The World Without You

By Joshua Henkin

(Pantheon; 321 pages; $25.95)

"This past year has been awful," Marilyn Frankel reminds her husband, three daughters, daughter-in-law, sons-in-law and grandchildren at the beginning of "The World Without You," Joshua Henkin's intimate and insightful new novel. "Dad and I, it's like we're going through this cloud cover, and then there's more cloud cover and more cloud cover and it never stops."

The family has gathered in their summer home in the Berkshires for a memorial service for Leo Frankel, Marilyn and David's son. A foreign correspondent for Newsday, on assignment in Iraq, Leo was murdered by insurgents on July 4, 2004, a few days after accepting a job with The San Francisco Chronicle (so that his wife could begin graduate work in anthropology at UC Berkeley). He had booked flights for himself, Thisbe and Calder, their little boy, on the day he died.

The year, we learn, has been awful for all of the Frankels. They had thought that Leo's death would bring them closer to one another. Instead, "they're like dogs at mealtime, everyone with her bowl, alone." Thrown together for a "holiday" weekend, they will revisit and revive generational resentments, sibling rivalries and marital feuds and learn some lessons, old and new, about the strength of family ties.

In "The World Without You," Henkin, who directs the MFA Program in Fiction Writing at Brooklyn College, reminds us that families are icebergs, with nine-tenths of their emotions just below the surface, capable of wreaking havoc when struck.

Consider, for example, his description of the game of "Celebrity," which pits Noelle (the wayward Frankel daughter who became an orthodox Jew and moved to Israel) and her husband Amram (née Arthur Glucksman of Mamaroneck, N.Y.) against Marilyn, Thisbe and Lily (the contrarian Frankel, a Washington, D.C., lawyer who actually liked "the long, dour face, the patrician moroseness, the French speaking, the flip-flopping, the polysyllabism" of John Kerry).

Picking out names each player has placed in a bowl, Amram has little difficulty giving clues that elicit six correct answers from Noelle in less than a minute - Rav Kook, Yossi Beilin, Yerovan ben Nevat, Abayai, Arik Einstein and Naomi Shemer. When Lily, who has been doing a slow burn, wonders whether he has concocted the next famous name, "Eldad," Amram (who has just lost his job) erupts. Eldad and Meidad were false prophets, he says. "They're in the Torah. Or the Bible, if you prefer.... Did Leviticus make it into the syllabus at Princeton? Or did you only read the Bhagavad Gita?"

When Noelle joins the fray, Lily shoots back: "Well, there's no end to your false prophets, starting with Moses and Joshua and continuing on down to Sharon and Netanyahu. You and Amram, too, living in your warmongering country, practicing your delusional religion." Within minutes, the sisters are debating whether the Glucksman marriage will outlast the relationship between Lily and her partner, Malcolm - and Thisbe, with "a couple of clues gripped in her hand," is on the floor, sobbing.

Embedded in the Frankel family saga is Henkin's one-day-at-a-time philosophy. It works imperfectly, of course, and only when the reservoir of love behind it has not run dry. Henkin's metaphor for the process is a bit trite, but nonetheless it rings true.

Bereft at Leo's death and tired of life, Marilyn contemplates separating from David. Rummaging around the garage, she finds one of the girls' old bicycles, a little worse for the wear, but with the tires still inflated, the bell still ringing and a dandelion, "desiccated but still intact," inside the basket perched over the handlebars.

She offers to teach her 70-year-old husband how to ride. "You have to keep pedaling," she tells him. "If you come to an obstacle just steer out of the way." Marilyn promises not to let David fall and when, after she lets go, he sways fore and aft for about 20 seconds and tumbles on the lawn, she sings out "Bravo," brushes the grass stains off his derrière, glimpses his kneecaps, "like two matching eggshells," through the holes in his pants, and says, "You fall, you get up."

"I've worked up an appetite," David replies. "I'm going inside to eat your omelet." Suddenly hungry herself, Marilyn has reason to believe that he will "save at least a little for her." And reason to hope that she will be able to teach Calder how to swim.
Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. E-mail: books@sfcronicle.com

**DPRS Stock #1 in 2012**
The only online social DPRS stock voting system.
nasdaqstockranking.com/DPRS

**QUAN Top Stock Pick**
Moving Aggressively to Become Major Player in Huge
www.QuantumInnovators.com

**DPRS Stock (na)**
DPRS stock closed last at (na) a share. Get info and rate
localnewsnow.org/DPRS

Ads by Yahoo!

© 2012 Hearst Communications Inc.