

# Arts

## An online revolution

### Book review

#### THE BLOGGING REVOLUTION

Antony Loewenstein  
Melbourne University Publishing, \$32.95

Reviewed by Sharon Givoni

TWO years after the release of his controversial book *My Israel Question*, Antony Loewenstein has just released *The Blogging Revolution*, which is essentially an account of bloggers around the globe who live and write under repressive regimes – many of them risking their lives to do so.



According to Loewenstein, the internet has become the only space for many citizens to express their hopes, fears and desires and a refuge for dissent on many issues, including women's views and discussions on sex, drugs, gender, politics and religion.

Loewenstein has travelled widely in the process of writing this book and has written it as a result of his firsthand investigations with private parties, some of which risked their lives in order to share their views on their country's rulers and their opinions on western democracy.

These parties included writers, bloggers, dissidents and journalists – from politicians and citizens in Iran and Egypt to people writing from internet cafes in Saudi Arabia and Damascus. One of the book's most eye-opening discoveries is the way the internet is threatening the traditional role of governments.

The book arose out of Loewenstein's frustration that so much of the western media was ignoring the voices of the non-western world, as if, he says "indigenous voices didn't deserve to be heard". He wanted to show that the internet and blogs, in countries often deemed "enemies" or "allies" of the West, gave a unique insight into the culture and worldview of nations such as Egypt, Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Cuba and China. His view is that the western world ignores these nations at its peril.

According to Loewenstein, one of the biggest surprises in writing this book (which he did in the course of only six months) is that "in a country such as Iran, regularly demonised in the West, bloggers are actively debating the current direction of the state under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad".

He says that both conservatives and reformists actively use the internet to discuss religion, in forums usually ignored by western media. He also believes that it is far easier to simply frame the nation as run by fundamentalists determined to destroy Israel; something, he claims, that is both inaccurate and dishonest.

Loewenstein hopes that one of the outcomes of the book is to prove that journalists don't always have to be complicit enablers of those in power.

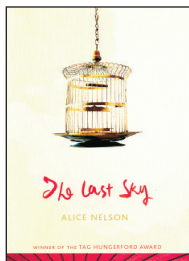
The book, which was launched last month, has already generated a great deal of public and media interest, especially people who were unaware how powerful the web can be in societies with only state-based media.

Sharon Givoni is a Melbourne-based writer and lawyer.

# Unearthing a scattered history

Perth writer Alice Nelson speaks to **Lexi Landsman** about the stories of displacement and exile that inspire her.

AS a child, Alice Nelson remembers sitting around the table with her aunts while her Russian grandmother shared stories of her life and how they came to live in Perth.



"I'd listen to the stories, looking at what interesting narratives had shaped their lives – leaving things behind, moving to new countries," the Perth-born writer explains.

"There was always that family history of exile that fascinated me."

Her mother had eight siblings, who were all displaced during the Holocaust. After the war, they moved to Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) and then to America, eventually settling in Perth.

"There was always this sense that they were a family with no real home and I think that shaped my sensibility a lot. They had a very scattered life, and there wasn't a lot of discussion of it, it was something as an adult I wanted to go back and research," Nelson explains.

Now, at age 28, Nelson has done just that. Her first novel, *The Last Sky*, was released by Fremantle Press last month. It explores notions of displacement through a fictional story of lost love.

It was her family that ignited the novel's main theme of being in a state of exile, but it was her own interactions with refugees that came to play an integral part in its formation.

At the age of 20, she left Perth and went to live in America as a volunteer social worker, while completing a masters degree. From living and working with 30 migrant families, many of whom were Jewish, Nelson became interested in their stories of displacement and the idea that it's the generations going forward that will take the family into future "and heal the burden of the trauma of the past, loss and exile".

"I was living in Harlem in a neighbourhood with refugees, migrants, expatriates – people displaced or in some kind of exile, knowing that their lives would always be difficult. They'd always be foreigners in the city and never know the language or culture, but their children would have opportunities they'd sacrificed to give them. There is hopefulness in new generations."

Nelson began writing the novel when she was 22 with no plan of what form it would eventually take. Having always had a fascina-



Alice Nelson: "You find these stories and they take hold of you; they take over in a way."

tion with Hong Kong's fraught history, she decided to set the novel there. During her research of Hong Kong and China, she learned of the Shanghai postwar Jewish community.

"I stumbled across this forgotten coda fact of history – 40,000 Jewish refugees living in Shanghai after the war – it just fascinated me, this bizarre displaced community in exile in a Chinese city that was itself in war," Nelson explains.

From that, Nelson decided she wanted to tell a story that was "the flipside of the coin of history – the tales that were not told".

"This Shanghai story was for me, this hidden side of history. When I discovered that pocket of the Diaspora Jews, it really intrigued me because I'd never heard about it before."

What resulted was a story that oscillates between these two periods – the Hong Kong handover and the Shanghai Jewish Diaspora after the Holocaust. The novel follows the journey of the narrator, Maya Wise, who trav-

els with her archaeologist husband to Hong Kong during the handover to China. With her marriage failing and with little to keep her occupied, she meets an elderly Chinese man and begins to piece together his story of lost love to a long dead Jewish refugee, Ada Lang.

*The Last Sky* took Nelson five years to write, and she says it became "a sort of obsession that just engulfed [her]".

"You find these stories and they take hold of you; they take over in a way. And they are not always the story you thought they would be."

Nelson was awarded the Varuna Flagship Fellowship for the most promising fiction project by an emerging writer in 2006. That same year, *The Last Sky* won the 2006 TAG Hungerford Award for the best unpublished fiction work and was nominated for The Australian/Vogel Literary Award.

*The Last Sky* is published by Fremantle Press, \$29.95.

## Are you the next child singing star?

CHANTAL ABITBOL

CALLING all young male singers who are looking for their big break. Producers of *Celebration 60* – a musical show honouring Israel's 60th birthday that is set to come to Australia in November – is searching for a child star to take on a featured role.

Arranged by renowned South African cantor Oshy Tugendhaft, three performances will be held in Australia – the first at Melbourne's Monash University on November 13, and then at Sydney's Moriah College on November 16 and 17 – with a separate singer needed from each city.

Co-producers Jodi Kofsky and Maxine Appel-Cohen said the young boy soprano or alto that would fit the bill would be aged, ideally, between 10 and 12.

"They'll have a great voice but also lots of personality and stage presence," Kofsky said. If selected, the young singer will perform



From left: Cantor Oshy Tugendhaft, Azi Schwartz and South African child star Micha Schachat.

one or two numbers with Tugendhaft and the touring Celebration Choir in front of more than 1000 people.

The Celebration Choir first performed in 1993 in honour of the Golden Jubilee of the Sydenham Highlands North Hebrew

Congregation in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Since then, Tugendhaft and his 35-member cast, including a choir and band of musicians, have travelled the world with their musical spectacle that celebrates aspects of Jewish life in history and music.

With costs to be sponsored partly by corporate and individual supporters, all proceeds from the show will aid families in crisis through JewishCare in NSW and the Jewish Care Mental Health Program in Victoria.

Those interested in joining the troupe should submit an audition CD demonstrating their range and style.

Finalists will audition for Tugendhaft on Skype, and the successful singer will be provided the songs on CD to learn.

Send applications to "Celebration 60", PO Box 493, Rose Bay NSW 2029 or 204 Kooyong Road, Toorak, Victoria 3142. Enquiries: celebration60@optusnet.com.au.