

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

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“THE TEN-YEAR NAP” BY MEG WOLITZER

(Riverhead Books, \$24.95)

Review by Alexandra Shelley

With her latest novel, Meg Wolitzer proves herself the Margaret Mead of the Upper East Side. “The Ten-Year Nap” follows a tribe of 40-something women who gather at the Golden Horn coffee shop after dropping their sons off at Auburn Day School. With an anthropological precision tempered by wit and compassion, Ms. Wolitzer chronicles their rituals and taboos; the local economy — the adult males venturing forth each day to their law firms or hedge funds while the females tend to the children; the social hierarchy; even their odd dances, which involve something called the yoga mat.

Satirizing this crowd of Manhattan private school mothers is like shooting fish in a bassinet. But this book is not about the neuroses, high-end gear, competition. What distinguishes “The Ten-Year Nap” is that its three primary narrators are fully rounded characters — flawed, brave, and, to use E.M. Forster’s definition, capable of surprising in believable ways. What also makes the novel more than a comedy of manners is the broader perspective into which Ms. Wolitzer places the individual stories: the confused roles of women amid the third or fourth — I’ve lost count — wave of feminism.

The “ten-year nap” is the time that Amy Lamb, the book’s first narrator, has been out of the work force caring for her son, Mason, while her husband toils as a salaried associate at a second-rate law firm. As the book opens, she’s 40 and waking up to the fact that she’s no longer needed as a full-time mom, yet feels no pull to return to her career as a trust and estates lawyer, even if she could (being, as she discovers, two whole legal software programs out of date).

She is the character who is the most direct descendant of the feminism of the ’60s and ’70s, with a mother who, thanks to her consciousness-raising group, found her career in midlife as a feminist historical novelist. “‘You girls will be able to do just about anything you want,’ Antonia had told her three daughters when they were young, taking a tug on her first cigarette of the day.”

What the stories of Amy and a majority of the other mothers in the novel illustrate is that the women’s movement made being a success both at work and at home possible, but not probable.

Ms. Wolitzer manages a fresh take on the fabled working-mother balancing act. The avatar is Penny Ramsey, mother of three and director of a museum of New York history, who at first appears to be “an advertisement for work and motherhood and glamour and a refusal to compromise.” But of course, as Amy gleefully learns, Penny leads a sordid secret life.

Amy notes the toll taken on most of the fourth grade’s working mothers: “. . . you could usually see evidence of the strain of their complicated lives and feel the breath of time upon them. They had folders clutched in one hand and a child’s science project involving a potato and a battery in the other; they rarely lingered; and they never sat in a booth at the Golden Horn before going off to work.”

But Ms. Wolitzer’s chief subjects are the women in that booth. They have poured all of their former career skills and artistic aspirations into being professional mothers in an age when keeping the family running smoothly requires attendance at motherhood lectures, the ability to say “playdate” without irony, and a BlackBerry “stocked with the names of shops and doctors and pediatric orthodontists and other mothers, and dates for meetings at the school about how to talk to your sons so they will listen.” And they all feel they’ve failed in some major way.

Take Jill Hamlin, Amy's old friend, who's just moved to the suburbs, where she feels stranded with her adopted 6-year-old daughter. Of the Golden Horn group, she is the most marked failure — at academia, independent film production, fertility. In boarding school, she won the Vivian Swope Prize for “A Graduating Senior Who Demonstrates the Most Promise” and now, she reflects, “her life bore no resemblance to the way she once had imagined it.”

At times in the novel it seems these women's chief failure is a failure to recognize their own good fortune. And Ms. Wolitzer herself underscores this by shifting narrative points of view in order to give cameo appearances to the less fortunate prior generations — the parents who worked in a Chinese restaurant so their daughter could go to M.I.T., for instance — or to the poor white teenage girl from South Dakota whom Roberta Sokolov, another of the narrators, volunteers to drive to the state's one abortion clinic.

But then where would Tolstoy have been without the Russian aristocracy? I found this novel most epic when it centered on the small back booth at the Golden Horn. It's fascinating and comforting to watch these women fumble with their futures, riven by an all-too-familiar combination of self-doubt and ambition, by an uncertainty about what society expects from them.

I should come clean and say that I'm a member of this confused generation. I founded a group called “Women's Lib” in first grade in the '60s (though for some reason membership involved crocheting), listened to Betty Friedan's commencement address to the Yale class of '83 in which she assured us it was okay to be feminine feminists, and now find it disconcerting that of a weekday, the Bleecker Street playground benches look like a gynecologist's-office waiting room.

I wonder, too, whether we're marching bravely backward when I pitch in at my daughter's preschool and watch the 4-year-old girls dress up in high heels to play intricate games of “family” while the boys gallop around putting out fires.

Ms. Wolitzer's 40ish characters are ambivalent about their mothers' feminism, treating it as a sort of quaint outburst (albeit one that reportedly involved eating your own placenta). The liberal Roberta Sokolov, who gave up painting when her two kids were born, represents the middle ground among the friends when she calls herself a feminist “theoretically,” but “It's not like it usually comes up. You don't have to put it down on medical forms or anything. But of course I'm a feminist. They accomplished a lot.”

“Yes, and look how equal we are.”

And yet perhaps the legacy of that feminism is the right to choose a career or motherhood or a *mélange*. “Amy knew that staying home with a baby was her right,” Ms. Wolitzer writes, sounding like a jingle for today's “motherhood movement.” But Amy's not militant. She just likes hanging out with her son.

It is during an argument with her mother, who's pushing her to find a job that matters, that Amy expresses the real-politik of the idealistic feminism of a half century ago: “‘... I expected things of myself,’ Amy said. ‘But not everyone is that driven. And not everyone is really talented. And also,’ she said, ‘sometimes it's too difficult to make it happen.’”

Although this novel is at once thought-provoking and entertaining, Ms. Wolitzer sometimes strains for the former at the expense of the latter. There are so many narrators and walk-on parts — including brief chapters featuring historical figures — that tension about the lives of the three unfamous central characters is dissipated. When Margaret Thatcher suddenly appears in Chapter 4, I thought: This is some nap, replete with nightmares.

I guess one could argue that this non-hierarchical structure is somehow egalitarian and female, like crocheting. It's a plot based not so much on rising action as on an accretion of perspectives and daily life events. The closest to a classic plotline is the development of the clandestine affair of the museum director Penny Ramsey and a British curator, Ian Janeway. But he literally and figuratively falls from grace (on a paraglider) and disappears halfway through the book.

In the end, Amy does go back to work as a lawyer and finds it's not too bad. She and her husband rediscover each

other, so that the climax of her story is fairly literal. “The Ten-Year Nap” provides no tidy endings, just a satisfying feeling that you know the tribeswomen of the Golden Horn as well as you do your best friends, and perhaps you even know yourself a little better.

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Meg Wolitzer is a regular visitor to Springs.

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