

Novel examines family relationships and human nature

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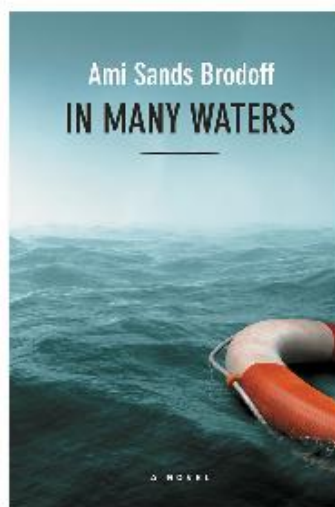
There is a lot to keep straight in Ami Sands Brodoff's new novel *In Many Waters*. The author of *The White Space Between*, the 2009 winner of the Canadian Jewish Book Award for Fiction, uses many different first-person voices throughout this book.

Often they are names we've heard before in previous chapters through the narrative of others but are now able to find out their side of things. While this is exciting to discover, we simultaneously miss the voice that has disappeared on the previous page, maybe flipping forward to see when they will return.

In *In Many Waters* the narrative jumps from past to present and from one voice to the next. Through hearing different perspectives on the same story from different times in the characters' lives, we learn about who they are and also eventually, of their betrayals. Brodoff doesn't make it easy for us: we have to form our own opinions of the situation and the people that make up this novel – she won't decide for us. We get to see each character's good and their bad. Some are deeply flawed, yet have such human qualities that they still draw our sympathies.

This is a book about a lot of things, from relationships, to betrayal, to the flaws of human nature, and as Brodoff says: how one creates one's own family. In this story, Brodoff shows "the unmaking and remaking of family – who becomes our family." It also brings in the story of the refugee crisis in Malta. As people fled the chaos in North Africa for the haven of the European Union, many ended up drifting to this tiny Mediterranean island.

Brodoff explains that each character came to her mind and then fit themselves together in the story. Some of her characters come fully formed and others are an idea that she then shapes. She got the image of a refugee and then also of a brother and a sis-



In Many Waters
By Ami Sands Brodoff

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ter, where one sibling had to function as a parent. In hindsight, she can see how these characters were always connected.

Those were the first three characters that came to her mind and then the others followed. She also wanted to include three generations of stories: from Zoe, to her mother, to her grandparents.

Zoe is the first we meet – a sister who has had to act as a mother to her younger brother Cal while her parents wrote and photographed travel stories all around the world. Although Zoe and Cal were all each other ever really had, this becomes more real when their parents meet their deaths in the ocean. Years later, Zoe uses her thesis to look into the way her parents died yet really finds out about the way they lived.



Ami Sands Brodoff

Aziza is a North African refugee found drifting near death by Cal in the Mediterranean. She has lost her immediate family escaping, yet is still strong enough to survive the internment camps set up in Malta to take in all the refugees and then try to create a life for herself in Canada.

Brodoff has been able to give a positive spin on a life that is often depicted as dire, that of a refugee from a war-torn land. She tells me in an interview that keeping a hopeful tone throughout this part of the story was a must.

"Jews are particularly empathetic," referring to the connection she has made between one of her strong characters and the people she has known, who came to North America from horrific situations and created success and families. She knows refugees often have PTSD and then have to learn to adjust and adapt—"there is darkness but there is hope."

One of the most impressive skills of

the fiction writer is making us see the other side of a viewpoint that we take for granted. In this case, the way the Maltese treated the refugees who came to their island in hopes of an entry into Europe. What those on the outside don't realize, Brodoff explains, is how small the island is and how the entry of even a few people can pull at their scarce resources. As it is throughout the novel, she doesn't tell us how to think but instead puts it all on the table to let us decide.

In other parts of the book, we hear from Zoe's mother, Cassandra, from the time when she was young, growing up Jewish in Malta, to when she meets her future husband Lior and further on. We learn this story sometimes separately from Zoe and sometimes with her, as she painfully learns that her parents were broken in many ways. Cassandra's flaws come from a piece of her that is missing: Yael, her adopted sister who ran away from Malta when they were young and never met again.

History is its own character in the story. Zoe finds a connection to the grandfather she has never met through tapes he and Cassandra recorded as they studied the little known history of the Jews in Malta. In the end, she begins to finish the work they started.

Water starts and ends the novel. This isn't surprising as Brodoff describes herself as a water person. It symbolizes so much for the characters as well: a trap, an escape, a place for bonding, a place for broken relationships, everything that can be feared. The story starts with water allowing one character to live and ends by taking away the lives of others.

When asked about the many themes that flow throughout the novel, Brodoff says that she free writes her first draft and then the themes begin to emerge. She never meant to write in the theme of "the responsibility to strangers" but it turns out to be one of the most prominent in the end. ■