

The Overexamined Life of Jacob Hart

Jerry Wald

Torchflame Books (Jun 11, 2024)

Softcover \$18.99 (366pp)

978-1-61153-593-8

Harmony and clarity are found as four men pursue happiness in tandem in the endearing novel The Overexamined Life of Jacob Hart.

In Jerry Wald's soulful novel *The Overexamined Life of Jacob Hart*, the longtime friendships between four men influence each of their trajectories.

In light of his mantra that "for every problem there is an answer, for every issue a solution," Jacob consults a rabbi for advice before leaving his engineering job at a firm accused of environmental injustices. The rabbi relates to Jacob, having himself kept a serious secret for years. And the company's chief executive officer belongs to the rabbi's congregation; he examines his own habits and lifestyle while talking to the men.

Upon their respective retirements, Jacob and the rabbi each move to Lake Paradise, Colorado. At the same time, the CEO downsizes. All three have changed their lives for the better. However, a scheme that Jacob's oldest friend concocts and then involves Jacob and the CEO in results in an additional turning point for all four men.

This methodical story is split into five parts, beginning with four parts in which each man's story receives equal and objective attention and ending with a fifth part in which the threads converge and a new community emerges from the wreckage of Jacob's professor friend's scheme. However, this tidy format is also the book's vulnerability, leading to a labored pace, redundancies, and the short shrifting of secondary characterizations. Indeed, the men's wives, children, and connections, while they tell their sides of the story in their own voices, are minimized; their individual concerns, including infidelity, a missing daughter, ardent religiosity, and a media report, are minimized in comparison to the men's. Further, as the men muse through gnawing questions, answers often remain elusive or are delayed. Indeed, the book's outwardly neat form belies the messy wrestling with faith that they, and Jacob in particular, have to do.

Lake Paradise is the best fleshed out of the novel's settings, which include Minneapolis and Chicago; the latter two are described in bare terms. Once the rabbi and Jacob wind up in Colorado, though, rich, active settings become more prominent. In Lake Paradise, Jacob has vivid dreams and moves toward a final confrontation with the professor. Indeed, the town, which is the site of supernatural phenomena and home to quirky residents, helps to balance out the men's probing questions and concerns with spontaneity and levity.

Four men transform over time in the musing novel *The Overexamined Life of Jacob Hart*, wherein lasting relationships and natural beauty support late-life reflections.

MARI CARLSON (June 21, 2024)

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