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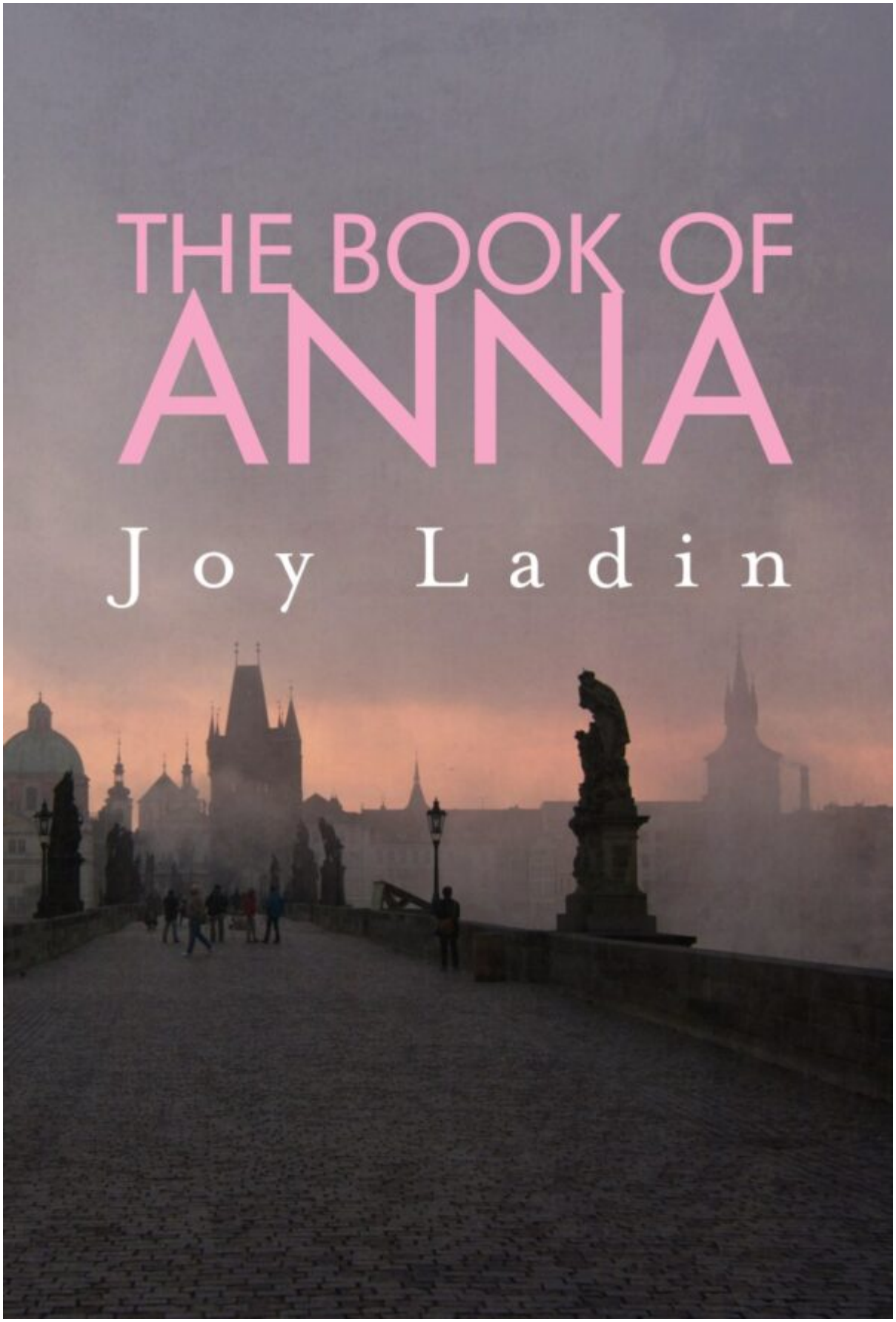
The Book of Anna

Risa · Wednesday, May 5th, 2021

The Book of Anna (Eoagh Books, 2021) by Joy Ladin reads like a hermeneutic text, riven into splintered layers of story and commentary. The hybrid style—diary entries interspersed with poem cycles—tells the story of Anna Asher, a fictional Czech-German Jew who spent her adolescence in a concentration camp and is living in Prague in the 1950's.

I undertook reading *The Book of Anna* with some trepidation. I have long avoided reading or viewing holocaust narratives. I've always felt that I knew enough about the Shoah without needing embellishment. I refused to view *Schindler's List*. I've received my own share of antisemitic insults. I know it could happen again. But because I know Ladin's work to be impeccable and honest (my own press, Headmistress Press, has published one of her books), I read this book. After the first few pages, I willingly devoured it. I believe the premise of the book is not simply that it did happen and could happen again, but that there are individuals for whom such narratives—even fictitious ones—contribute to a deeper understanding of their own lives. The book is disturbing and difficult to read, yet I would urge you to read it. Ladin's own narrative, described in an afterword to the book, recounts how writing this book was pivotal in her transitioning from male to female.



The book's first diary entry sets time and place: "15 February 195-, Prague." The first thing we learn is that Anna is a writer. She writes poetry. As a writer, Anna faces the existential problem of immortality, "for those whose desperation to make something that will outlive them." She says, "After all, so many are forgotten. Almost everyone." Anna is neither able to fully remember her

past, nor willing to attempt to forget it. She has little use for returning to a normal state of affairs; that would require a blindness she lacks. Her sardonic glance at how others are living around her takes note of:

> […] funerals (my God!); the smiles of pregnant women, sleepwalkers who keep the species going, waddling smugly through their final weeks, as though a savior might be growing among their intestines. The normal ones. The women still capable of bleeding.

In *The Book of Anna*, narrative moments are dispatched in closely observed, entirely credible, diary entries. In these entries, over time, we learn: Anna's reason for writing ("To dig up bodies, and bury them again"); her interactions with her seemingly unemotional neighbor Suzanne Wischnauer (also a camp survivor) who is a sounding board for disclosing scenes from the past; her sordid and angry sexual commerce; working for the Stasi; feeding Wischnauer soup spoon-by-spoon during an illness. There also are flashbacks: "Some memories you can't repress. … For me it's dogs." Anna's writing is suffused with an erudite Jewishness and she continues this recollection using words from the quintessential Jewish prayer, the Shema:

> "God may or may not be omnipresent, but dogs are everywhere. When I walk by the way, when I lie down and when I rise up, dogs are there, craving meat and love."

The poetry cycles are narrative and lyrical. These venture into territory far beyond the diary entries, exercising the freedom to excavate unconscious layers of Anna's experience. These sections, titled: "Tamar," "Earth," "Song of Songs," "Golem," and "Shabbat," are graphic and dizzying, full of kaleidoscopic revelations. Each one deepens Anna's story—linking what can be known about oneself with what lies in the unconscious and unspoken layers. Ladin has brilliantly used language from the Hebrew bible as scaffolding in the poems.

"Tamar" unhinges the story of Tamar from the book of Genesis, twice-widowed and running out of time to procreate, who tricks her father-in-law into impregnating her, while stealing his "signet and staff." She does this in order to protect the heir apparent, prove paternity, and escape the fate of being burned alive. So often in Bible stories we hear how women's lives depend on being able to "bear fruit." In this poem, Anna reveals that she was raped in the camps and impregnated,

> "The Lord remembered me. I conceived."

However the progeny is not to be. Anna was forced to perform a self-abortion. In Tamar's story, her offspring begets the royal line of King David; in Anna's story, she is the end of her own line.

> Then only I was left. Squeezing
> the rusted spring
> he'd ripped from under a bed.

> Getting rid of it.

“Song of Songs” is a complex tour-de-force. In a diary entry Anna is given the name of a shrink and the subsequent set of poems are divided into eight therapy sessions, where the psychoanalyst, Dr Solomon, says little, as Anna’s voice demands a hearing:

> Is this too much for a first session, Dr.?
> You’re looking a little pale.

In “Tamar” and “Song of Songs,” sentences merge with and are lifted from their biblical sources. The effect is particularly powerfully in “Song of Songs,” where secular phrases are conjoined with the biblical poetry, as here:

> God returning to the harem
> to kiss us with the kisses of His mouth,
>
> Or the inversion here:
>
> Like a thorn among lilies, Dr.,
> like a blade against their throats
> so is my love
> among the daughters.

The poem cycle “Earth” revisits a familiar holocaust story line. Here, “the Yeshiva bochers of Breshzt, aged sixteen to six,” were forced to dig their own graves with only their hands as tools, then shot and thrown into the pits. On hearing this story, Anna realizes that she knew one of the young scholars:

> I found him there by chance, slumped on a rock
> behind the ritual bath, a place
> that belonged to God, I thought
> neither forest nor town, garden nor wilderness.
>
> *I get so angry*, he said.
> Blushing. Fussing with his fringe.
> *I know,* I said, suddenly
> *like a hammer shattering rock*
>
> in love with him.

“Golem” explores the philosophical and theological question of what is human, by recognizing the presence of golem—humanoid creatures created not by God, but fashioned from clay, by man. Here Anna describes acts of reclamation and retribution: furiously killing hundreds of ants in her kitchen in the present and, in her past, killing the man who took her from the camps at liberation

only to exploit and rape her. She tells the story to the golem, Yossel:

> No doubt, Yossel,
> about his humanness: he talks nonstop
>
> to his reflection, reflecting
>
> for my edification
> on sodomy's etiquette. Splinters
> answer him. The chair leg
>
> that took me twenty minutes to detach
> cracks the back of his head.
> I could have left. He hadn't locked me in.
> But Prague was full of corpses, Yossel.
>
> I had decided to live.

In the final poetry cycle, "Shabbat," Anna revisits old longings: childhood abandonment by her father, chilly attention from her mother. Through women who sought Anna to bring her a message, she learns the ultimate fate of her mother, who also died in the camps, and whose words "There is no God," continue to reverberate. She also learns that her mother did in fact love her. Anna enacts the rituals of shabbat—the sabbath, known to Jews as the Queen—with reverence:

> God was there, Mama
> Had always been.
> I laid out wine and bread. Sabbath
> sang from the unlit oven.

In the last diary entry, Anna writes, "I'm finished," and turns her diary over to Wischnauer as she contemplates suicide, asking her to read "it all." At the same time, she begs the veracity of her own narrative, something we all must do from time to time, knowing that memory is often peppered with fiction and revision. Because Anna is the invention of a poet, Ladin taunts us with authorial doubt:

> How my world and I would crumble, if I wrote now that Wischnauer never existed.
> Or rather, she did, but never made it out of the camps. This is her old apartment I'm living in.
> She made it out of the camps, but died the year before I moved in. I found a pile of her papers—bills, a love letter—in the cupboard above the sink.

In this brilliantly conceived and executed book, we've come full circle. It is up to us to remember the past and reimagine a future in every generation.

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