

## Middle Eastern Promises

With *Israel is Real*, his impressionistic history of the Holy Land, author Rich Cohen maps the region's ever-shifting sands.

// BY AARON GELL



**"SOMETIMES YOU'VE GOT TO RUN** at the Deacon." That's what Herb Cohen used to say whenever his son, Rich, a hockey jock growing up in the suburbs of Chicago, was facing down a big challenge. The reference wasn't to a church official (the Cohens are Jewish) but to implacable NFL defensive end Deacon Jones: Running at the Deacon means facing an obstacle head on, confronting what scares or upsets you. It's an approach Rich Cohen has often taken in his writing, first with the critically acclaimed 1999 history *Tough Jews*, which reveled in the tales of gangsters like Meyer Lansky and Bugsy Siegel that Jews of an older generation might have preferred to forget, and more recently with *Sweet and Low*, a notably unflattering memoir of his family's misadventures in the artificial sweetener business, which didn't air his relatives' dirty laundry so much as slip into it like a hand-me-down suit. With his latest book, *Israel is Real: An Obsessive Quest to Understand the Jewish Nation and its History*, the author, a contributing editor for *Rolling Stone* and *Vanity Fair*, has run at the Deacon in a very big way, courting controversy in his search for catharsis.

"I think anyone being honest is going to be controversial, especially about a topic people care about," the author explains over coffee in New York's Lower East Side. The result is a feverishly wrought, passionate and riveting history of Jerusalem, from its origins as an ancient kingdom—sacked by Rome in 70 A.D., the Israelites

scattered to the winds—to a "city of the mind," as he puts it, detached from geography to live instead as a metaphor for two millennia, and finally to the contested capital of a modern state (hence the book's title). "There were a lot of nation-states in the ancient world that had state religions," Cohen observes. "After the destruction of the Second Temple, the rabbis found a way to take the Jews' spiritual capital and turn it into a story, a book, which made it portable and indestructible. That's why it survived."

Cohen devours history like a *zayde* (Jewish grandfather) tears into a pastrami on rye—a fact that becomes apparent on a walk through the neighborhood, once the center of Jewish life in New York. He stops abruptly on Norfolk Street. "This is the spot!" he says, gesturing at the pavement in front of us. "Right here is where Louis 'Lepke' pulled a drive-by on Jacob 'Little Augie' Orgen and his bodyguard 'Legs' Diamond."

Tough characters all, they ran at the Deacon, too. **///**



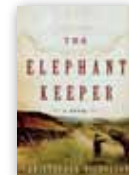
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#### *This is How*

After being dumped by his fiancée, a tightly wound auto mechanic attempts to hit the reset button by moving to a small English seaside village, in acclaimed Manchester-based author **M.J. Hyland's** haunting third novel. But a steady drip of small humiliations sends him over the edge.



#### *The Elephant Keeper*

**Christopher Nicholson's** enchanting debut novel, a sort of neo-*Dumbo* fairy-tale set in 18th century England, is the story of a 12-year-old boy who becomes the keeper of a pair of young elephants, newly arrived from India. He befriends the female and devotes his life to her care.



#### *The Venus Fixers*

As World War II raged around them, a small group of allied officers embarked on a mission to protect the cultural treasures of Italy. Author **Ilaria Dagnini Brey's** account of their exploits makes for a fascinating footnote to the war years, when the fate of civilization itself seemed to hang in the balance.