

# **The Golems of Prague**

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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הגולמים של פראג

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

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## **AIMS:**

This thesis will be the first part of a historical Fantasy novel that follows two descendants of the Maharal of Prague and their connection to the Golem in March 1939, when the Nazis marched into the Czech capital. As a historical urban Fantasy, the thesis will combine realistic and fantastic elements, transporting the reader back to 1939 Prague, while examining the implications of myths come alive: the Maharal and his Golem, the Vril (a supernatural master-race), and their connection to dybbuks. The thesis will be grounded in historical sources about Nazi-era and seventeenth-century Prague, as well as scholarly and popular works about Jewish legends and mysticism, and examples of the literary genre of Fantasy.

## **CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND:**

The conceptual background for my thesis divides into 3 parts: Fantasy literature, Jewish Mysticism, and History.

### **1. Historical sources and literature relevant to the time and setting**

As a descendant of Ashkenazi Jews I have a special connection to the Holocaust and a desire to explore this period more. My grandmother fled from Poland to Uruguay as a teen with her nuclear family, while her extended family were murdered by the Nazi regime. The Holocaust always summons the question: why didn't they fight? In many cases they did, including in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and among the partisans. But even these are more tales of woe than of triumph. For this reason, I turn to the fictional film *Inglorious Bastards* by Quentin Tarantino, which brings a tone of triumph to the conflict, allowing Jews to take center stage in the conflict for the survival of the race. I want to bring that concept to a fantasy novel.

For historical depictions of Prague, I will consult a number of scholarly works: Rella Kushelevsky's *Sites of Collective Memory in Narratives of the Prague Ghetto*, (2010), which examines stories set in Prague; Hillel J. Kieval's *The Social Vision of Bohemian Jews:*

*Intellectuals and Community in the 1840s* (1992), which provides insight into the variety within Jewish culture in Eastern Europe; and Jonathan Frankel and Steven J. Zipperstein's edited volume, *Assimilation and Community: The Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, (2004), which will be a helpful sourcebook in examining assimilation in part of my cast of characters--how it was responded to, how common it was, and how it impacted family relationships.

In addition, Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* will be a guidebook for my depiction of 1939 Prague, as the author does a wonderful job of bringing the city to life. *The Great Rabbi Loew of Prague* by Frederic Thieberger offers a detailed history and analysis of the life of the Maharal which has been substantively helpful in crystalizing my ideas of the rabbi behind the golem legend.

*Hitler's Monsters* by Eric Kurlander examines the fascination of the Nazi regime and German population with superstition. A multitude of secret societies and mad quests for scientific and arcane weapons and strategies kept thousands busy for the duration of the war and affected military strategy. As I dug deeper, I discovered a secret sect with fascinating beliefs called the Vril society. They are examined in depth in the novel which inspired them, Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871), and in a research book, *The Vril Society*, (Paijmans, 2008). This society and their beliefs will be a major part of my story.

## **2. Jewish Mysticism**

The Golem of Prague has had multiple modern adaptations, many significant in various ways, but none of which delivers an experience such as I seek. *The Golem Redux: From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction* by Elizabeth Roberts Baer will be a helpful resource during my writing process, as it gathers together the history of the Golem in literature and allows me to reference it as I write.

Baer examines a variety of sources and stories about the Golem. *The Golem and the Wondrous Deeds of the Maharal of Prague* by Yudel Rozenberg provides a framework for the character of the Maharal, showing his actions, character and the challenges faced by him as leader of a congregation. The story was claimed to be historical and was later outed as pure fiction by an ambitious Jewish author. *Golems of Gotham* by Thane Rosenbaum is set in the United States, and provides a satisfying read for fans of literary fiction with a speculative bent. *The Golem* by Gustav Meyrink was written over a century ago and was a successful novel at the time. Surprisingly, it chooses not to examine the Golem in the light of an action story, instead focusing on themes and characters which are intended for readers who enjoy slower stories. Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* focuses on transporting rather than breaking laws of nature and examining their effect: the Golem is presented as an inanimate object, the transportation of the reader remains within the bounds of science. It does this quite well, and brought the author praise from critics.

I've also delved into other books on the subject, including *The Golem and the Jinni* by Helene Wecker, a novel which brings together interesting elements of multiple mythologies and delves deeply into the literary aspect of writing, while my focus will be on pacing and plot. *Golem of Paris* by John Kellerman contains several mystical elements that have helped me conceptualize Jewish fantasy elements in my thesis. *Mudman* by James Hunter, is stylistically action-focused and will be worth examining closely despite not being about the golem of Prague. A final golem book, released in the last year, is *The World that we Knew* by Alice Hoffman. The story is written as a dark fairy tale rather than my more realistic style but the setting of WW2 Berlin is similar and the various Jewish myths and powers, including the creation and interactions with a golem, will be helpful resources to plumb for inspiration.

To round out my toolbox of fantastic elements I will consult Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Rawnitzki's *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha'Aggada* as translated by

William G. Braude. This repository of Jewish tales and quotes will bring authenticity to the religious characters in my story.

As my story involves dybbuks, their banishment, and the general concept of spiritual possession, I will rely on a variety of Jewish and popular resources: Matt Goldish's edited volume, *Spirit Possession in Judaism: Cases and Contexts from the Middle Ages to the Present* (2003); J.H. Chajes' *Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism* (2003); and Rachel Elijor's *Dybbuks and Jewish Women in Social History, Mysticism and Folklore* (2008). These are all resources I will consult to present the Jewish concepts of *dybbuks* and their exorcism. I won't restrict myself to the traditional concept of dybbuks; rather, I shall use these books to help shape character response to situations and unfathomable things.

From the world of spirit banishment I have chosen three varied resources and which have left their mark on popular culture. William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*—an iconic book that, along with the film adaptation, has haunted the nightmares of generations and focuses deeply on possession and exorcism—has been influential, although darker and more terrifying than my goal for my story. The comic book series, movie and TV show *Constantine*, (Shirley & Brodwin, 2005), deals with a variety of spirits and exorcisms while maintaining a lighter mood. *Supernatural*, (DeCandido, K. R. A., 2007), is a lengthy book and TV series which delves deep into mostly Christian mythology, spirit possession and banishment but does so quite well and with interesting methods and examples. There is also an interesting sibling relationship in the series which will be helpful as my story also focuses on siblings.

### **3. Fantasy**

The roots of fantasy go far back into history, perhaps even to the origins of religious belief. Writing without the constraints of the laws of nature allows authors to take things to extremes

to examine the human condition, philosophy and morality. It allows them to adapt the story to fit their agendas, and to convey the feelings, situations and messages they choose with complete artistic freedom. For instance, the legend of the *golem* of Prague raises questions about the nature of the soul, the creation of life, and what constitutes a person which could not be done as easily without using fantasy: the creation of the golem has many similarities to the creation of Adam, and an object of the physical realm has more human qualities than a machine. Viewed historically, the legend of the *golem* may very well be the origin of modern speculative fiction. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was quite possibly inspired by the concept of inhuman life from the story of the *golem*, with its wise Jewish creator who ultimately loses control of his creation (Brust, 2015). *Frankenstein* is now a classic story embedded deep in the consciousness of Western culture. Its poignant examination of the human condition and free will have inspired an entire genre of speculative fiction (Feige, 2001).

Fantasy stories centered on the Nazis are common, and many of them have achieved wide commercial success in recent years. The *Indiana Jones* films use religious themes, especially in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, which focuses on the Jewish people with a fascinating journey through history to solve a puzzle. These journeys fulfill a basic human desire for answers, which can be seen through the study of religious texts, the neverending scientific search, and the wild success of crime stories.

Mad Nazi quests for power are shown in a variety of fantasy stories, most prominently, beyond *Indiana Jones*, in the characters of *Captain America* and *Hellboy*. These characters have been featured in multiple media formats: feature films, novels and, for the superhero stories, comic books. *Indiana Jones* stories were first shot as films and then novelized, which affected the type of story told and the length of the narrative arc. Movies have limited time yet avoid the need for descriptions, and in action movies this allows filmmakers to offer a full narrative arc in a couple hours yet limits the breadth of emotion

expressed. This is evident to anyone watching *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. I aim to address this stylistic issue, to maintain a good pace in prose while adequately expressing emotion. Stories such as *Captain America*, *Hellboy* and *Indiana Jones* have held the attention of hundreds of millions over the years and maintained the Nazis role as villains in popular literature.

Since my novel won't follow the narrative arc of either of the above stories, I have needed to look farther for models in which fantasy addresses themes of coming of age, betrayal, the connection between the divine and the mundane, and moral tests.

One such inspiration is *The Wheel of Time* series by Robert Jordan: One of the most successful Fantasy series ever written focuses on a boy's journey to manhood as a dark menace threatens all he cares for. The story is epic fantasy, set in an alternate world, while mine will be historical urban fantasy. Nevertheless, many of the plot twists and turns used in that series will be helpful models for my construction of the plot as well.

Another model is *The Chronicles of Narnia* by CS Lewis, which focus on coming of age and difficult moral decisions, albeit with too light a tone for my topic. I would be remiss not to mention the works of J.R.R Tolkien which have inspired generations of readers and writers, and defined the genre of high Fantasy with its orcs, elves and wizards. His thoughts on morality and philosophy, however, still bear weight 80 years on. And, of course, J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter*, the bestselling books of all time outside the Bible. They feature character growth over a long series of books and supernatural elements. As I hope eventually to make my thesis into a novel series, I will look carefully at how Rowling used her first novel as a springboard to sequels. The *Percy Jackson* series by Rick Riordan is a great example of modern literature with divine elements which is able to entertain a diverse audience, from young children to devotees of Greek mythology. As I am also utilizing superstition and mystical beliefs, this series will provide examples of how to meld them into a story which maintains the reader's suspension of disbelief. Another author who has inspired

me and will provide a basis for my work is Brandon Sanderson, whose works, while accessible to readers of all backgrounds, attract many religious readers. His magic systems are systematic and clear, which pushes me to systematize the magic in my project as well. I have also grown much as a writer thanks to his recorded Brigham Young University lectures which will be a basis for the writing in this project. In particular, his thoughts and exercises in character perspective (lecture 7) and the “logic” of magic (lecture 8).

All of these stories have a large focus on character development, hard decisions and the cost of magic. By exacting a cost, magic becomes a precious commodity, and each writer chooses to exact the cost in their own way. For some, it corrupts, for others it drains the life force of the caster or others or is dependent on rare resources or appeals to a higher or lower entity. In fact, religious themes are embedded in these stories in various ways as well, either overtly, as in Percy Jackson’s and C.S. Lewis’ works, or in more subtle ways, as in Mary Shelly and J.R.R. Tolkien. These pieces provide a strong foundation for my novel with clear examples of gripping fantasy stories which raise deep moral, philosophical and speculative questions.

### **SHAPE OF THE PROJECT:**

This thesis will follow the actions of a Jewish family in Prague, beginning soon before the Nazi annexation until *erev Pesah*, ten days later. This fantasy story will bring in elements of Jewish as well as Nazi occult beliefs.

The legend of the Maharal and the Golem of Prague will be my central Jewish focus. I will take this story and make it darker, pushing it gently toward the grim, dark side of fantasy. I will also make considerable use of possession by dybbuks.

I will integrate a variety of Nazi occult beliefs into the story, with the main focus being the Vril Society and the Nazi quest to contact and gain power from the Vril, a powerful ancient civilization which (they believe) disappeared ages ago.

The main protagonists in the story will be Simha, about to turn 13, and his sister Devorah, 23. They are the children of Zohar, the rabbi of the *Altneuschul*. Simha is the son entrusted with continuing the family tradition, but Devorah is living a life estranged from her family. Their relationship to each other as well as to their father will be a central piece of the plot. The plot itself will involve dark deeds and the attempt to stop them, adumbrations of the looming thunderstorm of World War Two and the Holocaust. The thesis will comprise only the first part of the novel, which will unfold as follows:

**Chapter outline:**

1. Against the background of the announcement of the Nazi annexation of Prague and the local Jewish community's mobilization (including calls for the revival of the Golem), Simha and his father fight over his bar mitzvah and his estranged sister Devorah.
2. Simha learns about his family's history and their relationship to the Maharal and the Golem. After the Nazis, members of the Vril Society, arrest his father, Simha goes to his great uncle Eliyahu for help.
3. Based on information and texts provided by Uncle Eliyahu, Simha decides to rescue his father by awakening the Golem. However, in doing so, he inadvertently unleashes other, sinister powers and discovers secrets about his uncle that profoundly change his understanding of his family's history. The Golem flees, wreaking havoc along the way. Uncle Eliyahu disappears. Information about the Vril is revealed. Simha is reunited with his now pregnant sister.
4. Escaping the Nazi prison camp in which he is held, Rabbi Zohar makes his way to Devorah's apartment, where father and children hear reports of Jews being taken to the Altneuschul in droves and not returning. Father and children are attacked in the

apartment by Nazi soldiers who seem to have superhuman powers, but they manage to escape.

5. Suspecting the soldiers may be possessed by dybbuks, father and children break into Uncle Eliyahu's apartment to search for mystical texts with information on exorcism. The battle against the sinister forces of the Nazis begins.
6. Rabbi Zohar gathers a group of learned men from the community to assist them in exorcising the dybbuks. The battle intensifies; other, even more sinister forces are unleashed. The rabbi buys time for his children to escape and is captured and himself possessed.
7. Simha finds the Golem, convincing it to help him fight the Nazis and rescue his father. He gathers what support he can for the assault, including his heavily pregnant sister and the survivors of the first attack.

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