

Esther Amini, Author of “Concealed”, Reviews  
David Hirshberg’s novel “Jacobó’s Rainbow”

Americans, always on the hunt for easy answers, will be keenly challenged by David Hirshberg’s thought-provoking novel “Jacobó’s Rainbow.”

Hirshberg’s novel is a stirring story of a young man, Jacobo Toledano, born and raised in Arroyo Grande, a tight-knit, insular, small village in an isolated part of west central New Mexico. Jacobo, who led a sheltered life and is deeply loved by his parents, family, and community, leaves his home town for the University of Taos, close to the Colorado border. The Rio Grande magnificently courses through this tale evoking the ultimate symbol of freedom, reminiscent of Mark Twain’s Mississippi River.

On this 1960s fictional college campus, Jacobo is mesmerized by the fervor and fire of a student leader named Myles, and is swept into both the Free Speech Movement and the protests against the Vietnam War. Assigned as their scribe, Jacobo documents the interaction between forces at play and is the designated recorder of truth. As this role endangers him, Jacobo becomes a fugitive on the run.

Later, when the protagonist lands in jail, he’s offered release only if he agrees to be drafted into the army. Choosing Vietnam over prison, he witnesses war, engages in battle, and returns to the States a changed man.

While there’s the foreground story of charismatic Myles, his chess-like strategies to outwit college administrators and his obsessive determination to win, Hirshberg does not stop there. In poetic prose, the author breathes life into a cast of vividly drawn characters who artfully punch holes into our fixed notions of ‘friend versus foe.’ Hirshberg’s drive to uncover the motivational underpinnings of his characters keeps one glued to each page. Two-dimensional notions of ‘student versus police,’ ‘hero versus villain’...are debunked.

A prime example is when Jacobo falls off a fire escape during student protests and a cop, who has been fanning the riot, frees his foot and cares for him. Later, through a series of dramatic scenes, we learn that Myles, the revered student leader, is a self-aggrandizing, anti-Semitic plagiarist. In addition, Myles and his ardent followers refuse to question their own behavior and myopically are intolerant of doubts. The need to be worshiped, historically immortalized, becomes the primary obsession. Country and principles take second place.

The binary mindset: “You’re either with me or against me” doesn’t pertain only to the roaring 1960s. “I’m right, and if you don’t agree, then you’re bad” is a prevalent belief system today—a child-like notion we, as a nation, have not outgrown. Hirshberg gracefully holds space for all these layers.

He intricately weaves ethnicity, rebellion, academia, politics, police, and media into a coming-of-age story. Heroes are toppled, illusions shattered, and Hirshberg’s protagonist learns he needs to navigate a world jam-packed with individual and institutional agendas. Jacobo

realizes that much of the information we receive has been altered or obstructed by self-serving needs of those in power—be it conventional institutions or grass-roots revolutionaries.

Even when interviewed on TV by legendary “David Sussman”, Jacobo cringes as he witnesses Sussman twist facts to increase his program’s ratings. Again, much truth ends up in the slush pile.

Although set in the 1960s, Hirshberg addresses a myriad of issues we continue to face today. Throughout this eloquently written book, the author is not only concerned with Jacobo’s journey into adulthood, but also ours. I hear him whispering between the lines: *And what about us? Are we pursuing false leads and righteous paths only to increase our own personal ratings?*