

A Castle in Brooklyn

Shirley Russak Wachtel

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The aftereffects of Nazi brutality form the foundation of Shirley Russak Wachtel's novel *A Castle in Brooklyn*, which traverses six decades to address complex but universal themes, including grief, mourning, friendship, and betrayal.

Zalman and Jacob meet during World War II while hiding in the barn of a Polish woman who risks her life to keep them fed. After her farm is raided by the Gestapo, they escape. Their survival depends on trusting one another, and this realization cements their friendship. At the end of the war, they stick together, first in a displaced person's camp and later as emigres to the United States. Zalman ends up in Minnesota, Jacob in Brooklyn.

The men reunite after Jacob marries Esther, the daughter of a wealthy New York City realtor whose stock-in-trade is renting apartments to newly-arrived immigrants. Jacob begins working for EMI Realty, learning to leverage the postwar housing market. Now wealthy, he dreams of building a laughter-and-light-filled house for his bride. Fantasy becomes reality when his father-in-law gives him land in Brooklyn. Elated, Jacob wastes no time in inviting Zalman to help him execute the construction project. After all, Zalman's dad had been an architect before the war and taught his young son how to fabricate a building.

The unfolding drama brings Esther, Jacob, and Zalman into an intense friendship that is colored by the men's wartime experiences. The situations that arise collide with the social milieu of the 1970s. For Esther, this includes exposure to feminism. As each character grows, a vibrant family saga unfolds, though one that includes several extraneous plot lines and characters.

A Castle in Brooklyn is an impressive debut novel that illustrates the many ways that the Holocaust continues to impact contemporary Jewish life; a deeply felt hatred of fascism gives the novel its heft and lasting relevance.

ELEANOR BADER (January / February 2023)

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