



Life and Culture

Reading list: Our pick of the best Jewish books over the last year

The new year is upon us but have you read the best of 5783?



BY **KAREN E H SKINAZI**
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BOOKS



The JC's best reads of 5783 (Photo: Getty)



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The new year is upon us and with it, no doubt, a slew of new Jewish content. Personally, I'm looking forward to *The Future* by Naomi Alderman, one of my favourite living authors, as well as *The Golem of Brooklyn* by Adam Mansbach, who cracked me up in my early parenting days with *Go the F**k to Sleep*.

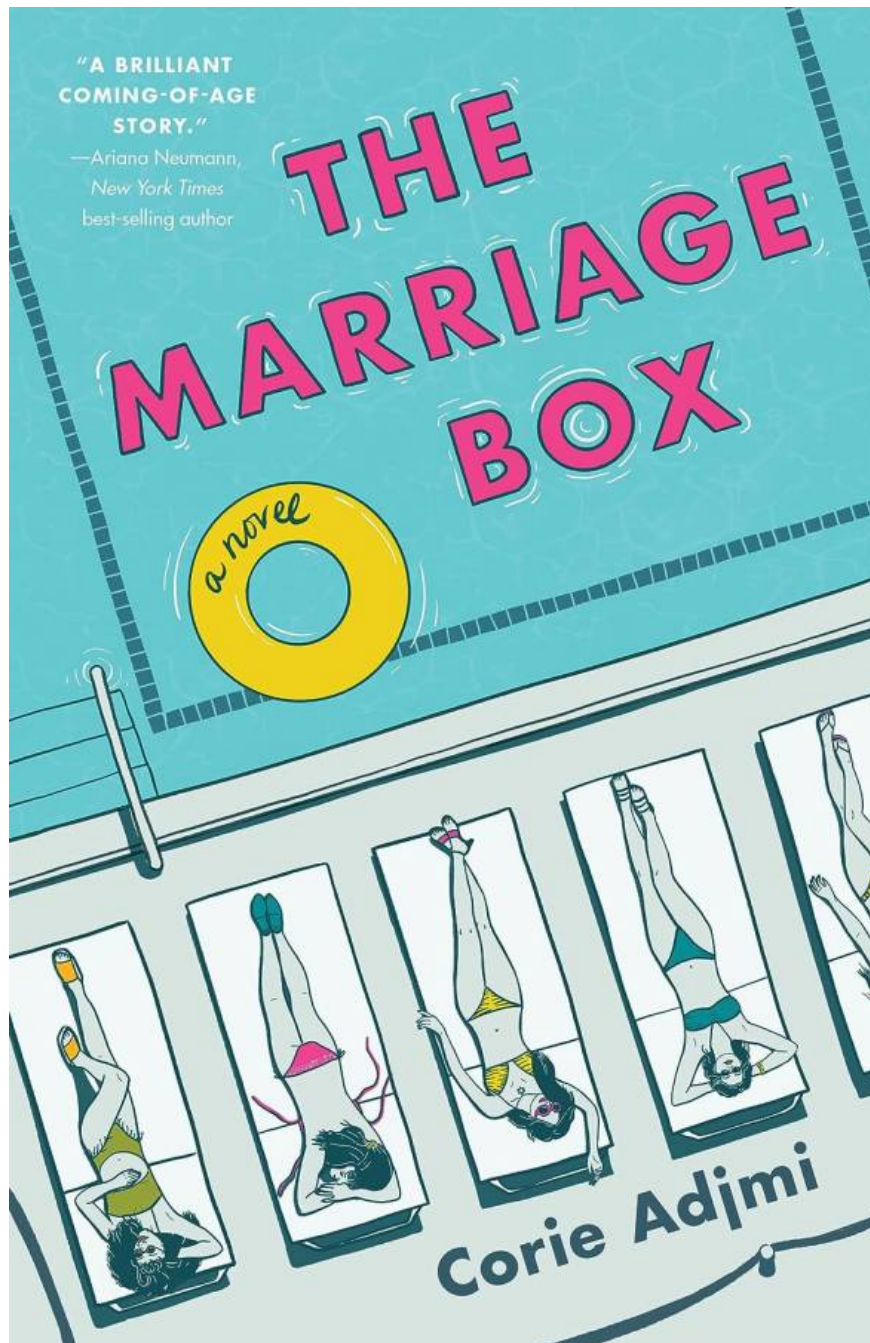
Oh, and Jessica Kirzane is coming out with another translation of Miriam Karpilove's writing; if the narrator of *A Provincial Newspaper* is half as witty as that of *Diary of a Lonely Girl*, count me in!

But as we shift into 5784, have you read the best of 5783?

Like most Jewish years, there were some fantastic showings. I laughed as I listened to an audiobook version of Curtis Sittenfeld's *Romantic Comedy* about a Jew-ish sketch artist and pop star crush; cried reading French writer Ann Berest's Holocaust-driven autofiction, *The Postcard*; and am excited to start Shastri Akella's *The Sea Elephants*, a queer coming-of-age story set in India and featuring a Judeo-Malayalam-speaking love interest. What I adore most about Jewish fiction is that I can start with the familiar (a Shabbat dinner, perhaps, or some old-fashioned intergenerational trauma) and explore the whole world.

Here are some you might have missed, exploring the lives of the Jewish and Jew-ish folk from around the globe:

1. *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store*, by James McBride



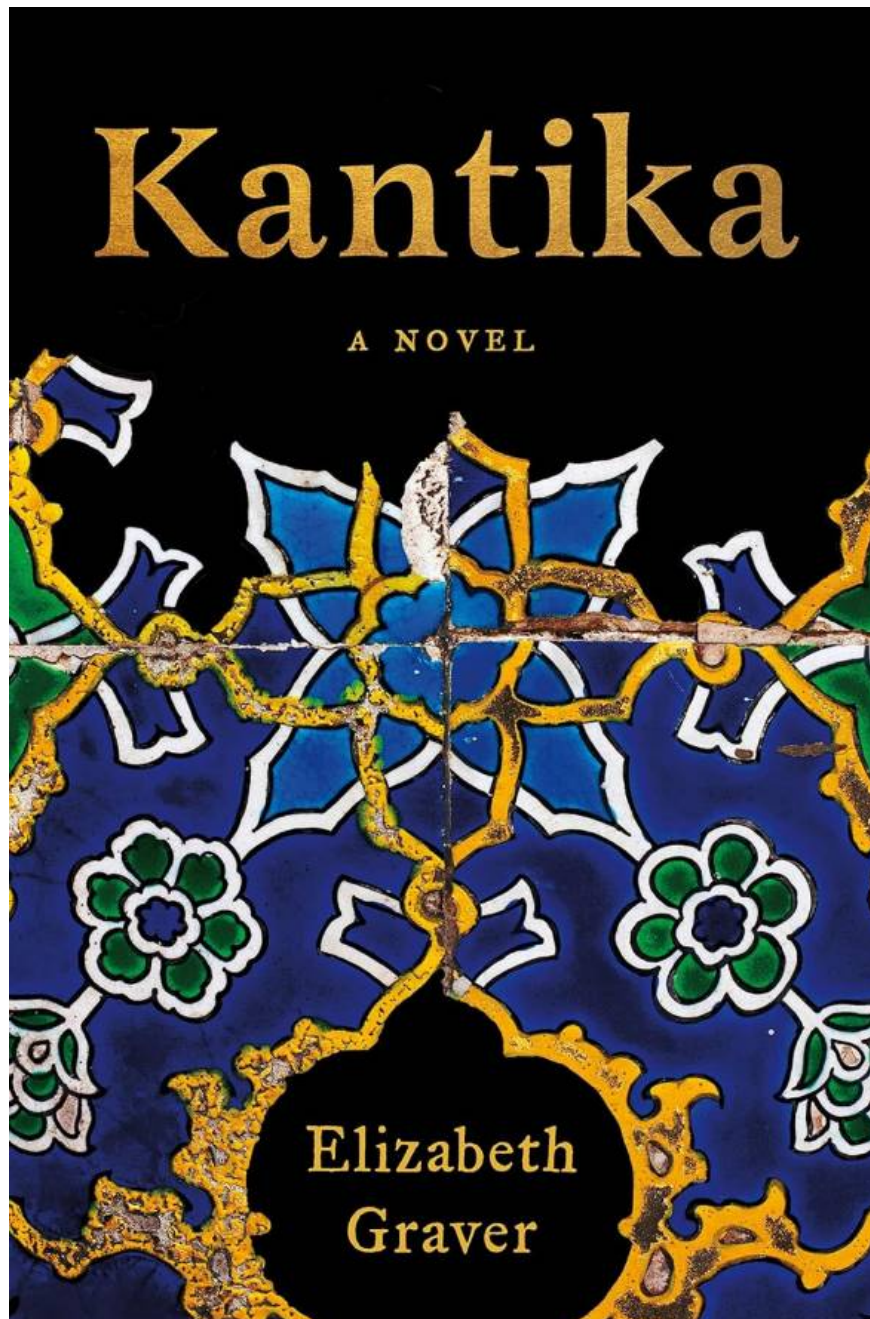
The Marriage Box, by Corie Adjmi (Photo: Book cover)

“The night started out like every Syrian Jewish wedding,” begins Adjmi’s riveting novel—but if you’ve never been to a Syrian Jewish wedding, you’ve got a lot to learn. I know I did! And so did Casey, the eighteen-year-old bride, standing among her eight hundred guests (standard, apparently), all the women in expensive skin-tight size 2 dresses and stilettos.

Raised in casual, secular New Orleans in the 1970s, where her mother, inspired by the Women’s Movement, cut her hair short and got a job at the mall, and her father watched porn, wore a red Speedo, and flirted with women, Casey finds the move to Brooklyn’s Orthodox Syrian community at the age of sixteen a shock to her system.

Although her family has Syrian roots, Casey needs to be initiated into their ways—of religiosity, sexual modesty, strict gender divisions, and endless glamour—in order to attract her “naseeb,” or “God-given intended.”

4. *Kantika*, by Elizabeth Graver



Kantika, by Elizabeth Graver (Photo: Book cover)

When we first meet Graver's protagonist, Rebecca, she is singing to herself, which is appropriate, as the whole novel feels like the embodiment of the title, "kantika"—Ladino for song. At the outset, Graver lyrically establishes the multilingual, multireligious, cosmopolitan, and yet concretely local and specific nature of Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 1907. We learn about Rebecca but more generally about life in the Ottoman empire, the water-based geography, open-air culture of buying and selling, neighbouring communities.

We travel with Rebecca from Constantinople to Barcelona, Barcelona to Havana, Havana to New York. Rebecca's life is not easy, but she is headstrong and independent; you can't help but root for her. Though fiction, the novel is based on stories from and interviews with family members, particularly Graver's grandmother Rebecca Cohen Baruch Levy, in whose memory the book is written. Real photographs of the author's family front each chapter.

5. *Undesirables: A Holocaust Journey to North Africa*, by Aomar Boum, Illustrated by Nadjib Berber