

FICTION

Tearing down walls

A Wall of Light

By Edeet Ravel

Random House Canada,
256 pages, \$32.95

REVIEWED BY JOSH LAMBERT

Imagine having to hold your breath every time you ride a bus or sit down at a restaurant, for fear of an explosion. Or being born in the same stinking refugee camp where your grandfather was born. If this were your life, who would expect you not to be angry, depressed or spiteful? How could you begin to live without fear and hate?

Such questions of trauma and recovery are at the heart of Edeet Ravel's *A Wall of Light*, a thoughtful and heartfelt novelistic meditation on Israel's past and present.

Though Ravel was born on a kibbutz, she has lived most of her life in Canada, and she writes about the Middle East with both the investment of an insider and the perspective granted by distance. She's an academic, a left-wing political activist and the author of two previous novels: *Ten Thousand Lovers*, short-listed for the 2003 Governor-General's Award, and 2004's *Look at Me*.

Like the region in which it is set, Ravel's latest novel abounds with suffering, and its Israeli protagonist, Sonya Vronsky, has suffered extraordinarily. Sonya is "one of the few people . . . who, without being famous or dead, had made the front pages twice," first as a child, having permanently lost her hearing due to a senseless medical error, and again as a young professor, when she was brutally raped after delivering a math lecture.

Astonishingly, Sonya recalls these horrific experiences with calm detachment. "We tend to recover from distressing events," she says. "I'm a perfect example." She leads a cast of characters who manage to be loving, adventurous, generous and loyal, despite the tragedies raining down on them.

Sonya recounts the events of a "remarkable" day, during which she kisses one of her students; makes love for the first time — at the age of 32 — to an Arab man whose name she doesn't know; treks to East Jerusalem; chooses to move out on her own after a lifetime of dependence on her relatives; and, to top it all off, discovers that an older lothario, who once attempted to seduce her, is her father. As a victim of brutality, and as a specialist in the field of probability, Sonya might be expected to recoil from all of these unnerving and improbable surprises, but she bravely embraces them.

Alternating with Sonya's story are two sets of historical documents, which allow Ravel to link the pre-

sent to the past. For six months in 1957, Sonya's immigrant mother, Anna, dispatches letters to the lover who could not escape with her from the Soviet Union, expressing her longing for him and the homeland they shared. Ravel presents these missives alongside diary entries spanning the 1980s, in which Sonya's nephew Noah charts his own coming of age.

Though these family members live in dissimilar times — Anna, new to the young state, complains that "it's so difficult to get a telephone," while Sonya nonchalantly fires off text messages — Ravel subtly highlights the parallels of their experiences. Anna's observations of the new country and Noah's confusions about patriotism and sexual identity resonate with Sonya's personal tale and the larger political allegories.

And like the great Israeli novelist Amos Oz, Ravel employs the contemporary family unit — a group of disparate people thrown together by genetics or happenstance, loyal to one another despite their differences, and planning for a shared future they can't predict — as the ideal metaphor for the Jewish state.

Ravel's writing is often charming, and occasionally plain. At moments, her phrases and plot twists veer dangerously close to cliché and banality. When, for instance, after all her experiences, Sonya says she feels "like Alice in Wonderland," the inaccuracy and inappropriateness of the comparison grates. More often, though, Ravel is impressive for her willingness to say in unadorned language what she so powerfully feels.

The Vronskys are finally heroic because they make the best of a variety of bad situations, and the book goes so far as to hope that Israelis and Palestinians, working together, can do the same. Sonya's Arab lover, Khalid — who has himself endured quite a lot — teaches her to be less "rational and distant," and she offers him comfort in return.

Ravel no doubt intends this cross-cultural exchange as an optimistic suggestion of what might be possible between the communities the characters represent. This is an idealistic vision, but not a naïve one. She recognizes the cynicism and anger felt by those who have suffered, and her valuable novel offers the simple wish that they will feel love, too — for each other and for life itself. As Sonya puts it, "No matter how pessimistic you were feeling, or how deep your fear, love meant that you were also hopeful."

Josh Lambert's work has appeared in The San Francisco Chronicle, The Jerusalem Post and Sleepaway: Writings on Summer Camp.