

an hour in

paradise

*stories*



Joan Leegant

**TAKING ITS TITLE FROM THE YIDDISH PROVERB**

"Even an hour in Paradise is worthwhile," Joan Leegant's startling debut features ten outstandingly original and prize-winning stories. Contemporary and fresh, these are stories that mine the Jewish tradition with an edge. Provocative and offbeat, in settings from Jerusalem to Queens, from the outskirts of Hollywood to Sarasota, Florida, *An Hour in Paradise* gives us characters who soldier on, despite the odds, in search of divine and human connection, aware that even a glimmer—that single heavenly hour—is worthwhile.

A former drug dealer turned yeshiva student faces his past while visiting a dying AIDS patient. A disaffected young American in the ancient city of Safed ventures into Kabbalist mysticism and gets more than he bargained for. Three sisters—one a Hindu, one an Orthodox Jew, and one a struggling actress just trying to get by—find unexpected happiness with the help of an unseen, yet beloved, hand. A Boston rabbi whose morning minyan is visited by a pair of mysterious guests considers the possibility that they are not the mortals they seem. An aging Jerusalemite chronicles his country's changes during the Biblical year of rest. Interspersed with these are tales of love lost and found—between fathers and sons, old childhood sweethearts past their prime, and strangers thrown together by circumstance and chance.

By turns poignant and comic, unflinching and compassionate—with a dose of fabulist daring—the stories in *An Hour in Paradise* explore the dangers and unforeseen rewards of our most fundamental longings.



**Joan Leegant** has won numerous awards for her short fiction, including the Lawrence Foundation Award and finalist citations in the Katherine Anne Porter Prize, the Tobias Wolff Award, and Glimmer Train's Short-Story Award for New Writers. She is the recipient of an artist grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and fellowships at The MacDowell Colony. Her stories have appeared in *The New England Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Bellingham Review*, and *Nimrod*, among other journals and anthologies. Born in New York, she lives in Newton, Massachusetts, with her husband and sons and teaches writing at Harvard University and Hebrew College.

an hour in paradise



# an hour in paradise

stories 

Joan Leegant

W. W. Norton & Company  
New York London

Some of the stories in this collection were originally published, in slightly different form, as follows: "The Tenth" in *Nimrod International Journal* (Fall/Winter 1998) and in *With Signs & Wonders: An International Anthology of Jewish Fabulist Fiction*, Daniel M. Jaffe, editor, Invisible Cities Press, Montpelier, 2001; "Lucky in Love" in *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art* (Winter 2001); "How to Comfort the Sick and Dying" in *Bellingham Review* (Spring 2001); "The Lament of the Rabbi's Daughters" (as "The Four Daughters") in *New England Review* (Fall 2002); "The Seventh Year" in *Prairie Schooner* (Summer 2002); "Henny's Wedding" in *American Literary Review* (Fall 2000); "Accounting" in *Crazyhorse* (Fall 2002); "The Diviners of Desire: A Modern Fable" (as "The Diviners of Desire") in *Pakn Treger* (Summer 2002).

Copyright © 2003 by Joan Leegant

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book,  
write to Permissions, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10110

Manufacturing by Quebecor World, Fairfield

Book design by Blue Shoe Studio

Production manager: Amanda Morrison

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Leegant, Joan.

An hour in paradise : stories / Joan Leegant.

p. cm.

**ISBN 0-393-05439-X (hardcover)**

I. Title.

PS3612.E3495H68 2003

813'.54—dc21

2003005445

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110

[www.wwnorton.com](http://www.wwnorton.com)

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd.

Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

FOR ALLEN





EVEN AN HOUR IN PARADISE IS WORTHWHILE.

—riddish proverb



# CONTENTS



THE TENTH 15

LUCKY IN LOVE 36

HOW TO COMFORT THE SICK AND DYING 62

THE LAMENT OF THE RABBI'S DAUGHTERS 79

THE SEVENTH YEAR 106

MEZIVOSKY 131

SEEKERS IN THE HOLY LAND 146

HENNY'S WEDDING 168

ACCOUNTING 188

THE DIVINERS OF DESIRE: A MODERN FABLE 203



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



For support during the writing of this book, my sincere thanks to the Massachusetts Cultural Council and the MacDowell Colony, where several of these stories were written. I am indebted to Elaine Markson, my agent, and her assistant, Gary Johnson, for their unflagging enthusiasm, and to Jill Bialosky and Deirdre O'Dwyer at W. W. Norton for their exceptional care and expertise. My appreciation to the editors of the journals and anthologies in which many of these stories first appeared, with special thanks to Paul Zakrzewski and Dan Jaffe. For their encouragement all along the way, I thank Art Edelstein, Bret Lott, Sharon Sheehe Stark, Chris Noel, Ellen Lesser, and Sena Jeter Naslund. Special thanks to Nathan Ehrlich, Peretz Rodman, and my mother, Selma Leegant, for help with factual details ranging from Talmudic tractates to the geography of the Bronx. Finally, my inexpressible thanks to the three who make it possible for me to write at all, my sons, Eli and Nathie, and my husband, Allen Katzoff. Their love and support are beyond measure.



an hour in paradise



