

Wouk's novel irresponsibly blends Israeli history, myth

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Under the influence of an inspiring ad campaign and fond memories of past Herman Wouk novels, some half million readers rushed to buy Wouk's new tome, *The Hope*. It's too late to warn away those 500,000, but not too late for others.

Listen: Before you drop two dozen bucks on this huge, awful book, think very carefully. Then reconsider.

The Hope is a novel about Israel. Not all of Israel, only the really exciting parts — that is, the wars. And not even all the wars, but the

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good ones — 1948, 1956 and 1967. Regarding the troubled quarter century since, there is nothing.

Focusing on a character named Zev Barak, the novel follows four Israeli men through the War of Independence, the Suez campaign, and the Six Day War. Each of these men seems pulled from the one-dimensional pages of Leon Uris' *Exodus*; they are tall, strong, handsome, and supremely competent on the battlefield — and in bed, where the soldiers and officers face their internal turmoil.

Yet here Wouk will disappoint even those readers hoping for enticing sex scenes. The first

doesn't appear until Page 229, and throughout, the author uses hilariously chaste descriptions of his characters' various fornications. "[T]here were happy doings," he writes of one encounter. "And so it happened," another is described.

In and out of the bedroom, many characters speak in stilted, overheated gibberish that, strangely, has a ring of bad translation. Barak's lover sobs at the Kennedy assassination: "Oh God, Zev. That radiant young man, that goddess of a wife at his side — struck down! It's something out of Plutarch. Jack Kennedy! Jackie Kennedy!"

Wouk liberally sprinkles real-life American and Israeli political figures throughout *The Hope*, often not to their advantage. For instance, while portraying womanizing Moshe Dayan as an unblemished super-soldier, Wouk implies that Golda Meir somehow slept her way to the top.

"Golda was Yael Luria's idea of a woman, handling the biggest men on equal terms in politics and — so the talk went — in bed," Wouk writes. To rub in the point, one character, asked about the source of Meir's "vindictiveness" toward David Ben-Gurion, says, "There are those who say it started in bed." Few will relish the images these passages call to mind.

In fact, Wouk manages to slight just about every non-soldier appearing in *The Hope*. Despite his populating the novel with



Photo — David Hume Kennerly

Herman Wouk's latest is *The Hope*, covering Israel's most exciting historical periods.

female characters, nearly every woman is discussed primarily in terms of the uniformed man, or

men, in her life.

Sephardim make only brief appearances. The only actual

character is Barak's little-seen wife, and the post-1948 influx of 700,000 Jewish refugees from Arab countries is referred to, fleetingly, as "this huge lump of different Jews who hardly knew of Hitler and Auschwitz."

But considering Wouk's treatment of Arabs, Sephardim should consider themselves fortunate. In an afterword, Wouk claims that "there is no attempt in *The Hope* to caricature, distort, or defame the other fellow." This is true; Wouk has neatly skirted possible bias by excising Arabs from the book. Incredibly, Arabs exist in *The Hope* only as faceless millions represented by two or three vituperative leaders. It's a terrible omission, one that utterly ignores the difficult quarter century to come.

Perhaps more disturbing are Wouk's reconstructed — or, more commonly — invented scenes of tense backstage diplomacy among Israeli, American, French, British, and Russian representatives. In doing so, Wouk presents an alternate history not unlike Oliver Stone's irresponsible "countermyth" of the Kennedy assassination in the movie *JFK*, freely mixing fact and fiction.

▶ *The Hope* by Herman Wouk (693 pages, Little, Brown and Co., \$24.95).

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