

The book cover features a solid orange background. A large, dark silhouette of a lion's head and neck is positioned in the lower half, facing right. The title 'Lion's Honey' is printed in white serif font across the lion's face. Above the lion, the author's name 'DAVID GROSSMAN' is written in a large, white, serif font. Above the author's name, smaller white text reads 'AUTHOR OF A HORSE WALKS INTO A BAR, WINNER OF THE MAN BOOKER INTERNATIONAL PRIZE'. A quote from the Guardian, 'Extraordinary, ground-breaking, empowering', is placed to the left of the lion's head. The publisher's logo, a white 'C' inside a semi-circle, is located at the bottom center. The text 'THE CANONS' is at the bottom, flanked by small white dots. Several black silhouettes of bees are scattered across the cover, including a large one on the right and several smaller ones on the left and bottom.

AUTHOR OF A HORSE WALKS INTO A BAR,
WINNER OF THE MAN BOOKER INTERNATIONAL PRIZE

DAVID
GROSSMAN

'Extraordinary, ground-
breaking, empowering'
Guardian

Lion's
Honey

C

• THE CANONS •

There is a point in the S
when he falls asleep on D
absorb and encapsulate th
draws into his childish, al
of the violence, madne
confounded and ruined his
the moment when his fate i
ing his hair and the razor
are already relishing their
his eyes will be plucked out
Soon he will be thrown into
ended. Yet it is now, perh
life, that he finds repose. F
cruel perfidy that he has s
is finally granted perfect p
and the stormy drama of

★

Samson story – the moment
Delilah’s lap – that seems to
the entire tale. Samson with-
most infantile self, disarmed
ss, and passion that have
s life. This is, of course, also
s sealed, for Delilah is clutch-
, and the Philistines outside
victory. In another moment
t and his power extinguished.
to prison and his days will be
haps for the first time in his
Here, in the very heart of the
surely expected all along, he
peace, a release from himself
his life.

★ ★

In those days, apparently the beginning of the eleventh century, there was not yet a king in Israel, nor a central authority. The neighbouring nations, Moab, Amon, and Philistia, were attacking the weak Hebrew tribes and their lands. Conquest and pillage again and again. There would arise, in one tribe or another, a man who would know how to lead his people. If several joined together, into a confederacy, and won, he would become the leader. Such were called *shofet*. Such were Gideon, Samson, the son of Gerah, Shamgar, and Jael. The story swung cyclically between periods of oppression and redemption that correspond to the Book of Judges, to their sins. First they would worship the gods of the nations, muster the murderous neighbours, and oppress them. They would cry out to Him who is their God. He would elect from among them a man who would save them.

OPPRESSOR

At the end of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries BCE, there was no political or any central authority. The Israelites, as well as the peoples of Midian, Canaan, and the Philistines, took advantage of the power vacuum and launched campaigns of aggression against them. Every so often a powerful tribe or another, a person would rise to lead his tribe, sometimes initiating a retaliatory battle. If he was a warrior, leader and judge, and he would be remembered as a hero, like Gideon and Jephthah, Ehud and Shamgar, or the son of Anat, and he would be remembered as a hero. Thus the Israelites experienced periods of oppression and liberation, as recounted in the Book of Judges and their atonement. When they worshipped idols, then God would punish them and their neighbours as punishment. He would deliver them from their affliction, and he would raise up among them a person who

In the midst of this time, a woman of the tribe of Judah, living in the Judean lowlands, and her husband, as in those days it was the custom, as and the Philistines. For the first line of defence against the Philistines, it was the custom to attempt to conquer the land. A man was called Manoah, whose name is not known. It is said of her that she was 'barren and had borne no children'. To suggest that, along with the frontier, their marriage was a source of pain.

But anyone familiar with biblical storytelling also knows of a barren woman almost always followed by a momentous birth. And in the context of those periods when 'the Lord was offensive to the Lord alone, without her husband', she came before her and tells her:

S HONEY

turbulence lived a man and
Dan. They lived in Zorah
an especially violent region,
the boundary between Israel
the Israelites, it was the
ntst the Philistines; for the
essential first step in any
e Judean hill country. The
s, but the woman's name is
of her only that she was
'children', which is enough
with the hardships of the
had also been filled with

with the semiotics of bibli-
vs that the very mention of
st always foreshadows a
indeed, one day – during one
he Israelites again did what
rd' – when the woman is
nd, an angel of God appears
'You are barren and have

borne no children; but you shall bear a son.’ And immediately she gave him instructions and warnings: ‘Now be careful not to drink wine, or to eat anything unclean, or to eat anything unclean, or to conceive and bear a son with a crooked head, for the boy is to be born with the feet on the womb on. It is he who shall deliver Israel from the Philistines.’

She goes to her husband and says: ‘The angel who came to me.’ And the reader knows that the woman does not use the name of the biblical narrator – ‘an angel of God’ – but rather ‘the woman’ – but rather ‘the woman’ – but rather ‘the woman’ – phrase rich with double meaning. The phrase once in the Bible refers to the woman herself.

The husband’s ears probably are not quick. The wife quickly describes the angel: ‘The angel of God, very frightful, did not ask him where he was, but only said to me his name.’ And between

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... shall conceive and bear
... he gives her a list of
... s, and also good news:
... nk wine or other intoxi-
... clean; for you are going
... ; let no razor touch his
... a Nazirite to God from
... o shall begin to deliver

... and says, 'A man of God
... r's ears prick up, because
... he same word as that of
... angel of God *appeared* to
... 'came to me', a charged
... eaning, which more than
... o the act of copulation

... ably prick up too, and his
... stranger. 'He looked like
... htening,' she explains. 'I
... was from, nor did he tell
... a her words one can hear,

it seems, a note of apology for the man's appearance that she asks where he has been from,

And the husband, Marston, and what does his silence mean? She frowns in puzzlement, trying to get from the confusion so suddenly revealed in his wife, but she doesn't speak quickly, anxiously, continuing her information: The man of God told me and promised I would have a child that I not drink wine or eat unclean, because the boy was in the womb until his dying.

There, she has told him, she has freed herself from the burden of extraordinary news, yet she says nothing about any emotion, nor of any smile or tenderness that come as no surprise, since she records the feelings of her life, the history of actions and events.

gy – so frightening was the
he didn't have the nerve to
or even his name.

noah, how does he respond,
e say? Maybe he furrows his
ing to fish out a question
ddenly thrust upon him by
t wait for him to ask, and
nues to pile on new infor-
told me 'you shall conceive',
ave a son and commanded
or liquor, or eat anything
r would be a Nazirite from
g day . . .

m everything. She has freed
of the encounter and the
the text does not tell us a
a that flows between them,
der glance. And this should
ce as a rule the Bible rarely
its heroes. The Bible is a
vents, and leaves to us, to

each and every reader, the exciting task but one that encourages speculation and fantasy. Nevertheless, in the pages that follow, we will see that readers before us have done well. We have read the spare biblical text with faith, the conventions of the genre, our personal inclinations, and our own conclusions (and sometimes our own) every word and syllable.¹

And so, with necessary caution, we will enjoy the pleasure of guesswork. We will not try to fix in our mind's eye the exact image of the man and his wife, she speaking, she going on at length, she saying that word. And there is no knowledge of what is under that silence, excitement, or perhaps maybe anger at the wife's conversation with a strange man; and we will not know whether she, as she speaks, looks at the eye or averts her gaze, or whether the husband to whom, for

ROSSMAN

task of speculation, an
carries the risks of exag-
theless, let us dare to do,
that many generations of
e, men and women who
l text according to their
their age, and their own
attached meanings and
wishes and delusions) to

caution, but also with
and imagination, let us
e the encounter between
speaking and he listen-
th and he not saying a
nowing what is willing
ment and joy perhaps, or
who converses so freely
d we may also wonder
s, looks him straight in
e downward, away from
r some reason, an angel

did not appear. And even if we accept what we have pictured as the truth, there is no doubt that the new arrival will shake them both to the core. Her deepest feelings about her long-awaited, troubling pregnancy, and more specifically about the weakness and vulnerability that seem, are hinted at in the text.

And we, peeking in, into this highly charged family moment, are able to notice that what the woman says is not quite the same as what she does. Two central details are omitted: the mention that a razor man had cut the hair of their unborn son, nor does she say that this son 'shall begin to fight the Philistines'.

Why does she omit these details?

One might argue that in her state of confusion she simply forgot. Or perhaps she was doubtless quite certain and assumed that Manoah would

S HONEY

When if only a small part of what actually took place, there is the possibility that what they have received will, at its core, will stir up his deep-time barrenness and star-void, maybe also hers about him, and his impotence that, it would be a relief in this brief scene.

They are so captivated by this moment that we almost fail to notice when his wife reports to her husband that she has done what she had been told. She is missing: she does not know where to go. She must not touch the head of the man. She tells her husband that she will go to deliver Israel from the

these crucial details?

She is so excited in her excitement and she has almost got the matter of the razor. She is quite agitated; and perhaps she could be aware that, if the

boy was to be a Nazirite, the same prohibitions would apply, including the cutting of hair. But how can this be an omission? How can it be that she even conceals – from her husband – information regarding their son? He would surely give him satisfaction, perhaps a measure of comfort, after his bitter, barren years?

To comprehend this, to understand why she would go back and read the text, we must recall that the biblical text refers to her by name. The word ‘barren’ is used, and is even redoubled: ‘barren, barren children.’ And this emphasis suggests she has been waiting long years for a child. She has probably given up hope that she will one day have a child. It is significant that the ‘title’ *’akara*, ‘the barren,’ is conferred upon her by other women of the tribe, in all of Zorah. And it is her husband, in moments of

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the well-known restriction of the prohibition against dowry to explain the second dowry that a woman withholds — from her husband such significant dowry for her future son, news that brings dissatisfaction and pride, and compensation for all those

to understand *her*, we need to see the story through her eyes. The text does not even reveal her name, but all that is said of her, that she was barren and had borne no children, suggests that she had a child who never arrived. The text is based on the possibility that she was barren. And it is quite likely that the 'barren one', has been a source of grief, in the family, in the community, who knows, maybe even a source of anger, flung at her now

and then the searing epiphany of the word befalling them, too, the word befalling her every time she thinks of her fate.

And now, this same 'word given birth' is suddenly given an angel who brings her a child. Yet at this very moment fulfilled and her joy is bound the boy is to be a Nazirite on. It is he who shall begin Philistines.'

And she plunges into thoughts and emotions.

A son will be born moment she knew nothing the angel knew about it first perhaps at the moment unfamiliar twinge inside emotions work best with confidence doubtless very proud that save the Israelites: what

S HONEY

withet 'akara, and between
me her name, the barb that
e thinks about herself and

childless one who has not
graced by the appearance of
the news that she will bear
y instant, as her dream is
ndless, the angel adds: 'For
ite to God from the womb
in to deliver Israel from the

o a dizzying maelstrom of

to her. To *her*. Until this
ng of this, of course. The
and told her the news. And
of the telling she feels an
(angels know that revela-
oncrete proof). And she is
t her son will be the one to
mother wouldn't be proud

to produce the saviour of his people from a hidden corner of her heart, more than complete.

For another recognition, the repressed, is beginning to grow. She has conceived her own private, independent, some 'national figure', a Messiah, the redeemer of Israel. And his name is something that will develop slowly, as the two can grow comfortable with their roles – to be a saviour's mother, a responsibility – but instead of waiting suddenly, already, in a fixed form. 'For the boy is to be a Messiah from the womb on . . .'

She tries to understand the long-awaited child, at the moment when she, her, has begun to sprout with life. When touched, it turns out, by some force, and this means – and here is the sting – that he will be a child, alone.

ROSSMAN

is people? But maybe, in
part, her happiness is less

ion, painful and still
gnaw at her: she has not
intimate child, but rather
Nazirite of God and the
uniqueness is not some-
ly, over the years, so that
ably together into their
other is also a position of
d this is happening now,
d and inexorable manner:
nazirite of God from the

d. This child, this long-
ent he has been given to
thin her, has already been
ome other, strange entity,
e she feels a sharp, alien
ld who will never be hers

Does she understand
no way of knowing. The
overwhelmed her, and it
this moment she is filled
nancy, and pride over the
to her – to *her*, and not to
the tribe who saw her only
. . . But we may surmise
mother knows, with a d
knowledge that has nothi
faith or fear of God – th
her has also been taken aw
moment of her greatest i
a woman – has been co
public event, shared with
interpret her story after t
this reason, in an instinc
and denial, she pushes a
news.

And here we are remi
the Bible, whose fate was t
mother: Hannah, who t

this immediately? There is the whole episode has surely is perfectly possible that at only with joy over the pregnancy special boy who will be born to all those in the village and by as *'akara*, the childless one that, deep down, Samson's deep womanly intuition – a thing to do with any religious that what has been given to away in the same instant. The intimacy – within herself, as confiscated and made into a strangers (including we who thousands of years), and for active gesture of distancing away part of the disturbing

inded of another woman of the same as that of Samson's fearfully prayed and vowed

that, if a son were born to
 to God as a Nazirite, and fo
 was born, and she was obli
 Eli the high priest. Both the
 pregnancies carry with th
 implication that God has
 despair of these mothers, w
 conceive and give birth th
 accede to any ‘suggestion’
 their child, even – in the l
 – to serve as ‘surrogate m
 plans.

★ ★

The wife of Manoah goes t
 him about the encounter
 observed that her report s
 and overly detailed: ostens
 fact omitting much. It is wo
 any number of commentato
 ing poets and playwrights

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her, she would give him
Following that vow, Samuel
ged to turn him over to
ese tales of extraordinary
hem the uncomfortable
somehow exploited the
who thirsted so avidly to
at they were willing to
regarding the destiny of
anguage of our own day
others' for God's great

★

to her husband and tells
; and we have already
ounds almost apologetic
ibly revealing all, but in
rth mentioning here that
ors on the story – includ-
, painters and novelists

who over the years have hinted at a liaison between his mother and Samson – have hinted at a liaison between his mother and Samson. Others, notably Vladimir Alexandrov, in his novel *Samson the Nazarene*, explore the possibility that Samson had a romance between his mother and a Philistine.² According to the legend of the ‘man of God who covered his eyes’ the cover story that she invented to get away her embarrassing pregnancy was a hypothesis, of course, and a reflection of Samson’s complex relationship with his mother. But we, tempted though we may be by the version given by Samson, will soon discover that, even if it is true, her great, fateful betrayal was done at the expense of her husband.

For, after she announces that she will have a son, she recites to Samson the angel’s message – which she quotes with less than complete

explored the character of
that Samson was born of a
her and the 'man of God'.
r Jabotinsky in his wonder-
write, went so far as to raise
son was the product of a
ther and a flesh-and-blood
this reading, the business
'came to me' was simply a
vented in order to explain
pregnancy to Manoah. This
lds extra spice to the saga
ations with the Philistines.
a we are, will trust instead
son's mother, since we shall
f she spoke the whole truth,
l was not, in the end, at the

es to Manoah that they will
o him the second bit of the
h, it will be recalled, she
mplete accuracy. She omits

to mention the prohibition of wine for the boy's future role as nation's high priest to be a Nazirite of God from birth to death and concludes with a few words on 'his dying day'.

And this is surely a strange thought for a man who has just learned that after long years of infertility, there will be a child to be expected of their son – *dying day?*

Even someone who is not personally experienced that special moment when an expectant couple gets the news that on such an occasion there will be a child to their hearts and minds that will be an unborn child. And even if not personally preoccupied, even to the point of overlooking the dangers and disasters that befall children, they are nonetheless able, as a whole, to imagine their young child as a person, decrepit, nearing death, not as dead. To construct

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of hair-cutting; likewise
ional saviour. 'The boy is
om the womb', she says,
words of her own: 'until

nge addendum: a woman,
he will bear a child after
ls her husband what will
- and then speaks of *his*

t a parent, who has never
moment at which the
good news, knows that
is nothing farther from
n the 'dying day' of the
many anxious parents are
point of obsession, with
that lie in wait for their
less not inclined, on the
youngster as an elderly
the end – and certainly
t such a mental picture

requires a strenuous, almost
ment that would appear
instincts of parenthood.

A woman who thinks
the dying day of the child
take shape in her womb
ure of grim sobriety. Su
like this, assumes a posture
the child, from the father
no less, from herself.

What, then, has driven
words?

Again, let's 'rewind th
what exactly has happen
woman the news, then v
husband, as the mixed m
is, or will soon become,
how to put it? – is not
other children are to th
deposited within her, as i
she knows that things t
the end, be returned.

S HONEY

most violent act of estrangement
antithetical to the natural

and speaks out loud about
d that is only beginning to
requires a remarkable meas-
ch a woman, at a moment
re of cruel alienation – from
who hears such words, and,

Manoah's wife to add these

the tape' and try to examine
ned. The angel brings the
vanishes. She hurries to her
message swirls inside her: she
pregnant; but the child –
completely hers, is not as
their mothers. He has been
t were, for safekeeping, and
that are deposited must, in