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The Association of Jewish Libraries Announces
the 2024 Winners of the Jewish Fiction Award

James McBride is the winner of the Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL) Jewish Fiction Award for his novel The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store, published by Riverhead Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC. The award includes a $1,000 cash prize and an invitation to attend the 2024 conference of the Association of Jewish Libraries, June 24–26, in San Diego, California. Two other honor books have been recognized: Kantika by Elizabeth Graver, published by Metropolitan Books, an imprint of Henry Holt and Company; and Once We Were Home by Jennifer Rosner, published by Flatiron Books, an imprint of Macmillan Publishers. The Committee reviewed over 70 works of fiction originally written in or translated into English with significant Jewish thematic content published in the United States in 2023. Thanks to all those who submitted entries for consideration. The wide array of books published in 2023 is a testament to the vibrant state of contemporary Jewish fiction.

Set in the 1930s, James McBride’s The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store immerses its readers in the Chicken Hill neighborhood of Pottstown, Pennsylvania, home to Jewish, Italian, and Black Americans and immigrants. The heart of the neighborhood is the titular grocery store, run by freethinking Chona Ludlow. When a deaf Black orphan is being hunted by white authorities who want to institutionalize him, Chona and her husband, Moshe, a nightclub owner who has recently integrated his club to appeal to the Black community, provide a refuge. The ramifications of this concealment spiral out from the store into the community and through the years.

“The unflinching descriptions of the hardships faced by the Chicken Hill residents are tempered by moments of humor and acts of compassion and reconciliation,” says committee chair Paula Breger. “James McBride has woven a vibrant tapestry of pre–World War II life and the struggle for survival by those on the margins of society. The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store is at once a searing commentary on injustice in America and a celebration of community, the power of love and friendship, and tikkun olam, repairing the world.”
Kantika (the Ladino word for “song”) tells the story of Rebecca Cohen, born into a well-to-do Sephardic family in Constantinople at the turn of the twentieth century. Following a change in fortunes for both her family and the city’s Jews, Rebecca must leave her home. Thus begins a continuous cycle of displacement and migration, a journey which leads her through Spain and Cuba and, eventually, to America. Yet, throughout it all, Rebecca remains strong, coming into her own as a Sephardic Jewish woman—cementing her as an enduring heroine in Jewish literature.

Drawing inspiration from the life of author Elizabeth Graver’s own grandmother, the novel is incredibly intimate, with each chapter featuring photographs from the real Rebecca’s life. Graver imagines the complex inner life of her grandmother which exists behind each moment frozen in time. “Above all,” says committee member Hannah Srour-Zackon, “Kantika is an evocative exploration of cultural inheritances across generations, in particular Sephardic Jewish culture and its ability to endure through familial bonds, even when removed from physical location.”

In Once We Were Home, Jennifer Rosner shares the stories of Roger, Ana, and Oskar, Jewish children hidden during the Holocaust, primarily through the lens of their lives after the war, when they are forcibly extracted from their adopted homes and settled—through trials physical, emotional, and spiritual—in Israel.

“Rosner has crafted an exquisite exploration of themes of belonging, home, and the long-term effects of wartime and displacement,” notes committee member Rena Citrin. Based upon the true stories of the many Jewish children hidden and later reclaimed, Once We Were Home raises poignant questions of identity, good intentions, and unforeseen consequences, as well as what it really means to find home.

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; Dina Herbert, AJL past president, Alexandria, Virginia; 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 2025 AJL Fiction Award (titles published in 2024) 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 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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