these stories: sexuality; experiences in Jewish summer camps, Hebrew schools or on trips to Israel, and the Holocaust -- which, while not an immediate part of these writers' lives, is a subject they can't escape. Young Larry Blank, the protagonist in "Ordinary Pain," luridly engages his classmates by piling up more and more lies about his grandfather: "There was this time in Buchenwald . . . my grandfather felt sick, probably from the soup they were fed, made with nasty sewage water. After dinner, when they got back to the bunkhouse, he threw up. His hunk of bread wasn't digested yet, so the other prisoners dove and tried to steal it."

Another recurring theme is the spiritual search. The stories seem to reflect a longing for the fruits of traditional piety (a sense of belonging to community, a strong faith in God, knowing what's right and behaving accordingly), but without the necessary observances, prayer and study. Like trying to do calculus when you've never had algebra.

I highly recommend this collection of fiction to everyone, not only Jews. These are the adventures of one group (ethnic? religious? cultural?) that reflect the lives and struggles of all Americans today, especially the young, as we search for identity and unity in a multicultural society.

Ruth Brin is the author of "Harvest: Collected Poems and Prayers" and "Bittersweet Berries: Growing Up Jewish in Minnesota."