



Her First American

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She's Ilka Weissnix, a young Jewish refugee from Hitler's Europe, newly arrived in the United States. He's Carter Bayoux, her first American: a middle-aged, hard-drinking black intellectual. Lore Segal's brilliant novel is the story of their love affair—one of the funniest and saddest in modern fiction.

Her First American Details

Date : Published November 30th 2004 by The New Press (first published 1985)

ISBN : 9781565849495

Author : Lore Segal

Format : Paperback 304 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Novels, Romance, Literary Fiction, Roman, Literature, American

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From Reader Review Her First American for online ebook

Allyson says

I read this in 1985 or so based on the recommendation of a friend. I did not remember much about it, but had kept the paperback so thought I must have liked it. Upon this reread I discovered I was bored by it. But it was a very fast read so I passed it on to another friend who might find some value in it's pages.

Maren says

I received Her First American by Lore Segal through NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

When I came across this book on NetGalley, I immediately wanted to read it based on the summary provided. I requested a copy and within a few hours my request was approved. I started reading it later that night. That's where my excitement ended and the confusion began. At times, the writing was hard to follow. I could not really get a decent feel for the characters. I couldn't connect or understand either of the main characters. The female character, Ilka, meets the male character, Carter, in a bar in Nevada (but for whatever reason she was positive that she was in Utah). Back in New York, Ilka waits for him to call her because he also lives in New York and they had exchange numbers. He didn't call for weeks but when he does, she's happy to see him. This all goes back and forth between them for as far as I could manage to read. Basically he does something nice, then bad, then tries to come back and be nice again and she accepts it every time. Not my kind of story at all. It may be good for some people but I just did not care for it.

I have read other reviews of the book and people either seem to really like it, or they are like me and did not like it or couldn't finish it. I myself did not finish this book.

Sarah says

In my opinion, this is brilliant. It's funny and sad and layered, and I need more time to think about what it says. But it does get at the American experience, European immigrant version. It might indeed be, as stated by others, the great American novel, endlessly sought. If not that, then it is a great New York novel at least.

kp says

Funny and piercing book about identity and loss. The main character, a young holocaust survivor who has washed up in New York and whose curiosity about the new world is boundless, meets "her first American," a black middle-aged intellectual with a drinking problem. The story is about their affair, but it's also a story about identity, about race in 1950s America, about loss, and about carrying on. You will fall hard for the protagonist, inquisitive and warm-hearted Ilka, and, in a different way, for the monumentally troubled and monumentally intelligent Carter, but the novel is also populated by a wonderful supporting cast and finely

etched scenes in subways, posh apartments, and shabby hotels, among others.

Nicole Overmoyer says

I wanted to like Lore Segal's HER FIRST AMERICAN. I really did. I read the blurb on NetGalley and I wanted to read the book immediately. And I was thrilled when my request was accepted.

I don't think this book is the one for me.

I read a quarter of the book, my test length for whether or not to read on. HER FIRST AMERICAN did not pass the test. It seemed repetitive in places. I didn't feel connected to Ilka or to Carter. I understood the roles they were meant to play and the message they were meant to give in the story, but it wasn't one I really wanted to read.

I hope I'm in the minority and many, many people love this book.
It's available for purchase now.

(I received a copy of HER FIRST AMERICAN through NetGalley in exchange for an honest & original review. This review will be cross-posted at my blog, my Goodreads account, and NetGalley.)

Diane says

Stranger in a confusing land

The book was okay, but I didn't love it. It had all the elements to make a great story. A young, Jewish refugee from Nazi Vienna, separated from her parents during the Holocaust, is determined to learn to speak English correctly and to learn the strange - to her - ways of American life so she can leave the New York immigrant society. The first 'real' American she meets is a black, enigmatic alcoholic, Carter. He seems to have made it his job to introduce Ilka to as many different experiences as he can.

The author did a fine job capturing the flavor of the post war era, including subtle references to race relations and the black perspective.

I really wanted to like this novel more than I actually did. However, the narrative lost me several times and I wasn't sure how one scene related to the one it immediately followed.

Stacy says

I didn't actually finish this book. I just couldn't get through it. The first 20-30 pages or so were interesting enough, but once the main character meets her "first American" the story instantly becomes difficult to follow. Events keep happening with no explanation, the main character seems to have no personality/likes/dislikes of her own, the author keeps introducing new characters & new ideas but then doesn't develop them & the story keeps going off on strange tangents. For example, the main character accompanies her "first American" to a wedding where the "first American" gets extremely drunk, makes the groom cry, and makes a fool of himself. The main character meets someone else at the wedding that she

wants to talk to, especially because she is annoyed with her drunk friend, but she leaves with the drunk friend when told to do so & forgets about the guy at the party. She accompanies drunk friend to dinner, which doesn't actually happen, and has a terrible night. Yet, when he contacts her again, she's excited and goes out with him again. It just seems too forced & not a natural read. This is only the 3rd book--EVER--that I have started and not finished.

Gail says

Lore Segal is a new discovery. Loved this book. Her characters are odd, painfully honest, and believable, with one exception, the mother. The mother did not seem credible, nor necessary to the story... story, no plot. And I wondered at how Segal was able to draw Black characters so convincingly, this White Jewish writer. Carter, I've known a Carter, but not quite so 'larger than life.'

Karen Chandler says

This wonderful novel is very engaging, but it calls on readers to be fairly active in interpreting the characters and their relationship to each other and to their social environments. The protagonist's cousin brings her copies of Henry James novels. And apparently Segal has read her share of them, but her prose is less intricate. (And frankly the idea of James bringing together a middle-age black man and a young Jewish refugee is not something I want to imagine.) My description is quite dry, and the book can be dry in other ways--very clever. It's also quite poignant. I am so glad that I discovered this book. I'll read others by Segal; and I hope to read this novel again.

Ayelet Waldman says

Lore Segal is my absolute favorite writer of the year. This book is so full of stuff, so packed with wonderful insights and people.

Suju says

I read "Shakespeare's Kitchen" right before this (by the same author) and while I found it eminently readable, I didn't find it memorable. But I'd heard that "Her First American" was a modern classic and so I jumped in.

It's a terrific book. There's not much in the way of plot. It's ultimately a character study - primarily of Carter Bayoux (the titular first American). He's a big, brash, brilliant, middle-aged, alcoholic, black intellectual in post WWII New York. The book focuses on his relationship with Ilka, a young, Jewish refugee from Vienna who is desperate to find the real America and her place in it, and finds it in Carter.

What's remarkable is first how real it feels (of course I wasn't there so what do I know), but also how it addresses issues of race and religion and never dismisses them but somehow never makes them central to the story, either. It's not about a Jewish woman and a black man overcoming the prejudices against their being together - though they do encounter those - but about two people who truly love one another and provide

each other with something of value in the course of their relationship. Well worth reading.

Kay says

Shelving this book took a moment of thought: the author was born in Vienna and educated in London, but this is at heart a very *American* story -- perhaps the most American of stories, in fact, for it is an immigrant's story.

The central characters, Ilka Weissnix and Carter Bayoux, are an unlikely pair of lovers: she, a young Jewish girl who fled the horrors of WWII, her parents left behind (one to die, the other to survive but driven mad); he, a sophisticated black intellectual, tormented and alcoholic. They need each other in unexpected ways. One of the pleasures of reading the novel is watching the two characters evolve. While there's little doubt where the story is headed, still it was absorbing to watch it play out.

I also liked how well the author caught the time and place -- 1950's New York. The two characters are set on the cusp of the great civil rights struggle of the sixties, yet it hasn't yet come. Ilka is in many ways an innocent, and she doesn't have any sense of the racial back story of the United States, and her reactions to and growing understanding of Carter's world provide a sort of commentary on the times.

Yet it was a secondary character, Ebony, that I found held my attention the most. There was a long sequence in the second half of the book, in a summer house in Connecticut, that featured Ebony and assorted friends of Carter's. To me this was the central episode of the book. There were long sections which dealt with Carter's long self-destructive alcoholic slide that I found less illuminating.

The greatest pleasure of the book, though, are the conversations - Segal has a wonderful ear for dialog. Each character has a distinctive voice. And the decade, the 1950's, has a own voice, as well - the constant radio and TV chatter that forms the background to Carter's drinking binges in his New York hotel room. It's a voice I can dimly remember from my childhood.

Hilary says

I feel like I didn't get this book. I know it was about race relations, and I even got the double entendre about Ilka's last name, but I still don't think I understood the various undercurrents in the book. (For example, was the Ebony character constantly feeling downtrodden, or was she sweet?) Maybe if someone had read it aloud so I could hear the tones of voice, I would have liked it better.

Jess says

I received this book from the Publisher in exchange for an honest review.

How It Made Me Feel:

I haven't read a book in a while that really made me think as I read. Her First American is very different from the books I've been reading lately and I really enjoyed it! It was a completely different take on Historical Fiction for me and I felt like it opened up a completely new door in books. The story is written from Ilka's point of view, a point of view from a Viennese woman learning English and being in New York for the first time in her life. Lately, whenever I've read a historical fiction book, it's been written by an American author. This book was different. I loved the feel of the book as I continued reading, I enjoyed the conversations between characters, I loved hearing about the history, and I liked how Ilka grew through out the story. It was a story that dealt with racism, depression, knowledge, alcoholism, post war situations, and foreign characters. A great combination to say the least.

What I Thought Worked:

One of my favorite parts was reading through Ilka's slow learning of the English language. Reading that she had to go find a 'real American' was sort of a different take on post WWII America. I rather loved that conversations Ilka would have in the book were true to type, seeing how someone who has spoken a language other than English as their first, would start to learn and have to struggle sometimes when hearing native English speakers.

What I Thought Didn't Work:

There were times, where I wasn't able to follow Carter's thought process or ideas. His character was a big all over the place and so very eccentric. But the further I read into the book, the easier I found to understand his character.

Rating

4/5

Why It Got That Rating:

It was a take on post WWII America that I had never taken into consideration. Reading this book opened my eyes and I found something I would have never appreciated before. I enjoyed the reaction I had after finishing the book and I hope that other people can find the same thing.

Who Would I Recommend To:

I would recommend to anyone who enjoys reading about Post WWII America, unconventional romances, and foreigners making their way in the United States.

Marc Gerstein says

Fascinating characters (Ilka Weissnix, a 21-year old refugee from post WWII Europe newly arrived in New York City, and Carter Bayoux, a presumably 50-something black well known writer/political commentator) and a fascinating setup (Ilka and Carter meet in a bar in the rural West as Ilka, soon after reaching NY, travels to meet genuine Americans and wind up in a relationship) should make for a five-star novel and many have rated it just that way. But for me, I thought what the author delivered fell far short of what could have been.

We know from the novel that Ilka wants to fit into her new country and can give her high fives for her persistence in dealing with various challenges and awkward situations to get there. We also know that Carter is in a decline. But its hard to extract much more as the novel stays on the surface going from dialogue to dialogue, episode to episode, with negligible at best drill down into how the characters got to where they

were when we meet them.

It appears the author wants us to see challenges regarding acceptance and assimilation. But I'm not really feeling it here.

Considering what Ilka has been through in Europe, she seems remarkably non-traumatized. She was a child of the Holocaust and World War II who gets to the US thanks to an ever-supportive cousin and with no idea if either of her parents are alive. Yet the most angst she shows is framing correct English sentences and understanding Carter's obsessive reliance on slang and idioms (one would think a person as educated as he would know better given Ilka's being new to the language, but oh well . . .). Yet as the novel progresses, I do see some assimilation issues as Ilka shows herself more willing than her cousin to put her European Jewishness on the back burner and go all in on being American — but with only one minor episode of reflection near the end.

As to Carter, we're supposed to see him as being a victim of racism. At least that's what Lore Segal tries to tell us through various monologues and quips by Carter. But to me, that theme was completely swamped by Segal's having chosen to also make Carter a roaring drunk (one who is not worthy of the more sensitive label "alcoholic" or "alcohol abuser;" an old fashioned pre-pc-era "drunk," "lush," "boozehound," etc.). While racism prevented many from reaching their potential, that played zero role in Carter's decline. Anybody who drinks the way he does has to fail, no matter what his or her race, nationality, gender, religion, sexual orientation, etc. (And I don't for a minute buy the notion that racism made him drink; other black characters in this novel weren't drunks, and history, even as of the time Segal wrote, gives us more than enough people in Carter's position who weren't drunks.)

It's a shame Segal chose to make Carter a lush. Had he been a normal drinker, or even one with a moderate tendency to drown sorrows, he could have delivered a powerful message. Being black, and favoring the militant views that were just starting to emerge at the time, Segal had ample opportunity to show Carter as a victim of skin color. I have no idea why she felt a need to have him hit the bottle so hard that he can only be viewed as an equal-opportunity failure.

As a result of this, and other novels I've read, I think I need to propose a revision to the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, something like this: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances — however nothing contained herein or in any other portion of this Constitution shall restrain Congress or any other branch of Federal, State or Local government from enacting legislation or regulation prohibiting writers of fictional works from presenting alcoholic protagonists, such restraints being highly desirable to protect the reading public from extreme boredom and/or exposure to needlessly one-dimensional characters."
