Tugging at Jewish Weeds: An Interview with Steve Stern

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In the narrative world of Steve Stern, the unexpected is not uncommon. Rabbis take flight, the ghosts of dead writers literally haunt their readers, children trap themselves in their own dreams, angels become petty thieves, and golems are created out of the mish-mosh of forsaken alleyways. The same kind of unpredictability could be said of Stern’s life as a writer. By his own admission, he was surprised that his first two books—Isaac and the Undertaker’s Daughter (1983), a collection of stories, and The Moon & Ruben Shein (1984), a novel—including Jewish characters and subject matter. Born in 1947 and raised in a completely assimilated household in Memphis, Tennessee, Stern had little exposure to traditional Jewish culture. He received his bachelor’s degree from Rhodes College in 1970 and his Master’s of Fine Arts from the creative writing program at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville in 1977, and between 1979 and 1986 taught as an adjunct instructor in almost every institution of higher learning in Memphis. In the mid-1980s, his relationship with his Jewish heritage took a fortuitous twist; unable to find steady work as an adjunct instructor, he obtained a job at the Center for Southern Folklore as a transcriber of oral histories. Here he inadvertently stumbled upon Memphis’ Jewish past through his introduction to the Pinch, an old ghetto community whose unearthing was, in the author’s words, “as strange as discovering the lost city of Atlantis.” In much of Stern’s subsequent fiction, this lost neighborhood would take on
almost mythic proportions and energize his writing in ways that he
could not have imagined.

His efforts met with critical success. The first collection of
Pinch stories, *Lazar Malkin Enters Heaven* (1986), won the
Edward Lewis Wallant Award for the best Jewish American
fiction, and both *Lazar Malkin* and *A Plague of Dreamers* (1993)
were *New York Times* Notable Books for their respective years.
*The Wedding Jester* (1999) received the National Jewish Book
Award, and Stern is also the recipient of an O. Henry Prize and
two Pushcart Prizes for short fiction. His stories and essays have
appeared in a variety of notable publications, including *Epoch,*
*Salmagundi,* *New England Review,* *Prairie Schooner,* *Tikkun,* and
*The Jewish Daily Forward.* Such wide-spread attention brought
him an invitation from Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New
York, to serve as their Writer-in-Residence (a position he currently
holds), and most recently a fellowship from the Guggenheim
Foundation. According to the blurbs on his books, Cynthia Ozick
calls herself “a zealous admirer” of his fiction, and Harold Bloom
has pronounced him “a throwback to the Yiddish sublime.”

Yet despite these many achievements, Stern feels himself to be
an obscurity, an author whose presence is as ethereal as his found
memories of the Pinch. Much of this attitude is due to his reserved
manner. He is often uncomfortable about discussing his own work,
but when he does he brings a healthy dose of self-deprecating—
and highly insightful—wit. Much of this humor can be found in the
email-based interview I conducted with him between November
2005 and March 2006. I asked Stern, for just a little while, to put
aside any reservations he might have in discussing his work and
share with me his experiences as a writer. During our dialogue he
was forthcoming on the genesis of his subject matter, and he
willingly shared with me his philosophy of fiction. What follows is
an interview in which Stern touches upon a variety of subjects,
from the inextricable links between fact and fiction, to the current
popularity of *Yiddishkeit* (Jewishness), to the development of *The
Angel of Forgetfulness* (2005), his most recent novel.
Derek Parker Royal: A lot of your fiction takes place in the Pinch, a Jewish neighborhood in Memphis, Tennessee. What are the origins of this setting?

Steve Stern: Much of the Pinch originates in my imagination, but it was indeed an actual place—an East European Jewish ghetto neighborhood that existed from the 1880s till just after World War II on and around North Main Street in my hometown of Memphis. I didn’t discover it until I was well into my 30s and the Pinch was wholly inhabited by ghosts. I was thirty-three, thirty-four, and had been writing fiction for nearly a decade, stories in which, to my surprise, undigested Jewish elements would turn up. (Given the pasteurized version of Judaism I was exposed to in my reform synagogue, I might as well have been a Methodist.) There came one of those banner days when the college I’d been adjuncting at called to tell me registration was down and my services would no longer be needed. Not three minutes later my agent called to say that the two books she’d been peddling in New York were getting lukewarm responses, and she herself was not all that keen [on my writing].

Feeling that life was effectively over, I appealed to a childhood friend who ran a local folklore center for a job. Folklore, I figured, was at least a poor relation to literature. She had me transcribing oral history tapes for a project involving interviews with the denizens of a vanished Beale Street. These were black musicians, promoters, colorful characters whose stories excited me to no end. And wouldn’t you know it, there was a Jewish component as well. There’d been a clutch of pawnshops and dry goods stores on Beale owned by Jewish proprietors who maintained a kind of symbiotic relationship with their black clientele—the only such black and white interaction to my knowledge in town. Anyway, my enthusiasm was noticed, and it was also observed that I was local, Jewish, and worked cheap. So I was given the title of Ethnic Heritage Director and assigned to explore the roots of the Memphis Jewish community.

DPR: What did you do to acquaint yourself with the Memphis past, and how did you turn these experiences into fiction?
SS: I began with the old pawnbrokers, all of them retired and advanced in years. To a one they alluded to growing up in the Pinch, an area I had never heard of before. It turned out that North Main Street had for nearly half a century been home to a vibrant Jewish community, complete with half a dozen synagogues and as many kosher butchers and bakers. There were fish markets, retail shops, and shtibls [small houses of prayer] all along a street of tenements in which the families lived above their stores. It was a self-contained Jewish ghetto like others in any sizable American city, but as I began to harvest the memories of the children of immigrants who’d grown up there, I started to feel proprietary.

Pretty soon the past with its ghost population—spooking about empty lots, parking lots, a bridge ramp, a power plant—began to assume more life in my mind than the desolate present. I felt as if I’d tossed my line into the past, expecting to snag a quaint memory or two, and hauled up the lost city of Atlantis. It was no doubt a bit self-aggrandizing to read anything like destiny into the experience, but the discovery of the Pinch felt like a homecoming, a place where my stories (which had been searching for somewhere to belong) could happen. The material of my fiction has traveled in recent years far beyond the bounds of the Pinch, but for at least three books North Main Street served as home base.

DPR: What was the reaction from the actual people on North Main Street? I would think that they would be pleased to be “immortal-ized” in your fiction.

SS: After the first book of Pinch stories (Lazar Malkin Enters Heaven) appeared, the survivors of the old neighborhood were so grateful for my mythologization of the place that they sued me for a quarter of a million dollars. It seemed that I’d attached the name of a woman who was still alive to a high-spirited character in one of the stories who eats pork barbecue in her father’s kosher home. Being a good Jewish daughter, the woman sued me for slander, but as I am a small and petty individual, I’ve found a way to get even. It turns out that the family of Elvis Presley, when they first came to Memphis, rented rooms from a family named the Dubrovners. A pious Orthodox family, the Dubrovners needed a non-Jew to tear
the toilet paper and flick off the lights on Shabbos, and young Elvis Presley was conscripted as their Shabbos goy. Fagie, the Dubrovner daughter who grew up to sue me, would have been a little older than an Elvis trembling on the brink of adolescence. My theory is that she initiated him into the mysteries of the flesh and that (yes!) there was a child. Or at least that’s the rumor I’ve been spreading for years as I wait for the next libel suit.

**DPR:** How was the Dubrovner lawsuit ultimately resolved?

**SS:** The libel suit was ultimately dropped, though not before the book had been effectively killed. The New York lawyers intimidated the Memphis lawyers, who talked Mrs. Schaffer, née Dubrovner, into dropping the case on the condition that I write a public apology to be printed in *The Memphis Hebrew Watchman*, a local Jewish newspaper with a circulation of around three. So the public pillorying could have been worse. The real consequence was that Viking postponed the release of the paperback of *Lazar Malkin* for another year, by which time the book was entirely forgotten—dream reviews notwithstanding. My career was consigned thereafter to the outer dark, where it has largely remained ever since.

**DPR:** Is this the only time as a writer that you found your fiction “bleeding” into the non-written world?

**SS:** I tend to view my own biography as another shaggy dog tale I can borrow themes and motifs from, distorting the facts in any way that whim or narrative design dictates. I’ve borrowed from my own life in the same way that I’ve borrowed (or poached) from the storehouse of Jewish folklore and mythology. This means that bits and pieces of real live people occasionally turn up in hybrid fashion in my stories—which was especially true of the characters in *The Angel of Forgetfulness*. Sometimes an old friend will threaten me with bodily harm for the way I’ve bent, folded, and spindled their life, when in fact the life I’ve abused is mostly invented, with only here and there a characteristic drawn from life. But my friends take such joy in their outrage that I seldom disillusion them by explaining that the characters are not really them.
DPR: You mentioned your most recent novel. How did your lived experience inform the subject matter of The Angel of Forgetfulness?

SS: The original impulse for The Angel of Forgetfulness was a far cry from my “lived experience.” I simply wanted to write the tale of a fallen angel and his son by a mortal woman, and I wanted that narrative to play out among the streets, theaters, and cafes of the old Jewish Lower East Side. But that story generated another, which included a character who (retroactively) became the author of the tale of the angel and his son. Nathan Hart, a ghetto Scheherazade, employs the story of the fallen angel, told in installments, to seduce the free-spirited Keni Freischutz: This is on the Lower East Side circa 1910. Then Nathan’s story generated yet another, about a character in the 1960s who receives the legacy of Nathan Hart’s unfinished manuscript concerning a fallen angel from his aged Aunt Keni. That character is Saul Bozoff, whom I use on occasion in other fictions as an alter ego. His receipt of the ragged manuscript (along with his dying aunt’s expressed desire that he complete it) was my means of introducing my own personal attachment to Yiddish culture into the text.

Saul’s narrative also gave me an opportunity to describe some of my own circuitous journey via the counter-culture—the hippie commune, the European wanderjahre—into the Jewish past. So the novel, through its various narratives, has something like a systole/diastole relationship between present and past. Or put differently, a cross-section of The Angel of Forgetfulness will reveal concentric narratives moving outward toward the contemporary world from a mythic core. Something like that; though a reader’s eye view should still perceive the thing as a single entity: the alternating time-frames dissolve into simultaneity, the several narratives all prove to be variations of the same—and the author’s lived experience gets to include, beyond his own nebbish biography, an historical and mythic past.

DPR: Czeslaw Milosz once said, “When a writer is born into a family, the family is doomed.” If we consider “family” the imme-
diately social sphere, do you think that this might be the case with most authors? With you?

SS: Speaking personally, I think I’m pretty harmless, but my family, most of whom are dead, assumed (usually without reading a word I’d written) that I was dragging the family name through the mud. This was due to their memories of me as an offensive youth, who they must have assumed grew up to be an offensive adult. They often tried to prevail upon my poor mother, already anxious with my making any kind of a public noise, to stop me before I wrote again. So much for my penny-ante Philip Roth experience. Most of the friends who’ve known me from my early years tend to treat my writing like some embarrassing affliction—like a goiter or clubfoot—which they feel is inappropriate to mention. Having since amassed a circle of friends who share the same affliction, I am able to sustain the illusion that I’m normal for days at a time, so long as I don’t stray outside the community.

DPR: And yet you write so often about artist figures, characters with creative imaginations who are described as “misfits” and dreamers. I’m thinking of Nathan Siripkin and Leonard Shapiro from your first collection of Pinch stories, Zelik Rifkin and Hymie Wisse in *A Plague of Dreamers*, and Nathan Hart and Saul Bozoff who, as you’ve already mentioned, are at the center of *The Angel of Forgetfulness*. I know that most writers concern themselves with artist figures, but in your fiction there seems to be a considerable number. Why do you think that is?

SS: I once had a job at a car wash where one of the transients who worked there, after twelve hours of wiping hoods and fenders for about ten bucks, said, “This is a job for poets and dreamers.” I suppose it’s obvious why any writer writes about artistic types—a clearly narcissistic exercise. What writer isn’t an outsider and what story doesn’t in some sense serve as a metaphor for the act of storytelling itself? Forfeit your outsider status, and you lose your ability to perceive experience from the kind of vantage that allows you to shape it into significant designs. My parents were not educated people, and the house I grew up in was barren of books, music, and art. When I began to get literary impulses, I still
thought of writers as swashbuckling characters of mystery and romance. I knew that whatever they were, I wasn’t. Consequently, writing for me has always seemed a kind of trespassing into a forbidden world.

This feeling of poaching or trespassing is compounded by my sense of pirating a tradition (i.e., *Yiddishkeit*) that was never my birthright, that I’ve appropriated by plundering books rather than experience. So my characters are frequently torn between two worlds—the one they’re born into where they tend to feel awkward and uncomfortable, and the one they are trying to enter by means of Rube Goldberg vehicles assembled out of bootlegged myths and dreams.

**DPR:** This sounds like the predicament of many of your protagonists, perhaps a theme common to all of your works.

**SS:** The problem for these characters often lies in the fact that the machinery of dreams draws its power from the engine of *olam hazeh*, real world experience. The past is barren when not illuminated by its relation to the present, the dreamer unfit for time-travel if he’s yet to inhabit his contemporary moment. My characters may even make it in their headlong flights as far as Paradise, where their crashed vessels leave them marooned among visions no longer animated by the vitality of human experience. If there’s a still point where a balance is struck between experience and dreams, my characters have yet to find it, and I would be disingenuous if I didn’t confess that their problem is my own and so informs much of what I write. I took to heart at an early age Yeats’s adage that “The intellect of man is forced to choose / perfection of the life, or of the work.” By the time I realized this was bullshit, the damage was done, and I’d made a duality of my life the opposing facets of which were mutually exclusive. I’ve been trying to resolve the conflict (with appallingly little success) through my fiction ever since.

**DPR:** As you say this, I’m thinking particularly of your character Saul Bozoff. He makes an appearance in several of your works, most recently in *The Angel of Forgetfulness*, so I would guess that
there is a special attachment or “relationship” you might have with him. Does he embody for you this ambiguous in-betweenness?

SS: Well, I’ve used Saul repeatedly in efforts to make peace through narrative with the incompatibility of art and life. Naturally he fails in the attempt, though sometimes (as in “The Wedding Jester”) he fails bravely. Of course I’m simplifying the issue, since even Saul is on occasion capable of taking pleasure in the arenas of both bedrock reality and imagination, of spirit and flesh, but his inability to reconcile their polarity, to dissolve their mutual exclusivity and travel with grace between them, is a persistent theme in my stories. He’s hopeless, Saul, longing for the city when in the country and vice versa, never at home wherever he is—the Diaspora, c’est lui. I wish he could get over himself. His situation puts me in mind of that Kafka parable which I won’t be able to recall verbatim. In it the maestro describes how we are all full citizens of both heaven and earth, but the chain that binds us to earth doesn’t quite reach heaven, and the chain that binds us to heaven doesn’t quite reach earth. Moreover, we’re reluctant to blame the chains for our limitations.

DPR: How much of your own life have you written into Saul Bozoff?

SS: I wanted to use Saul Bozoff in The Angel of Forgetfulness as a kind of gauge against which to measure the distance I had personally traveled from the mid-South to Vilna and Jerusalem. I wanted to use him the way an architect might put a figure in a blueprint to provide a sense of human scale. In Saul’s case the ratio involved the way lived experience relates to imaginative landscape. Yeah, Saul does things I did and goes places I went—the commune in the Arkansas Ozarks, the London street theater: I did all that back in the day. I also spent time in Prague, though long after the fall of the old regime; but rather than a drug-addled hippie, I was a middle-aged bourgeois professor teaching a seminar in Kafka and Jewish folklore. My life coincides with Saul’s and vice versa, but Saul is not me. Saul is a crybaby and a mama’s boy, whereas I am a fearless Jewish warrior. Okay, if not warrior, then worrier, which
is what I still contend God wants Jews to be. In Israel this view did not win me friends.

**DPR:** You stated earlier that your work as a folklorist affected the way you write. I was wondering, in light of your previous comments on the unresolved tensions between two spheres of possibility, if you see narrative indeterminacy as related to the nature of folklore.

**SS:** As a folklorist, I’m strictly an amateur, so beware my observations, but for me folklore does in fact open the possibility of embracing two opposing worlds simultaneously, and so dissolving the “in-betweeness” you mentioned. If myth takes place in a timeless realm, then folklore occupies a more familiar place where the boundaries of the possible may be extended beyond the common conventions of reality. Where myth takes for granted the impossible, folklore subverts the possible. Jewish folktales abound in examples of this subversion. Take for instance the tales of Elijah the prophet. Since ascending to paradise alive in a flaming chariot, he’s taken to commuting between heaven and earth, where he exchanges his archangelic garb for the *shmattes* [rags] of a folk hero. Ultimately transcendent, he’s subject for a while to the constraints of time.

On the other hand, his notorious antics stretch the boundaries of the possible toward that extremity where the borders between real and make-believe are no longer clearly defined. A place where the ordinary world exhibits elements of the extraordinary and time partakes of the properties of eternity. It’s the realm in which much of classic Yiddish literature exists, as well as the stories of the inheritors of that tradition—e.g., Malamud’s *shadkns* [professional matchmakers] and jewbirds, Ozick’s golem, Nathan Englander’s acrobats from Chelm. It’s also the province that my own conflicted and very mortal characters often stumble into, perceiving possibilities inconceivable where they hail from. Which is why they have such difficulty opting for one world above another.

**DPR:** This subversion of the possible is certainly a part of your fiction, and that’s putting it mildly. Some would call this mode of
writing "the fantastic," a few might describe it as more of a fabulation, and others would even call it an example of magical realism. I've always seen this aspect of your work as a contemporary form of romance, the kind practiced by Hawthorne and Melville. I'm thinking in particular of that famous passage from "The Custom-House" section of The Scarlet Letter, where the narrator is describing the way moonlight transforms an otherwise familiar room, creating what he calls "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other."

SS: If I had to choose, I'd take "fabulism" over the other labels, though all these terms are finally a bit confining and reductive. (As for magical realism, it always seemed to me that such books as the Bible and the Odyssey were mixing magic and worldly grit long before García Márquez came along.) And yes, I'm also fond of Hawthorne's definition of romance, though a little wary as well. There's a kind of limpid cast to his assertion that smacks of the fey pronouncements of the old spokesmen of the Celtic Twilight, which Joyce, in his fanatical devotion to the here and now, ridiculed as the Celtic Toilet.

Still, I'm partial to the idea of the marriage of the ordinary and the extraordinary, though the union, put that way, remains in the realm of the secular. The wedding that interests me more, in life as well as literature, is the marriage of the sacred and the profane. This is the notion of tikkun, the union of heaven and earth that every Jew is supposed to be playing matchmaker for. You help facilitate the marriage by gathering the scattered sparks of righteousness (through the performance of mitzvot [ethical deeds]) and returning them like a guilty Prometheus to their source in the Godhead. Easier said than done of course, but it's a reasonable metaphor for the redemptive aspect of art. In Jewish mythology the world is literally a book; it is made of words, and the stories of Torah function as templates for locating the coordinates of a vast hidden world. I believe that secular stories can lean in that direction as well, indicating a world more profoundly authentic and numinous than our own, though the words that tell the stories may have lost something of their original luster over the last few eons. The words may even deny the existence of a sacred dimension.
I’m of the generation that was weaned on Kafka and Beckett, crown princes of hopelessness. But while they expressed desolation as an absolute, they did it in a language so pure as to be itself redemptive. I think that this is especially true in the case of Kafka, who, even as he delivered his message of an abandoned universe, did so in the language of midrash [interpretation of the Holy Scriptures], of faith. That’s the paradox that allows for the cohabitation of the ordinary and the extraordinary, the sacred and the profane, and if it’s not exactly a sanctified union (in Kafka, in Beckett, in the legions of writers who honor their enterprise), it’s at least a common law relationship. So what I seem to be saying is that, even in their post-Genesis (God forbid, postmodern) state, words can retain something of their primal conjuring power, their ability to defy the laws of naturalism and the rational universe that we’ve fallen into. The possibilities are infinite, though I’m not sure that any of the above has much bearing on the kind of thing I try to do.

DPR: Do you think your Jewish subject matter easily lends itself to these larger themes?

SS: With regard to the Jewish materials in my work, I’ll always feel like something of a poacher, always a dilettante. Often I wake up thinking, How did I get into this Jewish racket? And how can I get out?! I never meant to write myself into the ghetto, especially one so rarefied that only a handful of eccentric tourists might care to enter. After all, I’m a guy from Memphis, whose first-hand experience—while it included Elvis sightings and segregated buses—never once involved a mikveh [ritual bath] or a bet hamidrash [house of study]. In my counter-culture vagabondage I met a lot of characters, though not a single tzaddik [righteous man] or yeshiva bocher [student]. What a shock it was when I published A Plague of Dreamers in 1993 and the category on the jacket flap read Fiction/Judaica.

DPR: How do you feel being read as an “ethnic” American writer?
SS: I suppose I should be content to be called any kind of a writer, but how did I get to be the hyphenated variety? Why must “writer” always be preceded by “Jewish-American”? Of course I have my ready explanation: how I stumbled into the Jewish past via my research into the history of North Main Street and my further exploration of its imported culture, and so on, but I still reserve the right to think of myself as an utter fraud. And while I can relate the story of my affair with Yiddishkeit with a certain narrative logic, in the end it’s like any other infatuation: a mystery. The friends of my youth still ask me, When are you going to drop the Jewish masquerade? But when I try to imagine writing fiction with no connection at all to the live currents I’ve hotwired from North Main Street or Orchard Street or Slutsk or Jerusalem, the engine just won’t start. There’s a Malamud story called “Man in the Drawer” in which a Russian writer with no real access to his Jewish heritage writes exclusively about Jews. His explanation: “When I write about Jews comes out stories.” I guess I would have to say, me too.

DPR: In some of your books, particularly Lazar Malkin Enters Heaven and A Plague of Dreamers, you used a form that’s been called the short-story cycle or composite novel. I’m wondering why you saw this as an appropriate generic form for those two books. Did it have anything to do with your desire to capture the Pinch community in a multifaceted way?

SS: Lazar Malkin was never projected as a series of linked stories. I was still close to the Pinch research when I wrote them, and it just seemed natural to begin to set my stories there. For me it was the happy marriage of fanciful projection and community. The community had a built-in structure and set of values that my imagination played havoc with through distortion and transgression—a mischievous impulse I’m helplessly drawn to indulging. The Pinch was my funhouse. With the Plague of Dreamers pieces I used as a model (believe it or not) Dylan Thomas’s Under Milkwood. I’d always loved the way he anatomized an entire community in his play for voices, filtering a more or less real place through the lens of a lyric and antic imagination in order to transform the inhabitants into creatures of dream. This is how folklore is created—and also, if I’m not mistaken, a certain type of litera-
ture. Thus, a seacoast village in Wales becomes a universal dreamscape. I had that process in mind when I wrote *Plague of Dreamers*, especially with the novella *Zelik Rifkin and the Tree of Dreams*.

**DPR:** How do you see Rifkin’s tale functioning as a “universal dreamscape”?

**SS:** By virtue of the sense in which the dreams of the Pinch community represent a cross-section of the collective dreamlife of humanity—or at least a *gemutlich* [congenial] version of that dreamlife. I also hoped that Zelik’s tree would echo various trees from mythology: *Yggdrasil*, the Nordic axis of the world; and of course *Etz Chaim*, the [Jewish] Tree of Life. I was thinking too of the tree the Siberian shamans climb to reach the realm of the ancestors. When there is trouble or illness in the tribe, a pole is erected in the center of the community and the shaman shinnies up it in a ritual that is meant to parallel an ascent to the cosmos. For the shaman, in his trance state, it is in fact a literal ascent fraught with real perils, just as the wisdom, which he retrieves from that archetypal realm and brings back to the tribe to resolve their ills, is also real. Zelik’s ascent is perilous and heroic as well, but unlike the shaman/hero he aborts his own return. I suppose this smuggling of mythic patterns into otherwise terrestrial stories has become a routine strategy of mine, intended to elevate the particular to that universality we were speaking of.

**DPR:** In terms of the connectedness of your stories, do you see any links between the cycle narrative form and your interests in blending folkloric fabula?

**SS:** In thinking about linked stories (a thing I don’t remember ever having done before), I realize I don’t imagine the stories linked to each other so much as attached to a particular place. Places, by virtue of enduring in time and accumulating history, have roots that extend beyond the confines of the merely mortal. Places can achieve immortality in ways that human beings cannot, although human beings who dwell in such places can partake of eternal and
universal elements, thus extending the possibilities of their own lives beyond the bounds of the ordinary. I think of places like Dickens’s London or Joyce’s Dublin or Babel’s Odessa, whose fictional inhabitants have attained mythic status largely via their connection to particular locales—locales refined and transformed by the fancies of their respective authors. Through the alchemy of their special perceptions, Dickens and Joyce and Babel (the list goes on) have distilled real cities into places as fantastical as they are historical and geographical; and by the same token the characters that inhabit these cities may display, beyond the merely terrestrial, celestial and infernal attributes as well. This is the sort of thing I was hoping to do (albeit in a more minor key) with the Pinch. It was to be a place where—in the words of the old vaudeville emcees—anything could happen and probably would. So it was a kind of natural impulse for me, after having discovered the Pinch, to begin to populate it with crazy stories.

DPR: How do you think your audience responds to these “crazy stories”? Do you think they strike readers the same way as more overt fantasy does, say, the kind of narrative you find in Tolkien or Rowling? Or does a presumption of realism, with a healthy injection of folklore, tend to catch readers off guard?

SS: Assuming I have an audience, most likely the latter. I haven’t read the Harry Potter books, but like all children of the 1960s, I got happily lost for a spell in Tolkien’s alternative universe—though I can’t imagine anyone looking to my stuff for a similar kick. I don’t mean to sound disheartened, but I sometimes think my audience is mostly dead. What I mean is that I like to think readers might go to my work for the same satisfactions they found in the works of writers like I. L. Peretz or Itzik Manger or Lamed Shapiro, and I’m afraid their readers largely perished in the epidemic of death that swept Eastern Europe during the Hitler years.

Though I’ve mentioned characters commuting between worlds in my stories, the truth is that their journeys are not so much between opposing orders of reality as between the present and past. They often dwell in places where the membrane between the here and now and a yesterday in which the citizens of the Pale of Settlement, both natural and supernatural (the demons, angels,
lamed vovniks [thirty-six righteous Jews], Lilith and her brood, here a golem, there a dybbuk), is quite thin. A haunted past invades and occasionally occupies a pedestrian present for good or ill. And sometimes vice versa. This is seldom a cozy cohabitation. To pursue a dubious metaphor, the penetration of that aforementioned membrane is often a violent rupture, prompting an abrupt end of innocence and perhaps the beginning of a painful wisdom. Given that caveat, however, I confess that for me the introduction of the denizens of folklore into the wastes of the contemporary landscape is like the circus coming to town.

DPR: You alluded to the Holocaust just now. How does that part of the twentieth century play in your writing?

SS: I’ve internalized the trauma of the Holocaust like any human being with a conscience. But as a writer, I’ve avoided until recently any literal confrontation with it, though the shadow of the Holocaust is, at least to my mind, an inescapable presence in my stories. It’s often felt as an approaching storm or sometimes as a desolation in the wake of a storm that’s already passed. Or sometimes as an unbridgeable chasm separating past and present. For most of my writing life I’ve heeded the admonishments of authorities such as Bruno Bettelheim and Cynthia Ozick, who insisted (perhaps a bit disingenuously in the case of Ozick) that the Holocaust should be off limits to art. Any attempt to characterize the experience by one who had not experienced it first-hand would reduce the unimaginable to mere metaphor, and thus betray the victims. But the metaphor is very powerful, and I’ve lately succumbed like so many others to its dark magnetism. I wrote a story called “The North of God,” which takes place primarily in a boxcar on the way to the camps, where a character makes a vain attempt to tell a story vital enough to displace the horror.

DPR: You say that until recently you’ve avoided a literal representation of the Holocaust. How has your recent work changed in this regard?
SS: I don’t know that my work has changed, at least not in regard to a preoccupation with the Holocaust, which can’t be maintained with urgency over time. To live in an intimate relation to that nightmare for very long is to insult the soul, and the Jewish soul, even mine, isn’t as in love with suffering as it’s cracked up to be. If my work has changed at all—and I still write about bifurcated lives, shotgun weddings between opposing states of consciousness—it has more to do with more prosaic circumstances: with growing older, being in a solid relationship, with (God help me) buying a house. Though I’ll confess to a recent experience that’s altered my attitude for better or worse.

Until I’d spent time in Israel in the fall of 2004, I’d always viewed the essential story of the Jews as being that of Diaspora, of the Eastern European experience and its American extension. Israel had been for me a kind of afterthought, a messy epilogue to a story that had effectively ended with the Holocaust and New World assimilation. It was much easier for the purposes of a symmetrical literary narrative to declare the story over and mourn the loss of the culture of Yiddishkeit than to complicate the tale with the inclusion of yet another chapter—especially one with elements as irresolvable as those that define the current state of Israel. What, I’d always wondered, were Jews doing in the Middle East anyway? My time there predictably turned my head around; it was a reckoning that had been a long time coming. I went there insecure about my identity as a writer and returned insecure about my role as a human being, and I’ll never again have the luxury of believing that the turbulent saga of the Jews will end before the terminus of history itself.

DPR: This brings me back to my previous question. It seems to me that in your work there is more of a focus on conflict within the Jewish community (especially as it concerns artist figures) than there is between Jews and non-Jews. Do you think that in your fiction you confront the “turbulent saga,” the Holocaust or otherwise, by not writing about it directly? In other words, might the saga be present through its absence?

SS: “The Holocaust or otherwise” is appropriate, since in my stories the “otherwise” is more often the focus. Of course the
Holocaust trumps all your common or garden calamities and taken head-on tends to end the conversation. But insofar as the Holocaust can be regarded as another chapter in "the turbulent saga" of the Jews, rather than the end of the line, it can also be metabolized without crippling consequences. Ontogeny recapitulates cosmogony, and I'd like to think my characters embody the whole spectrum of themes—of exile and return, ordinary life under extraordinary pressures, stolen ecstasies, etc.—that define Jewish history. To my mind these themes, in their various mythic incarnations, have left deep imprints on the psyche of the planet and have determined in large part the identity of the West; they suffuse the DNA of my characters and comprise the bones of my narratives, which hopefully echo the events of the turbulent saga without having always to mention them.

**DPR:** So the fact that much of your work takes place in America pre-1940s is significant. I'm reminded of your first piece in *Lazar Malkin Enters Heaven*, "Moishe the Just,"—a story surrounding Jewish legend which ends in death—that foggily alludes to events overseas.

**SS:** I suppose it is significant, though not because I think it was an especially more innocent time. The historical end of innocence seems to occur several times per generation. But I like to write about the kind of communities that largely vanished in America as well as Europe after the Second World War. They vanished along with the kind of folklore that attaches to tribal societies, and those old Jewish communities qualified as such. "Moishe the Just" is informed by the tale of the *lamed vov izadikim*, the thirty-six righteous men for whose sake God refrains from destroying the world. In his book *The Last of the Just*, Andre Schwartz-Bart has the last righteous man on earth entering the gas chambers at Auschwitz. My story suggests nothing so definitive, but the exposure of Moishe as merely an ordinary man, rather than a hidden saint, prefigures in a sense the near total eclipse of the sacred during the Nazi Holocaust.

According to the theory of the magus Isaac Luria, the earth was conceived by a kind of implosion of God, after which the sparks of
His divinity were scattered throughout creation. By retrieving these sparks from the husks of evil that entrap them, like extracting diamonds from ore, we help restore the earth to its original perfection. Since the Holocaust, however—an explosion as seismic in its destructiveness as the implosion that allowed our creation—the husks themselves have been hidden in the ensuing deluge. The sparks still sparkle, but you’re no longer likely to stumble upon them like (excuse me) hidden Easter eggs. Now their recovery involves major excavation projects of a type most likely to overwhelm your *kleine menschele*, your mortal man. I’m put in mind of the tale of the forest, the fire, and the prayer—and please stop me if you’ve heard this one:

When the Baal Shem Tov needed enlightenment, he went to a place in the forest, lit a fire, said a prayer, and *mirabile dictu*: enlightenment was granted him. His nephew would go to the same place in the forest and light the fire, only to find he’d forgotten the prayer. Still it was sufficient; it was enough to be in the forest and light the fire. Then the nephew’s nephew would go to the forest, only to discover that he was unable to light the fire or remember the prayer. But that was also sufficient; he was in the forest and that was enough. Then you arrive at the generation of the nephew’s nephew’s nephew, who can’t find his way into the forest, never mind build a fire or recall the prayer. But he at least remembers the story of the forest, the fire, and the prayer, and that must be sufficient for him.

In my most cynical moments I think that all my generation has left is the story of having forgotten the story—and that too must be sufficient.

**DPR:** Do you see this, the story of the forgetting, as a narrative common to much of contemporary Jewish American fiction?

**SS:** I think there’s astonishing variety in current Jewish American writing, giving the lie in spades to Irving Howe’s 1970s dictum that, with assimilation and distance from the immigrant experience, Jewish subjects and themes in American writing would dry up and blow away. Of course, who hasn’t had a go at forcing poor Irving Howe to posthumously eat his words? Though when he uttered them in the ’70s I doubt many would have disputed the sentiment.
Back in 1987 when I published *Lazar Malkin Enters Heaven*, I was surprised to find myself celebrated in certain Jewish quarters as having done something new. (All my models and sources were, after all, very old.) Since then there’s been a spate of young writers using folkloric materials to inject a note of timelessness into contemporary tales. With hindsight it seems rather predictable that, after the generation of Bellow and Roth in their very public divorces from tradition, their spiritual children would return to the scenes of various domestic crimes to fetch whatever was worth salvaging. Turns out there was a lot worth salvaging.

**DPR:** And you see this attitude apparent in today’s writing?

**SS:** Now the range of recent writing by American Jews is dizzying, some of it merely competent and conventional, much of it displaying varieties of wit and invention that defy categorization. And lately the Russian Jewish immigrants have entered the mix with exquisite variations of their own. Anthologies appear regularly showcasing the work of young writers with fresh voices and wild imaginations engaged in the intrepid work of remembering—writers like Nathan Englander, Aryeh Lev Stollman, and Dara Horn, fluent in the tradition yet able to translate the past into urgent contemporary designs. Don’t get me wrong; I’m not an unqualified booster of recent Jewish American writing. There’s a strain that disturbs me, as represented in the work of writers like Nicole Krauss, Jonathan Safran Foer, Michael Chabon, and others—immensely virtuosic writers who nevertheless play fast and loose with Jewish sources in what amounts to a *Yiddishkeit* lite. They know just enough of the traditional lore and literature to infuse their narratives with the flavor of “the turbulent saga” without taking responsibility for a confrontation with its essence.

This is to my mind a kind of theme park mentality, wherein the Jewish past is presented in language and settings that evoke a sepia sentimentality, that defang a ferocious experience until it’s safe for nostalgia. I prefer the gloves-off method of less cozy writers, who perhaps are not so reader-friendly, but then I’m getting old and curmudgeonly and dyspeptic from sour grapes. Still, there’s a quantum difference between telling the story of forgetting and
suffering from amnesia. The angel of forgetfulness tweaks us all under the nose at birth, erasing our memories of the paradise we inhabited before our souls were so rudely stuffed into mortal coils. The writers I admire tend to begin with a glimmer of remembrance, a spark if you will, and fan it like crazy in the hope of starting a conflagration. Others seem content to borrow a light.

**DPR:** This is interesting. The authors that you read with reservations, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, and Michael Chabon, have either had movies made of their novels (Chabon’s *Wonder Boys* and Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated*) or have adaptations in the works (both Krauss’s *The History of Love* and Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* are due out in 2007). On the other hand, none of the others you mention seem to be anywhere near Hollywood’s radar. Do you think this phenomenon has anything to do with the palatability of what you’ve called “Yiddishkeit lite”?

**SS:** Who am I to argue with success? Clearly these writers have struck a chord with popular audiences, and any disparaging remarks from my quarter can only sound like envy. I suppose there’s much to be said for importing traditional subjects and themes from the past in streamlined contemporary vehicles, though I worry about some of the cargo getting lost in transit.

**DPR:** What kind of “cargo” do you think is getting lost in the work of these authors? How might their handling of tradition be different from that of Horn or Stollman?

**SS:** The cargo is quite simply the whole knish; it’s the tradition. If you tug at a Jewish weed in a Jewish story, it shouldn’t come out of the ground like an artificial plant from a cube of styrofoam; instead, you pull the weed and the earth erupts, and up comes an immensely elaborate root system with the culture, history, and myths of the Jews attached. In Talmudic study there’s the acronym PRDS, which is a mnemonic device for recalling the four levels of biblical interpretation: 1) *peshat*—the literal meaning of the text; 2) *remez*—the implied meaning; 3) *derash*—the homiletical meaning; and 4) *sod*—the secret mystical meaning. Harold Bloom
references these categories in his *Kabbalah and Criticism*. What they suggest is that there's more to a story than meets the eye, or the ear, or the brain, heart, *kishkes* [guts], and genitals. And if the story fails to evoke a felt response in each of these categories, then it's not clicking on all its pistons; it hasn't created a unified experience, and it just doesn't matter enough. In other words, it's superficial. The narrative arrives at its destination without really having traveled very far; yet we're meant to greet its passengers and their light baggage as if they've endured some great journey—and often we do, because it's fun to make-believe. Again I'm reminded of a theme park ride, wherein you experience the illusion of an adventure—of sharing the rigors of authentic perils—without having taken any real risks at all. Think of Leon Uris as opposed to, say, Amos Oz; or the cuddly Yiddish writer in Nicole Krauss's tone-deaf *History of Love* as compared to the troubled misfit Der Nister in Dara Horn's *World to Come*.

**DPR:** Back in 1997 you were part of a symposium that *Tikkun* held on "The Jewish Literary Revival," and you seemed to take relish in pointing out the current vitality of Jewish American writing. What are your thoughts now, ten years later?

**SS:** You can call it a "revival," but I suspect it's just another mood swing in the attitude toward the text that the People of the Book have been composing and amending these several millennia. Start with the Book itself, which the rabbis couldn't leave alone; they had to add their apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, their Talmud and *midrash*, their *Zohar* [Kabbalah]—texts whose pages you only had to breathe on to scatter their stories like dandelion puffs across the centuries. Then came the secular writers like Peretz who, despite his wholesale rebellion against tradition, had to concede that the old stories still resided in his heart and bones, and Kafka, who wrote his hymns to hopelessness in the language of Talmudic discourse and employed liturgical tropes to sanctify despair.

**DPR:** So this is just another manifestation of the always ongoing Book. And how do you see your own work fitting into its most contemporary chapter?
SS: Do I still see myself as part of this “revival”? I’ve already qualified the word, but I confess there was a moment back in Lazar Malkin days when I thought I was at the forefront of some kind of movement. That moment ended only minutes after it began. Since then I feel like the procession has overtaken me and moved on into the future, while I turn around and toddle back to the sources to see if there’s anything we missed.

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