

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

## The weaving of a rich yarn and an incomparable narrator

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You want the essence of New Yawk-ese in your narrator? Call Barbara Rosenblat.

You want Yiddish? Oy vey! Rosenblat to the rescue.

Russian or Eastern European? Da! De bizony! Rosenblat again.

You want, on top of it all, insight, attitude, wit, vigor and enthusiasm? Seek no further.

There's probably something Barbara Rosenblat can't do, but I haven't encountered it.

The incomparable *la Rosenblat*, as at least one of the authors she narrates has gratefully dubbed her, is one of the most versatile narrators around.

In one of her latest outings among literally hundreds, she's taken National Book Award finalist Amy Bloom's *Away* - a story of love destroyed, a lost child and a final redemption - and made it into something extraordinary.

HighBridge has recorded it unabridged (8 hours, \$34.95).

The story is rich enough in itself.

Lillian Leyb is a Russian Jew trying to build a new life. All of 23, she has escaped her homeland after seeing her parents and husband brutally slaughtered one night during a pogrom. She bundles her daughter, Sophie, into a shawl and eases her out the window, telling her to hide in the chicken coop.

But, later, when Lillian goes to find Sophie, the toddler is gone. A relative says she has seen Sophie floating down the river. Dead.

So Lillian comes to live with a relative in New York, sleeping in a crowded house and trying to find work as a seamstress. Perhaps improbably, she winds up as the pseudo-mistress of a gay theater idol and the actual mistress of the idol's father.

Oy vey, indeed.

But Lillian is nothing if not practical. She's seen worse. She's lived worse. If she can get nice clothes and English lessons out of the deal, who's to argue?

Until someone tells her Sophie isn't dead after all. She's in Siberia with former neighbors.

Of course, Lillian must go.

With scant funds sewn into her clothing and suitcase, she winds up going not across the Atlantic, but across America, up to Alaska, across the Bering Strait. It's pretty much impossible, but it's cheaper.

And this introduces us to an even richer array of people for Rosenblat to voice - an Irish train conductor, a black California prostitute named Gumdrop, and so on.

Pretty much every one of them takes advantage. In a way, poor Lillian is a literary mirror for the dark side of human nature. Nothing attracts tragedy like an underdog. How odd - and how interesting - that she somewhat dully goes along, doing what she must.

I feared for a bit that the ending might be schmaltzy. But not to worry. Bloom shows admirable restraint.

And through it all, Rosenblat is an incomparable character guide, dancing from accent to accent, never letting up.