

Between Two Worlds

Tammar Stein's debut novel
by Ellen Barber (Grad '93)

When Tammar Laufer Stein (Col '98) graduated from Charlottesville High School in 1995, she told her parents she wanted to join the Israeli army. Girls her age in Israel were starting their mandatory service, and to Stein they seemed "the epitome of cool." With some reluctance, she chose to attend U.Va. instead, but her fascination with the Israeli army became her first novel.

Light Years tells the story of Maya Laor, an Israeli who serves as a soldier, loses her boyfriend in a suicide bombing she feels responsible for, and at 20 comes to the U.S. to attend the University of Virginia. In alternating chapters, Maya's troubled past in Israel and her new life in Charlottesville gradually converge.

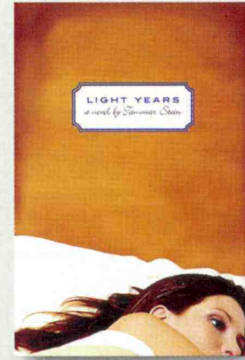
Born in the U.S., Stein lived in Israel between the ages of 3 and 9 and has returned often to visit family. In Israel, everyone serves in the military—women for two years and men for three—so Stein and her brothers grew up hearing their parents' army stories. Her father (U.Va. aerospace engineering professor Gabriel Laufer) "always made it sound like a really big adventure," she says. But he talked her out of enlisting, partly by convincing her that she didn't want to wait two years to start college.

As an Echols Scholar at U.Va., Stein majored in English, worked on the *Cavalier Daily*, and studied fiction writing with Sydney Blair. Blair became the adviser for her senior thesis, a short story cycle about Israeli soldiers in which Maya appeared as a recurring character. Blair says Stein had "an intuitive feel for the power of language—she could write wonderfully lyric lines at the drop of a hat—but she also early on found her subject. Once she hit on that, she became deeply immersed in, and committed to, writing her story." When she graduated, Stein had more than 100 pages of fiction and a character that reappeared over and over. "I thought to myself, 'Maybe there's a novel in this somewhere.'"

She spent the next five years digging it out.

After college, Stein returned for a time to Israel, where she was inundated with the stories of friends and cousins her age who had just completed their military service. To Stein, it seemed "the most fascinating, glamorous, exciting, adventurous thing to have done," and she began to regret her decision to go straight to college. "I felt like maybe I'd missed out on a really amazing experience." *Light Years* grew out of Stein's desire to imagine that experience.

Her agent suggested that the story would make a great young adult book. "The themes in the book of alienation and going to college and trying to figure out your path in this world are classic young adult themes," Stein says, though she believes adults can enjoy the book as well.



"He went to school to learn how to kill me. ... The girl who got him fired. The Israeli girl who ruined his life. Seven other people were killed instead. A single mother of two. A computer programmer. Two college students. A grandmother and her four-year-old grandson sharing an ice cream. And Dov, my boyfriend, my heart, the man I wanted to marry, who was there waiting for me.

I wonder if the Palestinian bomber would be pleased that it turned out this way. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth.

I ruined his life. So he ruined mine."

—from the novel *Light Years*

Indeed, the novel's honest treatment of love and loss has earned praise from both adult and teen reviewers. Combining grace and humor, Stein's writing shows a dedication to good storytelling, and the scenes of ordinary life in Israel—a country both Maya and her creator clearly love—reveal a world that will be new to most American readers. The novel has been nominated for the American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults 2006.

Though the Israeli-Palestinian conflict serves as the backdrop for Maya's story, Stein says she did not intend to write a political novel. "That issue is inescapable if you're an Israeli," says the 27-year-old. It is "also something that most Israelis have incorporated into their daily life," and yet every suicide bombing leaves the survivors stranded in grief and shock. In coming to the U.S., Maya tries to run away from the guilt she feels over her boyfriend's violent death. Stein calls the book "the story of somebody who is still reeling from what happened."

At U.Va., Maya struggles with the pressures of college life, suffers from insomnia, and studies astronomy, often retreating to the peaceful solitude of McCormick Observatory. Stein herself fell in love with astronomy in college and made it her minor. She wanted Maya to study a science, and she says astronomy was "the only science I thought I could write about with any kind of authority and not get myself hopelessly mixed up." But Stein also liked the symbolism: the stars are "something that's constant between Israel and the United States and all over the world."