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# Speaking volumes

In honor of next week's international writers' gathering, Haaretz asked three foreign authors who will be participating to offer their recommendations for your 'must-read' list



Mike Harvkey. Sharp and authentic.

## Jan-Philipp Sendker

*"In the Course of Human Events,"*  
by Mike Harvkey, Soft Skull Press,  
240 pages, \$24

In his powerful debut novel, the American novelist Mike Harvkey takes the reader to a rarely visited place: the universe of right-wing, racist extremists in the United States of America.

It is a world novelists usually don't dare to touch. It is dark, lonely and scary, filled with anger and hatred.

Clyde Twitty, Harvkey's main character, is in his early 20s, and drifts directionlessly through his life in Strasburg, a small town in the American Midwest. Strasburg is a place battered and bruised by the economic crisis: The houses are rotten, the yards full of junk, stores

## The American Dream gone bad

are empty, in their windows nothing but big "for rent" signs. A place that nurtures hate, violence and paranoia.

Since Clyde lost his job three years ago he has almost become a stranger to work. His savings are gone, he cashed out of his retirement. He lives with his mom in a small house that is falling apart. She hasn't had a steady job for years, mother and son have not been able to pay the mortgage for a while – not to mention health, life, car insurance. There is none of it.

For Clyde there is not much hope, no prospect of finding decent work apart from his part-time job at Walmart, which pays minimum wage. All this has beaten him down in ways he didn't even know. Even his best friend has left town, looking for a brighter future.

Little Strasburg is more than the product of the imagination of a gifted writer: It is a town far too familiar in many parts of the United States. A town where the American dream has turned into a nightmare.

It is Jay Smalls, a charismatic martial artist, who finally gives Clyde's life a purpose. He has a small group of students, whom he teaches not just karate but mostly right-wing ideology. Jay Smalls exerts an intense magnetic pull over this young group. Under his brutal instruction, Clyde drifts away from his family and few friends, as he has to endure a series of increasingly frightening tests, unable to see how he is being manipulated by a born leader, who reshapes his students one after another into blind followers.

After a few grueling months, Clyde

has changed into a fearless warrior, his desperate but aimless anger directed now at two targets: minorities and the government.

Harvkey writes in detail about the brutal nature of hate, the disturbing ways of radicalization, and the overwhelming power of the experience of being believed in, finally, for the first time in your life. It is this feeling of having someone believe in you, seeing your potential, or at least claiming to do so, that breaks down every barrier Clyde might have had. We follow him step by step on his long and painful transformation from a lost soul, a mild-mannered young man looking for direction, into a fanatic believer in white-supremacist propaganda.

Harvkey, a Midwesterner himself, has a very precise ear. His dialogues are sharp and authentic, his straightforward prose is perfect for describing the harsh and unforgiving world of Clyde Twitty. It is a broken part of America, neither hip nor sexy, little examined in literature and even less understood.

Clyde is not a young man you would want to spend much time with, but he stays with you far longer than you would expect. Even long after you close this book, you can't help but keep thinking about him.

Such is the power of a good novel.

Jan-Philipp Sendker was the U.S. correspondent of the German magazine *Stern* from 1990 to 1995, and its Asian correspondent from 1995 until 1999. He is the author of the novels *"The Art of Hearing Heartbeats"* and *"The Well-Tempered Heart,"* both published in the U.S. by Other Press.

