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**The Association of Jewish Libraries Announces
the 2023 Winners of the Jewish Fiction Award**

Omer Friedlander is the winner of the Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL) Jewish Fiction Award for his short story collection *The Man Who Sold Air in the Holy Land*, published by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. The award includes a \$1,000 cash prize and an invitation to attend the 2023 Digital Conference of the Association of Jewish Libraries, June 19–22. Two other honor books have been recognized: *Atomic Anna* by Rachel Barenbaum, published by Grand Central Publishing, a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc., and *Thistlefoot* by GennaRose Nethercott, published by Anchor Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. The Committee reviewed over 70 works of fiction originally written in English with significant Jewish thematic content published in the United States in 2022. Thanks to all those who submitted entries for consideration. The wide array of books published in 2022 is a testament to the vibrant state of contemporary Jewish fiction.

The eleven stories in *The Man Who Sold Air in the Holy Land* are remarkable for their intense originality and for Friedlander’s ability to portray the complexity and nuances of political conflict together with a deep understanding of a shared humanity that transcends borders—both geopolitical and metaphorical. In a series of vividly drawn cameos, Friedlander employs multiple literary forms to portray characters, historical events, and social conditions in contemporary Israel: surrealism in “High Heels,” where a young shoemaker scales cranes on construction sites in urban Tel Aviv; the picaresque in “Alte Sachen,” about a family of junk collectors in Tsfat; pathos in “Walking Shiv’ah,” when a mother and daughter trudge miles by foot to find out which of the two sons perished in war; black humor in “The Sephardi Survivor,” when two boys co-opt a stranger as a stand-in for their school Holocaust survivor project; and the gritty realism of “Jellyfish in Gaza,” where twin brothers try to cope with the reality and brutality of war and their father’s trauma doing army service. “The universal appeal of this collection reaches above and beyond the political as the stories highlight the kaleidoscope of human experience including insecurity, vulnerability, infatuation, loss, grief, love, compassion, and regret,” says committee member Sarah Feldman.

Combining historical fiction, magical realism, and science fiction, Rachel Barenbaum's *Atomic Anna* skillfully weaves together the stories of three strong but flawed women who travel through time and between continents in an effort to prevent the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the personal tragedies that follow. As the reactor melts down, Anna, the brilliant Jewish chief engineer, inexplicably travels forward to a mountaintop in 1992; an upsetting discovery there causes her to reconsider her past and seek to change the future with the assistance of her estranged daughter, comic book artist Molly, and granddaughter Raisa, a math and physics prodigy. "A sweeping generational saga and a unique exploration of the Jewish immigrant experience in the mid-twentieth century, the novel is a captivating portrayal of family struggle and one of the greatest disasters in modern history," notes committee member Laura Schutzman.

In *Thistlefoot*, the restless Yaga siblings Bellatine and Isaac are reunited for the first time in years by a mysterious inheritance which has made its way to them by way of Kyiv: a fantastical house on chicken feet which Bellatine dubs "Thistlefoot." With the house's arrival on the shores of America, past and present crash into one another with electric and magical shock, and the Yaga siblings, together with their new home, embark on a country-wide tour to stage a puppet show. Yet danger lurks around the corner as they are stalked by the eerie Longshadow Man, a dangerous figure on an enigmatic and sinister mission to find Thistlefoot. Committee member Hannah Srour-Zackon notes that "in weaving Ashkenazi folkloric myth into the fabric of reality, *Thistlefoot* explores how the impact of long-forgotten ancestors may be greater than we think. GennaRose Nethercott's prose is imaginative, underscored by dry wit; the result is spellbinding and a reminder of the pure joy that can be found in reading an enthralling story."

The AJL Jewish Fiction Award Committee members are Paula Breger, Temple Emanu-El, Haverhill, Massachusetts; Rena Citrin, Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School (retired), Chicago, Illinois; Sarah Feldman, Gann Academy, Waltham, Massachusetts; Laura Schutzman, Hebrew Academy of Nassau County, Uniondale, New York; and Hannah Srour-Zackon, Congregation Shaar Hashomayim, Montreal, Quebec.

The Association of Jewish Libraries gratefully acknowledges the generous support of Dan Wyman Books for underwriting the Award. Submissions for the 2024 AJL Fiction Award (titles published in 2023) are now being accepted. For more information, please visit <http://www.jewishlibraries.org/jewish-fiction-award>.

About the Association of Jewish Libraries

The [Association of Jewish Libraries](http://www.jewishlibraries.org) is an international, professional organization that fosters access to information and research in all forms of media relating to all things Jewish. The Association promotes Jewish literacy and scholarship and provides a community for peer support and professional development. For more information, visit www.jewishlibraries.org.

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