

Why Bother? The Search for Meaning in a Disappointing World

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

Department of English

Bar-Ilan University

Emanuel Bosgang

337-938-716

Adviser: Prof. Ilana Blumberg

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למה לטרוח? החיפוש אחר משמעות בעולם מאכזב

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר אילן

עמנואל בוסגנג

337-938-716

מנחה: פרופ' אילנה בלומברג

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Introduction

The project is a collection of fictionalized, dramatically embellished, short form accounts based loosely on my personal history growing up in New York as a child, adolescent and young adult. The protagonist travels the world to find meaning behind life's disappointments through a series of searches involving comedic scenes in an otherwise dark and brooding drama of self-discovery. The blue print for the stories is based on Voltaire's *Candide* in bildungsroman style parodying adventure and romance clichés but set in the world of 1980's and leading into the turn of the 21st century and post 9/11.

I first read *Candide* in my first semester of college after having returned from living abroad for a year and was inspired by the story of a young person's disillusionment and subsequent quest for enlightenment. It felt precisely the same as what I was going through at the time. The first thing that specifically spoke to me in the text was how *Candide* was banished from his home after falling in love with an unsuitable partner, which for me was analogous to coming out to my parents, being rejected and looking to form some sense of acceptance in other places. I will do a careful re-reading and attempt to align my framework with *Candide*'s plot development; I will use *Candide* as a source for form to build it's structure with my own personal content. Though it will not be obvious *Candide* was used as a model readers more familiar with Voltaire may draw correlations.

Aims and General Description

In the fiction collection I will address themes of coming of age, coming out, family and chosen family, sex, drugs, rock and roll, loneliness, isolation, and the city of New York as character. The work follows the protagonist's quest for meaning as he comes of age and struggles with hope, disillusionment and a yearning to be at peace with the world around him. The stories will fall into a humorist style with elements of magical realism and parody. The thread of fantasy will be employed through inner dialogue where we gain access to an imaginary world the main character inhabits as a safe haven in coping with the harsh reality of his circumstances. The satirical tone will be used to make light of the variation and often-extreme difference in theologies the protagonist encounters in his quest for truth. For example modes of thought involving religious fanatics, devout spiritualists, anarchist anti-establishmentarianism, political agitators for change or the idealism of a starving artist life will be experienced and contrasted in a matter of fact way that inevitably leads to a mockery of the extreme principles in comparison. The idea is to see the humor in often tragic circumstance as we follow the trials and tribulations of a suburban outcast leading up to and after his rejection from home and school as he fumbles his way on the path to self realization. In his journey to make sense of the world he'll cross bridges of painful disappointment and ultimately find some sense of redemption roughly based on the path of Voltaire's *Candide*.

For example, he spends time at an expensive art school with fabulously wealthy and incredibly hedonistic classmates, reveling in the club kid and celebrity nightlife scene, lives on his cousin's kibbutz in a small semi-egalitarian community in the Israeli desert, spends time in an anarchist squat in Berlin, becomes a member AIDS activist group ACT UP, washes up at a Bedouin camp in Sinai on the shores of the Red Sea, tours the States with an all girl punk band selling T-shirts, joins a Buddhist Ashram in the Bahamas, returns to his Jewish roots in a GLBT synagogue in New York, climbs the corporate ladder to obtain an executive vice president position, and inevitably goes back to finish his university degree. Each of these experiences brings teaching moments with new characters whose driving forces their lives depend upon enlighten his search for his own definition of identity.

Conceptual Background

In terms of literary style and theme I'm looking to achieve a portrait of life in New York as a young gay kid in the 1980's during the height of the AIDS crisis in a conservative suburban Jewish home with five sisters and three brothers helmed by a modern Orthodox father and holocaust survivor mother. The work is meant to loosely correspond to how Candide was thrown out of the kingdom for falling in love with the wrong girl and his resulting search for a meaning to life. The context each chapter deals with the life lessons on the journey of a gay Jewish kid foraging for the ideal community of acceptance, pride and growth.

The tone of Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye" first-person narrator Holden Caulfield was a great influence on me. I was inspired by the detail of intimacy shared within the workings of Holden's mind as he recounts the events leading up to being institutionalized. We as readers get to go deep into the mind of teenage rebellion and angst as Holden's inner dialogue unravels complex issues of identity, loss, connection and alienation. It's as if we become one with him on in his experience of events.

In David Sedaris's semi-autobiographical story collection "Naked", I was impressed with how he can take relatively mundane chapters of his life and transform them into vivid thought-provoking examinations of idiosyncratic human nature and the folly of it all. Sedaris is also speaking in the first person most of the time with a confessional aspect to his work where by

looking back at his life and “telling” on himself he’s able to draw larger conclusions about modern life and the patterns observed.

Marilynne Robinson’s “Housekeeping” was most inspiring to me in her use of description of character, scene and landscape. Imagery in the tale of orphaned sisters growing up in an isolated and bleak countryside colors in with stirring alacrity both physical and emotional space in a world essentially three characters inhabit.

Jeanette Winterson’s account of growing up the adopted daughter of a religious zealot and leaving home to be with the woman she loved moved me in many ways. Winterson’s voice has both great humor and pain as she grows through adolescence in a fanatically religious home learning she is gay. Winterson also makes use of dream imagery and fable to both inform and embellish the story adding to the narrative a kind of magical realism without taking away from the plot at hand. Her characters, as well as the home and city she’s growing up in, are all beautifully drawn out and believable. The uncanny scenarios are played out whimsically between herself and her mother’s church community grounded in the detail of an all too real comic-tragedy world.

Jewish works that deal with marginalization have also impacted my work. Themes of being an outsider as seen in examples ranging from Roth’s “Good-bye Columbus” to Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” struck deeply sympathetic chords for me. Additionally the works of Bernard Malamud, specifically “The Apprentice” and Wallant’s “The Pawnbroker” and Singer’s “Enemies, A Love

Story” have been influential in their craft of storytelling as well as outsider, assimilation, and themes of “passing”. In each of them a character is somehow left apart, hiding, or leading a double life and how these competing worlds align, combust or find solace is something that greatly interests me.

For example in Roth’s “Goodbye, Columbus” themes of assimilation in the lead character Neal Klugman’s relationship to Brenda Patimkin and its reflection on classism will be echoed. As a kid the Hebrew Day School I was sent to was in the nearby Five Towns area, a gilded ghetto, where most of the students came from higher income homes. Here I was introduced to a different breed of classmate who’s parents membership to country clubs was as, if not more, important than my own parents in the local synagogue.

Kafka’s character Gregor Samsa from “The Metamorphosis” struggles to adjust to his transformation and it’s toll on dealings with his family relationships and themes of isolation and abandonment. Though I did not turn into a man with the body of a spider I did leave home to attend an art school where the kind of life and people I surrounded myself with created a similar realignment to my past.

The dual identities of Singer’s character Herman Broder in “Enemies, a Love Story” and the double life he develops in order to survive in the post war world will also have parallels shaping theme and plots of the thesis. At a time when the main character is going through shifts in identity he juggles old relationships with family as changes within him transform both his inward and outward appearance and sensibility.

Shape of Project

The shape of the project is set in nine approximately 2,500 word chapters each dealing with chronologically ordered events as the protagonist transitions from early childhood through adolescence inevitably leading up to adult life in the quest to find himself and peace with the world around him. Each chapter will work as short story on it's own that build up upon one another. The movement from story to story will interweave character's teachings, each representing steps leading to a conclusive compendium of why life is worth living.

For example, beginning with his childhood upbringing the traditional family expectation is that life is made up of career as a lawyer or doctor, a wife, children and a house in the garden suburbs. Later chapters explore the "true meaning of life" as being a productive member of the artist class, of leading the life of a celebrity party animal, a rock star, a selfless follower of Buddhist teachings, a drop out making jewelry for tourists out of sea shells in a Sinai Bedouin encampment, an instigator of political change as an activist, and ultimately as a student, a writer and a generally kind person. Each chapter will center on key instructional characters and a new gospel that culminates ultimately in the protagonist's appreciation of what merits a life of true meaning.

I know there have been many takes on coming of age stories and the search for tranquility to life's often disturbing circumstances. There have also been attempts at modern adaptations of Candide however what makes my

proposal different is me. The work I'm setting forward is intimately personal based off my own dealings with a world I felt rejected and misunderstood by. Subsequently my search to find refuge outside the community I'd been raised to believe would graciously offer me everything I could ever need, only simply didn't accept me as I was. The stretch for me is to take these real life events, these characters and locations and transform them into words on the page readers can relate to. I strive to create a believable world that will appear to have actually happened while amusing readership by making light of dramatic turning points in a subtly mocking subtext of the theories expounded upon by pivotal characters met along the way. Most crucially the entire structure builds up to how, in hindsight, our most painful life experiences are necessary to construct the character each of us lives and breaths within daily. We "bother" I will demonstrate because we are alive and with each passing day attempt to make the best of it.

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