

Reaching higher awareness

Two conferences highlight the rise of Romance and New Age literature

• By ORIT ARFA

The Herzliya Performing Arts Center probably never had a presentation like this before. In one of its lecture halls, about 200 women were transfixed on a screen plastered with pictures of dildos. The topic: BDSM (bondage/domination-sadism/masochism), the erotic practice made popular and even normative by the ubiquitous, influential erotica novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James.

But no, this wasn't some sleazy talk with live demonstrations designed for the perverted. Here, the topic was raised to the subject of art – of literature – without any shame. It was presented as part of Israel's first ever conference on romance literature, Romantican, that took place on April 8 in Herzliya.

A week later, on April 15, at the ZOA House in Tel Aviv, several hundred people packed the main auditorium for a lecture on relationships given by Israeli Zen master and author Nissim Amon. The topic of this talk – the final in a series – was Tantric sex, and how lovemaking could enhance people's relationships. The talk was timed to coincide with the two-day "New Mind" conference dedicated to New Age literature and organized by Prague Publishers, Israel's leading publisher of books on these topics.

Two conferences – one on the fantasy of how life could be, and one on overcoming the actual realities of life through spiritual practice – highlight how these two genres of literature are coming into their own in Israel, but with a striking difference. Romance literature in the past two years has seen a sharp rise in the number of local authors, while New Age literature has yet to produce local, bestselling stars.

The women behind the Romantican Conference are Rinat Benor and Meital Or. Benor is the public face of a popular Facebook blog page dedicated to romance fiction called "Book Whisperers" (*Halo-hashot lesfarim*) which now boasts 11,000 likes. Social media and the rise of Hebrew e-books have played a significant role in the rise in romance literature in the Hebrew language.

"The blog has already been up for two years, and it's a labor of love," said Benor, aged 35 and single. "I told myself that the next step is a conference that brings all the authors of the genre together just as they do in the United States, where romance literature is one of the leading genres."

Benor has always been a voracious reader, and she got "turned on" to romance literature when she picked up *Fifty Shades of Grey*. To be clear, she said, erotica is a subgenre, accounting for about 50 per-



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cent of romance fiction. The difference, she said, is that erotic literature doesn't end a scene with a couple reaching the bedroom. It goes on to show exactly what happens next.

The BDSM "workshop" (and another on sex techniques) accounted for only a portion of the conference. Talks were held on general self-help for women and the art of writing. For aspiring authors and their fans, authors gave panels to discuss their work and processes (including myself, author of *The Settler*, a political-romance novel).

But the main thrust of the conference was putting Hebrew romance fiction on the map – bringing together the hundreds of readers who seem to know each other virtually from Facebook. For the authors, this was an opportunity to network, meet fans, and showcase and sell their work.

Ariela Baum, author of *The Secrets Trilogy* (erotica), was one of the authors selling her books in person alongside other best-selling pioneers in the field like Orit Patkin and Dana L. Elgrod.

In what sounds like an oft-repeated script, Baum, a Kiryat Gat resident and mother of three, also read *50 Shades of Grey* and got turned on to the genre. The first e-book she ever downloaded was a novel by Ayelet Svatsky, among the first Hebrew romance authors. With dormant writing ambitions, Baum finally realized that she could live out her fantasies – of steamy affairs in fiction and of success as an author in real-life. The developing technology for Hebrew e-books gave her the opportunity to publish with minimal financial investment but with a lot of passion.

"Two years ago it was just us," Baum told *Metro* after the conference. "Now it's just crazy. There are so many. People are having the courage to go after their dreams."

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don Bays's *The Journey*, Benjamin Hoff's *The Tao of Pooh*, and Julie Cameron's *The Artist's Way*. Some local players in the field, like Kochava Schneider and Sharon Adam, creators of the "Connecting Hearts" kit designed to improve communication, were on hand to sell wares and lead workshops. Highlights of the conference included a talk by Sam Osmanagich, an expert on the "Bosnian pyramid," and a screening of the film *Dreams of Damanhur* about an alternative, spiritual community in Italy.

"There are many groups that are working on spiritual fields and they are all over Israel," Schneider said, acknowledging that this conference was unique in bringing the various fields together under one roof in a more academic fashion.

Ilan Levy, CEO of Prague Publishing House, said Israeli authors have generally not made it big internationally in the New Age genre.

"We the Jews are too much in the mind," he told *Metro*, pondering one reason why that is.

On the other hand, workshops and retreats dedicated to self-help, Eastern philosophy and spirituality, yoga and the like have been held for decades throughout Israel. Israeli books in the field have yet to catch up with activity in the realm of events. With romance literature, it's the opposite. Benor is already planning the next Romantican conference to change that.

Today, several Facebook pages and groups promote new Israeli authors in the romance genre, and judging from the posts, they are all enthusiastic about sharing – and canning – new books. Some groups, in good humor, post pictures of ripped, shirtless men, just to start the day on a high note.

But not all the conference participants came for the R-rated talks. Liraz Cohen Rachmani, 16, went around the lobby with her camera, excitedly taking selfies with her favorite authors.

"What brought me to the conference was my love of books and also the chance to meet the talented authors and to see them up close," she said.

At the Paper Tiger bookstore in Florentin, also represented at Romantican, manager Lydia Vujadinovic said that both romantic fiction and New Age titles sell very well, but when she took me to the New Age shelf, she could count only one Israeli author. She has a theory as to why that is.

"Israeli authors may tend to write more about Judaism and Kabbala," she told *Metro*.

Merav Amon, wife and manager of Nissim Amon, offers another insight. Real-life, nitty-gritty relationships are not usually the stuff of romance novels.

"To write a novel you have to imagine and make things up; you create a new, imagined reality," Merav Amon said. "There's a limit when you speak about spiritual topics that relate to day to day life; you have to be very honest. You can't just make up sentences. I think that's the difference." •