

By Design – Fictions of Fate

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing
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סימן של עיצוב

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לבלשנות וספרות אנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

ג'וני אליאן

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Aims and General Description

I envisage my project, *By Design - Fictions of Fate* as comprising a novella and two short stories that will accomplish my twin goals of turning parts of my life into fiction and doing so in part through science fiction and fantasy literature.

The novella, *Chosen*, will recount a young girl's journey from Christianity to Judaism, rejection in one country to rejection in another, as she follows a passionate yearning to belong in all that is foreign: culture, religion, language.

The short story "Listening with Love" will capture the connection of an estranged Jewish mother and her son, and the short story "Out of Control," based on my own personal lifetime of sleep disturbances and nightmares, will recount the story of a woman who discovers through her chronic night and daydream terrors, that death is not the end of life as we know it and that we are not in control of our lives as much as we think we might be.

A shared theme is personal experience, viewing the ironies in retrospect, evident only in the aftermath of the events.

Conceptual Background

All three fictional pieces will be based on personal experience, born from a desire to record my own story for myself, but also for others who might want to read it.

According to author Claudia Mills, in any story based on truth there will be tension and “hurtful, harmful, dark, [and] dangerous things” that surface. But “if we don’t write about [these things], we won’t write anything anybody will want to read” (105).

This was one of the guiding principles that helped me decide to write fiction rather than nonfiction since Mills further points out that telling the truth, including the good things as well as the bad, as much as is possible, is in some way a public betrayal of trust of one’s family and friends. Another reason I chose fiction is that as the author I will have the freedom to embellish – in actuality, to design what happens. No one ever said that a true story is the best story. My aim is to make my story a better story, deciding along the way how close to the facts I want to stay.

As I search for the “right way” to write the story down, I notice another reason why I am drawn to fiction as a literary device. I am influenced by Israeli author Aharon Appelfeld, whose novels are all linked to his past, namely the Holocaust, and who used his novels to transform memory into fiction, beginning with a chronicle of his family in solitude and abandonment; from that desolation came one story after another. When he says that he never intended to cure himself of the terrors he had experienced through his writing, I realize that that is exactly what my purpose is. I want to take my earlier experiences, mold them, design them, change them, in a conscious effort to heal myself and overcome traumatic events which occurred in my past. Using the vehicle of fiction, I hope I will be able to look into the past, and in recording the events, treat myself and others who live there with more kindness than I feel today.

Something unexpected happened as I began to formulate the plot for “Out of

Control.” Since that time, I have not experienced a single night terror, which attests to the healing and releasing properties of writing fiction, and the ability to look at a personal problem, fashion it into something else, deal with it from a distance and fix it. When I was designing the plot I did not know it was going to heal me.

While key themes in all of my three pieces include family ties, childhood guilt, a yearning to belong, connection, independence, identity, and particularly Jewish identity, the shared theme is a personal experience of viewing ironies that only became evident in the aftermath of the events. Processing experience after we have lived it and then giving it shape through writing is what brings the ironies into relief, showing discrepancies between what we thought might happen or might have expected and what really happened.

Irony is not new to fiction, but my thread of recognition uses irony in its simplest form: when something happens that is the opposite from what was expected, as Eleanor Hutchens (1960) points out: “The basic concept of irony as the sport of bringing about a conclusion by indicating its opposite is implicit, then, in the widely accepted modern extensions of usage” (p. 362). Irony here is a game to be played as events turn out with a surprising twist; but the stories I will be writing follow a pattern based on my life experiences where the ironies only emerge after the events have occurred. The ironies were not there when I lived them, and I only realized they were there when I came to write them down. Through writing the stories I will expose the ironies, embedded in fictional plots, which pull all three of my pieces together into a single thesis, even though each story stands on its own and has its own concerns.

The ironies are a part of my life; the unexpected outcomes, which I did not see as they were happening but only now, after I look from outside inwards and begin to write it down. (The girl in *Chosen* finds out she has been Jewish all along; the mother and boy in

“Listening with Love” connect through the very thing which isolated them.) In addition, I am not creating these ironies. I will reflect on them and as I begin to formulate the journey ahead of me, I look with wonder at how things worked out and marvel at the apparent design of all of this along the way. It also seems ironic that I, as author, am designing a story, someone’s life; a life that looks, upon retrospection, to have been designed all along.

There are many published works of fiction which are based on real life events portraying the author’s need for the truth, something real to begin from. Some characters in Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol*, for instance, were derived from real people and not completely figments of his imagination. Even Mr. Darcy was likely to have been based on a real-life acquaintance of the real Jane Austen. Examples of more modern narratives inspired by true tales include *The Fault in our Stars* by John Green, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson, and Stephen’s King’s *The Shining*.

As author of my three pieces, it is my intention to design the narrative and in turn design the irony so that it makes for a better story.

Shape of Project

As I ponder the question of how I am going to write this story down, I am faced with a number of questions. As far as the story goes, I already know the beginning and I know the end. In truth, as the author, I am planning to write a fictional but non-fiction-based narrative, where I will play protagonist, narrator and focalizer. I will decide the perspective through which the narrative will be presented using external focalization like a camera lens, describing the characters' actions and gestures. I will be the author/narrator who is speaking but sharing in what the characters do as they see and react to the events. I will also take the role of retrospective narrator, like Mr. Pirrip from Dickens' *Great Expectations*, a retrospective narrator who narrates the story of himself as Pip, when he was a child and chronicles the events up to his adulthood.

When we live experiences and then look back, sometimes we see a pattern emerging, a kind of logic that reveals itself only after we are finished. Sometimes the pattern revealed is in opposition to what we were thinking during the living of it. My project is the culmination of getting to the end of a series of experiences and realizing that they worked out differently than I might have imagined. I will have to navigate between the experiences as they were lived and the knowledge attained when I got to the end of them.

As author, I will allow myself to play with the fate of my characters and manipulate the outcomes. I will also be required to decide how much of the narrative will be my own and how much I will make it someone else's. This fits in wonderfully with my decision not to write a non-fiction account of my experiences as I am not beholden to the absolute truth and can embellish the facts any way I wish. I will be the designer of the work, able to plan the story but influenced by the one who lived it and watched how it really went. I will design the protagonist's fate to be rooted in Judaism, with a slight hint

to the reader at the outset, either allowing her to find this out only at the end, after she has journeyed through struggle and rejection or another option is never finding out, as her mother's remaining family continue to hide the family tree, presented in the prologue, and only the reader will know that the protagonist is Jewish and has been all along. A possible sequel is that she finds out later.

It is my goal to write this project so it reads like a story, a good story. I will be giving a fictional form to these life events which seem in retrospect to have been authored. I must search for a plot for events which feel plotted when I look at their outcome. If I write the account of *Chosen*, for example, in chronological order, with the surprise element pushed on to the reader at the end that the protagonist was Jewish all along, I am concerned that this will diminish the complexity of what happened. That is not to say that real life has no twists and surprising turns but it will be important for me in this project to reevaluate what really happened.

I will design the designers of the universe, as they inject humans in and out of life and death and I will also design the "game" which becomes the boy's life-line and connection with his mother. I believe that my choice of fiction over non-fiction will make the story better. This leads me to explain a possible structure of the pieces.

Chosen – a novella of realistic fiction narrated by a retrospective narrator narrating the life of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood with possible flashback episodes and possible flash forwards. The protagonist, English-born, to fervent Roman Catholic parents, struggling to find her place, leaves them at age 18 for Israel as a volunteer on Kibbutz. The decision to stay in Israel is an easy one even though the struggle here is to enter the Jewish faith, the rejection she encounters, a failed marriage, her goal is to belong to this new life that she has journeyed far to discover, finding out only many years later that her mother is Jewish and this has been covered up by her

family or the cover up continues and she is still in the dark.

Short Prologue (poetry or prose): setting: in the future: the funeral of the narrator's mother. A family tree circulates in secret by her mother's sisters bearing the name of their great great-grandmother born in 1894: Rachel Goldstraw, a Jewess, unknown to all other members of the family.

There will follow a series of chapters including England, the connection with her mother, a calling to Israel, the flight to Israel, Kibbutz, the Mikva, Divorce, the funeral and an epilogue in similar form to the prologue.

“Listening with Love” - realistic fiction/fantasy, narrated by a third person narrator, telling the story of an Israeli boy turned IDF soldier who struggles to belong and fit in. His only joy in life is computer gaming and this activity anchors him to this life. It is ironic that this activity which locks him out of society is in fact the key factor in forging a connection with his mother and which returns him to real life. “Listening with Love” will use *whatsapp* texting -- the mode of communication between the main characters, as a modern take on the epistolary. I returned to reading *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley and *Pamela* (1740) by Samuel Richardson to feel the strength of communication through letters and my idea to redesign this form of communication in a different way. I was also influenced by the PowerPoint charts in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2006) and the text-message-ese which Egan adopts and which is no less challenging.

“Out of Control” - fiction/fantasy, narrated by a third person narrator about an Israeli woman suffering from sleep disturbances and chronic night-day-dream-terrors. She discovers through them that death is not the end of life as we know it. Higher beings move humans between the multiverse at the critical juncture of death, injecting them into life in alternative universes. She is a flaw in their plan and each night-terror is her awareness of what is really happening. She has to be stopped.

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