



Hawkwood Books Blog: June 24th, 2020

Shtisel

I have been watching a series on Netflix called Shtisel. In fact, it is the only thing I've been watching. Despite streaming companies persuading us as best they can to spend our lockdown time staring at our television screens, this is the only series I am following. I've one episode left so I am saving it, maybe until July 3rd, the night before lockdown ends.

Shtisel is an Israeli series about an orthodox Jewish family in Jerusalem. For many people, that might be an instant turn off, but the humanity of the characters transcends the parochial and makes this a remarkably relevant piece of writing. And for those who don't know, and I'm one of them, there are numerous orthodox communities in the country, some of whom are at odds with their own system of government – just like communities all over the world, dissatisfied with their leaders.

It is popular in America, so I hear, but more with the Jewish population than the secular. The quality and originality of the series ought, if the world were truly just and open-minded, to demand global attention. The issues it raises, including Faith and Art should be of interest for millions of us, indeed for all of us. Religion in one form or another has dominated human thinking for millennia, and still does. Groups of various sizes and strengths find security in their traditions. So how do they cope with Art and music and literature when it infiltrates their closed world?

Shtisel is not a polemic, it is a beautiful, touching, sensitive and thoughtful character driven drama that leads us from one wonderful moment to another. What's more, there is no CGI, no soap opera moments of eyeballing resentment, no crass moments at all, in fact. The 'righteous' men and women are seen realistically as simply men and women, sometimes moral, sometimes weak, sometimes straight, sometimes crooked. The community itself is seen as a complex body, based on ancient and not-so-ancient traditions, secure within its own borders, troubled but loyal, supposedly focused on family and Torah – Jewish Law - but with pockets of rebellion and individualism stoked by young and old alike.

We are so often presented with stereotypes in life – it's a way we deal with diversity, to pigeonhole and label entire communities – but Shtisel breaks that down. The characters cannot hide behind their centuries old uniforms – they are human, still - living, loving, making music, making Art, making little humans, with money problems, relationship problems, professional problems – the exact same problems we all face from birth to death. And there is never a slip-up, never a false note. Each episode is faultless, perfectly scripted, perfectly acted, an original, delightful series that would, and should, captivate a global audience.