

*Where to Find Me* tells of the unlikely relationship between Hannah Karalis, a teenager living in Notting Hill, and her elderly neighbour, Flora Dobbs. They meet only fleetingly (the result of a misplaced house key one rainy winter evening), just long enough to ignite an affinity between them. Decades later, after Flora's death, Hannah receives a package containing a handwritten memoir. She encounters her neighbour most intimately within the pages of a wire-bound notebook.

Flora's tale begins guilelessly: "Jean is my first boyfriend. We are nineteen years old, students at the Sorbonne. We both want to be writers and change the world." It is 1939. Flora senses "[t]he drip-drip of elimination. This is how it begins." Her mother is sent to Drancy. Her father loses his mind. Flora survives in hiding. After the war, she goes to Palestine where she falls in love with a man who is outraged at British quotas that leave Jewish refugees stranded, unable to enter Palestine. He loathes the government that imposes them. In 1946, Flora witnesses the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, and learns of her lover's involvement in the attack. Devastated, she moves to London, where she meets a married man whose son she bears but is forced to abandon. Her grief is such that she is treated for hysteria and receives electric shock therapy. She never stops looking for her son. Now Hannah is asked to continue the search.

Flora's memoir – the contents of the notebook – is nested within Hannah's narration. When Hannah reads its first page aloud to her companion, Aziz, we circle back to the start of the novel: "Jean is my boyfriend. We are nineteen years old [...]" The interlinked narratives, voices in counterpoint, harmonise and diverge as Hannah reflects on her own family tragedy and debunks, through her investigation, some of Flora's articles of faith.

Aside from the voice – humorous and without self-pity – what is striking about Flora's memoir is its tense: the hypnotic present, the tense of the personal anecdote, often used to recount trauma. It lends itself well to sensual description: "There is an urgency [in Jerusalem], as hard and hot as the stones that dominate the landscape." Hannah's sections of the novel are recounted in the more conventional past. This formal structure means we encounter the remote past with more immediacy, a paradox that makes us wary of narrative's promise to shape the chaos of life into the neatness of story.

Arikha is best known for her memoir *Major/Minor* about growing up in 1980's Paris in a cultural and intellectual milieu affected by the aftermath of the Holocaust. She is acutely aware of the ethical and political questions that call into question the idea that a narrative is a definitive account of a life. Perhaps her aim is to represent human helplessness in the face of historical circumstance; Flora's single act of will is to write her story. But if this is a critique of narrative, it's an ambivalent one. The novel is full of narrative pleasures. Still, the hypnotic sensuality of the present tense disguises the fact that things simply happen to Flora. And it isn't quite clear why Hannah needs Flora's story, why she devotes such energy to searching for Flora's lost son. What in Hannah's life is missing? What is she striving for?

These concerns are minor compared to the novel's strengths: its richly drawn characters, gorgeous language and the way it folds history delicately within the story of an individual life. Flora's late mother is conjured by the scent of her perfume, Shalimar. What haunts Flora after witnessing the hotel bombing in Jerusalem is not her lover's betrayal but the image of a young woman bending over the body of her dead husband, a British soldier. Her pale green dress was "smeared in filth and blood". The image burrows into the mind, securing what is most deeply human – grief, sensation, love – in the foreground of history