

## Tracy Safron Suggests

Ronald H. Balson's *Defending Britta Stein* and Naomi Ragen's *An Observant Wife* are wonderful new books. Coincidentally, both novels have plots that revolve around returning characters. Balson reunites his readers with Chicago based attorney Catherine Lockhart and her husband detective Liam Taggart. Catherine is defending ninety-two-year-old Britta Stein, who grew up in Denmark during World War II. Caught on camera, Britta admits to spray painting the words liar, traitor, betrayer, and Nazi collaborator on the wall outside of Ole Henryks's popular restaurant. Ole is ninety-five and claims he helped Danish Jews flee to Sweden aboard fishing boats to escape deportation and Nazi concentration camps. A prominently placed photo in his restaurant offers proof. Beloved by many Chicagoans, Ole is soon to be inducted into the hall of fame of the Danish-American Association of Chicago for his heroism during the war. Britta's defense is that she's not guilty of defaming Ole's character because the words she wrote are true. Balson crafts a thrilling story of Britta's past, her association with Ole, and the devastating impact he had on her family's future.

Ragen's *An Observant Wife* continues the story of widower Yaakov and new convert Leah. The novel begins with their wedding. Leah loves her husband and ready-made family and she quickly restores order and joy to Yaakov's chaotic household. Unfortunately, she soon becomes the focus of viscous gossip from her Boro Park neighbors. The prominent grandmother of Yaakov's children tries to help the family and becomes the buffer between Leah and her community foes. Yet nothing compares to Leah's seventeen-year-old stepdaughter Shaindele's struggle. Shaindele blames herself for her mother's tragic death. This misplaced guilt leads her to extremely risky behavior. Expulsion from school is threatened unless she accepts counseling from the school's approved male therapist. Help is the opposite of what Shaindele receives from this man. Yaakov and Leah fight to protect Shaindele but are stunned to discover the shocking realities of their insular community. Ragen provides her reader with a thought-provoking and discussion worthy view of the orthodox world.