

FUNERAL AT NOON

By Yeshayahu Koren.

Steerforth, \$23.

In limpid, elegant prose, Yeshayahu Koren's first novel unfolds in a small Israeli village in the 1950's. Hagar, a young housewife whose husband often works late, restlessly fills her days by wandering in an abandoned Arab village that is used as a training ground by the Israeli Army. She is often accompanied by a neighbor's lonely son, 10-year-old Yiftach. During one of their walks, they meet a soldier who has strayed from the rest of his unit, and so a triangle of desolate souls is formed, a relationship in which each member looks to the others for salvation. Instead, the union ultimately leads to their destruction.

Through brief vignettes centered primarily on a cafe and a grocery store, Mr. Koren meticulously describes the history and the people, the day-to-day struggles, of an Israeli village much like the one where he was born. Never are we privy to the thoughts of any of the novel's inhabitants. However, each act that is observed, each scrap of dialogue, each spare and essential line of description, reveals much more about the characters' lives than they could tell us themselves. Translated from the Hebrew by Dalya Bilu, this short, powerful novel succeeds in creating an eerie, tension-filled atmosphere, even though for most of the narrative there is little high drama. Unfortunately, the tragic denouement is predictable, transforming "Funeral at Noon" from a lyric, brooding meditation into a pedantic morality tale.

JENNY MCPHEE