Margins within the Margins: An Interview with Ruth Knafo Setton and Farideh Dayanim Goldin

Derek Parker Royal

In the fall of 2007, I was invited to Lehigh University to give a lecture on Philip Roth's fiction as part of the Philip and Muriel Berman Center Lecture Series. My host was Ruth Knafo Setton, the Moroccan-born writer in residence at Lehigh’s Berman Center, the Professor of Practice in the University’s English Department, and now current director of the Berman Center. During my time there, I had the pleasure to talk with Setton about her own work—her first novel, *The Road to Fez*, was published in 2001—and the state of contemporary fiction. While she agreed with me that the past several years had witnessed a flowering of new Jewish American writing, Setton was quick to point out that the authors who were capturing all of the attention were of Ashkenazi descent. There was no one in this growing list of writers, she argued, who was creating from a Mizrahi or even a Sephardic sensibility. What is more, and ironically enough, most of America’s first Jews, as well as their representatives in the arts and media, were Sephardic. Setton explained to me that if Jews were still marginal voices in America, then she was part of a community that felt marginalized within that margin. I responded by inviting her to express her voice in the form of an interview. She agreed, and in early 2008 we began an engaging e-mail conversation that grew from a discussion of Sephardic authors to a full-blown exploration of her own work and aesthetics. Along the way, we invited Setton's friend and fellow author, Farideh Dayanim Goldin, to join in. Goldin's unique background as a writer—born in the *mahaleh* (Jewish ghetto) of Shiraz, Iran, to a family of Jewish com-
munity leaders and then later immigrating to the U.S.—provided a much-needed Mizrahi perspective and, along with the views of Setton, gave new meaning to my understanding of contemporary Jewish American writing.

In addition to The Road to Fez, Setton has written a variety of poems, stories, and essays. Her piece of creative nonfiction, “Living between Question Marks” (2010), is a lyrical and evocative expression of what it is like to live between cultures, reside among diverse languages, and inhabit a space of memory and exile. She has recently completed a new novel, The Zigzag Girl, and is currently working on other works of fiction as well as a poetry collection. She shared part of her novel in progress, Darktown Blues, with me during our interview. Setton has received a number of fellowships, has taught as a visiting writer at several colleges and universities, and has been nominated for (and winning) a variety of fiction and poetry awards, including multiple nominations for the Pushcart Prize. Goldin, a tireless advocate for Jewish women’s issues, is perhaps best known for her memoir, Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman (2003), but she is also a prolific speaker, fiction writer, and essayist. Her moving “Conversations with My Father” was part of National Public Radio’s Hanukkah Lights special in 2008, and her stories and essays have appeared in collections such as Turnings: Writing on Women’s Transformations (edited by Louisa Igloria and Renee Olander, 2000), To Mend the World: Women Reflect on 9/11 (edited by Marjorie Agosin and Betty Jean Craige, 2002), and The Flying Camel: and Other Stories of Identity by North African and Middle Eastern Jewish Women (edited by Loolwa Khazzoom, 2004). She was recently the consulting editor for a special issue of Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies and Gender Issues (devoted to Jewish women writers of Iranian heritage, 2009), and she is currently at work on her second memoir, Iran: My Homeland.

Over the past two years both Goldin and Setton gave their time to discuss a variety of matters, including not only their own writing, but also the current state of Jewish American fiction, the place of the Sephardic and the Mizrahi literature within this community, their positions as women writers, the curses of “exoticism,” and the in-between cultural status that seems to define not only a good part of their identities, but much of their art as well.

Derek Parker Royal: Over the past several years there’s been increased critical attention given to the newer generation of Jewish authors in the United States, a phenomenon that has been called the “new wave” in Jewish American writing. Do you see yourself as part of this community of writers?

Ruth Knafo Setton: New wave of American Jewish writers? As far as I can tell, the new wave is the old wave, recycled for a new generation. It’s Ashkenazi, lox, bagels, and horseradish. Not a hint of cumin. Not a scent of orange blossoms.

DPR: So you feel that your and Farideh’s work isn’t a part of this?
RKS: I am reminded of a comment made by Ben-Gurion in the early days of the state of Israel when he was asked about the difference in treatment accorded to immigrants from Morocco (settled in primitive camps) and those from Eastern Europe (situated in city hotels and apartments): “They are family.” You can bet he didn’t mean the Moroccans. The Jewish Don Corleone (Don Cohen?) stands at the front gate—yes, it’s a gated community, contrary to what they’d have you believe—of the American Jewish Temple of Literature, identifying who goes in and who stays out. Russians? Family. Poles and Germans? Please. Latin Americans? Cousins. Sephardic/Mizrahi? Very suspect, the relatives you hide in the back room. There is a growing awareness of multiculturalism in Jewish literature, and I am glad to see it. But when I compare that awareness to the explosive dynamic inclusiveness of other contemporary ethnic groups writing in America (e.g., Latino, Indian, Russian, Native American), I find it woefully timid.

Do I have a Moroccan-Jewish chip on my shoulder? You bet. Am I still waiting for someone to make my day and knock it off? Bien sur.

Farideh Dayanim Goldin: I teach Jewish American literature at Old Dominion University. There are no anthologies that address Sephardic/Mizrahi history and literature in America. (I have to mention Mizrahi because we have been incorporated into the Sephardic culture even though we have our own distinct culture. Mizrahim are the Jews of the Middle East and the Muslim world. “Mizrahh” means “East.”) Most courses on American Jewish literature recognize Ashkenazi literature in translation and Ashkenazi writers who were not born in the United States. Isaac Bashevis Singer, for example, wrote in Yiddish; he was born in Poland. Elie Wiesel was born in Romania; he writes in French. They are both literary icons. Their books are often taught as Jewish American literature at the universities. However, I am not sure if literature written in Persian by an Iranian Jewish writer living in California would be accepted under the same category. I often wonder how much of this invisibility is the fault of the Iranian community for not promoting our writers and poets, and how much of it is due to a certain prejudice against us. Hopefully, with time this will change.

DPR: And you’re wondering why scholars are not bringing Mizrahi American voices into the fold?

FDG: Yes. There is not enough scholarly research on Mizrahim. Until recently, I complained that many of my articles on Iranian Jewish women writers had been ignored by American Jewish publications. One was finally published in Jewish Quarterly (Autumn 2005) in England. Two years earlier, I had requested membership at a Jewish women speakers’ bureau. I didn’t hear back. I called. I was told, “But you are not American!” Their website showed numerous women who lectured on Jewish women immigrant writers. Many Jewish women immigrants built the foundation for Jewish writing in this country. English was their second
or third language after Yiddish and maybe Russian or Polish. I have lived in the United States much longer than in my country of birth. I write in English. I give my lectures in English. Why am I not American? I asked them.

But now new scholarship has been generated. The Hadassah-Brandeis Institute and the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, for example, devoted the 2009 issue of *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies and Gender Issues* to Iranian Jewish women. I was honored to be its consulting editor. I am indebted to Shulamit Reinharz for her vision, for her efforts to promote scholarship on Jewish women around the world. Additionally, both The Hebrew University and Tel Aviv University have well-funded programs on Iranian Jewry. Iranian Jews in the United States and Israel have been behind this new wave of research and scholarship. I am very excited about the publication of novels and autobiographies by authors of Iranian background both in the United States and in Israel.

**DPR:** Both of you give quite emphatic, and very personal, responses. How do these matters affect you as writers?

**RKS:** When I write I am not American, Jewish, Sephardic, female—or rather, I am all of them, and therefore, none of them. I am a writer, which I take to mean that I am a human being who explores the human condition in my particular way, through my experiences, history and dreams. In the process of exploring difference and otherness, I find (create?) connections that may not be immediately apparent. In the words of Danny, the Moroccan Jewish trumpet player in my novel in progress, *Darktown Blues:*

> He plays because he can’t not play. He plays because music is his language, and he’s got to talk, and this is the only way he can do it. He plays because no one else has sung his life—from Mogador to Memphis, Paris to New York. A Moroccan Jew who can’t forget a thing: not the muezzin’s cry . . . the tears of the Jewish children in the fourriere . . . his father’s murderous voice, “You are nothing.” . . . Django’s golden laugh and his mother’s silvery one . . . Prosper’s gravelly warning, “Devenir humain: the greatest war we have to fight, against ourselves” . . . and Lili’s radiant question mark aimed directly at his heart, pierced and lodged there. That’s Danny’s song. No one else can sing it, and he’s got to sing because if he doesn’t, melodramatic as it sounds, he’ll die.

But after the writing is done and the work seeks a home . . . When I sent out my first novel, *The Road to Fez*, an editor responded, “You write very well. Next time write about the real Jews.” Another editor: “I’d publish this book but it would be a shelf of one.” A Sephardic Jewish critic: “Why tell this story now? And if you must, why tell it with so much passion?” And an Ashkenazi critic told me angrily, “This isn’t the way I imagined Jews in Arab lands.”

**DPR:** Were all critics as confining in their reactions?
Interview with Ruth Knafo Setton and Farideh Dayanim Goldin

RKS: No. One noted that “Setton takes risks on every page.” That’s more what I was after, but of course that means my writing doesn’t fall comfortably into any category. *The Road to Fez* explores love in every form—from sacred to taboo—without taking a stand. If that’s not problematic enough, it dives into the little-known world of Moroccan Jews and reveals highly charged pieces of their history, controversial in our politically correct atmosphere. It’s not a political call to arms, not an exotic (unreal?) road trip through Morocco, not multicultural enough or too multicultural. Some of the most moving responses to the book have come from non-Jewish readers all over the world—including China, Korea, Brazil, Rumania, and Spain—who tracked me down to tell me, “This story is my story.” Overall, critical responses to my first novel have been extremely favorable. And since I’ve begun publishing, there have been a number of Jewish critics, writers, academics who have been supportive and open to different voices.

FDG: I would like to add one more piece to Ruth’s list. Our stories are often told by the elite of our societies. Iranians who read *Wedding Song* are often the by-products of an elite English education. In Iran, they belonged to the very privileged class of Jews who studied at American, British or French schools. They mostly lived in the capital, Tehran, where they enjoyed much more freedom. They often were unaware of other Jews who lived in the Jewish ghettos, who lived in the more oppressive cities in Iran. As first generation immigrants, they would like to remember the best of Iran. They would like for their children to see the country they left behind through their parents’ rose-colored glasses. I have been called a liar by privileged assimilated Iranian Jews who left Iran when they were quite young.

DPR: Are there many of your readers who find that your accounts of Iran resonate?

FDG: Yes. I have received phone calls, e-mails, messages through my website or Facebook from readers who have thanked me for telling their stories through my own. I know that there are silent people whose stories can be told through a writer like myself. I think we—Ruth, myself and other Mizrahi/Sephardic writers—keep alive stories of our people, stories that would have been otherwise forgotten.

DPR: Wouldn’t you think that with such an emphasis on multicultural perspectives, both in the academy and in the general culture, there would be more readers out there wanting you to keep those stories alive?

RKS: I’m surprised that the cumin-scented chip still wobbles on my shoulder, that the growth in awareness of multicultural literature didn’t knock it off. Unfortunately—as I wrote in my essay, “Ten Ways to Recognize a Sephardic ‘Jew-
by multicultural, they don’t mean me. To complicate the issue, I confess to having mixed feelings about the label “multicultural writer.” At its worst this category invites excessive tribalism, suffocating self-obsession and political agendas that turn writing into propaganda. At its best it offers windows and insights into different perspectives and worlds. What disturbs me is that American Jewish literature, already a minority, shuts the door on the minority within the minority. In a sense I understand the resistance to a history that isn’t theirs, a vision that emerges from unfamiliar traditions, voices that don’t conform to their images and expectations. But it’s like being doubly, even triply exiled. I expected some form of alienation from other Americans; I did not expect it from other Jews. And despite the fact that people seem to understand that we exist, we are often—still!—segregated to Sephardic anthologies and conference panels.

DPR: Farideh, what are your experiences with being, as Ruth puts it, a minority within a minority? Does this phenomenon come out in your writing in any way?

FDG: I am now working on a second memoir, *Iran: My Homeland*, with two voices: my dad’s and mine, my life as a new Jewish immigrant in the United States and my father’s as a refugee in Israel. I watched as Israelis mocked my father on the streets when he was a broken man, having lost his country and much of his possessions. We were both strangers within our Jewish communities.

Those early years in the United States coincided with the arrival of South African Jews. I was surprised to see our community welcoming our South African immigrants with such enthusiasm, fighting over them, wanting to be seated with them at functions, whereas I had basically been invisible for many years. Comments were made that, at best, were thoughtless. I was quite alone and new to our community. I took my three daughters to the synagogue on Shabbat, partly to make friends, to connect with my new community. A woman approached me and asked why I would attend her shul. She grew up there, had connections, but what about me? I didn’t know what to say, so I stood there for a while not saying a word, and then walked away. My husband (an American-born physician) and I went to a party once. He tried to introduce me to a prominent Jewish doctor in town, “This is my wife, Farideh.” The doctor said, “Oh, yes, I have met her, Fatemeh.” I corrected him, “No, Farideh.” He shrugged, “Okay, Fatemeh, Fa...whatever.”

DPR: What you’re describing smacks of the worst kind of prejudice.

Recently, I was at a meeting, which was set up to hear an Israeli professor as a possible candidate for teaching Jewish Studies at our local university. A rabbi, who knows me well, said that when visiting Israel, he had heard Moshe Katzoff on the radio. “His language was foul, not suitable for a President.” The rabbi asked the Israeli professor, “Do you think that’s because he is Iranian?” Of course if one changes the word Iranian for Jewish or Black, one can see that his
statement was cloaked in the nastiness of his prejudice. When I confronted him, he wasn’t apologetic.

During the Soviet Jewry exodus, my husband and I went to a meeting with the purpose of soliciting funds for the settlement of Soviet refugees. A high-ranking Israeli official was our guest speaker. We were at a friend’s house; I had a glass of wine in my hand, not expecting what came next. Speaker after speaker stood up to say that this was the time to make Israel what it should be: a country oriented to the West, eschewing the growing Mizrahi influence. What was so appalling to me was the fact that the Israeli official couldn’t have imagined that an Iranian would be in that room. He clearly expected that everyone would mirror his bias. I experienced much anti-Semitism in Iran, but this was the most painful since it came from a place of comfort and familiarity.

I can give many more examples about events that exacerbated my sense of alienation among my own people. However, regarding conferences, I often participate simply as a writer or an Iranian writer. I have also been lucky that Iran is a hot topic, and I have been invited to speak to diverse groups about Iran and Iranian Jews.

**DPR:** How do you define the voice of the Sephardic or Mizrahi Jew? Who are some of the authors you look to in your own work, or in even in your teaching?

**RKS:** Because our origins, histories and traditions defy easy categorization—North African? Bulgarian? South American? Middle Eastern?—I would define Sephardic Jews as any Jews who are not Ashkenazi. And because our food, music, rituals, and even our languages mingle into a Mediterranean nomadic stew, same as our foods—served twenty courses at the same time—I envision Sephardic literature as a world cafe under the sun. The opposite of a gated house, this cafe has no roof or walls; it sits on the sand, facing the sea. And because our vision of time is circular and synchronic, writers dead and alive are welcome: Primo Levi, Albert Memmi, A. B. Yehoshua, Edmond Jabes, Samy Michael, Erez Bitton, Lucette Lagnado, Edmond El Maleh, Homa Sarshar, Andre Aciman, and others. In my essay, “Living Between Question Marks,” I attempt a description of the Sephardic mood:

We are Jews with a Mediterranean accent who carry the memory of the sun in our hearts. Enter our houses in the mellah or juderia, and go directly to the soul—the tiled inner courtyard crowded with women and children—like us, hidden, secretive, restless. Dance with us: flamenco guitar and hypnotic desert oud, drums that pound like bare feet running on a beach, nostalgic and mournful yet always with a beat that circles on itself. Look at our family photos: men wearing tasseled fezzes and djellabahs, women with painted icon faces and pointed babouches beneath silver-threaded caftans. Eat with us: bstilla, with its exquisite commingling of sweet and savory, fragrant
couscous, salads vivid with color and wit, and flaky orange-scented desserts that tingle your senses with their beauty and then melt on your tongue. After the meal join us in the salon arabe for mint tea or cardamom-spiced coffee, and discuss the destiny of the Jews, the concept of home and identity, and tell Johra stories in Arabic, French, Hebrew, Spanish and English—all in the same sentence. Laugh until you cry. Remember the sun.

Yes, it’s lyrical, but there is a richness, a joie de vivre, a spicy wit and appreciation of life I find in the Mediterranean-Jewish world that I don’t see anywhere else. What a shame to deprive people of it!

FDG: I have taught Andre Aciman’s book, Out of Egypt (1996), Gina Nahai’s book, Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith (1999), Ruth’s essay, “Ten Ways to Recognize a Sephardic ‘Jew-ess,’” poetry by Majorie Agosin, and interviews with Ilan Stavans, to name a few. I have to work harder to find material for this segment, and I do feel guilty for putting them in a separate category. I also include Mizrahi writings in my World Literature and Women Writers courses. I consider this a personal responsibility to educate my mostly non-Jewish students about Mizrahi, Sephardic, and Ashenazi Jews, celebrating their achievements and their literature.

DPR: What about the American timbre of the voices in this community? Who are some younger American Sephardic or Mizrahi Jewish authors that you feel aren't getting much attention?

FDG: Fortunately, Dalia Sofer’s book, The Septembers of Shiraz (2007), received great reviews in the New York Times. I included her book and Dorit Rabinyan’s Persian Brides (1998) in a course on Iranian Women Writers. I also managed to get an invitation for Sofer to our university’s literary festival. We must be mutually supportive to one another and promote each other’s works. Ruth and I have done this for each other. We must encourage new writers. For every Mizrahi/Sephardic who writes, there are thousands who are afraid, who remain silent.

DPR: Ruth, earlier you mentioned “the minority within the minority,” or the margins within the margins. How does this find expression in your own writing?

RKS: This is a question about negotiating difference and otherness. For me it comes up after the writing. When we watch a foreign film we rely on visual cues as well as subtitles to translate the “foreign” world into one that is comprehensible. In ethnic/minority writings, unless the author is writing solely for those who are already familiar with her world, what I call the “Subtitle Factor” comes into effect. How much of her world needs to be translated and explained? Does every foreign word need to be defined? Does the work require footnotes and glossary?
How much explanation is too much? Does the work need an introduction as a gateway? A writer can plunge forward, letting the hardy reader follow her into the Steppes or the Sahara; or she can acknowledge the “Subtitle Factor,” and create a bridge into the foreign world. In *The Road to Fez*, I did include a glossary; however, I did not italicize any words. Mediterranean Jews speak in a mélange of languages, often four in a single sentence, and to determine which word is the “foreign” one is beyond me.

**DPR:** What are the potential drawbacks in focusing on what for many readers is a “foreign” world?

**RKS:** Well, one drawback is timidity. Fear of penetrating the alien world without a guide. There is also the tendency to exoticize such a world, something I strenuously resist: I’m more in-your-face exotic! For a member of a largely unknown minority, the negotiating becomes a slippery bridge between what Philip Roth calls P.R. and writing the truth. I’ve been asked more than once by well-meaning Sephardic readers about my responsibility in describing a world that for many readers will be their only contact with it—ever. In other words, if among my Moroccan Jewish characters, I include illicit lovers, liars, and cowards, then I should balance them by including saintly rabbinic and Kabbalistic students and noble women. But what is my responsibility as a writer? Certainly the answer—for me—goes far beyond borders and minorities, and at the very least, punches holes into metaphorical and literal walls through which we can see each other and breathe each other’s air.

**DPR:** Tell me more about your “in-your-face exoticism” and how that translates into your representation of the Moroccan Jewish experience.

**RKS:** It’s too easy to play the exotic odalisque/Rick’s Café world with Morocco. I wanted to take risks: to bite into the forbidden fruit, turn the key of the locked room, lift the veil, peer behind the curtain, become a trespasser of country, body and soul—where the exotic and the erotic become facets of each other. The exotic is the erotic: we desire what we don’t fully know and understand. Hence, the shifting mirror of the Jew, particularly the Jewish woman, in the imagination of Muslims in precolonial Morocco, European Romantics, and men (Jewish, Muslim, and Christian).

**DPR:** I do see the temptation to exoticize the Sephardic experience, even within—or especially within—the American Jewish community. Have you found a similar impulse with Mizrahi concerns, Farideh?

**FDG:** Our culture might be exotic because it is unfamiliar. For example, no one complains when a writer mentions stopping by a deli to get lox and bagels. When
I write about gondi, an Iranian Jewish food, the smell of roasted chickpea flour and cumin permeates the story with a tinge of foreignness. Once another writer told me that I used food in my stories as a crutch, but he himself wrote about hamburgers and hot dogs. We write about the food we eat. Hot dogs and hamburgers were exotic food when I lived in Iran. Having said that, yes, you are right. I think Edward Said would have had unkind words about, for example, Dora Levy’s books and the way she exploits the myth of exotic Iranian Jewish women and their sexual rituals in a Shah’s harem. But that’s also a genre of literature, and she obviously has a lot of readers. Readers are smart enough to differentiate between fact and fantasy—I hope.

DPR: Have critics or readers cavalierly described your work as “exotic”?

FDG: Not the critics, but definitely the readers. I am not as worried about being called “exotic” so much as being labeled “primitive.” I have to constantly remind my readers that the events in Wedding Song cover fifty years of my life, during which Iran changed rapidly from a poverty-stricken post-World War II country to a modern, progressive state. My paternal grandmother was married off at age nine, never learning to read or write her own name; my mother was forced into an arranged marriage before puberty at the age of thirteen, barely finishing elementary education. In contrast, my sisters and I have earned graduate degrees and speak multiple languages, a testimony to the cultural evolution in Iran.

I think older Jewish readers understand this better than younger, more privileged generation, who has forgotten that their ancestors immigrated to the United States from places very similar to my background. I address this in my essay, “My Iranian Sukkah,” published in Where We Find Ourselves: Jewish Women around the World Write about Home (2009). My husband, whose grandparents came to America from Eastern Europe, often tells me that I remind him of his Grandmother Fannie, who spoke with an accent, who listened to radio shows, who had bitter memories of her old country. She cooked food from scratch that sounded “exotic” to my ears; Teiglach? Gribenes? I pride myself on having these similarities with Fannie, a courageous woman who left Russia in steerage for a better life in America. However, unlike her, who wanted to forget about her life in Russia, I insist on being very vocal about my country of birth, about my own life, and the lives of the previous generations. If I don’t tell their stories, who will? It saddens me that Fannie’s stories are lost. Unlike her, I teach my recipes to my daughters. I serve this strange, “exotic” food to my American guests. I have also inherited Fannie’s mixing bowl, chopper, and her recipe for chopped eggplant. I am passing that down the line as well. I mix our, hers and mine, “exotic” Mizrahi/Ashkenazi customs.

DPR: This kind of memory, “exotic” or otherwise, is at the center of your writing, Farideh. Your “Hanukkah in Iran: Conversations with My Father,” for example,
a moving tribute. I was wondering how memories of your father define you as a writer from Iran, and as a Jew? Or another way of putting it, how does your father link you to your history?

**FDG:** My father and I were very close, yet we had a turbulent relationship. I wrote that essay for NPR’s *Hanukah Lights*, trying to highlight the way two different generations of Jews processed our Iranian lives. My father, like many Jewish people of his generation, loved Iran and would have never left had the Revolution not forced him into exile. In contrast, I had tried to sever my relationship with everything Iranian. I was angry. My father encouraged me to appreciate our Iranian culture even though he should have been bitter, having lost so very much. I watched Persian TV programs with him in Israel. Whenever I wanted to buy something, he introduced me to Iranian shopkeepers. Those were the ones he trusted. When he spoke to me, he spiced his words with Persian poetry. My father had already passed away when I wrote “Conversations With My Father.” I was still arguing with him as it had become a habit of ours.

As a side note, the NPR representative who solicited me for the article loved it. They paid me well; I cashed the check. Then the radio host who was assigned to read my article refused to do so. It was too “political,” she said. I asked to have it back. They told me that I could keep the money and write another piece for the following year. I wrote something more heartwarming, more palatable this time, a story about my hopes to find a dear Muslim friend with whom I had lost contact after the Revolution. The article was later published in *The Jerusalem Post*.

**DPR:** So how do mothers figure your writing?

**RKS:** My mother was my first muse. Night after night, we lay awake in this new country of ours, America, while my father worked the night shift and my little sister slept. Huddled in my bed, both of us afraid of the foreign night sounds, my mother told me stories about Safi, the small town in Morocco where I was born and where she grew up. A born storyteller gifted with an amazing memory and the art of creating suspense, my mother recreated the wildly eccentric seaside town and breathed life into it. And like Scheherazade, she held back the harsh light of winter mornings with the fascinating soap opera that took place on the North Atlantic coast. It wasn’t until years later that I understood the urgency in my mother’s tales, the need to communicate her past to me, to make me see the Jewish world in Morocco that had vanished, except in her memories. And now, in mine. By transferring these stories of a vanished world to me, she imparted a sense of responsibility: to remember. To never forget the people and places that gave birth to me. When I began to write, I returned to those long magical storytelling nights in which my mother’s memories became my memories and her stories mine.
FDG: Some of the articles in that special issue of *Nashim* addressed the topic of motherhood. In fact, the cover artwork depicts the artist’s mother sitting in a chair, her hands folded on her lap; on the wall behind her hangs a drawing of her daughter’s right hand. The voices of our mothers have not been heard, I think. They passed down their stories through the oral tradition, but they were rarely given credit for their efforts. As I have interviewed writer after writer, it has become clear to me that our mothers were our muses, our source of creativity. That issue of *Nashim* conjures that voice, giving it credibility.

DPR: Ruth, as you show in *The Road to Fez*, certain narratives, such as that of Suleika, are romanticized or revised to where they become disconnected from history and take on a life of their own. In other words, they become myths. What are your responsibilities as a writer when confronting such powerful stories?

RKS: Like Cinderella, Suleika has over three hundred versions to her story—but the difference is that Suleika was a real historical figure. A seventeen-year-old Jewish girl, her brief life and tragic death have been picked apart by the guardians of official history and reassembled as (depending on whose version you choose) Jewish cautionary tale, Arab crime of passion, or Christian holy virgin martyr legend. By the time I came to her story, nearly one hundred and fifty years after her execution, it had already hardened into myth; and by the time I visited her tomb in the Jewish cemetery of Fez, I saw Jewish and Arab women praying side by side, and European Christians kneeling before her tomb. Her story warned of the dangers of crossing borders, yet seemed to transcend every border. A Jewish girl who chose death rather than a forced conversion to Islam. Yet today, she’s worshipped as a saint by three faiths. How to write a story in which every detail contradicted another? For years I was a sleuth, searching for the one ultimate version that would finally reveal the truth. Meanwhile I tried to do justice to her by squeezing crucial elements of each version into one story. Unsurprisingly, I ended up with a swollen, ungainly mess.

Years of struggle passed during which I reimagined, reshaped, and rewrote her story. I cannot describe to you the sense of responsibility I felt during that time, the absolute determination that even if my book never saw the light of day, I would not compromise by erasing and distorting portions of her life. Even if I never found out what really happened, how she crossed the border into the Arab world, whether or not the Sultan of Morocco fell in love with her (as many versions insist), I would not stop until I found the way to tell her tale that cheated neither of us. During those long years of endlessly rewriting the novel, of course, I was doing my apprenticeship as a writer, learning not only my craft but also my own code of honor. The turning point came when I understood that I would never discover the truth, that maybe there was no single truth, and that even if I’d been a member of the breathless audience who witnessed the executioner teasing the back of her neck with the point of his sword, I still might not know the truth.
The only way to be true to her—and to me—was by not choosing a single truth with which to encompass her life. Who would want to be narrowed and flattened to that extent? I rewrote the novel—for at least the fifth time in its entirety!—this time inserting fragments of Suleika’s tale between the fictional story of my characters, Gaby and Brit. These paradoxical, contradictory fragments contribute an ironic commentary on the novel itself—where everyone has his or her own Suleika. Finally, imperfect as it still was, the structure of the novel sang true to me. I offered the reader the chance to examine the complex nature of identity, history and myth by sifting through the fragments of a woman—as I had—and to create her own Suleika.

DPR: Who is your Suleika?

RKS: Hmm. Fair enough. Suleika is a Moroccan-Jewish girl who stands on the border between Africa and Europe, Judaism and Islam, tradition and modernity, the world of women and that of men, the sacred and the profane. A girl who represents all things. People look into her story as if they’re looking into a pool and see their own needs and desires reflected. As I wrote and struggled through the many contradictory versions of her life, I realized I was, in a sense, writing my own story. Suleika was my sister. She is my sister. That’s why I fought the tendency to exoticize her, why I chose Iranian artist, Shirin Neshat’s controversial photograph for the cover, why I refused to whitewash the forbidden love story in the novel. “The road to Fez” was quite simply the road to the heart awakening. My own heart, as well as that of others.

DPR: You’ve told me a little bit about how you feel as a Jewish writer, and specifically as a Mizrahi or Sephardic writer in America. But how do these ideas mesh with your thoughts on being a woman writer?

FDG: Women writers give me strength. I knew I wanted to write, that I could write, that I must write after taking a women writer’s class, reading and analyzing women writers from around the world. Their stories have empowered me, strengthening my own voice.

RKS: From the very beginning my writing has been deeply imbued with a sense of what it means to be a woman. And that destiny has been interwoven with what it means to be a Jew. After receiving rejections for early versions of my first novel—most dealing with the fact that it was too foreign for them—one night I had a dream that I’d open Suleika’s story with these words: “I am going to tell you a story you don’t want to hear.” Thinking about this today saddens me, but that is how it felt in those days of premulticultural awareness, when any foreign/ethnic writer was suspect, particularly when she challenged their world views. Looking back, I see that from the very beginning the idea of the “Jew” and the
idea of “woman”—these two dangerous, unknowable creatures—were tightly, irrevocably interwoven. The question has never been fully answered: was Suleika executed primarily because she was a woman or a Jew?

For me, being a woman, a writer, and a Jew form the braided strands of my identity. I can't remove one without weakening the others. My writing is profoundly influenced by the fact that I am a Jew and a woman. Every story I write is a daughter I send forth into the world. She emerges in fragments and slivers. I gather the pieces and breathe life into them, set her on the ground, and watch as she takes her first steps. She stands on the border, always on the border: between you and me, him and her, star and cross, star and crescent, dead and living, past and future. You can't miss her: she carries her mother’s memories on her back, yet she stares at you with eyes that burn like six-pointed stars.

DPR: What do you see as the particular burdens or hurdles that Jewish writers face as women in today's literary environment?

RKS: The challenges are similar: first of all, to be read; and second, to be read without prejudice. The burden is on us—Jewish writers, women writers, writers of color and ethnicities that are unfamiliar to the mainstream American readers—to write work that is enlightening, entertaining and exciting enough to capture their interest. But the burden is also on the readers to be open to new worlds and worldviews that may contradict or overturn their ideas of reality. So yes, you’ve got to be read, and that means publishers and readers willing to take a chance on the unknown; and yes, your work has to be good enough, powerful enough to make the reader see through the differences that separate us to the similarities that connect us.

FDG: I fear we might become a victim of our own success. At the last Associate of Writers and Writing Programs Conference, I was surprised to hear so many panelists voice resentment against Jewish women writers. There were no panels on Jewish writing. With the help of the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, a group of us tried to put together a panel on Jewish women writers for this year’s conference. It was rejected. A few years ago I organized a panel on Iranian Jewish writing. That was rejected as well. I hope I am wrong about this issue.

DPR: Ruth, your fascination with Suleika—a strong female artist figure in her own right—seems to me a fascination with borderland identity, one that transcends boundaries, one that is constructed in an in-between space that pulls from dual (or multiple) origins but rests easily in neither. Do you see this as a general characteristic of contemporary Jewish American writing, including your own work?

RKS: Yes, I definitely see this uneasy borderland identity as one shared by Jewish American writers, as well as by other minority groups. The difference between
Jewish writers and those of other groups is the slippery definition of what it means to be Jewish—and of course, who decides on the definition. Is it a religion? Race? Nationality? Historical or cultural identity? Most Jewish writers I know struggle with where they stand in terms of American literature, particularly if their own Jewish identity is not superficially evident in their work. Are they simultaneously ethnic and mainstream? Jewish and American? Is it possible to be both on the fringes and on center stage? What if they see themselves on center stage, but readers, publishers and critics move them to a smaller, ethnic stage? I love that, for Philip Roth, Jewish history begins on a kitchen table in Newark. When I first read him I was drawn to that image of solidity and rootedness—a wooden table on a solid floor, in Newark. Newark, for God’s sake!

DPR: Does your history begin in a similar place?

RKS: Where does Jewish history begin for me? In a brass key that hung on my grandfather’s wall in Morocco, “the key to our home,” a home he described in such loving and rich detail that it was years before I realized he was describing the house of our ancestors in Toledo, Spain, before the Inquisition. And yet, brass key in Morocco or wooden table in New Jersey: maybe both symbols exist in that in-between space that Jews create wherever they go, a place they call—for lack of a better word—home. That in-between space is exactly what I explore in my essay about living between question marks:

From the first moment I saw the Spanish question marks—one inverted and one right side up—that bracket questions, I shivered with pleasure. I thought, I can live between these question marks. There is something very Jewish about Spanish question marks. Maybe something female too. They question the very essence of the question and make concrete what is implicit: that the inner mystery is contained, almost protected, within the two question marks. Like the Moroccan courtyard, in which the truth is turned inward. Like my grandfather living between two worlds—the historical reality of Spain and the imagined reality of the future in Jerusalem—while standing on his rooftop.

I guess what I’m trying to say is that I’ve learned to live between those two question marks. I could live between dashes too, but never between two periods! Too final. Too sure of themselves.

DPR: You mentioned Philip Roth earlier. He also wrote about this in-betweenness quite forcefully in *The Counterlife*. In fact, the very middle of that novel takes place in flight, suspended in air and unanchored to either the turbulence of Jerusalem nor the relative safety of the West. I’m reminded of that passage that opens your novel, *The Road to Fez*. Brit, in her journal, writes about a photograph taken of her when she was six years old and about to leave Morocco for the
United States: “my patent leather shoes will be lifted from the tiles, will dangle in the air, as I hover between two worlds—the New and the Old, belonging to neither, clinging to both.”

RKS: That may be why *The Counterlife* remains my favorite Roth novel: the sense of existing between countries, identities and lives, of somehow trying to remain aloft while never choosing (settling on) a single identity or life. It embodies the conflict of living on shaky ground between a nebulous future and a vanished past. When I was a child, I tried to hide all signs of my “difference” from my American neighbors and friends—the foods we ate, the music my parents listened to, their French accents, and that dim, powerful memory: Morocco. With time I’ve come to accept the rich complications a hyphenated identity brings, and the fact that no matter how rooted I may feel in America, the slightest breeze tilts me toward a world I can’t forget.

DPR: These complications of a hyphenated identity that Ruth refers to—what do you make of this idea, Farideh, that we can best define ourselves and our writing within some ethnic or other sociopolitical context?

FDG: In my early years in America, during a dispute with an American family member, I was labeled as someone who was “different,” who didn’t understand American culture. Someone told me that my English wasn’t good enough to comprehend issues. I internalized that conversation that went around and returned to me as all gossip eventually does. For the next five years I questioned myself; I was unsure of my identity. Who am I? Where do I belong? I asked myself. The turning point for me was a trip to Israel with my youngest daughter. My parents had a tiny apartment. I slept under their dining room table. It was a hot summer night, and they didn’t have air conditioning to cool off the suffocating air. But the air cooled off, as it does in the desert climate, a few hours after sundown. I woke up to a nice breeze coming through the window, the sound of Kol-Israel in Persian, the aroma of warm bread and hot Jasmine tea. I was transported to my younger years in Iran. It was a feeling of comfort, of belonging. That week I visited the ruins of Petra in Jordan. Persian and Arabic have similar script. I enjoyed reading the signs in the letters of the alphabet I had learned as a child. Although Iranians don’t consider themselves to be Arabs, the body language of the Jordanians we encountered was all too familiar. I felt as if I could finally remove the mask I had worn since my arrival in the United States in 1975. It was liberating.

Returning to the United States, I had a different sense of myself. That family member had been right. I was different. I processed information and events around me differently, but that was a good thing. I knew who I was: Iranian, Jewish, American, and many other things. I didn’t have to be “All-American,” whatever that is. I could disagree with parts of my Iranian upbringing without
having to discard all of it. I am a person of many identities, but I don't have to label myself, and I won't allow others to define me.

**DPR:** Both of you keep bringing up Morocco and the Middle East, for you the “Old World.” I’m thinking of the significance of Eastern Europe, Poland, and the Ukraine in the works of other recent Jewish novelists such as Michael Chabon and Jonathan Safran Foer. For them, obviously, this Old World is a link to their familial and cultural past. But as several critics have noted, at times there is a tendency in them to cast a nostalgic glance and romanticize that past. Do you find yourself tempted to use your ancestral homelands in a similar fashion?

**RKS:** Like them I am tempted, of course. However, for me, the temptation is rather different since their “Old World” is much more widely known than mine. My first instinct is to recreate Jewish Morocco, a world that is not only unknown and vanished, but that has been largely erased by revisionists of the past. We are even denied our history! I find it curious that the Jews of Arab lands have been largely left out of the Jewish and Middle Eastern historical narrative, as if their stories are not significant in the current situation. I know that Sephardic/Mizrahi writers have been attacked on all sides when they bring up painful events in their history: for example, the Jewish refugees of Arab lands; the massacres, persecutions, and forced conversions they suffered; their dhimmi status. In Morocco, when I read an excerpt about Suleika from *The Road to Fez*, a Jewish professor asked me with genuine curiosity, “But why bring this up now? It happened so long ago.”

**FDG:** I am almost always categorized as a Middle Eastern writer, not an American Jewish writer. I don’t mind that. My Iranian culture will forever be a huge part of my identity. However, with the advance of technology, it should not be difficult to cross reference authors. I am a woman, a Jew, and an American with very close ties to Israel. My parents and my sister escaped to Israel after the Revolution. Consequently, we are not equally proficient in Persian, Hebrew, and English, the three languages we speak. My father passed away not long ago. During the shiva period, as we sat together on the floor, my two brothers, two sisters, and my mother, stumbled and fell on our words. As our various languages did not convey our feelings, we switched from one language to another, struggling to communicate. This cross-cultural experience is depicted in Ashkenazi literature as well, Henry Roth’s *Call it Sleep* (1934), or Cynthia Ozick’s *The Shawl* (1989), for example. Yet, it is exotic and foreign when I write or speak about it. Sometimes I feel that my shared experiences with American Jews do not bring us closer to one another. It rather separates me from the majority. I have become the voice of their grandmothers, whom they have tried to forget or to file in a “long ago” cabinet of Jewish history.

**DPR:** This is an interesting point, “cross referencing” authors. How do you feel about such ethnic labels being placed on your writings? And have there been
any instances where you’ve been labeled in ways that you think might restrict or prejudice your readership?

**FDG:** One Jewish reviewer was irate that I would mention my devotion to America and reject Iran. In a politically correct world, maybe that’s a sin. The Iranians call this *gharb-zadeghi,* West-smitten. The Iran that I rejected was the country that oppressed me. She didn’t mention that I had emphatically warned the readers that this book was just a small part of my life and even a smaller section of Iranian life—and yes, I do have the right to criticize my country of birth as she has the right to criticize America. I tried very hard to make my memoirs a bit claustrophobic to show that I lived in a small city and a house that was suffocating with its old-fashioned rituals and beliefs—no sympathy there either. She was upset that the book didn’t show the vast expanse of Iran, and that it had not mentioned Shirin Ebadi, who had not won her Nobel Prize when the book was finished, and I didn’t know a thing about her during the time frame of my memoir. (I recently met Ebadi and have taught her book.) I felt as if the critic were appalled by a story so different, so foreign to her senses that she found it easier to dismiss rather than try to understand it. I wonder if she would have written the same review about a minority suffering in the United States.

**RKS:** Ethnic labels can be informative—such as, she’s a Moroccan Jewish writer, rather than an Indian—but also restrictive—as in, does that mean she writes only about Morocco and Jews?—particularly when the label itches or chafes (e.g., but what does a serial killer have to do with Morocco? A prehispanic mask maker with Jews? How about a woman magician?). Since no label covers what I do, except exactly what I do, I try to ignore them and hope readers will explore with me. I’ve been accused by militant Sephardic activists of failing to “join the Sephardic army” in our war against the Ashkenazim. I’m not kidding. I’ve also been scolded for not being militant enough, for being too ethnic, for not being ethnic enough, for writing too much about Moroccans (in a novel taking place in Morocco), for not writing enough about Moroccans (in a story about Irish magicians), for being too positive, for being too negative. You name it.

**DPR:** How do you deal with this unfair perception?

**FDG:** I think a writer, Jewish or not, Mizrahi, Sephardic, or Ashkenazi, has to remain true to her words and keep on writing. I spoke to a Jewish group outside Philadelphia a few years ago. A woman raised her hand after I finished, claiming that I was not telling the truth. When I asked a few questions, it was clear that her reality was very different from mine. She had lived in a wealthy Muslim suburb outside Tehran. The neighbors were unaware of her Jewish background. She left Iran at a very young age and married an American Christian. That makes her experience different from mine. A book about Harlem doesn’t tell the story of
everyone in the United States, New York, or even Harlem. My book about my life in a religious family in a small town doesn’t have to encompass all life in Iran, or all Jewish life in Iran, or even all Jewish life in my city of birth, Shiraz. So, I will keep on writing and talking to give a different perspective that is just that—different, maybe unusual, maybe unimaginable, maybe even exotic—but the truth as I know it.

RKS: By writing my way through it, by communicating the pain through words, by trying to show that the richer and denser the tapestry of voices in American writing, the richer and denser we become as human beings. And maybe subversively I try to blur and confuse the borders and boundaries. For example, Danny—the father in Darktown Blues—is a jazz trumpeter. Jazz saved his life in Morocco, gave him a dream of a place where all men’s voices have an equal chance to be heard. He called it Louisland, and that’s why he brings his family here. A fellow jazz musician in the book describes Danny’s sound this way: “He’s got a different groove, mixing sounds from North Africa and the Mediterranean and bop, and making them his own.” Maybe that’s what I’m after—taking all these influences, mixing them up and making them my own. Creating an immigrant stew that is a mix of New World ingredients and Old World memories, a stew that feeds not only your belly but your hunger for your roots. With each spoonful, you are simultaneously there and here, then and now, the you who existed across the seas and the you who walks the streets of America. Food that’s a bridge. A novel that’s a bridge.

DPR: What are you working on now? Where is your writing taking you today?

FDG: I am working on many different projects. My second memoir is in its final stages; I just finished a substantial article about the impact of language on memoirs written by Iranian women. Two years before he passed away, I asked my father for a list of Judi, Judeo-Persian words in the dialect of the Jews of Shiraz. The language is just about dead. My next project is to create an online Judi dictionary, making the language accessible to researchers.

RKS: I’m working on a collection of poetry, several memoirlike essays, the revision of my novel, Darktown Blues, and a new novel that explores the power of myth in modern-day life, particularly myths of female power. This new novel is profoundly inspired by a recent Mediterranean voyage during which I sailed and taught on a ship that stopped in Athens, Rome, Naples, Istanbul, and Casablanca, among other ports. The experience of wandering through ancient-new cities while feeling the weight and timeless presence of history and myth was very moving and inspiring on many levels. I felt I was returning to my roots, retracing the voyage my parents made when they sailed from Tangiers through the Strait of Gibraltar, and across the Atlantic to New York City. The novel I’m work-
ing on is set in contemporary America with non-Jewish characters, but in surprising ways, it’s deeply Jewish—going back to our most ancient stories, myths, rituals, dreams, and yearnings. So far no Moroccans have entered the story, but they have a way of appearing in my works in progress. Usually around chapter 3, a Moroccan family will move to town and brew mint tea, cook couscous, play the oud, and serenade me with songs my mother sang to me.

**DPR:** What’s on the horizon with Iranians and your work, Farideh?

**FDG:** I would like to end on a more optimistic note. There are now more Iranian Jews living in the United States than in Iran. There is a critical mass of Iranian Jews in Israel as well. The Mayor of Beverly Hills, Jimmy Delshad, is an Iranian Jew from my city of birth, Shiraz. We have found a voice, partly because of our numbers, partly because we have adjusted to life under democratic governments that do not persecute us for our thoughts, for our spoken or written words. The colossal painstaking research on Iranian Jewish life—by the Iranian journalist Homa Sarshar and her son Houman Sarshar in the United States, and by eminent scholars such as David Menashri, Amnon Netzer, and countless others in Israel—germinated hope and pride. The new generation of Iranians are mostly upbeat and proactive. For example, in 1999, when thirteen Jews were arrested in Shiraz in charges of spying for Israel, older Iranians suggested silence; otherwise, they feared, other Jews would have been in danger as well. The younger generation of Iranian Jews refused to accept humility. I believe those thirteen are still alive because of these young Iranians’ decision to get involved. Similarly, there are new voices in Iranian American literature, such as Gina Nahai, Roya Hakakian, and Dalia Sofer, to name a few.

However, personally, my own fears persists as I put the last touches on my new memoir—not the fear of not being received well by the American readers, not the fear of being categorized as “other.” Rather, the fear of my own Iranian Jewish community in the United States threatens to paralyze my writing hand. I face the worst fear of all for a writer, the fear of facing myself and to be as truthful as possible. But that is universal, not Mizrahi, Sephardic, or Ashkenazi—not Jewish or Gentile—just human.