



JRB | FICTION

Joseph Epstein • Dara Horn • Abraham Socher • Adam Kirsch
Michael Weingrad • Matti Friedman • Nadia Kalman
and more

JEWISH REVIEW of BOOKS

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OF BOOKS

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Introduction

Dear Readers,

Perhaps you enjoy our magazine because you agree with A. O. Scott that, “Criticism, far from sapping the vitality of art, is instead what supplies its lifeblood.” This collection of 13 of our favorite pieces on literature, published over the last decade, is more than list of reading recommendations. Of course, you can certainly use it that way and discover a hankering to read Alan Lightman’s wildly creative novel told from the perspective of God (“Mr g”), Zachary Leader’s prodigious biography of Saul Bellow, or Haim B er’s poignant and humorous investigation of the inner life of a Hasidic rabbi.

These thoughtful essays also illuminate the world through art: Noah Millman’s learned reading of the *akedah*, the biblical story of the binding of Isaac, through Shakespeare’s *King Lear*; Dara Horn’s smart and sweeping summation of the career and writing of Cynthia Ozick; and Michael Weingrad’s illuminating history of the golem in Jewish and popular culture. Collectively, these pieces consider the greats of Jewish American literature, original writing on the Holocaust, the best of Israeli fiction, and more. We’ve loved returning to them, and we hope you will too.

Happy reading,

The Editors

Upon Such Sacrifices: King Lear and the Binding of Isaac

BY NOAH MILLMAN

“Which of you shall we say doth love us most?” Is it ironic that the tragedy of *King Lear*, perhaps the most devastating in the English language, begins with a father’s plea for love? The question certainly surprises his court, which is anxious over the disposition of the kingdom.

Here is the situation. Lear, feeling his decline, looks to prevent future strife by settling his succession now. But he does not simply settle. He doesn’t incline to Albany, as his faithful vassal Kent tells us he thought he had and which would have been seen as only right and natural since Goneril, Albany’s wife, is Lear’s firstborn. Nor does he directly vest all in his youngest and dearest, Cordelia, which, had he done so, would have left her sisters gnashing their teeth while France and Burgundy overleaped each other in striving for her hand. Instead, he poses a test:

Tell me, my daughters—
Since now we will divest us both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state—
Which of you shall we say doth love us most?
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge.

His favor will incline toward love. But first, that love must be manifested. How can love be demonstrated to a father’s—and a monarch’s—satisfaction? His older daughters offer Lear the cloying words they think he wants. “Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter”; “No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour”; “I profess / Myself an enemy to all other joys”; and so on. Cordelia wonders how to follow these extraordinary exhalations, and counsels herself to “Love, and be silent.” And when it is her turn to speak, the words she makes of silence are:

CORDELIA
Nothing, my lord.

KING LEAR
Nothing!

CORDELIA
Nothing.

KING LEAR
Nothing will come of nothing: speak again.

CORDELIA
Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty
According to my bond; nor more nor less.

Far from being rewarded for her truth, her spoken silence unleashes a howling void that, by the end of the play, has swallowed nearly all the world, leaving only a wasteland of wolves for the righteous Edgar to rule and the loyal Kent to wander.

It seems an extravagant consequence, even for the legend of an ancient king. Why should the very fate of the world depend on the outcome of such a silly test? Why should one foolish, fond old man’s feeling of rejection threaten to dissolve creation into chaos? I’ve seen at least a dozen productions of the play, but this central question has remained a puzzle to me. Until I reflected that, once upon a time, another, greater king posed an even more terrible love test for a father and his child.

The first instance of the verb for love in the Hebrew Bible is in Genesis 22:

And it came to pass after these things, that God did prove Abraham, and said unto him: “Abraham”;

and he said: “Here am I.” And He said: “Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.” (Gen. 22:1–2)

Thus begins the story of the *akedah*, the binding of Isaac. It’s a story that has harrowed both Jewish and Christian commentators for more than two thousand years. And before it is anything else, it is a story of love, of the sacrifice of love, and of the sacrificial nature of love. And, as the story has it, the fate of God’s kingdom, the world, hinged on whether it was passed.

The *akedah* prompts different questions than *King Lear* does, not of how so much tragedy could have sprung from a foolish love test, but how the God of all creation could have put his faithful servant to such an unconscionable test in the first place. And so there is a long interpretive tradition that labors to elide that fact in increasingly creative ways. Surely God never intended Isaac to be a sacrifice—the boy was merely to be present at the sacrifice! How could Abraham have thought otherwise, when God had already sworn that it was through Isaac

that his promise to Abraham would be fulfilled? Or, alternatively, surely Abraham never doubted that God was

Why should one foolish, fond old man’s feeling of rejection threaten to dissolve creation into chaos?

merely testing him—after all, Abraham tells Isaac himself that God would provide a lamb to substitute!

By such means, commentators have sought to relieve the unbearable tension the story reveals at the heart of our relationship with God. Perhaps the best evidence of the fundamental unpersuasiveness of such readings is in the role the *akedah* plays in the traditional liturgy. Thus in the daily morning prayers, the story is read to remind God of Abraham’s unfathomable faithfulness: “Just as our forefather suppressed his mercy for his only son and wished to slaughter him in order to do Your will, so may your mercy suppress your [justifiable] anger . . .” What merit would there have been if Abraham had merely misunderstood God’s command—or understood it correctly but knew that he didn’t really



Tapestry depicting the sacrifice of Isaac, the King’s Great Bedchamber, Hampton Court Palace. (Courtesy of the Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2017.)

have to fulfill it?

The *akedah* is also read from the Torah on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. Thus, as we prepare to face God in judgment, we read the primal story of parental and divine love in its most terrifying and all-devouring form. And yet in one of the most moving prayers of the day, *Ha-yom Harat Olam* (Today Is the Birthday of the World), we pray:

Today all creatures stand in judgment, whether as children or as servants. If we merit consideration as children, have mercy on us as a father has mercy on his children. If as servants, our eyes beseech You to be gracious unto us in judgment, O revered and holy One.

And we close the service with *Avinu Malkein*—a plea for mercy not only from our king, but from our father.

This is the way we approach God when we want to emphasize the most fundamental level of our relationship. We ask God to consider us as children, and be merciful as a father is, not a master: with partiality toward the unique value of our own selves. But this is the love that Abraham had for Isaac and that he believed God had for both of them as His chosen servants. And it is this, even this, that God demanded Abraham sacrifice to prove his total love for Him, when He commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son.

That is the central, unresolvable tension of the *akedah* when I read it by the light of Shakespeare's tragedy, as if Shakespeare were a writer of midrash. Can we merit God's consideration as children only if we give God that which Lear demanded of Cordelia—love Him with all our hearts, all our souls, and all our means, reserving nothing for ourselves, for others, or for the world? And if so, then what is left of us to receive that consideration?

William Shakespeare was certainly familiar with the story of the binding of Isaac, and not only because of his deep cultural familiarity with the Bible

and access to the Geneva translation. Medieval dramatists had repeatedly depicted Abraham's trial on stage; the typical version explicitly brought out the understanding of Isaac as the great typological forerunner of Christ, and the substitution of the ram as prefiguring God's substitution of His own son for humanity.

But the *akedah* also had particular resonance in early modern England. Hampton Court, where Henry VIII resided, included a magisterial tapestry depicting Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, and this was not happenstance. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his beloved was the paradigmatic instance of the subject's total obedience, the complete subordination of his will and his interests to those of his sovereign. Moreover, in a country where the king not only ruled by asserted divine right but had made himself the head of the church, the space between



Cordelia Comforting her Father, King Lear, in Prison, by George William Joy, 1886. (Courtesy of the Leeds Museums and Galleries, U.K./Bridgeman Images.)

royal and divine command had shrunk almost to non-existence.

Shakespeare actually alluded to the *akedah* in a scene in *Richard II*, as Ken Jackson demonstrates in his recent book *Shakespeare and Abraham*. It is a comic scene in which the Duke of York denounces his own son, Aumerle, before the newly crowned King Henry IV, demanding

that Aumerle be put to death for treason even as the king offers him mercy. What is being satirized here is precisely the psychological situation created by the demands of absolute fealty to the monarch. In a sense, York is testing whether Henry Bolingbroke *is* the king, whether he *will* demand loyalty in the most absolute terms, because this

It is precisely God's absence in *King Lear* that sheds clarifying light on Abraham's trial.

is what royal authority *means*. This is reminiscent of the scenario described in a midrash on the *akedah*. The angel has stayed Abraham's hand, and Abraham has seen the ram, and sacrificed it. But now Abraham turns to heaven and protests that he *still* needs to sacrifice Isaac, else his intention will not have been fulfilled, and it might have been thought that he never intended to fulfill it. For the command to be withdrawn is to put into question either the authority of the one who commands or the loyalty of the one who obeys. Our sympathies in Aumerle's scene are unequivocally with the natural bond between father and son. But what happens when the sovereign and the father are one and the same, as is the case in *King Lear*?

King Lear is not usually thought of as having a relationship with the story of Abraham, though a suggestive connection was made by King James I himself. Before ascending to the English throne, James VI of Scotland wrote a political guide, *Basilikon Doron*, for his eldest son advising him never to divide his kingdom (as Lear does) but "make your eldest son Isaac, leaving him all your kingdoms." Instead, the most common point of biblical reference for *King Lear* is Job—because of his extravagant suffering, his demands for justice, the storm against which he rages, and, not incidentally, his trio of daughters (though Job was happier there than Lear was). But just as Richard II and King Lear have a clear kinship—two kings who abdicate, suffer, discover their humanity thereby, and come to wonder how political authority can survive the knowledge that the king is but a man—Job himself, though not an Israelite, is a version of Abraham.

Job's story begins as Abraham's climaxes: with a test. Will he remain righteous when God punishes him for no reason? There is even a midrash in which Abraham's test originates in an argument with Satan that mirrors

the frame story of Job. Job, like Abraham, passes his test. He does not follow his wife's advice and "curse God and die," nor does he succumb to the false comforts of his friends, who urge him to blame his own sinfulness for his suffering. Instead, he suffers for his fidelity. This is very close to Abraham's own agony, but Job did not have to wield the knife. Similarly, Lear's suffering in abdication is akin to Richard's, but, unlike Lear, Richard did not decide upon his own destruction.

Why does Lear need to prove his daughters' love? He knows his youngest daughter's devotion. I have never seen a production in which Lear is in any way fooled by his two older daughters' false comforts. He already knows that Cordelia loves him truly and that Goneril and Regan exaggerate their affection. What, then, is the purpose of the trial?

Well, what is the purpose of Abraham's trial? God, even more than Lear, surely knows the depth of Abraham's devotion. From God's perspective, the command cannot be posed in order to see whether Abraham will be willing to perform the terrible deed. Rather, the purpose can only be to teach Abraham something by going through the experience of preparing for sacrifice, right up to the point the knife is raised, and to teach succeeding generations through the story of his deed.

So, too, I would suggest, with Lear. The love test is almost always staged as a bit of theater: Lear knows what he is going to do, and he thinks he knows what Cordelia is going to do. He has orchestrated this as a teachable moment for his daughters and for his court, a lesson in what love looks and sounds like—love for a father and love for a king, which are, in Lear's case, one and the same. He would give her all, and he expects that she will demonstrate a love commensurate with that gift: a love that matches all with all. But Cordelia refuses to follow the script. "Love, and be silent," she tells herself—what is the salience of this silence? I cannot help but hear an echo of Abraham's own silence in the face of the divine command, a terrible silence that envelops the crisis within which Abraham is caught.

Midrash fills up Abraham's silences—for example, by way of explaining the prolixity of God's original command. "Take your son," God commands, and Abraham, in the famous midrash quoted by Rashi, replies, "I have two sons." "Your only son" is elicited in reply, "each is the only son of his mother [Sarah and Hagar]." "The one you

love”—“but I love both of them.” Only with the name “Isaac” does Abraham run out of ways to escape. But all of this midrashic elaboration only underlines what is missing from the original biblical text: any sign of what Abraham is feeling.

Although Cordelia begins her speech with a literal “nothing,” she does not stand upon that silence, but interprets it for her father and his court:

Good my lord,

You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall
 carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty:
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all.

For this, Cordelia is banished and disowned—and we, like the loyal Kent, are appalled. But in this reaction, we are reading Lear as something less than what he knows himself to be, that is, as less than a king. We should take the moment, and Lear’s intentions, more seriously. And reading Lear by the light of the *akedah* is a way in.

What has God asked Abraham to sacrifice when He calls for Isaac to be set forth as a burnt offering? Remember the three ways God describes him: your son, your only one, whom you love. Isaac is Abraham’s son, the continuance of his own name. Isaac is unique, the vessel through which the entire world is promised blessing and redemption. And Isaac is Abraham’s beloved. Isaac is the child of Abraham and Sarah’s old age, the fulfillment of all of God’s promises to Abraham since He took him out of Ur of the Chaldees. And this—all that God has given him—is what God demands Abraham surrender, to prove his obedience—his love—for God, his ultimate father.

The principle here is terribly simple, and one that Satan’s cynical argument about Job makes explicit. If we obey God in expectation of reward, then our love of God is not pure. So to prove that our love is pure, and not transactional, we must be willing to sacrifice everything—indeed, everything that God Himself

promised us—on the altar of our devotion. If we do less than this—if we reserve anything for ourselves, for our own futures, for our destinies on earth—then we have proved ourselves unworthy of those very blessings that were promised.

Cordelia’s response to her father turns this equation on its head. She is to be wedded to a great prince and will inherit the choicest portion of her father’s kingdom—if she demonstrates total and complete love. This is the transactional love that the *akedah* rejects, a prize for a price. Her response is that if she demonstrates that total love—and implicitly values that inheritance and that marriage at nothing—then the entire ceremony of king and court and of her courtship is pointless. It is not her love that must be total, but his, her father’s—total enough to give her a kingdom knowing she will not return it.

But if we empathize unequivocally with Cordelia’s resistance, what do we make of Abraham’s obedience? And more troubling still, what do we make of Cordelia’s own tragic end?

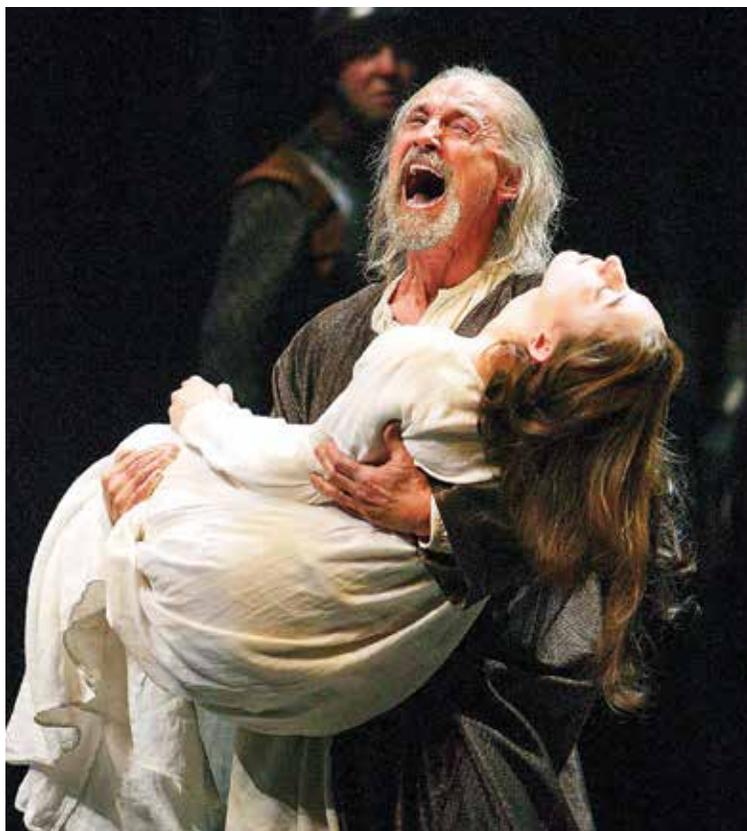
I have been very free in my associations until now, moving fluidly between apparently competing identifications. If *King Lear* can be read as a version of the *akedah*, then where is God and who is Abraham? *Meshalim*, allegorical stories that elucidate a biblical text, generally follow a one-to-one correspondence, and where “a king of flesh and blood” is posited, he is usually a stand-in for God. Following that allegorical logic, Lear, who poses the test, is God. But then, who is Abraham? A child or a father?

There is no way to perfectly match up a story with three parties—God, Abraham, and Isaac—and one with two—Lear and Cordelia. But consider the story instead from Isaac’s perspective. God does not speak to him but to his father. And he is tested as surely as Abraham is. A wide variety of *midrashim* fill in the voids of Isaac’s own silence, but the biblical text gives us only the one question: Where is the lamb? From Isaac’s perspective, God and his father are as one in this moment of trial, and he must have either faith in the rightness of his own slaughter or faith that God will not demand what He appears to be demanding. Is this not similar to Cordelia’s own dilemma when faced with her father’s love test?

Moreover, from both a medieval and an early modern perspective, the line between the monarch and the

divinity was blurry. The medieval Christian ideology of the king's two bodies held that while the king was in one sense just a man, he was also, numinously, the kingdom in himself. This idea clearly informs Shakespeare's play; much of Lear's physical suffering can be read as the king experiencing in his actual body the afflictions of the body of state. He grows most God-like on stage precisely when he is powerless in exile from his kingdom and from his children.

But it is precisely God's absence in *King Lear* that sheds clarifying light on Abraham's trial. Where, after



Colm Feore as King Lear and Sara Farb as Cordelia at the Stratford Festival, Ontario, 2014. (Photo by David Hou.)

all, does the impulse to sacrifice the firstborn originate, but in a sense of primal gratitude? The womb is open, but we cannot take credit for opening it. Who, then, deserves the first fruit? And with promises as extravagant as those embodied in Isaac, how could anyone accept them without first offering to give them back? For Abraham, Isaac is his relationship with God—the living embodiment of all of God's promises. Even if Abraham had not heard God's command, he would

have known the awesome implications of having been granted Isaac in the first place.

And so *King Lear*, in which God's presence is occluded and the monarch stands alone with a test of his own devising, is a useful lens through which to see Abraham's crisis. Lear is a king, God's regent on earth. Like Abraham, he is a legendary patriarchal figure. Finally, he is a father, and it is not so simple to divorce from fatherhood that illusion of true continuity, that one's living legacy owes total obedience in gratitude for their very life, because only in this fashion does one's own life continue beyond one's death.

This is the burden that both Isaac and Cordelia bear. Isaac's own willingness to be sacrificed is a frequent theme of midrash and commentary, from an interpolated dialogue with his half-brother Ishmael that fills in the backstory to the opening words of the *akedah*, "after these things" (Ishmael brags of how much blood he shed when he was circumcised as a teenager, and Isaac retorts that he will shed far more blood on Mount Moriah), to exhortations by Isaac to his father to bind him fast, so that any involuntary struggle on his part does not result in a less-than-perfect cut with the knife, invalidating the sacrifice.

And by the play's end, Cordelia also shows her love to be absolute. That husband for whom she reserved half of her love, she leaves behind in France, returning armed to rescue her father from her cruel sisters. When they meet again, and Lear says he knows she does not love him, but that she has cause not to, she replies—in a line that can fail to make you weep only if you have no heart at all—"No cause, no cause." And when their arms do not avail, and Lear and Cordelia are captured, Lear tells her not to despair, because now they truly have all that they need, which is each other. In describing their future life together in prison, he

uses the language of human sacrifice:

KING LEAR

We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,

Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,
That ebb and flow by the moon.

EDMUND
Take them away.

KING LEAR
Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
The gods themselves throw incense.

Lear and Cordelia go together to their doom as Abraham and Isaac climbed up Mount Moriah side by side.

But only Cordelia dies. God's angel stays Abraham's hand at the final moment, while Edmund's reprieve comes too late for Lear's poor fool. Cordelia's death came as a shock to Shakespeare's first audiences. All the signs pointed to *King Lear* as a romance rather than a tragedy, situated somewhere between *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*, a story of sundering and reconciliation, turning the father's heart to the children and the children's hearts to the father.

King Lear does contain something like that romance in the story of Gloucester and his sons Edgar and Edmund. There are biblical echoes here as well: Gloucester's coming to sight through blindness and illegitimate Edmund's trickery employed to win an inheritance over his brother darkly recall the aged Isaac's deception by Jacob. Shakespeare gave us all the romance one might want in the good Edgar's slow succoring of Gloucester away from self-destruction, even to a final reconciliation that kills the father with joy.

Audiences had every reason to expect to see that mood continue to the finale, with Lear restored to the throne with Cordelia by his side. In fact, that was, quite literally, the promised end. In Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Shakespeare's primary source for the story, Lear's wicked daughters are vanquished by Cordelia, who restores her father to the throne and succeeds him as queen. Shakespeare's other major source, a play from the 1590s called *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*—first published in 1605, just in time to inspire Shakespeare's own effort—ended on a similarly happy note.

Most of Shakespeare's plays are revisions of older

works by other writers (the Gloucester-Edgar subplot came from Sidney's *Arcadia*), but in this case he radically revised the ending, swerving suddenly from romance into the bleakest tragedy. Edgar's triumph butting up so directly against Cordelia's murder only sharpens the narrative cruelty of the latter. All our expectations, like those of the characters left alive onstage, are crushed. One feels that this isn't how it's supposed to end.

Why make this change? It is tempting to conclude that this is of a piece with God's absence from Shakespeare's story, that in a world ruled by the biblical God, the blessing of life does not, finally, require a commensurate sacrifice. In a deep sense, to accept the death of Cordelia is to accept an utterly bleak universe. Perhaps that is why the story was revised yet again. For more than a century and a half the English stage never saw Cordelia's death, since Shakespeare's play was performed only in the 1681 adaptation by Nahum Tate in which Cordelia lives and marries Edgar. If Cordelia is an Isaac figure, of course she must live and testify to the presence of God in the world.

But did Isaac live? If some biblical critics are correct, the *akedah* narrative as we find it may itself be decomposed into two strands, one for Elokim, who demanded the sacrifice of the firstborn male child as of the first fruits, and one for the God of the Tetragrammaton in the "J" strand, who sent the angel and substituted the ram. On this theory, something older, and darker, was revised out of our *akedah* story.

And though the biblical text as it has come down to us clearly states that Abraham's hand was stayed in time, the question nagged at the ancient midrashists. Small gaps in the biblical narrative—why, for instance, doesn't the text say that Isaac went down the mountain together with his father just as they had gone up together?—support a shocking counter-tradition: Isaac was indeed sacrificed. In his classic book *The Last Trial*, Shalom Spiegel explored these *midrashim*, in which Isaac spilled a quart of blood on the altar, was reduced to ashes, and spent three years in paradise before being restored to life on earth.

Whatever theological significance one imputes to such stories, what they demonstrate first and foremost is a basic narrative dissatisfaction with the *akedah*. Expectations are raised by the terms of the test: Will Abraham truly grasp the nettle of his terrible position and sacrifice the

life of the blessing itself to show his gratitude for that life and that blessing? His last-minute reprieve is a let-down. The story as we have it also poses a problem for anyone facing a situation of terrible, unavoidable sacrifice. As Jews have asked in terrible historical moments (the Crusades, the Holocaust), why is God demanding more of me than He demanded of Abraham? Where is my reprieve? The midrashic tradition of an Isaac who was not merely bound upon the altar but sacrificed responds to that gnawing demand for an ending that completes the awesome task and closes the terrible circle.

But set Shakespeare's play beside the *akedah*, with its own history of changes and reverses, and the multiply revised revisions double back upon themselves. There is the potential for tragedy here, and there is the potential for romance here, but we cannot choose; no ending can satisfy. Why should that be?

I read these texts not only as a critic, but as a father. And as a father, I cannot help but be attuned to the central paradox of parenthood. Children are the way in which we continue in the world beyond our lives, and so we want them to carry us with them, as fully and completely as possible. But to continue in the world, they must differentiate themselves, must become less us and more them. And the less us they are, the more we feel a promise unfulfilled: We will not continue beyond our lives.

God's first command to Abraham was *lech lecha*—take yourself out, exile yourself, differentiate yourself as radically as possible from the place and people that you came from. Then He promised him Isaac for continuity.

This boy would be the fulfillment of the covenant, the means by which God's name, and Abraham's, would be known throughout the world. And His last command was to surrender all this, and give it back, with Isaac's life.

Reading Cordelia as a revision of Isaac, the revision says: I must also go out; I must also differentiate myself. I cannot love you all, not even for the best of the kingdom, because the kingdom is worthless if I cannot inherit it, because there is no "I" to do so. And if I do not go out, there will be no "I," for to love you all is as much as to die.

If Cordelia's death is unbearable, it is because we want to believe in reconciliation on those terms. But if Isaac's survival is also unsatisfying, perhaps it is because we cannot believe in reconciliation after his binding, not because he would not love his father after such an experience, but because the binding was itself a kind of death, a complete submission. Lear's test, like Abraham's, cannot be satisfied any other way but by total love, which, it turns out, is death.

And so we turn, and turn again, revise and revise again, finding no ending satisfying. Because the point is, we do not want to end.

Noah Millman is a senior editor at the American Conservative, a columnist at The Week, and part of the team that made the film We've Forgotten More Than We Ever Knew (2016). He is currently working on a book about Shakespeare and the Hebrew Bible.

Before the Big Bang

BY DANIEL C. MATT

A Universe from Nothing: Why There is Something Rather than Nothing

by Lawrence M. Krauss
Free Press, 202 pp., \$24.99

Mr g: A Novel About the Creation

by Alan Lightman
Pantheon, 214 pp., \$24.95

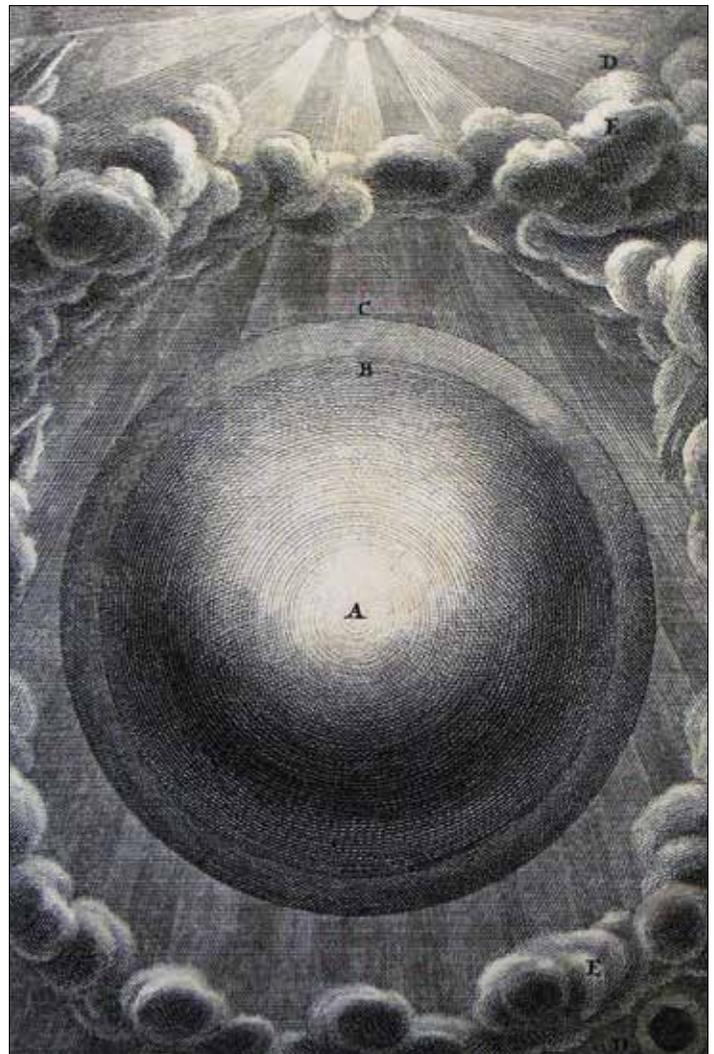
Can we explain how the universe began without invoking God? Certainly, answers the noted cosmologist Lawrence Krauss in *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing*, because, bizarre as it sounds, “nothingness” contains energy. Near the beginning of time (approximately 13.72 billion years ago), through a process of rapid expansion, this energy of empty space was converted into the energy of something—particles and radiation.

The modern scientific creation story goes like this: Within a second or so after the Big Bang, the building blocks of atoms emerged—protons, neutrons, and electrons. By the end of three minutes, protons and neutrons joined, forming the first atomic nuclei. But roughly 300,000 years passed before things cooled down enough for electrons to combine with these nuclei to create full-fledged atoms. Over the next billion years, giant clouds of such primordial atoms coalesced to form stars and galaxies. Deep within these stars, nuclear reactions gave birth to heavier elements such as carbon and iron. When the stars grew old, they exploded, spewing these elements into the universe. Eventually this matter was recycled into solar systems such as ours.

Krauss writes, “One of the most poetic facts I know about the universe is that essentially every atom in your body was once inside a star that exploded.” We, along with everything else, are literally made of stardust.

Taken together with the elegant laws that govern

the universe, such facts evoke a sense of wonder. As Krauss writes, “for Einstein, the existence of order in the universe provided a sense of such profound wonder that he felt a spiritual attachment to it, which he labeled . . . ‘God.’” Although Krauss knows that Einstein’s God was not the God of the Bible, he stills wants none of it: “‘something’ can arise out of nothing without the need for any divine guidance.” Science, not religion, provides the path to understanding, and a picture of reality that is



“Genesis” from the Bowyer Bible. (Bolton Museum, England.)

based on the work of tens of thousands of dedicated minds over the past century, building some of the most complex machines ever devised and developing some of the most beautiful and also the most complex ideas with which humanity has ever had to grapple. It is a picture whose creation emphasizes the best about what it is to be human—our ability to imagine the vast possibilities of existence and the adventurousness to bravely explore them—without passing the buck to a vague creative force or to a creator who is, by definition, forever unfathomable.

For Krauss, it's either/or—the clear-eyed, rational project of science or the outmoded, blinkered bias of religion. “Theology,” he writes, “has made no contribution to knowledge in the past five hundred years, since the dawn of science.”

The God that Krauss dismisses is “some external agency existing separate from space, time, and indeed from physical reality itself.” However, this is far from the only definition of God. Just as Krauss depends on a new conception of “nothing”—“empty space endowed with energy”—he might also expand his understanding of what “God” could mean, or has meant over the last five hundred (or one thousand) years of theology.

Among other conceptions of the divine are several that figure prominently in Kabbalah. One of these is *Ein Sof*, Infinity (literally, “there is no end”). *Ein Sof* is the ultimate divine reality, or (to borrow a phrase from the great Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart) the “God beyond God.” Where, you might ask, does *Ein Sof* appear in the Bible? Kabbalah acknowledges that it is never mentioned explicitly, but the author of the *Zohar* uncovers it in the very first words of Genesis.

Read hyperliterally, the first words of the Bible don't mean, “In the beginning God created . . .” but rather “With Beginning (identified with Wisdom), It created God.” The invisible subject “It” refers to *Ein Sof*, while “God” designates one of the emerging aspects (or *sefirot*) of divine being, specifically, in this case, the Divine Mother, *Binah* (Understanding). According to the kabbalists, the divine personality or being that emerges from *Ein Sof* is dynamic and continually unfolding, a God that includes both male and female elements whose union depends on virtuous human conduct.

One way to understand this radical rereading is as a critique of previous theology. Our notions of God cannot encompass the true nature of divinity; such imaginings are puny and secondary compared with the vastness of *Ein Sof*. At best we can imagine the God of the *sefirot*, where Infinity manifests, as the personal God.

“Theology,” Krauss writes, “has made no contribution to knowledge in the past five hundred years, since the dawn of science.”

Sometimes the kabbalists use a more radical name than *Ein Sof*. This is the name *Ayin*, Nothingness. We encounter this bizarre term among Christian mystics too: Johannes Scotus Eriugena calls God *Nihil*; Eckhart, *Nichts*; St. John of the Cross, *Nada*. To call God “Nothingness” does not mean that God does not exist. Rather, it conveys the idea that God is *no thing*. God animates all things and cannot be contained by any of them. God is the oneness that is no particular thing, “no thingness.”

This mystical nothingness is neither empty nor barren; it is fertile and overflowing, engendering the myriad forms of life. The mystics teach that the universe emanated from divine nothingness, a view that resonates surprisingly with Krauss' description of unstable nothingness, out of which something is constantly liable to spring—or with the vacuum state: “empty space endowed with energy.”

Yet, the mystical description of matter and energy is composed in a different key. Material existence emerges out of *Ayin*, the pool of divine energy. Ultimately, the world is not other than God, for this energy is concealed within all forms of being. Were it not concealed, there could be no individual existence; everything would dissolve back into oneness, or nothingness.

Leaving aside Krauss' anti-religious bias (the book contains a characteristically strident afterword from arch-polemicist Richard Dawkins), his book is a superb summary of the latest cosmological research and speculation, in which Krauss himself has played a significant role.

Alan Lightman's new novel *Mr g: A Novel About the Creation* begins with a casual bang: “As I remember,

I had just woken up from a nap when I decided to create the universe.”

A theoretical physicist by training, Lightman burst onto the literary scene nearly twenty years ago with *Einstein's Dreams*. In *Mr g*, he approaches Creation as a novelist imagining his way into the divine perspective. This God has a simple, folksy, lower-case personality, and Lightman's tone is correspondingly light, but before long he and *Mr g* are delving into profound questions of existence.

Mr g begins by issuing certain basic organizational principles, for instance the principle of causality: “Every event should be necessarily caused by a previous event.” But he ensures that humanity will retain a sense of wonder.

Even if a very intelligent creature within this universe could trace each event to a previous event, and trace that event to a previous event, and so on, back and back, the creature could not penetrate earlier than the First Event. The creature could never know where that First Event came from because it came from outside the universe, just as the creature could never experience the Void. The origin of the First Event would always remain unknowable, and the creature would be left wondering, and that wondering would leave a mystery. So my universe would have logic and rationality and organizational principles, but it would also have spirituality and mystery.

If you're writing a novel about God and Creation, how do you deal with the traditional account in the Bible? At times, Lightman fashions a kind of cosmological midrash. He riffs, for example, on the famous refrain in the opening lines of Genesis: *God saw . . . that it was good . . . There was evening and there was morning, one day.* But, being scientifically accurate, he expands the cosmic zone:

At a certain moment of time, a particular planet in the universe completed its first rotation, before any other planet, the end of its first day. This was the first day in the universe. I noted when this happened, and it was good (or at least satisfying), and this

was the end of the first day on that planet. Then, in another galaxy . . . another planet completed its first rotation, its first day, and I noted when this happened, and it was also good, and this was the end of the first day on that planet. Then . . . another, and another . . . all with different rates of rotation, completed their first days . . . There were billions and trillions of first days, all of them good.



First page of *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation), 15th century.
(© Gianni Dagli Orti/The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY.)

Mr g observes many planets, and sees bolts of electricity slamming energy into their atmospheres, forming complex new molecules. “I could hardly wait to see what would happen.” Eventually, self-replicating cells emerge, and then animate matter. “As was now apparent to me, animate matter was an inevitable consequence of a universe with matter and energy and a few initial parameters . . . If I wanted, I could destroy life. But I was only a spectator in its creation.”

Yet all is not blissful. Mr g has an antagonist—or a shadow side—called Belhor (a variant of Belial, the name of the Devil in some pseudepigraphic literature). This unsettling figure (“my dim shadow . . . my antipodal companion”), demonic yet wise, argues that Mr g should relinquish some of his omnipotence and allow intelligent beings to act on their own. “Let the creatures act without your foreknowledge.”

We along with everything else are literally made of stardust.

Mr g hesitates; he is concerned that they will suffer and come to harm. But this, it seems, is unavoidable. As Belhor explains to Mr g:

You have created a universe with minds. It is the nature of mortal minds to suffer, just as it is the nature of flesh to expire. The higher the intelligence, the greater the capacity for suffering.

There is no turning back, and humans must learn to live with chance, free will, and vulnerability. Yet, their intelligence also enables these feeble mortals to discover music, mathematics, and the laws of nature, to realize how they are connected to the galaxies and the stars.

They begin to speculate, too, about Mr g himself. “The creatures have made up their own ideas about me . . . They have religions.” Mr g understands that humans need to believe in something, to give meaning to their

lives, and he admires them for that. Since they cannot be immortal, “they want *something* to be immortal. They come and go so quickly. They want something to last.”

Mr g realizes that humans are just guessing, that they are missing the true reality of God, which is basically Infinity and the Void. But he concludes that “guessing is not so bad.” Humans “feel a mystery about it all,” which yields inspiration. He hopes to give them at least a glimpse of the Void, so that they may understand that their brief lives partake of an endless stream.

To some extent like the God of the kabbalists, Lightman’s Mr g is a God who evolves, who is enriched by his Creation. As galaxies and stars form, he feels “as if new things had been created within Me.” His imagination is amplified, and he discovers things he hadn’t known before. As independent creatures chart their own course, Mr g learns that not everything can be controlled. “Events spill out and slide and defeat attempts to explain . . . This I have learned from the new universe.” He learns, too, that he can take chances, that he can act, even with doubts.

Lawrence Krauss is sure that he can explain how the world came into existence. Alan Lightman dares to take a wild guess. If you go along for the ride, you won’t stop wondering for a long while afterward.

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Joseph Roth: Grieving for a Lost Empire

BY JOSEPH EPSTEIN

In *Ostend*, his book about the German and Austrian émigré literary group that gathered in the Belgian resort town after Hitler came to power, Volker Weidermann describes Joseph Roth, the most talented of these writers, looking “like a mournful seal that has wandered accidentally onto dry land.” Roth was small, thin yet pot-bellied, slightly hunched over, with a chosen nose, a bad liver, and missing lots of teeth. He began most mornings, like the serious alcoholic that he was, vomiting. Always in flight, one of the world’s permanent transients, Roth was a one-man diaspora: “Why do you people roam around so much in the world?” asks a Galician peasant in one of his novels. “The devil sends you from one place to another.”

Joseph Roth happens also to have been a marvelous writer, and he might have gone on to be a great one had he not died in 1939, in his 45th year. (He is of that uncharmed circle of writers—Chekhov, Orwell, F. Scott Fitzgerald—who died before they reached 50.) Not the least of Roth’s marvels was his astonishing productivity. In his short career between 1923 and 1939, he published, in German, no fewer than 15 novels, a batch of short stories, and, by his own reckoning in 1933, something on the order of 3,500 newspaper articles, most of them of the genre known as feuilleton, those short, literary, free-form, usually non-political essays that were once a staple in French and German newspapers. None of his writing that I have read, even the most ephemeral journalism, is without its felicitous touches, its arresting observations, its striking evidence of a first-class literary mind at work.

Roth’s work is bedizened with metaphor, laced with simile. In the short story “Strawberries” one finds: “The sun came out, as though back from holiday.” “Later they planted pansies on the lawn, beautiful big pansies with soft, clever faces.” Crows “were at hand like bad news, they were remote like gloomy premonitions.” In *The Emperor’s Tomb* (1938) there falls “a rough sleet, failed snow and wretched brother to hail.”

In the same novel a landlady appears “as broad in the beam as a tugboat.” In *The Radetzky March* expensive “wine flowed from the bottle with a tender purr.”

A strong taste for aphorism and risky generalization runs through all Roth’s work. In his early novel *Hotel Savoy* (1924) one finds: “All educated words are shameful. In ordinary speech you couldn’t say anything so unpleasant.” “Industry is God’s severest punishment.” “Women make their mistakes not out of carelessness or

He went on to the University of Vienna, where he dropped the Moses from his name and claimed his father was (variously) a Polish count, an Austrian railway official, an army officer, and a munitions manufacturer.

frivolity, but because they are very unhappy.” In *The Emperor’s Tomb* we learn that “honor is an anesthetic, and what it anaestheticized in us was death and foreboding” and “to conceal and deny frailty can only be heroic.” Joseph Roth was a writer, as was once said of Henry James, “assailed by the perceptions.”

At the same time, Roth’s eye for detail is unerring. In a story called “The Place I Want to Tell You About,” a character, setting out for Vienna, remembers “the umbrella with the ivory handle” before leaving. That ivory handle puts one in the room. A minor character in *The Radetzky March* is “the father of three children and the husband of a disappointed wife.” Another minor character in the same novel reveals “a powerful set of teeth, broad and yellow, a stout protective grill that filtered his speech.” A woman in the story “The Triumph of Beauty” has “a long but unexciting chin”; a man in the same story has a large square torso that makes him look like “a wardrobe wearing a blazer.” Travelling in steerage to America the family at the center of his novel *Job: The Story of a Simple Man* sleeps along with

20 or so others, “and from the movements each made on the hard beds, the beams trembled and the little yellow electric bulbs swung softly.” In his preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* and “The Secret Sharer,” Joseph Conrad wrote: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel, it is, before all, to make you see. That and no more—and it is everything.” Roth understood.

A second marvel is that Joseph Roth was able to get as much done as he did under the strained conditions in which he worked. The strain was financial. Roth was a money writer, less by temperament than by necessity. A spendthrift always hovering on personal pauperdom, he had the additional heavy expense of a wife who fairly early in



Joseph Roth and his wife, Friederike, in the south of France, 1925. (Courtesy of the Leo Baeck Institute.)

his marriage had to be placed in various sanatoria for schizophrenia. (In 1940, Friederike Roth was removed from a Viennese hospital and murdered under the Nazis’ euthanasia program.) Much in Roth’s letters—published recently in English as *Joseph Roth: A Life in Letters*—is given over to pressing publishers and newspaper editors for the payment of advances or for raising his fees, complaints about his barely scraping by, and the expressions of guilt because of his need to

borrow from friends, chief among them the commercially much more successful Stefan Zweig, who was his dearest friend and practically his patron.

Many of Joseph Roth’s novels are of modest length, some barely beyond that of the standard novella. (His final work, *The Legend of the Holy Drinker*, published in 1939, runs to 49 pages.) The four of these novels I find most accomplished are *Right and Left* (1929), *Job: The Story of a Simple Man* (1930), *The Emperor’s Tomb* (1938), and, the lengthiest and most fully realized, *The Radetzky March* (1932). An account of life under and a tribute to the Dual Monarchy, as the Austro-Habsburg dynasty was also known, *The Radetzky March* is one of those extraordinary works of fiction that, like Lampedusa’s *The Leopard*, cannot be anticipated by what

has gone before in its author’s oeuvre. (Michael Hofmann, Roth’s ablest translator and most penetrating critic, writes of “the accelerated development otherwise known as genius.”) The novel’s title derives from Johann Strauss’s famous march and is one of those books that when two people meet who discover they have both read it sends a pleasing shock of recognition between them, followed by the bond of mutual admiration for an extraordinary work of literary art.

The range and variety of Roth’s fiction are impressive. That fellow in Eliot’s great poem might have done the police in different voices, but Roth in his fiction could do poor shtetl Jews and the Emperor Franz Joseph, Polish nobles and Ru-

thenian peasants, down-and-outs and successful entrepreneurs, Romanians, Czechs, Poles, Germans, Cossacks—in short, the entire Austro-Habsburg Empire, and all in perfect pitch.

Moses Joseph Roth was born in 1894 in Brody, a Galician town of roughly 18,000 people, two-thirds of whom were Jewish, on the border between Poland and Ukraine, 54 miles north-east of Lemberg (now called Lviv). He never knew his father, who died in

a mental asylum. In 1913 he earned a scholarship to the University of Lemberg, and after a year there went on to the University of Vienna, where he dropped the Moses from his name and claimed his father was (variously) a Polish count, an Austrian railway official, an army officer, and a munitions manufacturer; at one point he took briefly to wearing a monocle; later he would claim to have been an officer, not the enlisted man that he was in the First World War. All this in the attempt to shed the identity of the *Ostjude*, then held in much contempt in Vienna. This outsider, outlander even, became the great chronicler, and eventually the prime mourner, for the Dual Monarchy, later in life declaring himself a monarchist. On his gravestone in a cemetery outside Paris the words “Écrivain Autrichien” are engraved.

Of the cards dealt at birth, not the least significant is that of the time into which one was born. Here Roth drew a poor card. He came into his majority with the onset of the Russian Revolution and the First World War—“world,” as a character in *The Emperor’s Tomb* says, “because of it, we lost a whole world”—and left it as Hitler was gearing up the machinery for his Final Solution. (Communism, he noted in a letter to Zweig, “spawned Fascism and Nazism and hatred for intellectual freedom.”) Meanwhile, the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the Treaty of Versailles finished off the Dual Monarchy, reducing what was once a sprawling empire to a shriveled Austrian Republic. The multitudinous fatherland Roth knew as a young man evaporated in the fog of nationalism. In his splendid story “The Bust of the Emperor,” Roth quotes the Austrian playwright Grillparzer on the fate of the Dual Monarchy: “From humanity via nationality to bestiality.”

What Roth valued in the Austro-Habsburg Empire was the fluidity it allowed its subjects, who could travel from country to country without the aid of passports or papers, and its discouragement of nationalism, which worked against the nationless Jewish people. “I love Austria,” he wrote in 1933. “I view it as cowardice not to use this moment to say the Habsburgs must return.” In 1935 he wrote to assure Stefan Zweig that “the Habsburgs will return . . . Austria will be a monarchy.” Before the approaching Anschluss of 1938 he even attempted, through the offices of Kurt Schuschnigg, the chancellor of the Federal State of Austria, to restore the monarchy by installing Otto von



Left: Coat of arms of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, 1915–1917. (Acceptphoto/Alamy.) Right: Emperor Franz Joseph I. (Ivy Close Images/Alamy.)

Habsburg, heir of the Emperor Franz Joseph, on the empty throne.

Not that there wasn’t anti-Semitism, that endemic disease, under the Dual Monarchy. Nor was it absent in France, where, after Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, Roth lived out his last years, but, as he wrote in a strange little book called *The Wandering Jews* (1927), there “it is not one hundred proof. Eastern Jews, accustomed to a far stronger, cruder,

more brutal anti-Semitism, are perfectly happy with the French version of it.” Never other than unpredictable, Roth, that most cosmopolitan of Jews, valued the shtetl Jews of Eastern Europe above all. He valued their Jewish authenticity and felt that those Jews who had taken up the assimilated life in Germany and elsewhere and pretended to a patriotism that ultimately wasn’t returned to them, “those rich Jews,” as he wrote in *Right and Left*, “the ones who want more than any-

We are, he held, chameleons all, changing character with the opportunities life provides us: “The more opportunities life gave us, the more beings it revealed in us.”

thing else to be native Berliners” and who “go on celebrating their holiest festivals in a kind of shamefaced secrecy, but Christmas publicly, and for all to see,” these were the Jews most deceived and hence most to be pitied.

The real subject at the heart of *The Wandering Jews* is the distinctiveness of Jews. “Of all the world’s poor, the poor Jew,” Roth writes, “is surely the most conservative . . . he *refuses* to be a proletarian.” The difference between the Russian and the Jewish peasant is that “the Russian is a peasant first and a Russian second; the Jew is Jew first and then peasant.” Roth underscores the intellectual cast of the Jews. “They are a people that has had no illiterates for nearly two thousand years now.” Not wishing to fight other people’s wars, “the Eastern Jews were the most heroic of pacifists. They were martyrs for pacifism. They chose crippledom”—a reference, this, to the Jews who inflicted self-mutilations to avoid fighting in the army of the tsar, especially since only in Russia was anti-Semitism, more than the usual free-floating version, “a pillar of government.”

Zionism was the best answer to the Jewish question for Roth, “for it is surely better to be a nation than to be mistreated by one.” The Jews “are forced to be a ‘nation’ by the nationalism of the others,” and “if one must be patriotic, then at least let it be for a country of one’s own.” Even though “the American cousin is the last hope of every Eastern Jewish family,” it is only the presence of blacks that “insure[s] the Jews won’t have the

lowest status in America.” Whether Roth would have made aliyah had he lived longer cannot be known—toward the end of his life he called himself a Catholic—but there is little doubt that he yearned for an end to “the flight out of Egypt, which has been in progress now for thousands of years.”

Intensely Jewish though he was, apart from *Job: The Story of a Simple Man*, his novel with a shtetl setting, Jews tend to figure only peripherally in Roth’s fiction. Until the small commercial success of *Job*, Roth was in fact better known for his journalism. His early fiction is always brilliant but emotionally spare. Roth wrote against the grain of the ascending modernism of his day. He thought little of James Joyce. “No Gide! No Proust! Nor anything of the sort,” he wrote to a journalist and novelist named Hans Natonek. He criticized Natonek’s penchant for abstraction. “A novel is not the place for *abstractions*. Leave that to Thomas Mann.” In his novel *Right and Left*, the criterion he sets for a wealthy character’s buying art is “that a picture should repel his senses and intelligence. Only then could he be sure of having bought a valuable modern work.”

In *Right and Left*, Roth lays out the fictional program under which he worked, holding foremost that “passions and beliefs are tangled in the hearts and minds of men, and there is no such thing as psychological consistency.” Change interested him more than consistency. We are, he held, chameleons all, changing character with the opportunities life provides us: “The more opportunities life gave us, the more beings it revealed in us. A man might die because he hadn’t experienced anything, and had been just one person all his life.” Roth the novelist believed that in the drive through life none of us is really at the wheel.

“No interest in day-to-day politics,” Roth wrote to Natonek. “They distort. They distort the human.” Elsewhere he referred to “the hollow pathos of revolutionaries.” In a brilliant passage in “The Bust of the Emperor,” he writes that “the inclinations and disinclinations of the people are grounded in reality.” Reality is quotidian life. “After they have read the newspapers, listened to the speeches, elected the representatives, and discussed the news with their friends, the good peasants, craftsmen, and traders—and in the cities the workers—go back to their homes and workshops. And their misery or happiness is what awaits them there: sick or healthy

children, quarrelsome or agreeable wives, prompt or dilatory customers, pressing or easy-going creditors, a good or bad supper, a clean or squalid bed.”

The characters in Roth’s own fiction may be sentient but are rarely sapient. Never heroic, they are more acted upon than acting. Consider the opening paragraph of *Job: The Story of a Simple Man*:

Many years ago there lived in Zuchnow a man named Mendel Singer. He was pious, God-fearing and ordinary, an entirely everyday Jew. He practiced the modest profession of a teacher. In his house, which consisted of only a roomy kitchen, he imparted to children knowledge of the Bible. He taught with genuine enthusiasm but not notable success. Hundreds of thousands before him had lived and taught as he did.

Like the biblical Job, Mendel Singer’s essential decency is repaid with relentless sorrow. His two sons are unruly, and one goes off eagerly to join the tsar’s army; he has a daughter who is arranging trysts with Cossacks and who will later, when the family emigrates to America, descend into insanity; a wife whose regard for him is dwindling and who will die an early death; and, worst of all, a last-born son, Menuchim, deformed in figure and barely able to speak. Mendel Singer did nothing to deserve any of this, but must somehow cope with all of it. “All these years I have loved God,” Mendel thinks, “and He has hated me.”

The only flaw in Roth’s *Job* is the uplifting reversal of fortune on which the novel ends. In the realm of plot, the art of fiction consists in making the unpredictable plausible. In this one novel of Roth’s, alas, the predictable seems implausible. Forgive my blasphemy, but I have never been much convinced by the ending of the biblical version of Job either. Yet, as with the biblical story, so with Roth’s novel, the (relatively) happy ending merely soils but does not spoil the story.

Roth’s next book, *The Radetzky March*, embodies his central ideas about the human condition: that we are at the whim of happenstance, our fate despite what more romantic novelists might hold not finally in our own hands, with ours not to reason why but to live out our days with what dignity we might manage and then die.

What is surprising is the drama that such dark notions of character can evoke in Joseph Roth’s skillful hands. *The Radetzky March* is a family chronicle, recording three generations of a Slovenian peasant family, the Trottas, whose rise begins with a son, serving in the Austro-Hungarian army, who one day, almost as much by accident as through bravery, takes a bullet intended for the emperor. He is immediately raised in rank, known in the textbooks as “the Hero of Solferino,” and his family, henceforth allowed to call itself the von Trottas, ennobled. The novel centers on the lives of the son and grandson of the Hero of Solferino.

The son, though wishing for a military career like his father, instead, at his father’s order, becomes a midlevel bureaucrat, serving out his life as a district commissioner in Moravia. Dutiful, punctilious, a man with no vices apart from the want of imagination, District Commissioner von Trotta not only thinks of himself as the son of the Hero of Solferino, but raises his son in that tradition. “You are the grandson of the Hero of Solferino,” he tells him. “So long as you bear that in mind nothing will go wrong.” But everything does. The boy, Carl Joseph, is unfit for the cavalry, for the military, for life generally. He dies a useless death in the First World War fighting for a lost cause that will mark the end of the very world in which he was brought up to believe.

One of the signs of mastery in a novelist is his skill at making his subsidiary characters quite as rich and fascinating as his main characters. In *The Radetzky March*, the Jewish Army surgeon Max Demant and Count Chojnicki are two such characters. Count Chojnicki is “forty years old but of no discernible age.” Nor is he of a discernible country, for, as Roth writes in another place, “he was a man beyond nationality and therefore an aristocrat in the true sense.” Everything Chojnicki says in the novel is of interest, and it is he, the count, who predicts the fall of the Austro-Habsburg Empire well in advance of the actual event: “This empire’s had it. As soon as the emperor says good night, we’ll break up into a hundred pieces.”

The emperor, Franz Joseph himself, shows up in the pages of *The Radetzky March*, once to inspect Carl Joseph’s battalion, late in the novel to meet with Carl Joseph’s father, the district commissioner. The em-

peror is also given a chapter to himself, a brilliant chapter, in which he gauges his own position as a leader thought near to a god even as his mental powers are slipping. Roth assigns the emperor, while inspecting the troops, “a crystalline drop that appeared at the end of his nose” and “finally fell into the thick silver mustache, and there disappeared from view,” thus in a simple detail rendering him human. (Roth’s portrait of Franz Joseph is reminiscent of Tolstoy’s of Napoleon in *War and Peace* and Solzhenitsyn’s of Stalin in *The First Circle*.) Herr von Trotta and the emperor die on the same day, and “the vultures were already circling above the Habsburg double eagle, its fraternal foes.”

In Michael Hofmann’s translator’s introduction,

he refers, percipiently, to *The Radetzky March* as a work that “seems to have been done in oils.” What gives the novel that done-in-oil aspect is its weight, its seriousness, ultimately its gravity. No better introduction, for the student of literature or of history, is available for an understanding of the Austro-Habsburg Empire than this splendid novel, written by a small Galician Jew, who came of age in its shadow, grieved over its demise, and owes to it his permanent place in the august, millennia-long enterprise known with a capital L as Literature.

Joseph Epstein’s latest books are Wind Sprints: Shorter Essays and The Ideal of Culture: Essays (both from Axios Press).

Cynthia Ozick: Or, Immortality

BY DARA HORN

Critics, Monsters, Fanatics, & Other Literary Essays

by Cynthia Ozick

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 224 pp., \$25

Why does Cynthia Ozick, at 88 an undisputed giant of American letters, still seem obsessed with fame?

Like nearly everyone else who appreciates Cynthia Ozick's brand of genius—and I don't mean "brand" in the 21st-century sense, but rather the brand plucked from the fire, searing one's lips into prophecy (the distinction between the two neatly encapsulates Ozick's chief artistic fascinations)—I'm not the type of person who is a fan of anything at all. As something close to Ozick's ideal reader, I am skeptical of the entire concept of fandom, religiously suspicious of the kind of artistic seduction that would make one uncritical of anything created by someone who isn't God. But I am nevertheless a fan of Ozick's, in the truly fanatical sense. I have read every word she's ever published, taught her fiction and essays at various universities, reviewed her books for numerous publications (occasionally even the same book twice), written her fan letters and then swooned over the succinct handwritten replies in which she graciously gave me a sentence more than the time of day, and even based my own work as a novelist on her concept of American Jewish literature as a liturgical or midrashic enterprise (a stance she has since rejected, though too late for me). As a young reader I was astonished by what she apparently invented: fiction in English that dealt profoundly not with Judaism as an "identity," but with the actual content of Jewish thought, at a time when almost no one, and certainly no one that talented, was quite bothering to try.

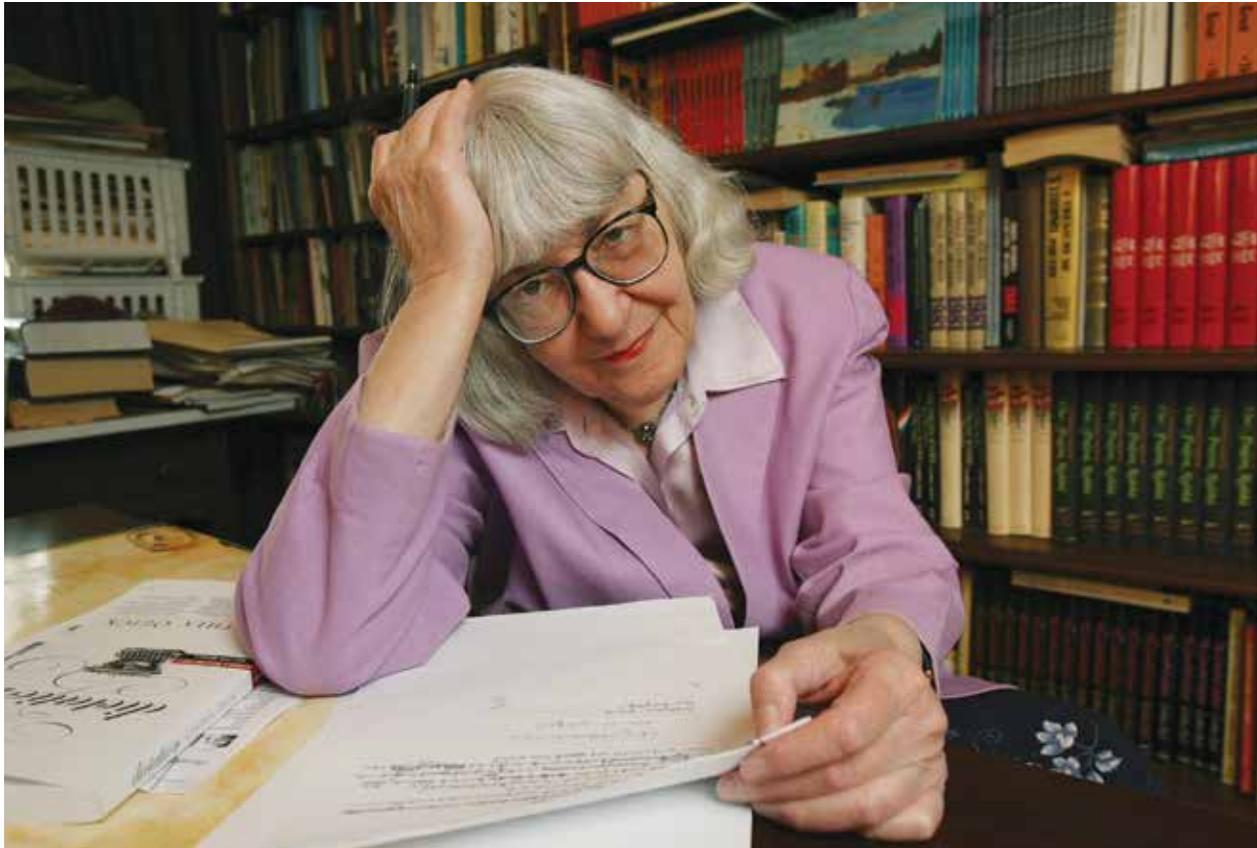
Today I remain utterly seduced by the dazzling architecture of her stories, the distilled clarity of her sentences, and the urgency of her arguments. But my

love for her is haunted by one point of strange discomfort: her obsession with fame, which in one form or another suffuses nearly everything she writes. (In this collection she loudly clarifies that she really means "recognition," since "Fame is fickle"—but we knew that. Fine, then: high-end, enduring fame.) Her early masterpiece, "Envy: Or, Yiddish in America," is a novella-à-clef about Isaac Bashevis Singer's cheap glamour overshadowing better-yet-untranslated writers; her novella

Ozick is as marvelously demanding, harrumphing, and uncompromising as she has always been.

"Usurpation (Other People's Stories)" involves, among much else, a fable about a magic crown that grants its wearer eternal literary fame (spoiler: this isn't a good thing); *The Messiah of Stockholm* is about the forgotten genius Bruno Schulz and failed writers and charlatans vying to steal his legacy; *Heir to the Glimmering World* includes a scholar and a scientist both robbed of their greatest discoveries, forced to become wards of a famous-yet-thoughtless millionaire . . . I could go on, but instead I will simply point out what Ozick's entire oeuvre brilliantly enacts: Despite the underlying assumption of Western civilization that we owe our world to the genius of Great Men (yes, men) whose names still resonate today, the truth is that merit and credit are only rarely linked. This sad truth is genuinely fascinating, because it unearths our most buried questions about the purpose of living as mortals in a world that outlasts us. But it also can become a perverse obsession for creative artists of every stature, because, as conventional wisdom and the degrading experience of reading Amazon reviews suggests, nothing good comes of it. Or does it?

The thought that this obsession with fame (or "recognition") would still affect someone as titanically accomplished as Ozick is, on its surface, dismaying in the ex-



Cynthia Ozick at home, New Rochelle, New York, April 2008. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens.)

treme. But Ozick's interest in this subject has always been civilizational rather than personal. And as her newest book, *Critics, Monsters, Fanatics, & Other Literary Essays*, makes clear, Ozick's tendency to run a live wire of envy through her work doesn't play the same role now as it did earlier in her career. Forty years ago, Ozick's writing—both her fiction and her essays—was deeply Jewish, less because of its subject matter (though yes, that too) than because of its loud claim that art itself was a form of idolatry and fame even more so. This prizefight between imagination and obligation—once labeled by Matthew Arnold as Hellenism and Hebraism—was a fight worth having in 20th-century American culture, where art and literature really did occupy a quasi-sacred public space, a time, as Ozick recalls, “when the publication of a serious literary novel was an exuberant communal event.” But through her career-long evolution as an artist and the simultaneous coarsening of American intellectual life (about which more, shortly), Ozick's fame-obsession has shifted, taking root once

more in a Judaic paradigm, but a different one: the Jewish historical consciousness that gives the lie to American culture's vain worship of the new.

In this latest essay collection, Ozick is as marvelously demanding, harrumphing, and uncompromising as she has always been; her curmudgeonly persona is by now so familiar that one imagines that she has been 88 for her entire life. But this collection, mostly composed of previously published essays that together take on an almost narrative trajectory, nonetheless feels different. Gone is the bitter bite of envy that once flavored her every public word, whether on behalf of her characters, the wronged or underappreciated authors she ingeniously lauded, or rarely (in the occasional autobiographical essay or interview) herself. In its place is a wonderment at the ravages of time, but also an awestruck awareness of what one gains when one is doubly blessed with both a long career and that profound historical consciousness: a rare and vivid vision of what lasts, and why.

“One of the several advantages of living long,” Ozick

discloses, “is the chance to witness the trajectory of other lives, especially literary lives; to observe the whole, as a biographer might; or even, now and then, to reflect on fame with the dispassion of the biblical Koheleth, for whom all eminences are finally diminished.” Lest we think she is being metaphoric, in an essay aptly titled “The Lastingness of Saul Bellow,” Ozick fires off a sustained and gleeful volley at what amounts to the last 60 years of American letters, punishing and brilliant:

Consider: who at this hour (apart from some professorial specialist currying his “field”) is reading Mary McCarthy, James T. Farrell, John Berryman, Allan Bloom, Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Edmund Wilson, Anne Sexton, Alice Adams, Robert Lowell, Grace Paley, Owen Barfield, Stanley Elkin, Robert Penn Warren, Norman Mailer, Leslie Fiedler, R.P. Blackmur, Paul Goodman, Susan Sontag, Lillian Hellman, John Crowe Ransom, Stephen Spender, Daniel Fuchs, Hugh Kenner, Seymour Krim, J.F. Powers, Allen Ginsberg, Philip Rahv, Jack Richardson, John Auerbach, Harvey Swados—or Trilling himself?

These names, Ozick explains, are not merely dead writers whose stars have faded. They are all people with whom Saul Bellow exchanged letters, the point being that only Bellow himself remains immortal.

Ozick goes on to analyze, or try to, why Bellow’s work endures. She credits not only his sentences, but something much larger: his context, his wrestling with his own century, and that “He was serious in invoking whatever particle of eternity he meant by soul, that old, old inkling he was fearless in calling up from contemporary disgrace.” Yet contemporary disgrace, as Ozick slyly intends, is what haunts the reader here: not Bellow, but that goddamn list. At less than half Ozick’s age, and in a “field” that makes me more familiar with these names than most, I read that list with a faint feeling of awe, as though beholding the ruined Ozymandias. And that list is merely the most sustained version of Ozick’s invocation of oblivion; it reappears in abridged form as a kind of Greek chorus throughout this book. “As for poor befuddled mystical Jack Kerouac and declamatory fiddle-strumming mystical Allen Ginsberg [him again], both are diminished to Documents of an Era: the stale turf of social historians.” Tillie Olsen, renowned for her 1960s feminist stories, was

“rewarded afterward with close to five decades of personal freedom, affectionate celebrity, and public honors . . . and never again sat down to write anew. She lived to ninety-four.” Of Edmund Wilson (him again), Ozick mourns, in poignant italics, “he is not read.” Nor, Ozick reminds us, are canonical authors spared this curse: “[A]part from Orwell specialists, who now reads *The Road to Wigan Pier*?” There is, of course, a fair retort to this litany: Works need not be read in perpetuity to have branded the worlds of their readers, or for the works that follow them to be indebted to their fleeting presence—and in any case immortality is a fool’s errand. Allegra Goodman, one of the select contemporary novelists Ozick has publicly praised, once enacted this argument in an imagined dialogue:

“Well,” your inner critic counters gloomily, “just remember that when you’re gone, your books will suffer the same fate as all the rest. They’ll be relics at best. More likely, they’ll just languish in obscurity.” To which I have to say: So what? I won’t be around to care.

Yet Ozick is very much around to care, and she will have none of this. She is singularly, almost maniacally, devoted to literature, and she is not merely merciless but prophetically searing in her surprising diagnosis of what ails literature today. In the gauntlet-strewn essay that opens the volume, “The Boys in the Alley, the Disappearing Readers, and the Novel’s Ghostly Twin,” she begins with Jonathan Franzen’s whine about how few people read “serious” literature and the experimental novelist Ben Marcus’s whine about how few people read “difficult” literature before she points out the stupidity of it all. The real problem is that, as she puts it, “*the readers are going away*.” A less astute critic (that is, nearly everyone else) would blame TV and the internet and call it a day. Instead, she offers this:

The real trouble lies not in what is happening, but in what is not happening. What is not happening is literary criticism . . . Novels, however they may manifest themselves, will never be lacking. What is missing is a powerfully persuasive, and pervasive, intuition for how they are connected, what they portend in the aggregate, how they comprise and color an era.

At first, this seems impossible. Can a lack of criticism really be the problem in an age like ours, when everyone's opinions are endlessly and aggressively "shared"? But wait: Ozick is already on the warpath. She has the expected snobbish words for book club boosters, crowd-pleasing publishers, and Amazon reviewers, several of whom have taken to her book's Amazon page in their own surprisingly thoughtful defense. But then she delineates what truly distinguishes criticism from mere reviews: "[T]he critic must summon what the reviewer cannot: horizonless freedoms, multiple histories, multiple libraries, multiple metaphysics and intuitions." This, we now see, is not scolding. It is context, a reminder that "no novel is an island," which would give thoughtful people the reasons they need to read them, to join the civilizational continuum of the imagination which still exists and always has, but is only apparent when "criticism has taught us how to see it." Or as Ozick succinctly puts it in the volume's preface: "Without the critics, incoherence."

It is a relief, then, that this volume, though strewn with ruins, is also overflowing with living, breathing critics whom Ozick ushers into her own contemporary pantheon, with occasional asterisks. Among them are Harold Bloom, Leon Wieseltier, Adam Kirsch, Daniel Mendelsohn, and James Wood—along with the Hebrew scholars Robert Alter and Alan Mintz, in a delirious essay presenting Mintz's work on American Hebrew poets, a tiny coterie of readerless fanatics (one of whom was Ozick's uncle). In critiquing the critics, as in an essay about her longtime antagonist Harold Bloom, she even dares to ask whether a critic's work can itself be inspired rhapsodically—or, if you will, Hellenically rather than Hebraically. (Spoiler: No.)

But in most of this volume the chief operating critic is Ozick herself, applying her uncompromising standards to the likes of Auden, Kafka, and others. These essays are sheer intellectual thrill rides. They have narrative arcs, settings (Kafka's insurance office, Trilling and Whittaker Chambers at Columbia College, Auden at the 92nd Street Y), and best of all, characters—not merely the authors, but also the biographers and critics who shape our visions of these authors, along with, occasionally, a younger and more awestruck Ozick herself. In these, she is pervasive, and persuasive, in the credo that has emerged throughout her career: against idolatry, yes, but also in favor of the

particular, context, rootedness, the profound archaeological wells from which no writer can be removed without removing his or her greatest powers.

For Ozick herself, that archaeological well is not only Anglo-American literature, but the far deeper well of Judaism. While she doesn't quite spell it out here, Ozick's idea of criticism being essential to literature is itself a claim with its oldest roots in Torah study. In a passage in Deuteronomy that directly denies the rhapsodic or incantatory power of scripture, Moses informs the Israelites that the Torah "is not in heaven...neither is it beyond the sea...No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart." The rabbis later understood this passage to mean that interpreting Torah was itself an indispensable component of Torah, that God—or a Hellenic-style muse—is not going to show up and provide an answer to the text's many questions. Therefore, careful readers are obligated to not merely read, but consider, compare, situate, interpret. In other words: without the critics, incoherence.

And this brings us to the central Jewish idea that drives this book, along with so much else Cynthia Ozick has given us, which at last explains her enduring fascination with fame: Without critical reading, no eternal life. The blessings recited at public Torah readings announce that the book itself, rather than some mystical promise, is "eternal life planted in our midst," the Tree of Life that had been walled off in Eden returned to us—not God, a prophet or an artist, but a book. As Ozick admits here in an essay that is less argument than dream, "[W]riters are hidden beings. You have never met one." The fact that Ozick's reputation is likely to outlast most of those names on her own long lists of the dead is, in the end, beside the point. What Ozick has sought all along, it turns out—not for herself but for literature, not for writers but for readers—is not fame, not "recognition," not even really "lastingness," but an assurance of ongoing purpose and meaning, something perhaps better described as redemption. In the grand arc of her career, itself a gift to every writer and reader fortunate enough to encounter her endlessly demanding words, she has achieved it.

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Live Wire

BY ABRAHAM SOCHER

The Life of Saul Bellow: To Fame and Fortune, 1915–1964

by Zachary Leader
Knopf, 832 pp., \$40

There Is Simply Too Much to Think About: Collected Nonfiction

by Saul Bellow, edited by Benjamin Taylor
Viking, 544 pp., \$35

In his brilliant novella *The Ghost Writer*, Philip Roth sends his fictional alter ego, a young Nathan Zuckerman, on a pilgrimage to discuss the life and art of fiction with the eminent writer E.I. Lonoff, a character clearly modeled on Bernard Malamud (with a bit of Henry Roth thrown in). Eventually they come to their greatest contemporary. “The disease of his life,” Lonoff says, “makes Abravanel fly.”

I admire what he puts his nervous system through. I admire his passion for the front-row seat. Beautiful wives, beautiful mistresses, alimony the size of the national debt, polar expeditions, war-front reportage, famous friends, famous enemies, breakdowns, public lectures, five-hundred-page novels every third year, and still, as you said before, time and energy left for all that self-absorption. The gigantic types in the books *have* to be that big to give him something to think about to rival himself. Like him? No. But, impressed, oh yes. Absolutely. It's no picnic up there in the egosphere. I don't know when the man sleeps, or if he has ever slept, aside from those few minutes when he had that drink with me.

Abravanel is even more clearly Saul Bellow (with, maybe, just a bit of Norman Mailer thrown in), who, according to Roth's recent chronicler Claudia Roth

Pierpont, was not amused.

That his own fiction drew so heavily on his famously full and messy life has been both an obstacle and a blessing for Bellow's biographers. On the one hand, it is hard to wring new insight from situations and events that Bellow described and thought through so deeply, repeatedly, and vividly in his fiction. On the other, it is easier to correlate the life and the art when the novelist in question approaches fiction as “the higher autobiography.”

That Bellow's own fiction drew so heavily on his famously full and messy life has been both an obstacle and a blessing for his biographers.

Bellow's first would-be biographer was Mark Harris, a novelist and acquaintance who approached Bellow in the mid-1960s and self-consciously imagined himself playing Boswell to Bellow's Johnson. Bellow ducked and weaved for 15 or so years until Harris—who is now remembered mostly for his baseball novel *Bang the Drum Slowly*—finally published *Saul Bellow, Drumlin Woodchuck*. It's an odd, charming memoir of his failures to pin down the elusive (and uncharmed) great author. The title is taken from Frost's famous poem in which the drumlin woodchuck's “...own strategic retreat/Is where two rocks almost meet,/And still more secure and snug,/A two-door burrow I dug.” A decade later, Ruth Miller, who had been among Bellow's first students in 1938 and a friend ever since, tried to corner him with a study called *Saul Bellow: A Biography of the Imagination*. It wasn't a great book; it was alternately chatty and ponderous, unsure whether it was a testimonial or a critical study, but it did hint at how much Bellow had drawn from his life for his fiction. They never spoke again.

Finally, in the 1990s, James Atlas was given full access to Bellow, his surviving family, friends, and papers

(also his former friends, ex-wives, and enemies). Atlas succeeded in pinning Bellow down, and—to switch animals and famous poems (one Bellow once parodied in Yiddish, in fact)—when the novelist was pinned and wriggling on the wall Atlas alternated between shrewd insight and a competitive, sneering condescension. (Three examples of Atlas' tone from early, middle, and late in the biography, taken almost at random: "Bellow's



Bellow, newly elected member of the Department of Literature of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, February 1958. (Photo by Victoria Lidov, © Bettmann/CORBIS.)

onerous duties as a parent didn't slow him down on the literary front," "it is a novel of ideas to put it in the kindest light," and, "After four marriages, Bellow was forced to acknowledge his shortcomings as a husband, but he continued to cast himself in the role of victim.") Most recently and poignantly Bellow's first son Greg has published a memoir, *Saul Bellow's Heart*, which, while less than subtle in its literary readings, is nonetheless forceful in registering the human costs of his father's art.

Bellow's new biographer Zachary Leader is both authorized and judicious. His excellent biography is being published on the occasion of what would have been

Bellow's 100th birthday—he made it to 89—as is a new collection of his essays, lectures and reviews, *There Is Simply Too Much to Think About*, edited by Benjamin Taylor. The two books complement each other nicely and both should push the reader back to the great fiction, which is in the end their justification. (Taylor also put out a terrific collection of Bellow's letters a few years ago, reviewed in these pages by Steven J. Zipperstein.)

Although Atlas did the initial spadework and interviewed many people who have since died, Leader has clearly done new and prodigious work in reconstructing and thinking through the details of a by-now familiar but still fascinating life, or rather the first half of it. Whereas Atlas took some 600 pages to tell almost the whole story (his *Bellow: A Biography* was published in 2000, five years before Bellow died), Leader takes almost 800 to get Bellow to the height of "fame and fortune," after the publication of *Herzog* at the age of 49 in 1964. A second volume will carry Bellow through (to stop just at the highlights) a Broadway flop, a bitter divorce and decade-long alimony battle, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, co-editorship of several small literary magazines, journalism from Tel Aviv and Sinai in the midst of the Six-Day War, *Humboldt's Gift*, the Nobel Prize, marriage to a glamorous Rumanian mathematician, then another bitter divorce, and his brilliant late-life renaissance culminating in *Ravelstein*, his novel about—an imprecise but unavoidable preposition with Bellow—his friend and University of Chicago colleague Allan Bloom. And, of course, his final, and finally happy, marriage to Bloom's student Janis Freedman Bellow. It is hard not to be, like Roth's Lonoff, overwhelmed just thinking about the roiling turmoil and gigantic achievements of such a life.

Saul Bellow was born in 1915, in Lachine, Quebec, just outside of Montreal, but Leader begins instead with his father Abraham and the family's life in Russia. Abraham Belo (or Belous) was a volatile man, who had been briefly prosperous in Saint Petersburg before he was arrested for living there under false papers. In fact, the prosperity may have come from dealing in such papers (someone named "Belousov" was convicted of doing so around the same time, at any rate). Turn-of-the-century Russia is not Leader's scholarly beat, but he is rightly more interested in the Russia of family lore that eventually made it into Bellow's fiction than that of history. As Bellow once remarked "the

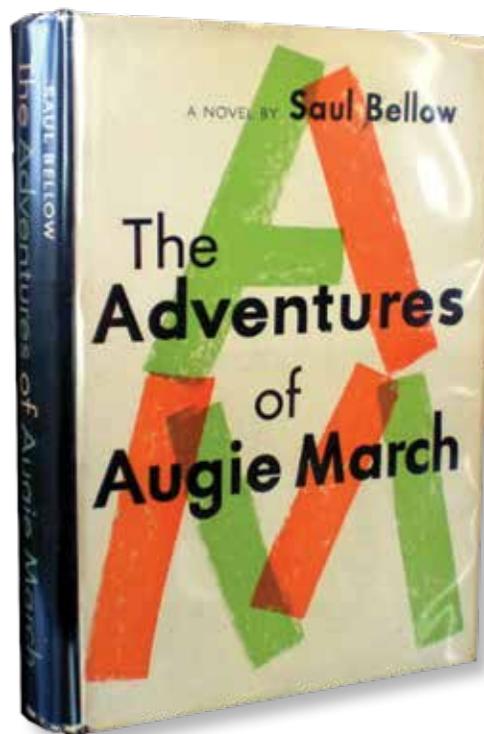
retrospective was strong in me because of my parents,” so Leader moves swiftly from the Russia of Abraham Belo’s life to the old country that shadows his son’s fiction. Soon we are hearing of Herzog’s parents, who briefly lived like Bellow’s in a dacha in the old country, and of Pa Lurie in Bellow’s unpublished manuscript from the 1950s “Memoirs of a Bootlegger’s Son,” who was violent, “nervous like a fox,” and escaped from “Pobedonosteyev’s police” in Saint Petersburg, before eventually ending up in Chicago.

Bellow’s mother died when he was in high school. It hit him hard, and his relationship with his father was never easy. Although Bellow was a tough guy in print, Bellow’s father was a real tough guy, an operator who ended up running Chicago coal yards with his two older sons, and who could not understand his youngest or credit his success, even when it finally came. Of course things were not quite that simple; his parents had read Tolstoy and the other great Russian novelists (Dostoevsky was to become Bellow’s favorite), and, in an essay “On Jewish Storytelling,” included in *There Is Simply Too Much to Think About*, Bellow credited him with his sense of narrative, or rather with his sense that everything was a story. “My father would say, whenever I asked him to explain any matter, ‘The thing is like this: There was a man who lived . . .’ [. . .] ‘There once was a widow with a son . . .’ ‘A teamster was driving on a lonely road . . .’” In *Seize the Day*, a beautiful novella published the year after Bellow’s father had died, the protagonist Tommy Wilhelm is asked if he loves his aged, emotionally remote father:

“Of course, of course I love him. My father. My mother”—As he said this there was a great pull at the very center of his soul. When a fish strikes the line you feel the live force in your hand. A mysterious being beneath the water, driven by hunger, has taken the hook and rushes away, writhing.

Although it took him a while to find it—he was in his late 30s and had already written two novels—Bellow’s first great subject was really his family and the Jewish Chicago in which he had grown up. He was in Paris on a Guggenheim fellowship, working on a depressing manuscript called “The Crab and the Butterfly,” in which two invalids philosophize in a hospital ward. As

he later told Philip Roth: “I was walking heavyhearted toward my workplace one morning when I caught up with the cleaning crew who opened the taps at the street corners and let the water run along the curbs, flushing away the cigarette butts, dogs’ caca, shredded letters, orange skins, candy wrappers into the large-mouthed sewers . . . Watching the flow, I felt less lame, and I was grateful for this hydrotherapy and the points of sunlight in it—nothing simpler.” Bellow walked away from the street washers repeating to himself “I am an American—



First edition of Bellow’s The Adventures of Augie March, 1953.

Chicago born,” at least so he remembered it in one version of the story (there were several and Leader quotes another variant). That is, he was suddenly writing the justly famous opening lines of *The Adventures of Augie March*:

I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent.

As Leader says, this is when Bellow “found his voice

as a novelist,” that distinctive freestyling prose that affects not to care exactly how its sprung rhythms and startling observations knock the reader. The last semi-grammatical phrase of that famous opening sentence, “sometimes a not so innocent,” has an unabashed Yiddish flavor, while the one that follows reminds you that Augie is as American as Huck Finn but not unlettered:

But a man’s character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn’t any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles.

Bellow later spoke of his first two novels, *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, as too proper, narrow, and constrained, an attempt, perhaps, to glove his knuckles or change the door.

Bellow’s not so innocent knock is generally taken as the moment when Jews barged into American literature without apology, but it wasn’t just a matter of voice. *Augie March* made an argument that the rough-and-tumble lives of Chicago Jews were as fit a subject for litera-

ture as any other. Standing there as the cleaning crew hosed down the Paris streets, Bellow says he thought of “a pal of mine whose surname was August—a handsome breezy freewheeling kid who used to yell out when we were playing checkers ‘I got a scheme!’” Charlie August, like his later fictional counterpart, Augie March, was a social type of the 1920s and 1930s that basically no longer exists in America, a poor immigrant Jew:

His father had deserted the family, his mother was, even to a nine-year-old kid, visibly abnormal, he had a strong and handsome older brother. There was a younger child who was retarded—a case of Down syndrome, perhaps—and they had a granny who ran the show. (She was not really the granny; she’d perhaps been placed there by a social agency that had some program for getting old people into broken homes.)

This recollection, along with that of the street cleaners’ “hydrotherapy,” comes from the wonderful (if



Saul Bellow, 1962. (Photo by Truman Moore/The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images.)

fragmentary and repetitive) written interview that Philip Roth conducted on and off with Bellow in the last years of his life and published in *The New Yorker* after his death. Leader draws upon it in his biography, and it is now the last main selection in Taylor's collection of Bellow's non-fiction.

Bellow said that Charlie August lived next door to him on West Augusta Boulevard, which is an Augustinian coincidence, though not impossible, even if it's an unlikely name for a Jew and the novel he ended up writing about him was cast as a kind of spiritual autobiography. He also said that he never knew what became of his pal, which is surprising, given that the book was a best-seller and the first chapters were a close, heart-breaking description of life in the March/August home. Wouldn't Charlie/Augie, or someone who knew him, have called? Everyone else Bellow ever wrote about seems to have. Atlas took this all at face value in his biography, but there is no indication that he checked it carefully, and I wonder if the Marches were a "purer," or at any rate more complicated, fictional invention than Bellow let on. Zachary Leader doesn't say this, but on the other hand he doesn't quite repeat Atlas' claim that the actual Augusts had the same familial set-up as the fictional Marches. Whatever the case here, one has the sense that, as a biographer, Leader has complete control of his material and does not feel the need to let the reader in on every calculation, contested reading, and judgment made in the back room.

Bellow gave Augie March himself many of his own adventures and experiences, from teenage jobs and pranks to his visit to Leon Trotsky in Mexico, only to find the great man dying in a hospital from the wounds of his axe-wielding Stalinist assassin. And Augie's streetwise older brother Simon so closely resembles Bellow's older brother Maurice, down to the salacious details of a scandalous affair and love child, that it caused a rift between them. Years later, Maurice's daughter Lynn said of her uncle "What kind of creative? He just wrote it down."

This was a frequent complaint from Bellow's friends, relatives, and acquaintances who did not realize that they were sitting for a portrait, or did realize but didn't like the way it came out. Not that he was easier on himself. *Herzog*, which is probably Bellow's best, most fully realized novel, is an account of an intellectual falling

apart and pulling himself back together after discovering that his wife and best friend are lovers, which of course is what happened to Bellow.

As a truly literary biographer, Leader understands that what is important is how Bellow "wrote it down." In the case of the humble, mostly Jewish cast of characters in *The Adventures of Augie March*, one can see him asserting their significance as subjects from the very beginning, conjuring up the world of his childhood as he sits at a writing desk in Paris. Grandma Lausch, Augie's dictatorial matriarch who "wasn't really the granny," is described as "one of those Machia-

It is perhaps this emphasis on literary art as the jolt of observant caring that brings memories and facts to life that explains a puzzling feature of Bellow's work.

vellis of small street and neighborhood." Augie's description of his first great mentor, the devious crippled landlord-philosopher William Einhorn, sets out the theory behind this, what you might call Bellow's American aesthetic:

He had a brain and many enterprises, real directing power, philosophical capacity, and if I were methodical enough to take thought before an important and practical decision and also (N.B.) if I were really his disciple and not what I am, I'd ask "What would Caesar suffer in this case? What would Machiavelli advise or Ulysses do? What would Einhorn think?" I'm not kidding when I enter Einhorn on this eminent list. It was him that I knew and what I understand of them in him. Unless you want to say that we're at the dwarf end of all times and mere children whose only share in grandeur is like a boy's share in fairy tale kings, beings of a different time better and stronger than ours.

Of Einhorn's wife, he writes, "While Mrs. Einhorn was a kind woman, ordinarily, now and again she gave me a glance that suggested Sarah and the son of Hagar."

There was no fairy tale time different and better and stronger than ours, or, even if there was, one is still ob-

ligated to live and reflect upon this age and one's own people. Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Einhorn were also based on figures in Bellow's life, in this case the parents of his close friend, later enemy (he was his divorce attorney) Sam Freifeld, though it was another friend Dave Peltz, not Bellow or Charlie August, who really worked for them. As Leader quotes Bellow on the relation between fact and fiction: "The fact is a wire through which one sends a current. The voltage of that current is determined by the writer's own belief as to what matters, by his own caring or not-caring, by passionate choice."



An advertisement for Hart Schaffner & Marx Clothes by Jay Hyde Barnum, 1926.

It is perhaps this emphasis on literary art as the jolt of observant caring that brings memories and facts to life—as “when a fish strikes the line,” and “you feel the live force in your hand”—that explains a puzzling feature of Bellow's work. He was, without a doubt, the most celebrated American novelist of his generation,

winning every prize and most of them two or three times. But as compositions very few of the novels really hold together. Narrators overshare, narratives trail off, seemingly stray characters take over, and the individual elements of a novel can feel curiously unbalanced for a writer of such manifest artistry. The individual parts—breathtaking descriptions, brilliant dialogue, utterly original turns of phrase—often seem greater than the whole.

Philip Roth, who is Bellow's greatest champion, puzzled over this and once suggested that maybe he was in just too much of a hurry, which, in a way, is what Bellow himself wrote to Malamud in defense of *Augie March*: “A novel, like a letter, should be loose, cover much ground, run swiftly, take risk of mortality and decay.” He wasn't aiming for a jeweler's perfection but rather to capture and requicken messy, creaturely, contingent moments of human life, when a “mysterious being beneath the water, driven by hunger, has taken the hook and rushes away, writhing.” And he loved a good joke.

Bellow's sense of the relation between life and literature and the purpose of the latter also helps to explain a curious feature of the non-fiction collected in *There Is Simply Too Much to Think About*. He was one of our great men of letters, the most discursive of fiction writers, a professor at the University of Chicago's august Committee on Social Thought who seemingly gave lectures and wrote essays at the drop of an (elegant, rakish) hat, but he disdained literary critics and even the act of literary criticism. His own few reviews are more in the way of astringent encouragement of his peers. Reviewing Philip Roth's now-famous first book of short stories, *Goodbye, Columbus*, he wrote “Unlike those of us who came howling into the world, blind and bare, Mr. Roth appears with hair, nails and teeth, speaking coherently.”

Critics, in short, ought to provide useful encouragement and then get the hell out of the way. This—as much as their differing temperaments and approaches—helps to explain the lifelong tension between Bellow and Lionel Trilling, the leading critic of his time, certainly among the Jewish intellectuals who came of intellectual age with Bellow in the 1930s. Invited to write a review of a new book of essays about Shakespeare's sonnets for Trilling's book club magazine *The Griffin*, Bellow writes “Perhaps the pleasure this

collection gives me is in part the pleasure of seeing modern critics working hard in the 17th century. It is like having mischievous children at last out of the house.” Around this time, the mid-1950s, Leader recounts a story of Bellow greeting Trilling at a party: “Still peddling the same old horseshit, Lionel?”

Calling his Bellow-character “Abravanel” was a good joke, though one doubts that either Philip Roth or Bellow would have recognized Don Isaac Abravanel if he had stepped out of Ferdinand and Isabella’s court and swatted them with a copy of his commentary to the *Guide of the Perplexed*. In the autobiographical lecture, which opens *There Is Simply Too Much to Think About*, Bellow wrote that he had tried “to fit his soul into the Jewish-writer category but it does not feel comfortably accommodated there.” And then comes the famous crack:

I wonder now and then whether Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud and I have not become the Hart Schaffner and Marx of our trade. We have made it in the field of culture as Bernard Baruch made it on a park bench, as Polly Adler made it in prostitution, as Two-Gun Cohen, the personal bodyguard of SanYut-Sen, made it in China. My joke is not broad enough to cover the contempt I feel for the opportunists, wise guys and career types who impose such labels and trade upon them.

Roth and Malamud also resisted the category, but both of them made the meaning of Jewish identity a central problem in their fiction in ways that Bellow did not. Although Bellow was, intermittently, a spiritual seeker, his sense of Judaism, or rather Jewishness, was visceral, not intellectual. When William Faulkner advocated, as chairman of a distinguished committee of writers empanelled by President Eisenhower, freeing the fascist

poet Ezra Pound, who had been tried for treason but found insane, Bellow wrote to him:

Pound advocated in his poems and in his broadcasts enmity to the Jews and preached hatred and murder. Do you mean to ask me to join you in honoring a man who called for the destruction of my kinsmen? I can take no part in such a thing even if it makes for effective propaganda abroad, which I doubt . . . Free him because he is a poet? Why better poets than him were exterminated perhaps. Shall we say nothing in their behalf?

Bellow’s unapologetic moral clarity here (and not only here) derived, in part, from the same intuition as the famous opening of *The Adventures of Augie March*: that one can be Jewish and entirely American. His job was to make something of that. As he wrote in an introduction to an anthology of Jewish stories: “We do not make up history and culture. We simply appear, not by our own choice. We make what we can of our condition with the means available. We must accept the mixture as we find it—the impurity of it, the tragedy of it, the hope of it.” This was written in 1964, the last year Leader’s biography covers, but the sense of life and literature it expressed will carry his subject forward into the next volume. Bellow remained ineluctably Jewish and perpetually attuned to living in chaos.

This is the key to understanding his life, his live-wire approach to artistic creation, even his jokes. A friend of mine was invited out to dinner with Bellow sometime in the 1990s. At the restaurant, his wife urged him to order healthily to which Bellow replied “enough of this *Tofu va-vohu!*”—*Tohu va-vohu* being, of course, the book of Genesis’ description for the chaos out of which God created the universe.

Abraham Socher is the editor of the Jewish Review of Books.

The Jewbird

BY ADAM KIRSCH

Malamud: Novels and Stories of the 1940s & 50s

edited by Philip Davis

The Library of America, 712 pp., \$35

Malamud: Novels and Stories of the 1960s

edited by Philip Davis

The Library of America, 916 pp., \$35

When Bernard Malamud died, in 1986, Saul Bellow composed a eulogy for the writer with whom he had been so often juxtaposed. The critical habit of viewing Bellow, Malamud, and the younger Philip Roth as a kind of literary consortium, a Jewish American all-star team, naturally irked all three of the men from time to time. It was Bellow himself who came up with the often-quoted quip that they were the Hart, Schaffner and Marx of American letters—a pointed joke, which suggests that Americans were more used to thinking of Jews as tailors than as contributors to American literature. For his part, Malamud was capable of envying Bellow's success, which was an order of magnitude larger even than his own. Malamud may have won the Pulitzer and the National Book Award, but it was Bellow who got the Nobel Prize, as Malamud wryly observed in his diary in 1976: "Bellow gets Nobel Prize, I win \$24.25 in poker."

Yet in Bellow's short eulogy, which can be found in his *Letters*, he welcomed the comparison with Malamud wholeheartedly:

We were cats of the same breed. The sons of Eastern European immigrant Jews, we had gone early into the streets of our respective cities, were Americanized by schools, newspapers, subways, streetcars, sandlots. Melting Pot children, we had assumed the American program to be the real thing: no barriers to the freest and fullest American choices.

It is easy to recognize in this description the Bellow who began *The Adventures of Augie March* with the triumphant words: "I am an American, Chicago born." Bellow's innate confidence—itself an American, Emersonian virtue—made it simply impossible for him to imagine that America and literature, which he loved so dearly, could

In the end, Malamud's was a success story—a life redeemed from obscurity and mediocrity by sheer talent and hard work.

refuse his love. This same confidence, the unquestioning self-acceptance that carried all before it, made Bellow's feelings about Jewishness fairly uncomplicated, especially in the first part of his career. Jewishness was the condition of his existence, the environment in which he came to consciousness, intimately bound up with the helpless "potato love" that Bellow's protagonists always feel for their family and early friends. If Jewishness was a problem, it was a problem for other people: In Bellow's novel *The Victim*, it is the anti-Semite Allbee who is obsessed with the Jewishness of Leventhal, not Leventhal himself.

For Malamud, however, neither Americanness nor Jewishness were so straightforward. Far from feeling that he faced "no barriers to the freest and fullest American choices," Malamud's life can be seen as a desperate effort to vault the barriers that hemmed him in on every side. His early years were defined by his father's business failures and by the mental illness of his mother: When Malamud was 13 years old, he came home to discover that his mother had swallowed a can of disinfectant in a suicide attempt. She survived, but had to go to a mental hospital, where she died two years later. As Malamud's biographer Philip Davis and his daughter Janna Malamud Smith make clear in their books about him, these early miseries haunted the writer and his relationships for the rest of his life.

Perhaps the most significant thing in Malamud's biography, however, is an absence. Born in 1914, he did not publish his first book, the baseball novel *The*

Natural, until 1952, when he was 38 years old. For a man who already knew as a teenager that he wanted to be a great writer, this meant that 20 years, the prime of his manhood, were spent in frustration and distraction. The effects can be seen throughout his work of the 1950s and 1960s, now collected in two Library of America volumes

edited by Philip Davis. (A third volume, covering the last part of Malamud's career, is forthcoming.) During his twenties and thirties, Malamud taught

long length of pipe, to get the inner sheets afire. Overhead a few dead apples hung like forgotten Christmas ornaments upon the leafless tree. The sparks, as he stirred, flew to the apples, the withered fruit representing not only creation gone for nothing (three long years), but all his hopes, and the proud ideas he had given his book; and Mitka, although not a sentimentalist, felt as if he had burned (it took a thick two hours) an everlasting hollow in himself.

By the time *The Natural* was accepted, by the legendary editor Robert Giroux, Malamud was teaching composition at Oregon State University, in the small college town of Corvallis. It was not a good job, and his negative feelings about both the school and the place are eminently clear from his novel *A New Life*, where they are satirized as nests of mediocrity and conformism. Still, teaching college was a step up from the life he had known in Brooklyn. On the cusp of 40, Malamud had escaped his family and finally established himself as a writer. From then on, his career would describe an upward arc. From Oregon he would move to Vermont, where he was a professor at Bennington College, and his stories and novels would earn steadily increasing acclaim (and money). In the end, Malamud's was a success story—a life redeemed from obscurity and mediocrity by sheer talent and hard work.

The experience of prolonged struggle, the sense that the goal to which he dedicated his life might remain forever out of reach, shaped Malamud profoundly. Certainly it shaped the lives of his fictional characters, starting with Roy Hobbs, the baseball prodigy of *The Natural*. *The Natural* is in obvious ways an anomaly among Malamud's books—a tall tale or folk legend, where most of his novels would be homely and demotic; a programmatically American subject, with not a single Jewish character to be found. The story regularly lapses from narrative into dream or vision, and Malamud enforces a mythical framework that gives the whole book a self-consciously literary quality, a willed alienation from reality that it shares with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, published the same year. (If you don't immediately grasp that the story of Roy Hobbs's redemption of a failing baseball team is a modern recasting of the medieval Fisher King legend, Malamud nudges you



Illustrations by Mark Anderson.

high school at Erasmus Hall, worked for the Census Bureau, and took a few factory jobs. Time for writing was short, acceptances were few, and his first novel, *The Light Sleeper*, turned out to be a botch: After it was rejected by several publishers, he burned the manuscript. He drew on the experience in the 1953 story "The Girl of My Dreams," in which the would-be writer Mitka does the same thing to his book:

In the late fall, after a long year and a half of voyaging among more than twenty publishers, the novel had returned to stay and he had hurled it into a barrel burning autumn leaves, stirring the mess with a

along by naming the team the Knights, and its manager Pop Fisher.)

The Natural is a Jewish immigrant writer's two-handed lunge for America, and while what Malamud came up with bears little relationship to the America he knew, the sheer effrontery involved energized his language in a way that he would never quite repeat. Here is Roy in his first professional at-bat, wielding his custom-made bat, his Excalibur, Wonderboy:

He couldn't tell the color of the pitch that came at



Bernard Malamud, 1961. (Photo © Seymour H. Linden, Bernard Malamud Papers, Oregon State University Libraries.)

him. All he could think of was that he was sick to death of waiting, and tongue-out thirsty to begin. The ball was now a dew drop staring him in the eye so he stepped back and swung from the toes.

Wonderboy flashed in the sun. It caught the sphere where it was biggest. A noise like a twenty-one gun salute cracked the sky. There was a straining, ripping sound and a few drops of rain spattered to the ground. The ball screamed toward the pitcher and seemed suddenly to dive down at his feet. He grabbed it to throw to first and realized to his horror that he held only the cover. The rest of it, unraveling cotton thread as it rode, was headed into the outfield.

What rings truest in this passage, what would prove to characterize Malamud more than the poeticism, is Roy's sense of being "sick to death of waiting." One of the disorienting things about *The Natural* is that it is structured around a false start. When the book opens, the teenage Roy is riding a train to Chicago, where he is supposed to have his major-league try-out. Then, in a weird, abrupt, and dream-like scene, he is shot in the stomach by a madwoman, a serial killer of athletes whose presence in the story has just barely been prepared for by a brief allusion early on. When the novel resumes, Roy is in his mid-thirties and has somehow made his way back to the majors. But nothing can make up for the time he has lost, and his age means that his first season as a baseball player might be his last. We hear about Roy's missing years only in hints, and the effect is as if he had been put to sleep, Rip Van Winkle-like, and then woken up almost two decades later. Malamud was deeply drawn to the situation of a man taking his last shot at happiness—a man who feels he has wasted the best years of his life.

That same feeling is shared by the protagonists of all the novels included in these two Library of America volumes. All of them approach middle age as if they had never been young, as if large parts of their lives had simply been deleted. Frank Alpine, the thief turned grocery clerk in *The Assistant*, feels like Roy: "I've been close to some wonderful things—jobs, for instance, education, women, but close is as far as I go. . . . Don't ask me why, but sooner or later everything I think is worth having gets away from me in some way or other." The very title of *A New Life* suggests that Seymour Levin, by following his creator and moving to Oregon to teach in a college, is making his last grasp at resurrection. (Unlike Malamud, Levin's missing years are explained as the result of his alcoholism.) And in *The Fixer*, Yakov Bok gets himself into disastrous trouble when he, too, rebels against what he sees as a wasted life in the shtetl, symbolized by his inability to produce children with his wife, Raisl. "I've been cheated from the start," Yakov grumbles. "The shtetl is a prison . . . it moulders and the Jews moulder in it. . . . I want to make a living, I want to get acquainted with a bit of the world."

Yet none of these characters achieve the success that Malamud himself eventually did. Roy Hobbs makes it to the majors and becomes a sensation, only to lose everything when he agrees to throw a crucial game in exchange

for a big bribe. Seymour Levin's story ends on a desperate note, as he agrees to take in his married lover, with her children, even though he no longer loves her; his bid for a new life has landed him in a new kind of prison. And Yakov Bok finds himself literally imprisoned. When he moves to Kiev and tries to seek his fortune under a Gentile name, his identity as a Jew is discovered and he is scapegoated for the murder of a local Russian boy. Perhaps only Frank Alpine can be said to achieve "a new life," though he does so by taking over the old life of the poor grocer Morris Bober, confining himself voluntarily to poverty and insignificance.

If Frank's confinement looks to Malamud like a victory, rather than a defeat, it is because it is undertaken voluntarily, like monastic orders. Yet the form that this monkhood takes is, paradoxically, conversion to Judaism. The novel ends with Frank undergoing circumcision as a kind of inverse baptism: "One day in April Frank went to the hospital and had himself circumcised. For a couple of days he dragged himself around with a pain between his legs. The pain enraged and inspired him. After Passover he became a Jew."

These are the book's last words, and though abrupt, they nevertheless feel exactly right—the destination to which the whole story has been heading. Outwardly, that story is fairly undramatic, after the initial hold-up that brings Frank into Morris Bober's store and life. The rest of the book chronicles Frank's attempt to make up for the robbery by becoming Bober's assistant and the consequent moral education that he undergoes. This is, in the novel's terms, an education in Judaism: Morris lectures Frank about the majesty of the Law, which he construes not in religious or ritual terms but strictly ethically. And Morris himself is an ethical paragon, refusing ever to cheat his customers or take advantage of people, even though he is at the bottom of society's pyramid. Becoming a good person, for Frank, means becoming Morris; and since Morris is a Jew, Frank must become a Jew as well.

Malamud's definition of what it means to be a Jew is teasingly dialectical. One of the first things we learn about Frank is that he was raised in a Catholic orphanage, where he was exposed to miracle tales about St. Francis of Assisi that he has never forgotten. Becoming a Jew, for him, may be merely the name he gives to becoming a good Christian. Indeed, one of the main themes of the novel is that, while Morris' Jew-

ishness consists in fidelity to the Law—unswerving ethical behavior—Frank's Christianity is expressed as Love, a matter of inwardness, conscience, and good-heartedness. That is why Frank can continue to hold the reader's sympathy when he repeatedly backslides, committing crimes against the Bober family even as he claims to be helping them: stealing from Morris' cash register, even raping his daughter Helen. These are sins, but Frank, as a Christian, comes to teach the Bobers (and the reader) the importance of forgiveness and mercy—exactly the lesson that Portia tries and fails to teach Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. At the same time, the Bobers are there to teach Frank the final earnestness of the Law—to help him to reach a state of moral perfection in which it is no longer necessary to be forgiven, because he no longer has the need to rebel.

In equating Christianity with Love and Judaism with Law, Malamud is of course reinstating an old and troublesome binary opposition—one that he learned not from Judaism, to which it is foreign (or at least as foreign as Paul), but from the Western culture and literature that shaped him. Yet at the same time, Malamud reverses the usual weighting of that equation, which makes Law benighted and Love superior. Both, he suggests in *The Assistant*, are necessary, but the Law is finally supreme: It is Frank who must become a Jew, not the Bobers who must become Christian. Jewishness, for Malamud, is less important as a religious or ethnic identity than as the password to a moral existence.

Here again, the contrast with Bellow is illuminating. If the first line of *Augie March* is Bellow's credo, Malamud's might be the last line of "Angel Levine": "Believe me, there are Jews everywhere." For Bellow, Jewishness was a condition of the self, but for Malamud it had a tendency to metastasize into the condition of the world—a moral and metaphysical quality that pops up in the most unlikely places. In addition to the Catholic Frank Alpine, among the Jews we meet in Malamud's novels and stories of the 1950s and 1960s are the African-American angel of "Angel Levine," an Italian aristocrat in "The Lady of the Lake," and a bird in "The Jewbird." In "The Jewbird," indeed, the Jewish bird is persecuted unto death by the Jewish family with whom he seeks refuge. They are "anti-Semeets," to use the bird's Yiddishized pronunciation, not because they hate Jews—after all, they are Jews—but because they demonstrate the kind of cruelty and distrust of the Other that, to Malamud, is at the heart of anti-Semitism.

What Jewishness is not, for Malamud—what it cannot be, if it is to be a universal experience—is a concrete identity, or a specific religious tradition, or the history of a people. In a short memoir, “The Lost Bar-Mitzvah,” Malamud recalled that when he was about to turn 13, he petitioned his father for a bar mitzvah, but the family’s poverty and basic indifference to religion meant that it came to nothing. Instead, on his 13th birthday, his father put tefillin on him, had him recite some incomprehensible blessings, and it was all over: “Then he kissed me and said I was bar-mitzvahed, and he went downstairs into the store, to wait on any customer who may have appeared.”

As this anecdote shows, poverty, the grinding need to make a living, which Malamud writes about as well as any American ever has, was the bedrock reality of the family’s life. And because the writer came to know Judaism in no other form than the family, he ended up equating being poor and hardworking and terribly earnest with being Jewish. Contrast the list of non-Jewish Jews in Malamud’s fiction with the actual, ethnically and religiously, Jewish protagonists: Morris Bober, miserably poor but ethically sublime, and Yakov Bok, ditto. Notably, both these characters are directly based on real people: Morris on Max Malamud and Yakov on Mendel Beilis, the victim of a blood libel in 1913 Kiev. When Malamud searched the past for authentic Jews, what he found were tragic and serious men, usually victims.

At least, that is what he finds in his novels. But reading these Library of America volumes confirms the usual critical verdict that it is in his stories, rather than his full-length novels, that Malamud emerged as not just a talented writer, but a unique one. The best stories in *The Magic Barrel* (1958) and *Idiot’s First* (1963) avoid the earnestness and moralizing of Malamud’s novels. He achieves this by deflecting Jewishness away from actual Jews, who command his pity and respect, and toward “Jews”—angels, birds, mystic matchmakers—who are so flagrantly unlikely as to become comic. The collision of the surreally absurd with the tragically earnest is what defines Malamud’s fiction at its best. The opposites ought to

cancel each other out, but instead they crazily coexist, and the leap of faith this demands from the reader helps to explain why stories like “Angel Levine” and “The Magic Barrel” seem like religious parables.

If, like Kafka’s parables or Hawthorne’s, they remain impossible to fully interpret, that is because all three of these writers knew what it meant to live in the grips of a religious tradition they no longer understood. Indeed, Malamud is one of the great writers of Jewish modernity precisely because Judaism has been severed, for him, from any determinate content. For exactly this severance from the past is the defining trauma of Jewish emancipation: The emancipated Jew finds himself answerable to a name that no longer corresponds to any definition.

Malamud’s mischievous contribution to this post-traditional tradition was to point out the contradiction involved in equating Jewishness with such universal identities. If Judaism is moralism, then why isn’t Frank Alpine a Jew? If it is chosenness, why isn’t Angel Levine a Jew? If it is victimhood, why isn’t the Jewbird a Jew? The outrageous answer Malamud gives is that they are: Everyone, pushed to the most extreme version of themselves, becomes Jewish. That this answer could seem plausible and meaningful, not just to Malamud himself, but to the large audience that acclaimed him, speaks volumes about the unique position of Jews and Judaism in post-Holocaust America—the objects of tolerance and pity and shame and envy and admiration, all at once, a condition never before experienced in Jewish history. But such a historical moment could not last forever, and while Jewish American literature continues to live, we will probably never again see a writer who conjoins, or confuses, the Jewish and the human as daringly as Bernard Malamud.

Adam Kirsch writes for The Wall Street Journal and Tablet. He is the author of Why Trilling Matters (Yale University Press) and The People and the Books: 18 Classics of Jewish Literature (W. W. Norton & Company), among other books.

The Hunter

BY RICH COHEN

All That Is

by James Salter

Knopf, 304 pp., \$26.95

In my sophomore year of college, I took a class called The Jewish American Novel. I was hoping it would acquaint me with a culture I'd spent much of my youth trying to deny. I grew up in a town in Illinois, where, on the playground, appearing exactly the same as everyone else was a matter of social survival. This was not Jesse Jackson's Hymietown; this was the United States. We studied the greats in that class, Bellow and Roth, the red-brick Brooklyn of Delmore Schwartz, the Molochs of Allen Ginsberg. Most of the classic types were represented: the worriers and clowns, the big thinkers and survivors. But left out was the sort of Jew that mattered most to me, the Jew who's trying to pass.

James Salter changed his name from Horowitz for the same reason the Turks renamed Constantinople: He liked it better that way. His career, which began with spare war stories in the mid-1950s, has culminated, just now, with his magnum opus, *All That Is*, an autumnal novel that caps a stunning body of work. More than any other artist's, Salter's career, intentionally or not, has perfectly described the situation of many American Jews, who feel at once free and not free, liberated from Judaism yet stubbornly defined by it. Salter speaks to all those who intermarried and joined the club, donned white bucks and seersucker, who, lost in Sag Harbor and Hilton Head, have spent years trying to slip the shackles as Houdini, né Weiss, slipped his shackles before the multitudes. Between Salter's most elegant lines, I can still hear Horowitz scream. Neither Bellow nor Roth, it's Salter—defined by what he's left out—whose art depicts the Jew who has tried to dissolve the ancient in the American quotidian but still feels a pang of difference.

Life is contingent. In the summer of 1942, James

Horowitz, having graduated from Horace Mann in Riverdale, where he was a third stringer on a high school football team that starred Jack Kerouac, was working "on a farm in Connecticut, sleeping on a bare mattress in the stifling attic," as Salter wrote in his memoir, *Burning the Days*, killing time until the fall, when he was to enroll at Stanford. Then, a kid who'd been accepted to West Point failed the physical exam, and another kid failed the written exam, opening a spot for the second name on the wait-

He went in shaggy; he came out sheared.

ing list: Horowitz. He wanted to continue on to California, but his father, George, had graduated first in his class from West Point in 1918, and, fathers being fathers . . .

It's instructive to look at Horowitz before he matriculated—"Seventeen, vain, and spoiled by poems, I prepared to enter a remote West Point," Salter wrote. "I would succeed there, it was hoped, as [my father] had"—as you would not be seeing that young man again.

He went in shaggy; he came out sheared. He went in dreamy; he came out steely, realistic, remorseless, and fascinated by machines. What do they do to a plebe at the Academy? They line him up, shout him down, run him, humiliate him, punish and break him, burning away the eccentricities that make him unique. Horowitz resisted for a time, turning up, each Friday, for a synagogue service conducted by a local rabbi. Whereas church services were part of the schedule, attending Friday night meant separating yourself from the group, coming back alone, not wanting to explain. "After an hour of services, eternal and unconnected to the harsh life we were leading, we marched back to barracks where everyone was studying or preparing for the next morning's inspection," Salter wrote much later. "I felt uncomfortable about having been gone. Though no one ever said a word, I felt, in a way, untrue. In the end I dropped out and went to chapel with the Corps."

In short, they broke him, then remade him in the image of the rest. The Jewish thing was driven inside,

where it remains in hiding, occasionally spilling out between the lines. “Of course, you cannot drop out—you may perhaps try—and I became part of neither one group nor the other, but it seemed to me that God was God, as the writings themselves said, and what essentially distinguished me was an ingrained culture, ages deep, which in any case I wanted to put aside.”

This quote is interesting for what it says, but also for when: It was written many years after the fact, in a memoir published in 1997. Salter had obscured his background for much of his career. So here was a man in his 70s grappling, not with “all that is” but with all that had



James Salter in front of his F-86 Sabre jet fighter during the Korean War, 1952.

been put aside. Even so, you still hear the words—the truth of the biography—catch in his throat. He’s like an old le Carré spy who still can’t break cover even decades after the game ended.

Though it was years before he took the pen name, Horowitz became Salter at West Point. That’s where he assumed a new identity, a military cast of mind, learned to love neat hierarchies and the importance of rank. From his first publication, he’s been obsessed by physical trials, feats of endurance, heroic acts. Critics attribute it to the influence of Hemingway, but it really comes from the

Academy: It’s the ideology that filled the vacuum when he switched from Friday night to Sunday morning, because “[t]he most urgent thing was to somehow fit in, to become unnoticed, the same.”

In 1944, Horowitz was sent to Pine Bluff, Arkansas for Army Air Corps flight training; he would eventually become a pilot in the Air Force, then in its golden age. By 1950, he was a flyboy out of Tom Wolfe, buzz cut in the cockpit, screaming over Europe. The military supplied him with material, history, and myth, a lore that predated him and would continue long after he was gone. Salter’s work is crowded with vainglory: immortal, imperishable, unconquerable.

Looking back, after a distinguished lifetime of avoidance, he wrote:

We were [stationed] not far from Dachau, the ash-pit. One of them. I had seen its flat ruins. That Otto Frank, Anne Frank’s father, had served as an officer in the German army in the First World War, I may not have known, but I was aware that patriotism and devotion had not saved him or others. They might not save me, though I swore to myself they would. I knew I was different, if nothing else marked by my name. I acted always from two necessities; the first was to be like everyone, and the second—was it foolish?—was to be better than other men. If I was to be despised I wanted it to be by inferiors.

In 1952, he volunteered for a fighter wing and was sent to Korea, which was then at war. For several months, he operated at the tip of the spear, flying jets above the frozen 38th parallel, waste places and factories, the Yalu curving toward the Yellow Sea. It gave him a real-world credibility that would eventually make him an oddball in the literary world, where no one does anything but go to parties, read, and write. He led squadrons, flew as a wingman, tumbling through the sky, chasing the Russian MiGs that howled from the north. He made a study of “aces,” pilots in possession of the mysterious thing. But there still was a sliver of the old poem-saturated Horowitz, dreaming of the perfect phrase.

His first novel, *The Hunters*, was a story of American pilots in Korea. He’d written it at night, in a notebook (stashed, one is tempted to say, beside his Judaism). Fly all day; report all night. The book appeared under the name James Salter in 1956. He later described the

pseudonym as a necessary precaution. “It was essential not to be identified and jeopardize a career—I had heard the sarcastic references to ‘God Is My Copilot’ Scott. I wanted to be admired but not known.” He claimed he chose Salter because it “was as distant as possible from my own name.” But it seems no mistake that he chose an old Anglo-Saxon name, a Christian name first used to identify musicians who played the psaltery, a medieval harp. He’s always had a taste for pedigree. “A name is a destiny,” he wrote. “It is the first of all poems. Even after death it keeps its power; even half-buried in newspaper or dirt, something catches the eye.”

Salter suffered from a disease diagnosed by the early Zionists, for whom a Jewish nation—what if Horowitz had been flying a Mirage over Sinai instead of an F-86 over the Yalu?—was the cure. Simply put, Salter believed what they told him at West Point—about the world and about himself. He internalized it, then shaped himself around this conception. If he wanted to be a great pilot and a great American writer, he could not do it named Horowitz. It’s the same mentality that turned Bernard Schwartz into Tony Curtis. And it’s the reason why, for many of us, the famous first line of Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March*—“I am an American, Chicago born . . .”—is so liberating.

Perhaps surprisingly, this internal conflict does not weaken Salter as a writer but deepens and complicates him. In this, he is akin to Isaac Babel, the great writer of the Russian revolution, a Jew who rode with the Cossacks in the war between the Reds and the Whites. It’s the telegraphic prose style as well as the dilemmas buried deep but still visible. Here’s another Jew riding through the *goyishe* countryside, dressed like a soldier. In one of Babel’s famous stories, “My First Goose,” the narrator, a bespectacled intellectual, finally earns the respect of his comrades by slaughtering a destitute family’s goose.

I caught up with it and bent it down to the ground; the goose’s head cracked under my boot, cracked and overflowed. The white neck was spread out in the dung, and the wings began to move above the slaughtered bird . . . ‘The lad will do all right with us,’ one of [the Cossacks] said, referring to me, winking and scooping up some cabbage soup in his spoon.

For Salter, initiation came in the air, riding the wing of a laconic hotshot.

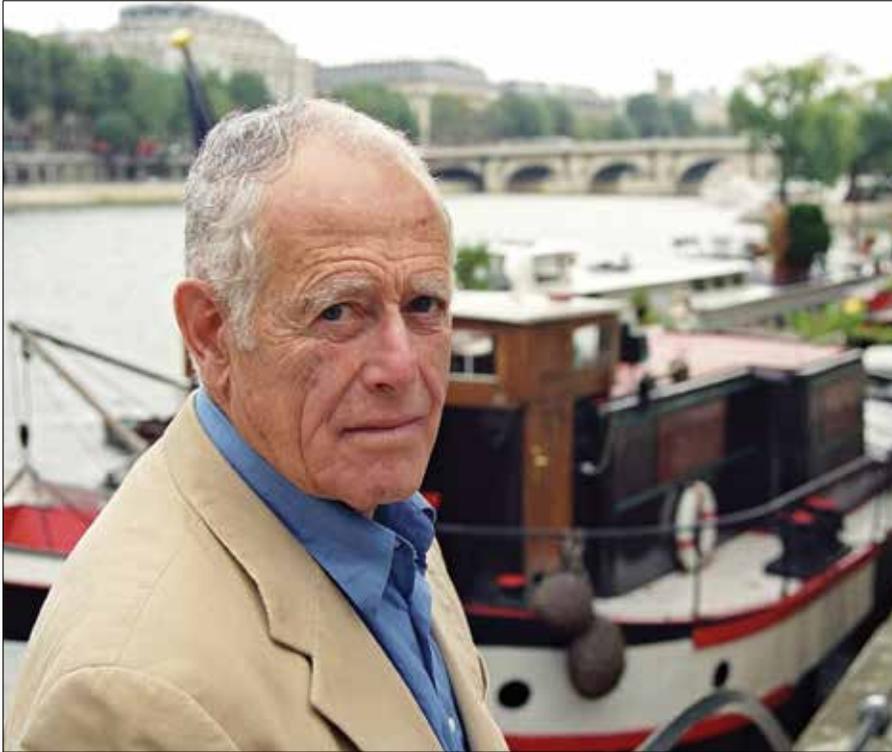
Never looking at me, absorbed by the instruments in front of him and by something in his thoughts, sometimes watching the world of dark forest that swept beneath us, hills and frozen lakes, he was gauging my desire to belong. It was a baptism. This silent angel was to bring me to the place where, wet and subdued, I would be made one with the rest . . . Afterwards he said not a word to me. The emissary does not stoop to banter. He performs his duty, gathers his things, and is gone. But the snowy fields pouring past beneath us, the terror, the feeling of being for a moment a true pilot—these things remained.

One should note the term baptism: a new name, a new faith. And you sit and eat the goose with the Cossacks. Then there’s the point of view: For Babel, it was from



Original poster for *The Hunters*, a 1958 feature film adapted from the James Salter novel.

horseback, an unusual position for a Jew. It's about freedom and movement as much as perspective. "An orange sun is rolling across the sky like a severed head," writes Babel. "[A] gentle radiance glows in the ravines of the thunderclouds and the standards of the sunset float above our heads. The odour of yesterday's blood and of



James Salter in Paris, October 1999. (Photo by Ulf Andersen/Getty Images.)

slain horses drips into the evening coolness." For Salter, writing only a few years later, it's not horseback but the cockpit of a jet fighter at thirty thousand feet, a point of view once reserved for God: "We crossed Gibraltar, like a pebble far below, and then brown, hard Spain. We were going home with new airplanes, the first of those that could routinely fly faster than the speed of sound."

The *Hunters* was a hit. It sold and sold. It was purchased by Hollywood, where it was turned into a film starring Robert Mitchum. Just like that, a new road opened before Salter. He had been career military, on the Pentagon path. He would forsake all that, go the Hemingway, which was Paris and publication parties and off-season resorts. He made the decision at thirty-two. No matter what else you might think of Salter, you have to acknowledge his bravery: To give up

a career of rank and insignia for literature takes guts. He later wrote about wandering the Pentagon, in uniform, looking for someone who would accept his resignation. Then he went home and cried. When he told a friend what he had done, the friend said, "You idiot!"

In the mid-1960s, he began working on the book that would become his artistic breakthrough. It was like nothing he'd ever done: a chronicle of an affair, a young American and a French girl, their story narrated by a third-party voyeur. Everything is in retrospect, years later, a strange run of towns and restaurants, escapades in bed.

Over the crown of western hills we sail beneath a brilliant sky of clouds shot through with sunlight and began the descent to town . . . And then those great, lineal runs through neighborhoods I knew nothing of, making straight for the perfect square which marked the city like a signet.

His writing had matured, clipped and beautiful but also a threat. It gets in your head and comes out your mouth. The odd comma, the odd beat: "September. It seems these luminous days will never end. The city,

which was almost empty during August, now is filling up again. It is being replenished. The restaurants are all reopening, the shops."

Salter is obsessed with light—it pours down, fills up, lingers. After light, darkness. After life, death. In this way, his books are about nothing and about everything. *A Sport and a Pastime* can be read allegorically. It's boy meets girl, but it's also the writer fantasizing about a world he can never truly possess, not the Paris of hotel lobbies but the impenetrable towns of bourgeois France. It's a fever dream, a poem of unrequited love. Critics heard an echo of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Henry Miller. Americans abroad, enraptured by foreign places. To me, it's less Hemingway than Herzl—with his Christmas tree and fantasy of seamless assimilation. Salter is Herzl before Dreyfus, or whatever made him a Zionist, grasping at a mirage, always going but never arriving,

always outside, humping through the exile. If you wear just the right coat, strike just the right pose, assume just the right name . . .

“They drive through the streets of an unknown town,” he writes in *A Sport and a Pastime*.

The rain pours down like gravel. In the green light of the instrument panel he feels as homeless, as desolate as a criminal. Gently she wipes his wet cheeks with her fingers. They have nowhere to go. They are strangers here, the doors of the town are closed to them. Suddenly he is filled with intimations of being found somehow, of being seized and taken away. He doesn't even have a chance to talk to her. They are separated. They are lost to each other. He tries to cry out in this coalescing dream, to tell her where she should go, what she should do, but it's too complicated. He cannot. She is gone.

The manuscript was rejected by his publisher. It was such a departure. And it was boring. And it was about nothing. And it was pornographic. It was then turned down by just about every other publishing house in New York, until it was finally put out by George Plimpton and *The Paris Review*. The ensuing trajectory of the novel describes the arc dreamed of by every author whose book has tanked: Three hundred copies sold the first year, three thousand sold the second, ten thousand the third, and so on. In 1995, it was republished by the Modern Library, a rare honor. It's now rightly considered a classic.

Salter is often said to be a writer's writer. He's more like a writer's writer's writer, unread by the public. Yet he goes on, page by page, a man with a message he knows will prevail in the end. He followed *A Sport and A Pastime* with *Light Years*, which many consider his greatest novel. He was living in New City, a suburb on the Hudson a few dozen miles above Manhattan. The novel tells the story of a seemingly perfect marriage as it comes apart. It's about meals, cities, people, habits, worldviews, but its real subject is time, which does not exist and is also the only thing that matters. People age before your eyes, collapse like old houses, give up the ghost before they die. The book is a perfect example of the Salter aesthetic: The taut sentences and icy scenes are organized to spotlight Salter's brilliant prose and, perhaps also, to disguise Horowitz. I wouldn't

keep harping on this if he didn't try so hard to disguise it. Of all the Jewish writers of his generation, Salter might be most influenced by his Jewishness.

Somewhere, in just about every Salter book, you'll find a seemingly anti-Semitic passage. It's not just what he says, but the way his narrators seem to regard Jews: less as individuals than as instances of a type. In *Light Years*, it comes at the beginning, when introducing a main character, who was based on a friend and neighbor of Salter:

He was a Jew, the most elegant Jew, the most romantic, a hint of weariness in his features, the intelligent features everyone envied, his hair dry, his clothes oddly threadbare—that is it say, not overly cared for, a button missing, the edge of a cuff stained, his breath faintly bad like the breath of an uncle who is no longer well. He was small. He had soft hands, and no sense of money, almost none at all. He was an albino in that, a freak. A Jew without money is like a dog without teeth.

In the new novel, it comes near the end, when the protagonist finds himself among Jews:

As he sat there, Bowman was more and more conscious of not being one of them, of being an outsider. They were a people, they somehow recognized and understood one another, even as strangers. They carried it in their blood, a thing you could not know. They had written the Bible with all that had sprung from it, Christianity, the first saints, yet there was something about them that drew hatred and made them reviled, their ancient rituals perhaps, their knowledge of money, their respect for justice—they were always in need of it. The unimaginable killing in Europe had gone through them like a scythe—God abandoned them—but in America they were never harmed.

Why does Salter do it? It's a question I've often considered—because I love his books, the best of which cast a spell that lasts for days. I've come up with three possible reasons. The first is that Salter always wanted to write his version of the great modern novel in the manner of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, whose books were riddled with the kind, country club anti-Semitism

that went out of fashion after World War II. In emulating the old models, he's taken the bad with the good, the movable feast but also the prejudice that gives the whole thing its neat tone of exclusion. It reminds me of a kid who copied a friend's homework. In the middle of the page, without realizing what he was doing, he wrote, "continued on the back." But perhaps that lets him off too easy, because Salter really does seem to harbor a variety of the anti-Semitism that suffused the army's officer corps before World War II. To be Jewish is to be venal, weak, and grasping, and he is the poet of a certain kind of glorious American masculinity. Or maybe it's just a diversion, meant to demonstrate that he's not really Jewish. I mean, what Jew would write, "A Jew without money is like a dog without teeth."

Whatever its source, such artifice and obfuscation can make Salter's work, at its weakest, seem phony, a fancied depiction of a world that exists only in the minds of a small community of East Coast WASPs. In this mode, Salter most resembles Ralph Lauren, another name-changing Jew who internalized the lie and the fantasy. Like Lauren, né Lifshitz, Salter has drawn on an invented past to place himself at the center of an impenetrable world that is impenetrable only because it doesn't exist. It's a snipe hunt. It's a joke. A guy told a guy who told a guy, and there you are, holding a burlap sack open in the forest and cooing like a dove. The result, in Salter's case, is an art that is sometimes false. No one laughs in his books; no one wrestles, curses, or sweats. It's a picture window in New Canaan where everything is just a little too perfect.

Salter's new novel, *All That Is*, published when he was eighty-seven, is a masterpiece, a singular work that restates his entire oeuvre. He's been working on it forever—his first novel in thirty years. The book is about what it feels like to be alive, captured through the life of Philip Bowman, a New York book editor whose story takes us from World War II to the day before yesterday. It's beautiful and terrifying: beautiful because Salter can write like the wind, terrifying because it's a life without rules or a code, where the only deities are human, the only immortality by daring act. God is gone, his place taken by roads a moment before sundown, love affairs, betrayals, hotels, beach grass, and houses by the sea (there are no oceans in Salter; just seas).

At Salter's age, one expects an artist to reconcile his written and his actual self. With *All That Is*, it's clear this will not happen. Salter will never make room in his work for Horowitz. It is, in fact, the distance between that gives his work its candied, marzipan power. His novels capture the slipperiness of the world, where there's no telling where reality ends and artifice begins. It's the sensation you have when you see a beautiful girl vanish down a mysterious street in a foreign country, where the trolley cars clatter and the muezzins call the faithful as the bulls race between the high walls—a sensation that lasts right up to the moment when you actually chase down and talk to that girl.

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Brave New Golems

BY MICHAEL WEINGRAD

Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters

by Maya Barzilai

New York University Press, 288 pp., \$35

The Book of Esther: A Novel

by Emily Barton

Tim Duggan Books, 432 pp., \$27

The Golem of Hollywood

by Jonathan Kellerman and Jesse Kellerman

Jove, 688 pp., \$9.99

The Golem of Paris

by Jonathan Kellerman and Jesse Kellerman

G. P. Putnam's Sons, 528 pp., \$9.99

There is a good chance that a golem is lurking near you at this very moment. You won't see it, though, unless you're viewing your surroundings through your smartphone's Pokémon GO app. As over 100 million players know, the game challenges one to capture virtual creatures stationed in physical locations across the globe. True, the Pokémon golem looks more like a dinosaur than the foreboding, helmet-headed colossus that has dominated visual portrayals of the golem since Paul Wegener's famous silent film of 1920. But that's the way of golems these days. As pop culture monsters they don't have the cachet of zombies or vampires, but they are all over the place: in film and television, video games and comic books, and a continuous stream of novels both highbrow and popular. And while in most cases these golems are explicitly connected with Jews, in some of the recent incarnations the relation to the golem legend, or to anything Jewish at all, is, at best, tenuous.

Of course, what we usually think of as the golem legend in its classical form—a magically created humanoid who does the bidding of a kabbalist—does not have especially

deep roots in Jewish tradition. The word itself occurs only once in the Bible, and refers to the unformed state of the human being before being shaped into life by God:

My frame was not hidden from Thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see mine unformed substance [*golmi*], and in Thy book they were all written. (Psalms 139:15–16)

We begin as golems, before God and the sorrows of history etch their letters onto our brows.

In the Talmud we first encounter the idea that magical or divine energies can be used to create artificial life. “Rava created a man,” we read, “and sent him to Rabbi Zera” (Sanh. 65b) who returns the unspeaking automaton to dust, but it's a one-off story and hardly a focus of interest in later rabbinic literature. Among the Jews of medieval France and Germany there are references to the magical creation of artificial beings, but, according to Gershom Scholem, even in this period the creation of a golem was primarily a mystical exercise that, significantly, did not involve making an animate servant. Rather, in forming a human shape from clay the ritual allowed the mystic to enter into ecstatic contemplation of God's creative powers. According to Scholem, “the golem, no sooner created, is dissolved again into dust: with the initiation of the Talmudist it has served its purpose, which is purely psychic.”

The familiar version of the golem story takes place in Prague, where the creature is brought to life by the Maharal, the 16th-century rabbi Judah Loew, in order to protect the Jewish community from Christian violence. In some versions of the tale, the Maharal animates the golem by placing a scroll in its mouth; in others, he inscribes Hebrew letters on the golem's forehead. Having either served its purpose or gotten out of control, the

golem is later deactivated by removing the parchment from its mouth or by erasing one of the letters on its brow, turning the word *emet* (truth) into *met* (dead). And yet this story does not take shape before the 17th century, well after the death of the Maharal who, in historical fact, never claimed to have created a golem despite these latter-day legends and the current enthusiasm of the Czech tourist industry.



Paul Wegener in The Golem: How He Came Into the World, directed by Carl Boese and Paul Wegener, 1920. (AF Archive / Alamy Stock Photo.)

Indeed, the modern popularity of the story owes far more to non-Jewish writers in the 19th and early 20th centuries than to any Jewish preoccupation with golems. Important milestones are the 1808 publication by Jacob Grimm of a golem legend as part of his researches into European folklore; the Austrian writer Gustav Meyrink's best-selling novel of a sinister and otherworldly Prague, first published in serial form beginning in 1913; and Wegener's captivating film, which was actually one of three golem movies he produced between 1914 and

1920, the first sci-fi trilogy in cinematic history (though the first two films were lost).

The most popular rendition of the golem story by any Jewish creator during this period was a collection of tales first published in Hebrew in 1909 by the Polish rabbi Yudl Rosenberg, who claimed that his book was based on a rare early-17th-century manuscript in his possession. In fact, there was no such manuscript and *The Wondrous Deeds of the Maharal of Prague* was largely Rosenberg's own invention, a cycle of adventure stories in which Rabbi Loew and his sidekick, the golem Yossele, repeatedly defeat the nefarious schemes of the anti-Semitic priest Thaddeus to frame the Jewish community of Prague with blood libel accusations. And so, while the golem is taken as a metaphor for Jewish authenticity and folk tradition itself, its actual history is rather modern and Christian.

To these observations, I would add a further, perhaps controversial point. As monsters go, golems are pretty boring. Mute, crudely fashioned household servants and protectors, in essence they're not much different from the brooms in the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" story best known today from Walt Disney's *Fantasia*. Appropriately, in Yiddish the word means a blockhead or dunce. Since the beginning of the 20th century, there have been attempts to see in the golem story an image of technology run amok: a precursor to robots, computers, weapons of mass destruction, clones, and genetic engineering. Yet these metaphorical connections, while suggestive, leave the simple clay of the golem story itself far behind. Similarly, it is sometimes imagined that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was inspired by the golem story, but the juxtaposition is itself telling: Shelley's monster became an icon of romanticism because of its rending self-consciousness, its loneliness and eloquence—in short, everything that the golem typically lacks. It is not surprising that the most famous golem novel, Meyrink's *The Golem*, and the most brilliant modern literary work to feature the golem, H. Leyvik's Yiddish play of the same title, each tend to ignore the classic golem story and focus on other themes.

We have, then, a bit of a puzzle. Golems are dull and Judaically marginal. Yet they continue to proliferate in popular culture and, moreover, are taken to be the quintessence of Jewish fantasy. Why?

One reason for the attraction of the golem is that it has served as a charged metaphor for Jews and

Judaism themselves, reflecting the biases of Christian writers who first took this obscure story and popularized it in the course of the 1800s, as well as attempts by later artists, Jewish and Christian alike, to reframe the figure in more positive terms.

Golems, after all, are ugly, crude, lumbering clods of earth. They are of limited utility, cannot think for themselves or can do so only in the most literal-minded fashion, and must not be allowed to get out of hand. They are, in short, a classically negative Christian imagining of Judaism itself: unlovely, slightly threatening,

As monsters go, golems are pretty boring. Mute, crudely fashioned household servants and protectors, in essence they're not much different from the brooms in the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" story.

and hopelessly literal and earthbound. The golem is a perfectly Pauline figure for Judaism as crude and unimaginative materialism, the dominance of the letter (in this case, the Hebrew letters famously inscribed on the golem's brow) over the spirit.

Further, as Cathy Gelbin notes in her 2010 study *The Golem Returns: From German Romantic Literature to Global Jewish Culture, 1808–2008*, the 19th-century emergence of the golem story in European literature resonated with questions that were being asked about Jews at the time, in particular how fully human (and thus worthy of citizenship) they were. Or, in the context of romantic nationalism, whether Jews were capable of true artistic creation, or whether, like makers of golems, they could produce only weak, soulless artifacts. Jewish writers responded in turn by presenting the golem legend as proof of Jewish national creativity and the possession of a popular folk culture.

This is not to suggest that Pokémon GO is a meditation on the Jewish Question, but the golem still crops up in interesting, sometimes unsettling ways. Take, for instance, the 2004 novel *Iron Council* by the celebrated British author China Miéville. Miéville, thought by many to be one of the most significant fantasy writers working today, is a socialist, and *Iron Council* is a meditation on the dream of violent revolution, rendered in a steampunk sci-fi idiom. Interestingly, the main character and leader of the revolution is a golem-maker named

Judah Low—though this one inhabits the labyrinthine megalopolis New Crobuzon rather than Prague.

In fact, *Iron Council* seems to be awash in Jews—the novel's revolutionaries refer to each other as "chaver," Low's main disciple is named Uri, and the novel's villain is named Jacobs. Yet Miéville himself is an outspoken anti-Israel propagandist. The novel may therefore tell us something not only about revolutionary politics as Miéville sees it, but about the place of Jews in the progressive imagination today, especially in the context of the ongoing metastasization of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism within the British Left. Miéville's Judah Low is the last, best hope of the revolutionaries, yet at the end of the novel he betrays the revolution. Fearing that his comrades on the barricades will be massacred by the bosses and their militia, Low "saves" them by enveloping them in a "time golem," to be forever frozen a split second before the present. Low protests that he was only trying to rescue those he loves, but his outraged comrades indict him:

[W]e were never yours, Judah. We were something real, and we came in our time, and we made our decision, and it was *not yours*. Whether we were right or wrong, it was *our* history. You were never our augur, Judah. Never our saviour.

Thus radical fantasy in the 21st century returns us to the tropes of Jew as savior and Jew as traitor, Christ and Judas; the modern golem reminds us of its origins in European unease regarding Jews ("it was *our* history").

A second factor in the popularity of the golem is its use as a figure for meditations on Jewish power, violence, and vengeance. The theme of the golem as a household servant that malfunctions dates from the 17th century, and by the end of the 19th century the golem becomes the protector of the Jews against Christian violence, a protector that sometimes grows so indiscriminately violent that it must be destroyed by those whom it protects. In 1893 I. L. Peretz penned a brilliantly satirical version of the golem story in which the golem successfully defends the Jews of Prague from being massacred by their Christian neighbors. Peretz's Jews then plead with their rabbi to deactivate the golem since if it continues its rampage "there won't be any Gentiles left to heat the Sabbath ovens or to take down the Sabbath lamps." Committed to the status quo of diasporic powerlessness, the Jews allow

the golem to be locked away in the synagogue attic under cobwebs—a symbol for dormant Jewish vitality.

By contrast, in a number of 20th-century American iterations the golem is a figure for what Peretz in his own time was satirizing: Jewish discomfort with violence. From Marvel comics to Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, the golem becomes a figure for Jewish vengeance against Nazis, about

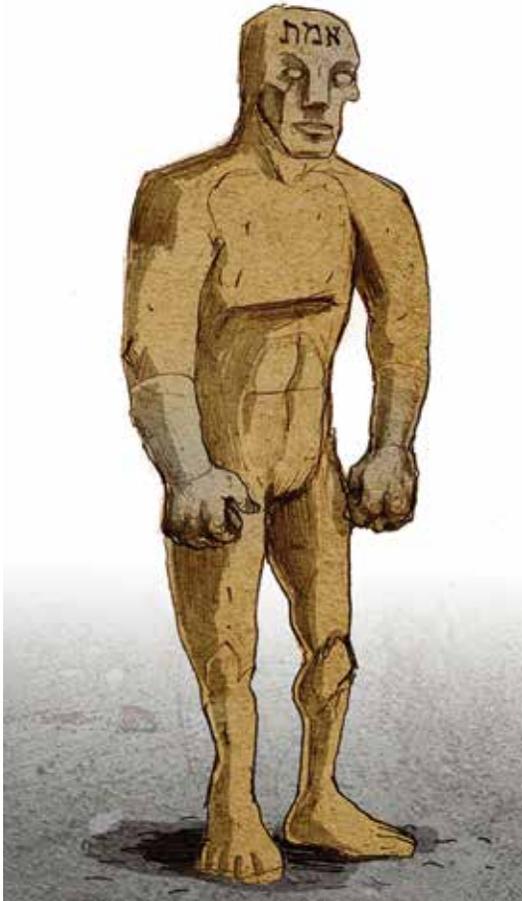


Illustration of a golem, January 2009. (Courtesy of Philippe Semeria.)

which the stories express deep ambivalence. On the other hand, the non-Jewish film director Quentin Tarantino cheerfully embraces the golem without any ambivalence whatsoever. In his film *Inglourious Basterds*, an unapologetic fantasy of revenge by Jews on Nazis, an exasperated Hitler whines to his generals about the Jewish American GI, played by Eli Roth, who likes to brain Nazi soldiers with a Louisville Slugger:

How much more of these Jew swine must I endure?
They butcher my men like they were flies! . . . Do you

know the latest rumor they've conjured up, in their fear-induced delirium? The one that beats my boys with a bat. The one they call "the Bear Jew" . . . is a golem.

As long as Jews fantasize and worry about power, and as long as non-Jews ponder the relationship between Jews and violence, it seems the golem will continue to be revived.

In her wide-ranging new monograph, *Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters*, Maya Barzilai argues that the myth of the golem tells us something about humanity more generally. It teaches us about what she calls "the golem condition," in which "the fantasies of expanding our capacities and transgressing our natural boundaries are always curbed by the inborn limitations of human existence." In five chapters she discusses, respectively, Wegener's golem films, their reception in the United States, the changing use of the golem motif in Israeli writing in the 1940s and 50s, the golem as an ambivalent figure for post-Holocaust Jewish revenge in American popular culture, and the intersection of the golem with writing about cyborgs and artificial intelligence. Barzilai sees the golem as a metaphor for the evils of war, militarism, and destructive technology.

Barzilai's interpretation of Marge Piercy's 1991 golem novel *He, She and It* in this context is illuminating, as is her discussion of the golem motifs in S. Y. Agnon's novel *To This Day*, which treats the relationships between Jews and Christians in Berlin. In other cases, her emphasis on war and technology is less convincing, as when she argues that the golem's clay in Wegener's film is akin to the mud of the trenches in World War I. Indeed, there is a tension running through this study between Barzilai's desire to analyze a figure that has become so deeply embedded in modern Jewish culture, on the one hand, and on the other a subtly polemical impulse to reframe the golem in terms that seem to her more usefully subversive. She is, she writes, "concerned with the living-dead golem as a transgressive monster that enabled artists to call into question national narratives, as opposed to nostalgically portraying a Jewish minority and its desire for protection," and so the texts she chooses to treat—and the theoretical authorities, including Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, to whom she nods—often reflect that interest.

Yet neither the questioning of national narratives nor

the dread of militarism and technology really work as an explanation for the ongoing popularity of the golem. The fact is that, more than ever, the golem is today the archetypal point of connection between Judaism and popular culture itself, a way for Jewishness to be introduced into the worlds of fantasy and other genre fiction. In this sense, the golem is popular because it represents a Jewishness that is global, virtual, and entertaining.

It is no accident, for instance, that golems feature centrally in Emily Barton's recent attempt to fashion a Jewish fantasy novel. *The Book of Esther*, Barton's third book and first attempt at fantasy, conjures an alternate-history 1942 in which the Nazi war in Europe comes to the borders of Khazaria, the fabled medieval Jewish kingdom that still exists in the 20th century of Barton's imagination. (For an overview of the actual Khazar kingdom and the way it has been recently dragooned into pseudoscientific theories about Jewish origins, see Shaul Stampfer's "Are We All Khazars Now?" in our Spring 2014 issue.) The book's eponymous heroine is the teenaged daughter of Khazaria's vizier. Seeing the danger posed to her country by the Germans, yet prohibited because of her sex from taking a role in battle, Esther sets out to find a village of kabbalists who will transform her into a man. The plan doesn't go entirely as expected, but she does learn how to make an army of golems, and she collects, in Wizard of Oz fashion, an eclectic range of companions (gender-bending kabbalists, Karaites, Uyghurs, Yiddish-speaking Ostjuden, etc.) to add to her valiant troop.

Barton's golems, it turns out, are not the docile servants of legend, but their rebellion takes an unexpected form: They want to be accepted as Jews and pray side-by-side with their masters. Though the question of whether a golem can count in a minyan is actually a classic halakhic dispute, the more traditionally minded members of Esther's company are scandalized by the very thought: "it goes against nature," says one. Nevertheless, the golems' petition triggers more familiar questions: Why shouldn't women be allowed to count in a minyan? Why aren't Karaites accepted as fellow Jews? Can't the non-Jewish Uyghurs participate in prayers? Esther comes to a realization: "I can't imagine it pleases Hashem if some who desire to worship Him are forbidden to." In short, Barton's novel is a liberal Jewish allegory about perceived inequalities within traditional Judaism. Her golems are

less constructed than Reconstructed.

The real enemy in *The Book of Esther*, one soon grasps, is not the Nazis, but the traditionalists who rule Khazaria. One can't help but compare Barton's Jewish kingdom with the one in Michael Chabon's adventure tale *Gentlemen*



The legendary golem, part of a brick pathway, Prague, Czech Republic. (Photo by Godong/ UIG/Bridgeman Images.)

of the Road, a book which also features a cross-dressing Khazarian heroine and characters trying to repel an invasion. Surprisingly, Chabon's 12th-century Khazaria is a far more cosmopolitan and freewheeling place than Barton's insular, stiflingly traditionalist 20th-century realm. Barton's characters therefore spend far more time arguing about egalitarianism and gender status than the safety of their homeland. As Esther, in the face of the immanent Holocaust, mentally prioritizes: "So she was alone, her mind wheeling through the possibilities of foreign domination, enslavement, mass murder, and above all else, who she would be if she became a man."

The novel's contemporary priorities and Jewish polemics aside, how does *The Book of Esther* stand up as fantasy? Unfortunately, not very well. There

are weaknesses in plotting and characterization, but most fatal is Barton's failure to create either a believable alternate reality or a compellingly strange fantasyland. The novel undercuts its attempts to introduce a sense of the marvelous by having the characters accept some wonders as perfectly ordinary and others as cause for amazement. Golems are presented as extraordinary, yet the Khazarians ride far more impressive mechanical horses without much comment.

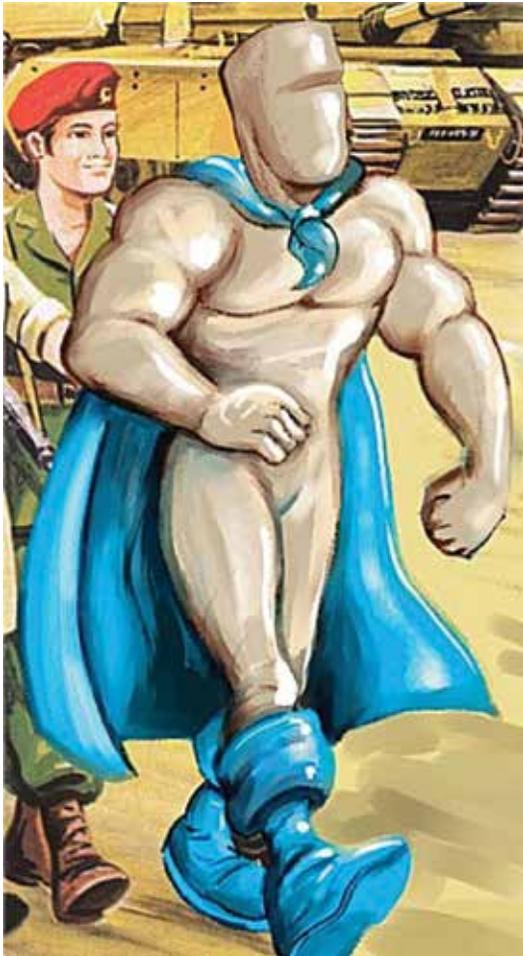


Illustration from *Ha-golem: sipuro shel komiks yisraeli* (*The Golem: The Story of an Israeli Comic*) by Eli Eshed and Uri Fink, 2003.

More problematically, the Judaism of this Jewish fantasyland is not woven into the fabric of the novel's reality, but instead belabored as a problem for the characters, who constantly explain and question basic Jewish practices to themselves and each other. Not a page goes by without some character asking which blessing to make over a type of food, or delivering a

mental exposition on the significance of *mikvah* or *eruv*, and the result feels more like a conversion class than a fantasy novel.

Sabbath rules are especially perplexing to Esther and her army, who argue over halakhic questions (whether one can march and fight on Shabbat) that were resolved in the time of the Maccabees. At points this verges on self-parody, as when Esther takes her concern to remain modest to unprecedented lengths as she fights a group of German soldiers: "A man grabbed hold of her foot and she kicked him before thinking to fire the pistol. So much for the injunction not to touch a man outside one's family." Had Barton trusted her Jewish materials to speak for themselves without trailing explanatory apparatus the result might have been more magical.

If Barton's fantasy world feels disappointingly familiar, *The Golem of Hollywood* and *The Golem of Paris*, two paperback potboilers written by the father-and-son team of Jonathan and Jesse Kellerman, introduce supernatural elements into our own world with results that are, at least, successfully weird. That last adjective may sound vague, but how else does one describe a pair of thrillers in which the Los Angeles Police Department has a special unit staffed by the descendants of the biblical *nephilim* (the gigantic offspring of "the sons of God"—traditionally understood to be angels—and "the daughters of men," see Genesis 6)? These giants are charged with the apprehension of the golem, who is actually the reincarnated spirit of Cain and Abel's sister and now takes the form of a giant flying beetle that hunts serial killers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Female golems like the Kellermans' don't often get their due, though there is a long enough tradition of them, running back through Cynthia Ozick's Xanthippe to author-politician Walther Rathenau's fin-de-siècle story about a golem-wife to 19th-century romantic antecedents. This one acts as the protector—and a sexually jealous one—of the Kellermans' protagonist, a hard-drinking police detective named Jacob Lev, a Robert Ludlum character lost in a Kafkaesque universe. The first novel introduces Lev, his mysterious bond with the golem, and his conflicted relationship with his parents. It also gives us a wildly original backstory for this female golem through an apocryphal book of the Bible treating the secret history of Cain and his doomed love for his sister.

Book two fills in the backstory of Lev's mother. In

contrast to the uncertain use of Judaism in *The Book of Esther*, the Kellermans place its discovery by Lev's mother front and center, portrayed with moving authenticity, as when the non-observant Jewish teenager attends her first Shabbat dinner:

The singing began—noisy, joyously out of sync. People swayed, people stood still. There seemed to be no rules, yet Barbara felt she was breaking one simply by existing. A little white booklet appeared in front of her. She stared at Hebrew, blocks and blocks of incomprehensible Hebrew. For all she knew, she was holding it upside-down.

Later, Barbara—now named Bina—is imprisoned and tortured behind the Iron Curtain, which shatters her sanity (and makes for extremely gruesome reading). Throughout, the Kellermans lay on the literary references from the Bible to moderns like Kafka (that beetle) and Bulgakov, numerical and name play (clocks, for instance, tend to display Jewishly symbolic numbers like 6:13), and the occasional odd bit of Kabbalah.

The sum of these unlikely parts doesn't always make sense—many long-time readers of the Kellermans were understandably baffled—yet is compelling nonetheless and not least because the thriller genre actually fits the Kellermans' understanding of Judaism. Their golem is a figure for Judaism's drama, for a tradition that is itself a kind of potboiler, pulsatingly alive if not always conventionally pious or easily consoling. To be Jewish is, for the Kellermans, to be forced to confront forces both celestial and demonic, to struggle against external and internal evil. The Kellermans' description of one of the golem's flights (she can turn into a beetle, remember) sums up the books and their Jewish message as a whole: "It's the same as always: for one terrifying moment, gravity overpowers faith, and she plunges toward the earth. Then she remembers who she is, and she begins to rise."

The golem, then, can be used in many different ways. A particularly delightful instance of this plasticity is the book *Ha-golem: sipuro shel komiks yisraeli* (*The Golem: The Story of an Israeli Comic*, 2003) by the cultural historian Eli Eshed and Uri Fink, Israel's most successful comic artist. The book purports to be a scholarly history of Israel's most popular superhero comic, *The Golem*, from its beginnings in the 1930s to the present. In fact, the comic book and its entire history are the invention of

Eshed, who uses the figure to dramatize the history of Israeli popular fiction, and Fink, who forges perfectly executed "samples" of the nonexistent comic book in various styles of Israeli popular illustration from the last 80 years. The book sends up Israeli national tropes and patriotic shibboleths, with the golem joined in various panels by David Ben-Gurion, Ariel Sharon, and others. One of the things that allows the book to work so convincingly is the blank face of Fink's golem, featureless save, usually, for a Star of David. The golem is a contentless cipher, so Eshed and Fink can stick the caped super-Israeli in any decade and render it in any style they want.

So while I would just as soon let most of the new golems remain hidden under cobwebs in the attic, some writers and artists are clearly capable of molding the dull clay of the golem tale into new forms. A surprise is always possible. Take, as a last example, a scene in the French graphic novelist Joann Sfar's bittersweet *Vampire Loves* (English translation 2006). Sfar first introduced his golem in the 1990s. In *Vampire Loves*, the golem now belongs to a Holocaust survivor named Eliyahu whose wife and daughter were murdered. At one point Eliyahu is moved to sing Sfar's invention of a Hasidic tune, including the lyrics:

Thank you for misfortune, which makes us all unique.

We enter the world dumb as golems.

And misfortune molds us. Thank you, Lord, who gives us all a history.

Thank you, Lord, who did not make us golems.

In suggesting that we become human inasmuch as we are shaped by the misfortunes of the world, Sfar daringly returns the golem back to its first mention in the book of Psalms. We begin as golems, before God and the sorrows of history etch their letters onto our brows. Sfar compounds the touching irony as the scene ends, when Eliyahu's golem, who can only repeat robotically what its master says, responds with something between an affirmation and a lie. "Thank you, Lord," says the golem, "Who did not make us golems."

Michael Weingrad is professor of Jewish studies at Portland State University. He is a frequent contributor to the Jewish Review of Books and Mosaic and is currently working on a book about Jews and fantasy literature.

Coming with a Lampon

BY RUTH R. WISSE

J: A Novel

by Howard Jacobson
Hogarth, 352 pp., \$25

Howard Jacobson's latest novel really got to me. I have been reading Jacobson with pleasure since his 1983 debut novel *Coming from Behind* and was happily surprised when he was awarded the 2010 Man Booker Prize for *The Finkler Question*, although in my opinion he ought also to have won it earlier for his darker novel *Kalooki Nights*. Jacobson is a world master of the art of disturbing comedy and each new work of his advances the genre—this one by a giant step.

J, or more precisely *Ɔ*, begins with a challenge, first to typesetters and then to readers, to crack the code of the double lines that cross the eponymous letter. Kevern “Coco” Cohen’s father would always “put two fingers across his mouth, like a tramp sucking on a cigarette butt . . . to stifle the letter *j* before it left his lips.” Kevern follows his father’s custom, which might have been taken over from *his* father. But if this is a family sport, it is not much fun for the son who would have liked to understand this habit of erasure. As a reader who sees the potential *jew* in every jewel, I was certain I grasped what Kevern doesn’t, but my anxiety then focused on the whys and wherefores of striking or muzzling that portentous consonant.

This novel is situated in the aftermath of “WHAT HAPPENED,” a fictional time at about the same chronological remove as we are now from the Shoah, whose horrors have been written about, commemorated, and mourned by a people schooled in such matters since Jerusalem’s destruction at the hands of the Babylonians. However, unlike the events of the Shoah, WHAT HAPPENED has been deliberately and systematically repressed.

In stark contrast to Jews who transmitted their heritage from generation to generation, always focused on their eventual recovery of Zion, the residents of Jacobson’s allegorical territory inherit a frightful history they refuse to confront. Determined to create a “harmonious society,” they try to erase the murderous past for perpetrators, bystanders, and victims alike through strategies

One is not permitted to speak of what happened except by adding “if it happened.”

of silencing and pacification. They look for a final solution to the *J* question by trying to expunge all memory of the evil that was done as a means of stamping out both the evil and those destined to become its victims. One is not permitted to speak of what happened except by adding “if it happened,” which attempts to suppress reality itself. Nor may one teach a *J* about his ancestor *Js*, as a means of ensuring that it will never happen again. Heirlooms and memorabilia are proscribed. Everyone in this fictional land assumes a recognizably Jewish family name to eradicate the kind of distinctions that presumably led to what happened—if it happened. That the given names of all the characters are British or Celtic in origin situates the action somewhere in the fictional England of all Jacobson’s fiction, with the adopted Jewish patronyms ensuring a permanently irritating reminder of what is being denied.

In “breaking” the *J* code and making explicit what the novel never does, I do not in the least lighten its nocturnal atmosphere which is telegraphed in the opening sentence:

Mornings weren’t good for either of them.

They are Ailinn Solomons and Kevern Cohen, whose love story reveals the condition of their world. We learn that they are damaged in opposite ways, Ailinn by the absence of any known family, having been picked out “like an orange” from an orphanage, while Kevern is

haunted by a father and mother who beleaguer him from beyond the grave. He continues to hear his dead mother's voice as a cry for help, pronouncing his name "Key-vern," which minus the last consonant is the Hebrew-Yiddish word *keyver*, for grave. The complementarity of this man and woman would appear to make

Just as the biblical Tamar waylays Judah, the female duo of Esme and Ailinn conspire to seduce Kevern for the sake of a tribe he has no wish to perpetuate.

them a perfect fit; others recognize their affinity before they feel it on their own. Both are homespun artists, he a wood turner and she a designer of paper flowers, and they express their love through art without words. He makes her a lovespoon "in which the two of them could be recognized, entwined, inseparable, carved from a single piece of wood," in return for which she makes him "a pair of exquisitely comical purple pansies, a paper likeness of his face in one, hers in another," and arranges them so that "they stared at each other unremittingly." Alas, mere words are the medium through which society—and the novel—must function.

When they meet, Ailinn is painfully literal, unable to recognize let alone grasp the implication of Kevern's wit. He instructs her in humor. (So as not to alarm her by overuse of that freighted J, he avoids the word *joking*.) She tells him that she feels constantly—eternally—in flight from some pursuer, like Herman Melville's white whale from Captain Ahab. Around such intimate revelations they develop lively repartee:

"I was going to ask . . . [he says] whether Ahab is a generalized idea for you or you actually picture him coming at you with his lampoon."

"Lampoon?"

"Slip of the tongue. You've been making me nervous. Harpoon."

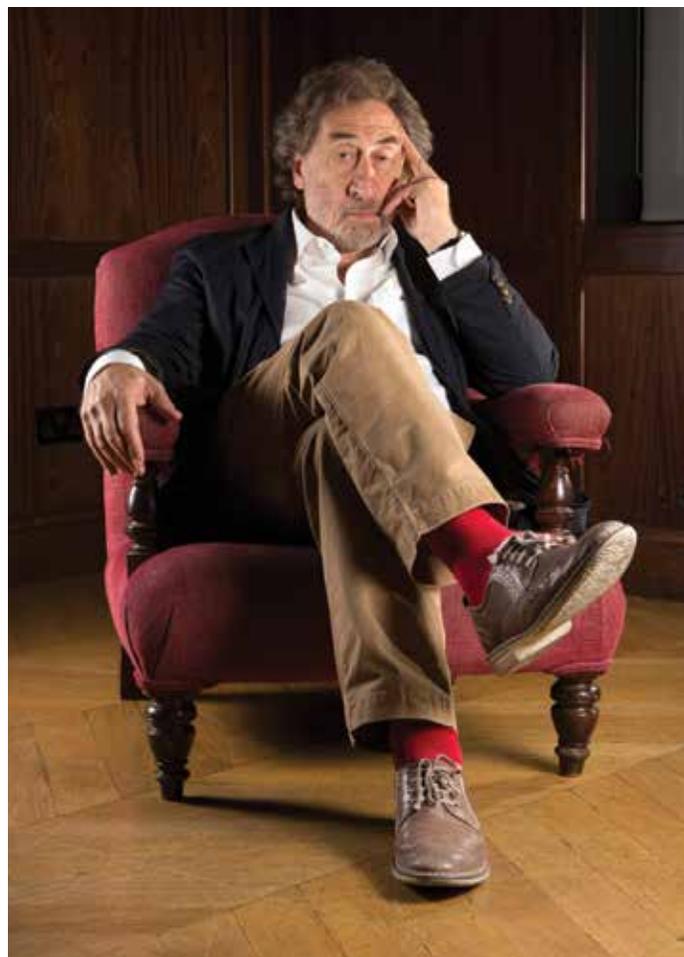
She stared at him. "You call that a slip?"

"Why, what would you call it?"

"A searchlight into your soul."

She has figured out how his mind works. "You set it a problem and when it could come up with no answer, it

came up with a joke." She also realizes that his obsessions about being invaded are those of a paranoid who has real enemies. In fact, they are both the objects of pursuit, though by pursuers with opposite intentions—Kevern's aim to complete the deeds of the unmentionable past, while Ailinn's aim to undo them.



Howard Jacobson, September 2014. (© Richard Saker/Contour by Getty Images.)

The forces shadowing Kevern in the seaside village of Port Reuben have been likened by other reviewers to East Germany's STASI or the Big Brother network of George Orwell's *1984*, but they appear to be spying less for a state than for a state of mind. Edward Everett Phineas Zermansky is a teacher of "Benign Visual Arts" who starts out rather liking Kevern, but later rages with mistrust of him and holds him responsible when his wife walks out on their marriage. Equally unhinged and overzealous is Detective Inspector Gutkind, himself the eventual victim of a murder he doesn't see coming.

It seems that everyone in this small village is reporting on the residents known as “aphids”—those marked as alien not by their genealogical records (which are taboo as is everything relating to the past) but by their distinctive behavior. Neither Kevern’s gentler nature that earns him his clownish nickname nor his being a native of Port Reuben make him any less suspect in the eyes of his goyish beholders.

***J* feels less like a book by a writer who went looking for a subject than the outcry of a subject that was in need of its writer.**

Ailinn falls under the no less intense scrutiny of Esme Nussbaum, a researcher employed by Ofnow, “the non-statutory monitor of the Public Mood.” In the course of studying the effects of the social experiment, Esme discovers “the continuance of low- and medium-level violence in those very areas of the country where its reduction, if not its cessation, was most to have been expected, given the money and energy expended on uprooting it.” The summary of Esme’s report as delivered to her superior enunciates its dystopian premise: “The past exists in order that we forget it.” Ofnow requires that the citizenry continually disremember and apologize. Esme, however, concludes that unless one learns from the past . . . but she is cut off before she can complete the thought. Her defiance of Ofnow almost gets her killed in the kind of staged accident whose intentionality cannot be proven. As she slowly recovers the use of her broken body she resolves to learn what *did* happen. When she discovers Ailinn and deduces her origins, she becomes the orphan’s unsolicited guardian and reacquaints her with the identity her ward had not known was hers to claim.

Thus the aphid lovers are of equal importance to two opposing constituencies: those who need to reconstruct them to recover their prelapsarian world and those who need to destroy them as a means of inhibiting their own need to keep destroying them. Much as we are invited to enjoy the emerging love of this smart and well-matched couple, we come to realize that the forces pressing in on them allow them no private getaway or escape. On one such attempted excursion to the Necropolis that his parents warned

him against visiting—at this point the text jarringly interjects “Who wanted to holiday in the environs of Babi Yar?”—Kevern unwittingly learns about the enormity of violence and betrayal that preceded his birth, including in the personal behavior of his “first-generation” parents. There are secrets of all kinds in private and public life, but historical erasure makes it hard to separate genuinely evil deeds from fairly innocent assignments, such as Kevern’s mother apparently had in an unconsummated affair with a local butcher. Weighing Kevern down is the cumulative weight of WHAT HAPPENED, which his “harmonious society” and his survivor parents forcibly suppressed. The only solution he can see is to end their line.

Because Esme persuades Ailinn to perpetuate her species, Kevern is betrayed by the woman he loves. Just as the biblical Tamar waylays Judah, the female duo of Esme and Ailinn conspire to seduce Kevern for the sake of a tribe he has no wish to perpetuate. Whether this constitutes a happy or unhappy ending may depend on whether one believes that Jews or anti-Jews will win out.

When I came to the final page of this book, I was reminded of something I had heard 30 years ago while on a visit to Paris. We were staying with a Frenchwoman who had met her Jewish husband-to-be when they were both in the anti-fascist resistance. The Jew and his mother were the only ones of their family to survive the war, and so our Christian hostess insisted on raising their children as Jews as an extension of their “resistance.” Their boys were circumcised and when their eldest son decided to circumcise *his* newborn son, she called her mother-in-law to share the good news. But the Jewish great-grandmother insisted they call it off, saying: “*Ça suffit!* It’s enough!”

So what’s this about Jacobson’s “disturbing *comedy*”? My ham-fisted (forgive me) exposition has conveyed too little of the book’s wit. “This place needs cheering up,” Ailinn says when she and Kevern visit a cathedral, and indeed, she picks up the habit of joking as though she were genetically predisposed to it. So she is. Yet it must be said that all the cheer that she and her author bring into their world is not enough to brighten it. The book is a satire of all the unfunny people that surround the novel’s J-crossed lovers, anti-Semites ranging from Wagner and his enthusiasts to local blokes who can’t help baiting Js because that is what they are predisposed to do.

This society's homogenizing attempts at self-improvement cannot eliminate its malice. Smaller forms of corruption seep back with a vengeance: Kissing, for which Jacobson uses the current British slang verb "snogging," is brutal and ugly; marriages are vengeful and ugly; murders are coarse and almost random. If I were English, I would shudder as Jacobson approached with his lampoon.

And what of the Js? When Ailinn begins to read about her forebears, the dog-eared books tell her:

They demanded too much. They set too high a standard. A second writer understood their defining characteristic as a near irresponsible love of the material world, and it was this that had landed them in hot water. Offered the spirit, they chose matter. Offered emotion, they chose reason. This one said they were deeply pious; that one found them profoundly sacrilegious. They were devoted to charity, yet they amassed wealth regardless of how they came by it. When they weren't consumed by self-regard they suffered a bruising sense of worthlessness. They saw the universe as a reflection of the God that loved them above all people, but moved through it like strangers.

She recognizes herself in none of this except, slightly, the alienation. Given the depth of her deracination, her only function in the future world of the novel is as fodder for her antagonists.

J feels less like a book by a writer who went looking for a subject than the outcry of a subject that was in need of its writer. Europeans composed no Book of Lamentations to record the destruction (self-

destruction) of their civilization, leaving it mostly to Jews to document *their* losses as though theirs was the reckoning that mattered. But nothing had HAPPENED that was not made to happen and Jews were not the agents of that happening, although the temptation to blame them retroactively remains as great as it ever was. The tens of thousands of real and fictionalized survivor testimonies contribute little to our understanding of the forces that generated the destruction of European Jewry. This novel does so by shining a searchlight into the soul of Europe; it functions as the fictional equivalent of Esme's report to Ofnow. The record of *now's* adaptation to *then* through forcibly harmonizing people and indiscriminate apologetics without arduous self-scrutiny shows how the conditions of violence are reconstituted.

Of course, the British are a special case. Their habits of obfuscation are different from continental malice, and the atmosphere of this book is that of an island nation, a people that wants to be decent if only it could figure out how. As a genre, the dystopian novel aims at warning against the worst that can happen. I pray that Jacobson's may have some effect, though, as another *J* once noted, prophets are usually without honor or impact in their own country.

Ruth R. Wisse recently retired from the Martin Peretz Professorship of Yiddish Literature at Harvard University. Her book No Joke: Making Jewish Humor (Princeton University Press) is now in paperback. Wisse is the creator of an online course about Daniel Deronda, George Eliot's novel of Jewish nationalism, offered by the Tikvah Fund, where she is currently a distinguished senior fellow.

Who Owns Margot?

BY NADIA KALMAN

Margot: A Novel

by Jillian Cantor

Riverhead Books, 352 pp., \$16

These are exciting times for those of us who grew up reading comics and Asimov before “graduating” to literature. Some of the most interesting fiction now being written includes elements from popular genres: Jonathan Lethem’s sad superheroes, Lev Grossman’s elitist magicians, and Gary Shteyngart’s future world, in which jeans have become transparent, but Jewish parents are the same as ever. At their best, these works bring complex characterization and multilayered imagery into the imaginative realms of genre and other “low” forms.

The possibilities offered by speculative fiction—the fiction of what might have been—often lead Jewish writers to a rewriting of the events of the Holocaust. In Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, millions are fictionally saved, given temporary refuge in Alaska. More often, though, authors pull single victims safely out of history. In *The Ghost Writer*, Philip Roth speculated upon what kind of adulthood Anne Frank might have had (as has Shalom Auslander more recently). Ellen Feldman’s incandescent novel *The Boy Who Loved Anne Frank* does the same for Peter van Pels. And now Jillian Cantor has written *Margot*, imagining the life of Margot Frank had she survived Bergen-Belsen.

It is not surprising that we return so often to Anne Frank and those close to her. In Cantor’s less than felicitous but certainly memorable phrase, Frank is a “Holocaust icon.” Why Anne Frank? In the brilliant essay “Who Owns Anne Frank?” Cynthia Ozick argued that the answer lies in both the power of her writing and the malleability of her image. *The Diary of a Young Girl* is keenly observant, darkly humorous—and deceptively accessible. The shallow analogies we can draw between our lives and Anne’s have allowed “a world that made of [the *Diary*] all things, some of them true, while floating

lightly over the heavier truth of named and inhabited evil.” It is easy to misread Anne’s diary, to think that because we know what it is to be young and misunder-



Anne Frank, left, and her sister, Margot, at the beach, ca. 1935. (Courtesy of Anne Frank Fonds/Anne Frank House via Getty Images.)

stood, we understand the Holocaust and its victims. It is easy to identify with the smiling girl in the photograph and to drape her in comforting sentiments that are easily disproven by the facts of her life and death.

We cast Anne Frank in our own image. In *The Ghost Writer*, an august judge sees Anne Frank as a beacon of Jewish community-minded probity, whereas the young protagonist Zuckerman sees her as the ultimate assimilationist. Some of that can’t be helped—it is human

nature to see ourselves in others. Some of it, however, relies on a willful blindness.

Unfortunately, now Anne's sister, Margot, has been subjected to the same kind of treatment. As I read Jillian Cantor's new novel, I encountered a very different Margot than the one who appeared in the *Diary* and her friends' recollections. The historical Margot had many interests and studied widely, including five different languages and literatures, advanced mathematics and science, ancient and modern history, as well as practical subjects, such as shorthand and book-

There is very little to be learned about human suffering from a book in which no one is fully human.

keeping. According to the *Diary*, in her spare time, Margot read "about everything, in particular about religion and medicine." Margot planned, after the war, to become a midwife in Palestine. She probably would have done well; her friends and the *Diary* describe a kind, levelheaded young woman.

Of that Margot Frank, Cantor has retained little, mainly just her knowledge of shorthand and Anne's teasing description of her as a "paragon of virtue" (two facts that appear early, on consecutive pages, in the *Diary*). The fictional Margot alludes to her former scholarship and religiosity, but seems to have retained little of either. There are few references to any books besides her sister's diary, few references to Judaism besides candle-lighting, and no mention of Israel at all.

Margot's current interests include eye color. If she isn't remembering that Peter van Pels' eyes were "blue, like the sea," she is noticing (or renoticing, many, many times) that the eyes of her American love interest are "gray-green." This thirty-three-year-old woman experiences what appear to be novel and intriguing sensations of "warmth" in the presence of these men and their eyes. Another of her interests is romantic rivals, both real and imagined. Watching the film version of the *Diary*, she is most upset not by its lack of realism, nor by painful memories it has triggered, but because it is Peter and Anne kissing in the final scene: "And Margot, she is nowhere to be found."

In Cantor's reimagining, Margot's past includes a se-

cret romance with Peter van Pels. Far from midwifery in Palestine, this novel's Margot dreamt of wifery in Philadelphia, where she and Peter had planned to reunite. The book is set in the Philadelphia of 1959, where Margot has taken on the non-Jewish name "Margie Franklin," concealed her roots, and found work as a legal secretary in a Jewish practice.

As I read on, I realized that *Margot's* closest literary cousins were to be found not in speculative fiction, but in romance novels, where the focus is on love and the endings are happy. Several tropes of the romance genre come into play in the novel: a romantic rivalry with a scheming sister (in this case, with Anne, which gave me pause, as the fictionally scheming rival was not yet sixteen); a mousy secretary in love with her boss; and a hidden identity that, once revealed, makes the love interest all the more enamored.

Although Margot/Margie is studying to be a paralegal (a slight anachronism in 1959, if I am not mistaken), she doesn't seem to have much interest in her work outside of the opportunity it provides to see her boss and crush, Joshua Rosenstein. A workplace discrimination suit brought by an Auschwitz survivor inspires excitement and ambivalence, but not for the reasons you might expect:

As I wait for Joshua to come out of his office, just before noon, my cheeks grow warm at the notion of our upcoming lunch, just the two of us. Then I find myself thinking, *That was how it began with Peter and me, lunch.* And it is confusing how my mind wanders to Peter, when I am so eagerly awaiting the time with Joshua.

The men in her life are little more than points in a romantic triangle. Peter is a lover from her past; Joshua represents her potential romantic future; otherwise, they are very similar. They both complain about their parents in rather adolescent terms (granted, Peter is an actual adolescent at the time). They both woo Margot with clichés ("You're really beautiful, even if you don't know it," says Peter, anticipating a One Direction song of two years ago). And, of course, they both have nice, albeit differently colored, eyes.

Other characters function mainly as catalysts to Margot's love life. Even Peter's cat, Mouschi, best known in the *Diary* for his urinary antics, gets dragged in to do his bit, plopped in Margot's lap so that Peter can say, "He knows

that you are special,” and Margot can experience exciting sensations of warmth. Bryda, the Holocaust survivor who’s bringing the discrimination case, and who presumably might have more on her mind than her lawyer’s love life, re-enters the novel at the end to say in her broken English, “I see way he look at you . . . You more than secretary.”

My favorite parts of *Margot* were those not tethered to the marriage plot. Some of Margot’s early reactions to American acquaintances and popular culture, including the film *Some Like It Hot*, are well-rendered. Bryda, the bitter, canny plaintiff of the discrimination case, seemed like an interesting character when she was first introduced. Some descriptions of the camps are haunting, although the impact of several startling phrases diminishes with their repetition. Edith Frank, in Margot’s memory, says some sensible and character-appropriate words.

Ultimately, though, the drive toward a happy ending takes priority, and the book begins knocking off obstacles. One such obstacle is Ezra Rosenstein, Joshua’s father and boss, whose focus on earnings prevents Joshua from pursuing cases that “help people.” So, Ezra sickens and dies. Joshua and Margot open a practice that matches Joshua’s ideals, where he wears shirts that match his eyes. Joshua also breaks off his engagement to the brassy, snobby Penny, a romantic rival out of a Taylor Swift video. (Apparently, the wedding was all Ezra’s idea.) The queasy-making historical irony—that their happiness results from the death of a purportedly money-obsessed Jew—eludes the blithe pair. The trauma of Holocaust survival poses another obstacle and is dispensed with equal efficiency.

United lovers, a happy ending: *Margot* certainly meets the basic genre requirements for a romance novel. The trouble is, it is not being presented to readers as a romance, but as serious literary fiction. Advance blurbs mention its truthfulness and psychological subtlety. Yet, this novel houses its romantic hero on *Knight Street*, repeatedly, and nonsensically, uses skipping to denote childhood innocence (Cantor imagines that Anne and Margot, at ages twelve and fifteen, are often skipping home from school), and gives everyone the same stilted and melodramatic speaking style. As for psychological insight: Of her father’s decision to publish the diary, Margot says:

If nothing else, Father is a good businessman, and

when he realized he could get the diaries published, make money, profit from the books, I am sure he thought, *Why shouldn’t I?*

(In reality, of course, sixteen English-language publishers rejected the *Diary* before it finally sold. Selling a victim’s story to a determinedly postwar world was not the quickest way to make a buck.)

In ordinary life, someone who places romance above all else may seem merely neurotic. In times of war, that person seems deranged, and this novel’s “romantic” approach to the *achterhuis* residents distorts their characters. When the Green Police come to the door, the narrative focus is on a fictional plot twist that could have been lifted from a soap opera: Anne discovers Peter and Margot in bed together. (In Cantor’s invented version of events, Peter was two-timing the sisters.) Anne then becomes hysterical, screaming at the police and refusing to leave. In reality, needless to say, Anne never came close to jeopardizing her family’s safety like that. There are more important things than romance, as she well knew.

To some, including perhaps Cantor herself, the inclusion of terrible historical events makes *Margot* more than a romance novel: It’s the Holocaust as ballast, with romance as bait. In this view, the sugary love story is there to help the lessons of the Holocaust go down easily. But there is very little to be learned about human suffering from a book in which no one is fully human. There is a reason why most genre fiction is so stylized, its characters subservient to plots. To put it starkly, conventional genre fiction tries to offer readers an escape from unwieldy and unhappy human realities, whereas literature mostly tries to do the opposite. An author does, ultimately, have to choose between the two.

As lines between genre and literary fiction blur, some writers seek the gravitas conveyed by serious subjects without being willing to grapple with the messiness of actual events and humans. Unfortunately, for every genre-bending Art Spiegelman, there is someone who learned precisely the wrong lesson from *Maus*: that it is possible to depict those who suffered and died in the Holocaust as cartoon characters.

Nadia Kalman is currently completing a novel set in Russia in 1917; her previous novel was The Cosmopolitans. She is also the editor of the website Words Without Borders Campus, which publishes global literature for classroom use.

Appelfeld in Bloom

BY SHOSHANA OLIDORT

Blooms of Darkness

by Aharon Appelfeld, translated by Jeffrey M. Green

Schocken, 288 pp., \$25.95

Great writers often repeat themselves, and Israeli author Aharon Appelfeld is no exception. A child survivor of the Holocaust, he has published more than thirty books—among them novels, short story collections, and a memoir—through which he explores the traumas of his past, sometimes directly, often less so.

Appelfeld was eight years old when the Germans invaded Romania, killing his mother and deporting him and his father to a Ukrainian labor camp. When the two were separated, the young boy escaped the camp. For two years, he wandered the forests, subsisting on wild fruit and berries. During winter, he passed himself off as a Ukrainian orphan in order to find work in exchange for meager shelter and food. For a time he worked as a servant for a temperamental prostitute; later, he joined the Soviet army, assisting in the military kitchen. After the war, he traveled to Italy with other survivors, and from there to Palestine, where he arrived, alone and uneducated, at the age of 14.

Appelfeld's work draws heavily on his childhood experiences. Although he writes in Hebrew, his works are all set in Europe, before or during the war. Always, the language is bare, even plain; observations and ideas are communicated in a simple, childlike voice. In *Blooms of Darkness*, the protagonist Hugo lives in an unidentified ghetto with his mother (his father has been taken away). From his apartment window, he watches the deportations, and observes desperate Jews grope in the dark as they try to make sense of what is happening around them and search for some means of escape. In these harsh surroundings, the boy has "learned not to ask" but "to listen instead to the silence between the words."

Many of Hugo's friends have been sent to the mountains with peasants who agree to hide them in exchange

for hefty bribes. But when the peasant that Hugo's mother had reserved fails to show up, she entrusts her only child to Marianna, a prostitute and old friend who has agreed to hide the boy. Mother and son escape the ghetto in the thick of night, and make their way through the suffocating sewer pipes. At the brothel, Hugo's mother instructs her son to do as he is told, and not to ask questions. When she leaves, the boy watches as his mother is "swallowed up in the darkness."

Hidden away in a closet in Marianna's room, Hugo invents an imaginary world filled with people from his past—teachers, friends, and relatives. But his only actual friend is Marianna, and the relationship, while not exactly equal, is mutual. He sees her as a beautiful, generous savior; she sees him as the only male not trying to take advantage of her. In the end, Hugo loses his virginity to a drunken Marianna at the tender age of 12. Appelfeld's descriptions of the boy's first sexual encounter are restrained, almost to a fault, and Jeffrey M. Green's excellent translation evokes the reticence that is typical of Appelfeld:

More than once in his life, Hugo will try to reimagine that drunken night. He will call up the thick darkness that was infused with perfume and brandy, and the pleasure that was mixed with a fear of the abyss. But not a word passed between them, as if words had become extinct.

Appelfeld's tentative relationship with words derives from his personal history. As a young émigré to Palestine, he quickly shed the languages of his childhood (German, Romanian, Ukrainian) and of his time during and after the war (Yiddish and Italian), and began writing in Hebrew before he was really "rooted in the language," making his earliest attempts "more a kind of stuttering than writing," the author once said. While Hebrew remains his only written language, Appelfeld, who resides in Jerusalem and is one of Israel's most celebrated authors, still sometimes feels as if "what I'm writing is somehow not my own."

In place of a native language, the writer holds onto his memories—which, for him, are physically palpable sensations. “The cells of my body apparently remember more than my mind,” Appelfeld wrote in his memoir, *The Story of a Life*.

Hugo, too, learns to rely on memory, and “records in his heart everything his eyes see.” In the ghetto, he takes in “the people who enter the house in a panic and spit out a horrifying bit of news” and those who “sit by the table and don’t utter a word.” Later, in Marianna’s closet, Hugo listens closely to the goings on beyond the door.

Often, Hugo imagines reuniting with his parents. But the Russian victory—after the boy’s nearly two years in hiding—brings with it new worries. Marianna, having slept with German soldiers, is accused of collaboration, and it is this cruel irony that ultimately separates her from the boy.

This isn’t the author’s first attempt at capturing the experiences of the Holocaust through the eyes of a child. *The Story of a Life*, his critically acclaimed memoir, recreates the past by recalling the author’s own idyllic childhood in Czernowitz and the ways in which it was so suddenly and irreversibly shattered. Similarly, the novel *Tzili* depicts a young girl “devoid of charm and almost mute,” who is left behind when her family escapes to safety. Like the young Appelfeld, Tzili spends the war years wandering through the forests, at one point seeking refuge with a prostitute.

With *Blooms of Darkness* the author has once again set out to evoke a Jewish child’s experiences of loss and loneliness in war-ravaged Europe. The novel has all the characteristic trademarks of an Appelfeld work, yet it is less effective than many of his earlier books. Perhaps this is because reticence can only go so far, especially when the author is revisiting themes he has already explored at length.

Still, this is a powerful novel and the mood of isolation that pervades the book’s final chapters is particularly haunting. Returning to his hometown, Hugo discovers that much is familiar and little has changed, except that “here and there a tree has been uprooted, and a sapling has been planted in its place.”

In the town square, refugees have gathered to seek out loved ones and try to get their bearings. Communication is difficult, if not impossible. A woman harasses a man, demanding to be told what happened at the camps. But the man refuses to speak. Observing the emaciated survivors, Hugo notes, “it is obvious that something within them has died. And the part that is left can’t explain what has happened to them.”

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The Rebbe and the Yak

BY ALAN MINTZ

El makom sheha-ruah holekh (Back from Heavenly Lake)

by Haim Be'er

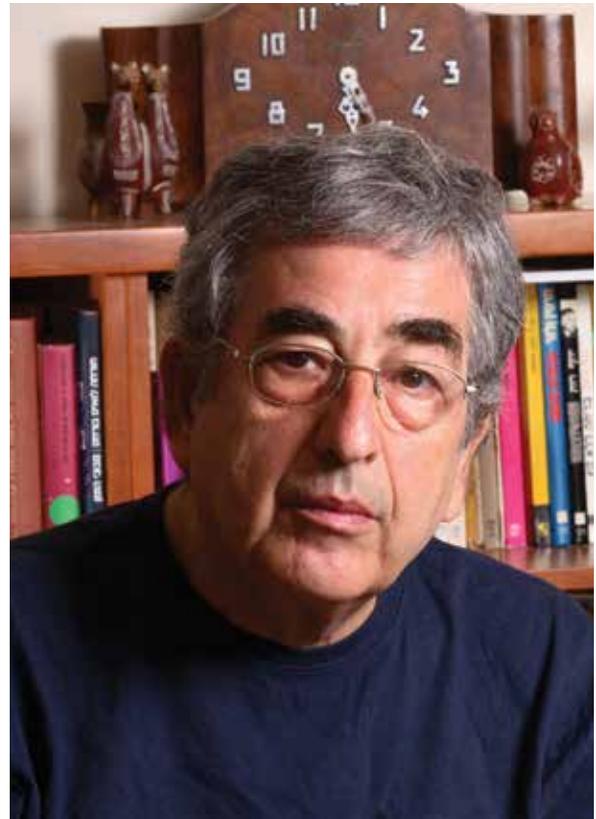
Am Oved, 452 pp., 90 NIS

During the High Holiday season in Bnei Brak, a city of *tzaddikim* (saintly rabbis) and their followers near Tel Aviv, the Ustiler Rebbe has a vivid and disturbing dream. A large buffalo-like animal stands against a backdrop of snow-capped mountains, and speaks to him. It is the voice of his ancestor and namesake Yaakov Yitzchak, known to (actual) history simply as the “Holy Jew” (*Ha-yehudi ha-Kadosh*), an 18th-century Hasidic figure of extraordinary spiritual integrity. The animal, or at least its voice, beseeches the Rebbe to rescue him. Ignorant of geography and zoology, the Rebbe consults with more worldly advisers, who identify the animal as a yak and the locale as Tibet.

The dream comes to the Rebbe three times, convincing him that it is truly a message from heaven rather than a trick of the unconscious. His great ancestor has, for some reason, been trapped in the body of a yak through the process of *gilgul*, the transmigration of souls. With the help of one of his followers, a wealthy Antwerp diamond dealer, the Rebbe secretly disappears from his court during the fraught weeks before Rosh Hashanah, flies from Tel Aviv to Beijing and then on to Lhasa, finally taking a Land Rover to remote monasteries in search of the famous wild Golden Yak and the soul of the Hasidic master imprisoned within it.

This is the premise of Haim Be'er's latest novel, *El makom sheha-ruah holekh*, in English literally translated as “to a place where the wind (or spirit) goes,” though the Israeli publisher's suggested English title is *Back from Heavenly Lake*. Be'er's novel is as funny as its premise is preposterous, but the protagonist turns out to be a man with a complex inner spiritual life rather

than the farcical Hasidic stick figure one might expect. Moreover, the language of the novel is suffused with antic echoes of sacred texts in a way that makes it a pleasure for any Hebrew reader with a modicum of Jewish literacy. That Be'er can pull all of this off makes him a unique figure in the landscape of today's Israeli literature, in which religious themes are usually regarded as



Haim Be'er at home in Ramat Gan, 2007. (Photo © Dan Porges.)

fruit of the poisonous tree. He is one of the few Israeli writers or public intellectuals who draw upon a wide range of traditional Jewish sources while still managing to gain the attention and admiration of a serious reading public that is preponderantly located on the secular side of a deeply divided national culture.

Born in 1945, Be'er used his own childhood on the outskirts of the old Orthodox neighborhoods of Jerusalem as the scaffolding for his early novels, while characteristically deflecting the focus from himself in favor of a gallery of colorful and eccentric characters whose lives

Be'er's language is suffused with antic echoes of sacred texts in a way that makes it a pleasure for any Hebrew reader.

could not be imagined in the pages of any other Israeli writer. Thus, at the center of Be'er's first novel *Notsot* (published in 1979 and translated as *Feathers* by Hillel Halkin in 2004), stands Mordecai, a childhood friend who is obsessed with creating a Nutrition Army that would establish a vegetarian state honoring the principles of Josef Popper-Lynkeus, a 19th-century Austrian Jewish utopian thinker. *Havalim* (published in 1998 and translated by Barbara Harshav as *The Pure Element of Time* in 2003), Be'er's most richly realized work, is a nuanced account of the author's family, including a pious, storytelling grandmother; a smart and independent mother who descended from the rationalist, anti-Hasidic stock of the Old Yishuv community in Jerusalem; and a passive father, a refugee from Russian pogroms, who loved synagogue life and cantorial music. Be'er's account of how he found his way to becoming a writer amidst these strong influences bears comparison to Amos Oz's more famous account of his parents' tangled lives in *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. Amos Klausner (later Oz) and Haim Rachlevsky (later Be'er) in fact grew up in nearly the same neighborhood in Jerusalem. As it happens, years later Be'er succeeded Oz as a professor of literature and creative writing at Ben-Gurion University.

Be'er extends his reach in his new, Hasidic-Tibetan novel by doing something unique in Israeli literature: examining the inner life of an ultra-Orthodox rabbi. The novel's great accomplishment is Be'er's ability to do this in a way that is at once satirical and serious. Here is a passage that demonstrates something of Be'er's capacity to operate in both modes at the same time. The Rebbe is in Beijing on his way to Tibet

with Simcha Danziger, the diamond magnate who has underwritten the trip. The two men are studying the weekly Torah portion, which happens to be *Ki Tetse* (Deut. 21:10-25:19), the beginning of which deals with the case of a Gentile woman captured in war. Meanwhile, Danziger has noticed, with alarm, his spiritual leader's keen interest in Dr. Selena Bernard, the beautiful zoologist who is accompanying them.

"Keep in mind, Simchele, that hidden in every transgression is a divine element. One who is engaged in worldly affairs—and who would know this better than you?—needs to conquer the sin in order to redeem the captive imprisoned within it. This captive," the Tzaddik of Ustil continued to teach Simchele, "is the very same 'beautiful woman' described in the Torah portion. A man sees her in her captivity, desires to take her as a wife, and brings her into his house."

On the one hand, the Rebbe makes a typically Hasidic interpretive move by spiritualizing the biblical text and making it an allegory for the inner life of the believer. On the other hand, he is simultaneously distracting his follower from his questionable behavior and rationalizing his conspicuous attraction to the lovely zoologist, with whom he does indeed fall in love as the story progresses. Is this a depiction of rabbinic hypocrisy in the best traditions of Enlightenment satire? Or is there a genuine lesson being taught about the need for religion to be fully engaged with and exposed to the world? Be'er manages to keep both ideas in play. In fact, this is a novel in which Be'er always has several balls in the air at once, and the good news is that despite the absurdity of its premise, it is both funny and affecting.

There are three very different genres of narrative that overlap and bump up against one another in this novel, and this jostling creates both brilliant effects and occasional confusion. It remains one of the most thought-provoking facts of modern Jewish history that the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah) and Hasidism both arose at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, often in exactly the same regions of Eastern Europe. *Back from Heavenly Lake* is, at one level, a return to the anti-Hasidic satires of the proponents of the Haskalah, known as *maskilim*. A tiny

minority compared to the Hasidim, the *maskilim* made the barbed arrows of satire their weapon of choice. Enlightened satirists like Josef Perl and S. Y. Abramovich (who went by the pseudonym Mendele Moykher Seforim) wickedly appropriated the very language in which their subjects thought and spoke, while leaving their readers to savor its absurdity. The novel's epigraph is taken from Abramovitch's *The Travels of Benjamin the Third*, a hilarious tale of a shtetl Jew who embarks on a grand quest but ends up only a few towns away. With the same wink and nod, Be'er lets the chicanery and sanctimony at the heart of the Bnei Brak court of the Ustiler speak for themselves.

In order to find a niche among the fiercely competing tzaddikim of Bnei Brak, the Ustiler's advisors and his wife Goldie have conspired to exploit the Rebbe's intuitive wisdom. He is presented to the public with the grandiloquent moniker—in talmudic Aramaic no less—as *Ha-tsintara De-dehava* (the Golden Catheter) who can penetrate people's hearts. The listening devices hidden in the anteroom to the Rebbe's study provide a useful assist in helping the Rebbe deliver his oracular counsel to Jews from all walks of life who seek his advice and then contribute in gratitude to his coffers. As the Ustiler's fame spreads, his handlers position him to be an Ashkenazi equivalent of such illustrious Moroccan holy men as the famous Baba Sali and his successors.

Alongside this satire lies a compelling realist narrative. Here is a man who is trapped—perhaps like his ancestor in the yak—inside an unhappy arranged marriage to the member of another famous Hasidic family. Goldie is a schemer who makes extra cash by smuggling diamonds into the US. Their three sons are devoid of learning or spirit, and the Rebbe's whole entourage is dependent on his willingness to continue playing the role of the wonder-working tzaddik. Although he sincerely believes in the heavenly origin of his strange dreams, it is evident to the reader that the Ustiler's mission to Tibet is a desperate if unconscious strategy to find a way out of his situation.

Even if the very existence of a figure like the Ustiler is just barely credible, Be'er does a good job of imagining what it would be like for a man who has never entered a theater or read a secular book or had a female colleague to encounter the outside world for the first time:

He had never spent time in the company of a woman who spoke to him as an equal. The only

women he knew were the mortified women who thronged his inner sanctum to pour out their troubles in hurried tones and with downcast eyes or the women in his family circle, whose words were outwardly modest and pious but inwardly empty, and this is not to mention Goldie, whose speech when they were first married was a kind of fake simpering, which with time became saturated with bitterness, resentment, and disappointment.

So when he meets Dr. Selena Bernard, the beautiful expert on high-altitude fauna who speaks to him simply and directly as a person, he falls hard. Yet although Selena is both impressive and desirable, the ease with which Be'er's sheltered tzaddik jumps into their love affair seems ludicrous and works against the novelistic credibility Be'er has been storing up.

The novel's most dazzling and credible creation is Simcha Danziger. Be'er has a sharp eye for the curious but real way in which fawning, abject piety can be combined with business savvy in the ultra-Orthodox world. Danziger holds his Rebbe's wisdom in high regard and readily submits to his moral instruction. Yet the lessons his Rebbe teaches almost invariably contain a humanistic twist beneath their holy garb. While the two men are observing a religious procession in Tibet, for example, one of the marchers stumbles and the religious figurine he is holding aloft almost crashes to the ground. Danziger, who is repulsed by such "idol worship," hastens to quote a famous verse in Psalms: "They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes but cannot see . . . they have hands, but cannot touch, feet but cannot walk." But the Ustiler fires back with Proverbs: "If your enemy falls, do not exult; if he trips, let your heart not rejoice." Behind his scriptural rebuke is more than good manners; he is genuinely open to the world in the way that the worldly businessman's piety cannot allow.

The third narrative layer of the novel is the story of the Rebbe's spiritual search. Despite his complicity in his own merchandising, the Ustiler possesses a genuine religious sensibility and a profound knowledge of both rabbinic and Hasidic literature. He understands his present dilemma as a belated version of his ancestor's quest for authenticity. His saintly ancestor, whose soul is now apparently trapped in a yak, was a student of the famed "Seer of Lublin." In time, the disciple took issue with the

master's desire to popularize the message of Hasidism. The "Holy Jew," as he came to be known, established his own court in Pshiskha, where he led a small number of chosen disciples in striving to unify ecstatic prayer with Torah study. His teachings were carried forward by his disciple, Menachem Mendel of Kotsk, who ridiculed wonder-working rabbis. The conflict between the Seer of Lublin and his erstwhile student is the subject of Martin Buber's novel *Gog and Magog*. Selena brings a copy of Buber's novel with her on the trip and finds that

Tibet serves as a foil for Israeli society, where the population has tragically alienated itself from its religious tradition.

the Ustiler has ironically—but entirely plausibly—never heard of it, even though his native humanism makes him sound at times like a Buberian Hasidic master.

The Ustiler Rebbe is seeking not only an elusive yak, but to extricate himself from his soul-crushing predicament in the contemporary world of Israeli Hasidism, and to find a purer path. As a place of genuine if sometimes frightening spirituality, Tibet serves as a foil for Israeli society, where a majority of the population has tragically alienated itself from the resources of its religious tradition, while a minority has turned religion into a prideful hieratic cult. But the contrast is, unfortunately, not really explored. There is a failure of nerve, or at the very least, a conceptual fuzziness, when it comes to parsing the religious moments of the novel. The Ustiler does finally succeed in finding the holy Golden Yak by the "heavenly lake" of the book's title, but whatever Gnostic enlightenment he may have received in the encounter is lost in the fatal breakdown or injury—it's never clear—he incurs at that very moment. The yak itself, and the captive soul it contains, remain a mystery.

Be'er has taken a big chance in attempting to combine three different literary modes in one novel, but his gamble pays off only in part. There are moments when we are buoyed aloft by the carnivalesque experience of *Back from Heavenly Lake*, and then there are others when the rapid switching back and forth among these modes leaves us disoriented.

Where this antic, overdetermined quality works to Be'er's best advantage is in his language, which might be the novel's true hero. The best Israeli authors today write in a literary Hebrew that is the culmination of a cultural smelting process that has been going on for at least the last century and a half. The religious meaning of words taken from classical sources has been leached out to fashion a secular literary Hebrew, which can then be mixed with the natural speech that has arisen organically from a living society. It is a powerful hybrid medium that has created exceptional literature. Yet reading Be'er makes us realize, heartbreakingly at times, how much has been given up to achieve this goal. Be'er himself uses the standard style adroitly and has a fine ear for slangy dialogue, but he also has at his disposal the daily prayers, the weekly portion, chestnuts from Psalms and Proverbs, the lives of the talmudic sages, the visions of the kabbalists, and, of course, the tales of the Hasidim. His Hebrew breathes of presence rather than absence. He blends these materials together like a joyous organ master who delights in the resources of his complex and magnificent instrument. In this, he can only be compared to his great predecessor S.Y. Agnon. Other writers of Be'er's generation have tried to integrate traditional materials, but their efforts often leave an aftertaste of sanctimony and entitlement. One hopes that the adroitness with which Be'er brings all of these elements together will serve as an inspiration for the next generation of Israeli writers.

It is perhaps *only* at the level of language, as in Be'er's masterful orchestration of Hebrew's many modes, that the contradictions of Israeli culture can be drawn together. If so, then it is not mere escapism to dwell in Be'er's world but a kind of positive duty to be performed with delight. Just as the rabbis positioned the Sabbath as a foretaste of the World to Come, reading Be'er's multi-valent novel sustains a larger vision of what the Jewish people could be. Despite the very steep challenges of translation, may the tale of the Ustiler and the Golden Yak soon have the good fortune of being available to English readers as well.

Alan Mintz was the Chana Kekst Professor of Hebrew Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the author of many books, including Ancestral Tales: Reading the Buczacz Stories of S. Y. Agnon and Sanctuary in the Wilderness: A Critical Introduction to American Hebrew Poetry (both from Stanford University Press).

Distant Cousins

BY MATTI FRIEDMAN

Reading novels published in the last year by some of America's best Jewish writers, I found myself struck by a recurring character—Israel. That Jonathan Safran Foer's *Here I Am* and Joshua Cohen's *Moving Kings* both feature Israel and Israelis as important plot devices might have been a coincidence. But then this fall came Nathan Englander's *Dinner at the Center of the Earth* and Nicole Krauss's *Forest Dark*, both of which are set mostly in Israel. Something's going on.

I came at these novels as someone the same age as the authors (40-ish) who left North America at 17 and has been living and writing in Israel since then. That might explain my sensitivity to this shift in American Jewish fiction. (I should also mention that I know Foer and Krauss, and that *Forest Dark* has a passing reference to an Israeli journalist named "Matti Friedman.") But I don't think anyone reading these books could miss their distance from the brash and rooted tone of "I am an American, Chicago-born." The center seems to have moved.

The Israel of each of these novelists is different, of course, but there are similarities. Two recount watching an Israeli war on TV from America and the strong emotions this elicits; two make reference to King David; two have *hamsa* keychains; two have the Mossad; all have soldiers; and all use a little Hebrew. Perhaps most tellingly, two feature American characters with Israeli *second* cousins—at first Jews in America and Israel were siblings divided by European wars, then first cousins, but now they're only second cousins, a generational fact that might explain the fraying connection as much as anything else. None of these novels is fully at home in Israel—they're more like Mars orbiters than rovers. They're not permanently on the ground. But they have entered the gravitational pull of this place, which makes it worth trying to figure out what, exactly, that pull is.

Saul Bellow once said that for moral critics the Jewish state was becoming what the Alps are for skiers. To see how prophetic this remark turns out to have been,

the reader need go no further than the recent collection of essays by writers who condemned the occupation of the West Bank after going on a little moral ski

The immigrant fires of writers who once hit America like shtetl-launched ICBMs are now too cold to even toast a marshmallow.

trip led by two prominent American Jewish novelists, Michael Chabon and Ayelet Waldman. None of the four authors here are up to anything as simplistic as that project (which I reviewed in the *Washington Post*), but moral dilemmas are certainly part of the draw. Englander's *Dinner at the Center of the Earth*, for example, which is about an American Jew who becomes a Mossad spy before going off the rails, has two characters set out the positions for and against house demolitions. "Giving five-minute warnings to old women who never race out the door with anything but their olive oil and a picture of Arafat? It's pitiful." "How else do you punish someone who's already gone? It's a deterrent." Elsewhere, there is a similar back-and-forth about bombing terrorists amid a civilian population, something the main character enables and regrets: "What we just did—it's not what I signed up for."

In all four novels Israel is the scene of strange and exciting events, if not outright enchantment, but the idea that magic is possible here is most present in Krauss's *Forest Dark*. (Home, on the other hand, is where the novels set jobs, divorces, affairs, and bar mitzvahs.) Krauss's narrator is a writer who has come unmoored in the United States and finds herself in Israel, which is evoked in descriptions of the Mediterranean, the warm and prickly people, the charmless concrete block of the Tel Aviv Hilton, and the smell of hot cat piss on the street—but also an Israel with the supernatural qualities suggested in some of the great stories set here, like the one in *Kings* where the prophet Elijah dramatically departs this earth

without dying, or the one where Jesus dies, then comes back, and then leaves again, but is still not dead. In *Forest Dark* a departed European writer might live resurrected as a humble Israeli gardener, or an aging New Yorker might take a taxi to the Negev and vanish.

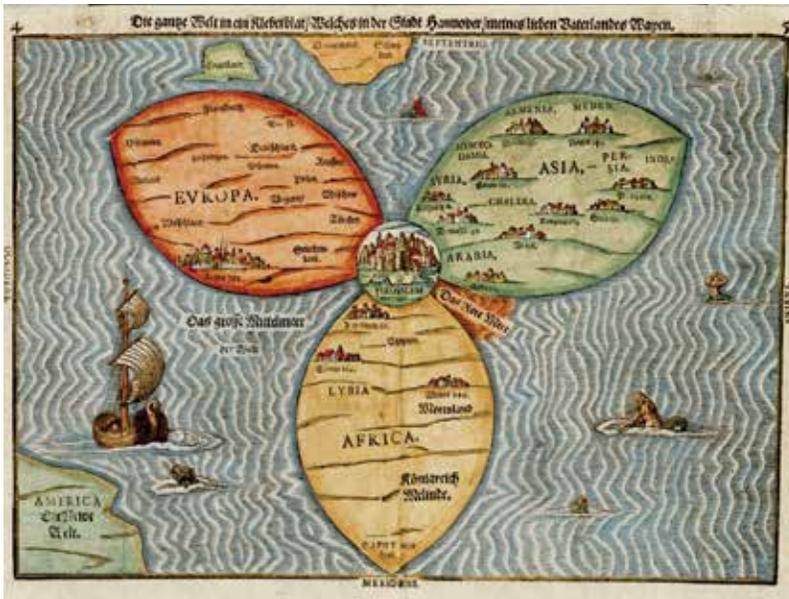
Many of the characters in these novels turn to Israel to shore up American lives that feel short on meaning, even if we're not meant to take

work in his New York moving and storage company and muses that there's something about Israel that is linked to immortality. "If he'd stay in touch with Israel," King says of himself after a heart attack focusses his thinking, "if he'd maintain with Israel, certain responsibilities would devolve on the living after his demise. He was almost sure of it, he almost said it aloud: who among the living was going to shovel dirt in his grave or say a kaddish? His daughter?"

Jewish American writers of a few decades ago might have poked around the strange Jewish country in the Middle East, but they knew that the real literary action for them was back home. The novelists of 2017 don't seem so sure. The immigrant fires of writers who once hit America like shtetl-launched ICBMs are now too cold to even toast a marshmallow. If you're not a recent arrival from the Soviet Union, you're not likely to have funny mannerisms, an ethnic chip on your shoulder, or much interesting history of your own. Yiddish nostalgia is stale, and with everyone in the suburbs, there is no American Jewish street. The broader American culture seems to offer little cohesion for a writer to either embrace or rebel against. So where do you go? As Shaul Tchernichovsky wrote in Berlin in the twilight of Jewish Europe a century ago, "They say there's a country, a sun-drunk country..."

And so there is—a country that seems to have hit its cultural stride, having recently struck some reservoir of distinctly Jewish fuel, turning into a blend of Beirut, St. Petersburg, and Palo Alto, but mainly turning into itself. It's a place that's messed up and revved up and moving, one that feels so different from the American Jewish world not just because it's Middle Eastern, and not just because it's endangered, but because it's alive.

Matti Friedman, a journalist in Jerusalem, is the author of The Aleppo Codex and Pumpkinflowers: A Soldier's Story (both from Algonquin Books).



Woodcut map with Jerusalem as the center of the world, by Heinrich Bünting, 1581.

that turn entirely seriously. At the end of Foer's *Here I Am*, in which an American family falls apart as Israel is struck by catastrophe and invaded, his main character gathers his courage and heads off to join the war. Entering a Long Island airport to be vetted along with other American Jewish volunteers singing "Jerusalem of Gold," he reflects, "I had written books and screenplays my entire life, but it was the first time I'd felt like a character inside one—that the scale of my tchotchke existence, the *drama* of living, finally befitted the privilege of being alive."

In Cohen's *Moving Kings*, David King brings over an Israeli relative, a young military veteran, to

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