

Misheberach and Other Stories

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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I. Aims and General Description:

This thesis will be a collection of short stories framed by two novellas. The stories will cover a variety of subjects and themes that explore the humor, the folly, and the sadness of everyday life. Some stories will tend to the dramatic, but all will be funny or satiric on some level—even if just in the layers of the story.

Happy Birthday to You will be a romp, chronicling the surprise 40th birthday party a boy threw for his mother, where he forgot to invite the guests. *Misheberach* will tell the story of a troubled Modern Orthodox Jew, Cemmie Green, whose religious alienation echoes the phenomenon of Social Orthodoxy. *A Killer App* takes a satirical yet sobering look at technology and the human condition. *Comrades* asks the age-old question, *can you go home again?*

My stories will explore the absurdities of our existence, in some of its lowest and highest moments. In how we view the past and the baggage we carry around from it, in our desperate search for safety and normalcy in a terrified world, in our yearning to believe in the divine or something larger than us, and in our wish to be loved and appreciated, especially at meaningful junctures in our lives.

II. Conceptual Background:

The inspiration for these stories is multifarious and eclectic; my path to writing has wound through many genres. Although there is some overlap, each story has its own provenance. The inspiration for much of my writing is Jane Austen. No, not for her romantic yarns, although they are heartwarming and pretty. Rather, Austen's ability to write small stories. Austen once wrote that she is not fit to write an epic story.¹ She saw the grandeur of existence amongst the people you might meet every day. She painted people and their emotions as they are within their world, eschewing fantastical characters or extraordinary stories to entertain.

More modern influences are authors Etgar Keret and Raymond Carver (and perhaps Carver's own minimalist model, Ernest Hemingway). Keret's lean writing and everyday language is a model for the humor and sadness I try to evoke. Edith Wharton disliked novelists who use dialogue to lend gravitas to a story. I try to avoid that sin of contemporary writers, where dialogue itself (often snappy or unrealistic) becomes the plot.² Carver's book *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* is about simple people, everyday lives, occasionally in extraordinary situations but unsentimentally drawn. His endings are subtle, and often carry no resolution. Hemingway and Carver's direct, unadorned prose is something I try to emulate in my profession as an editor, and in everything I write.

In short, my own stories aim to be local, immediate, and particular—and thereby hopefully universal.

"Happy Birthday to You" will be a semi-autobiographical, satiric memoir of a 40th birthday party hilariously gone bad. Only a random few acquaintances who were accidentally invited show up, and mortification ensues. The funny story is told manically, with many characters to keep track of. Yet each character has a role to play, enriching the silliness and attendant embarrassment of the event. This story

¹ "Jane Austen's Art and Her Literary Reputation," *Pemberley.com*, 2004

² "Say What? On Richard Price," *New Yorker*, April 7, 2008.

will use a first person limited narration, deepening the effect of humiliation and comedy for the protagonist. However, I may experiment with an epistolary format.

The telling of the story will be styled in a fashion of humorists high and low brow, old and new. Francois Rabelais is an early influence in terms of style (but not content). I will also try to channel Jane Austen's knack for chronicling absurdity with sarcastic, restrained humor in the corners of the story.

I will try to echo Douglas Adams, whose maniacal, purposeful reconstruction of the English language in his *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is a source of never-ending joy. Adams' style of writing is as much the subject of the parody as the fable itself.

The self-deprecating, hilariously comical asides in Lorrie Moore's "How to Become a Writer" taught me how to play with physical comedic imagery. Dave Eggers takes creative liberty in recounting a true story, because when it is so heartbreakingly funny, you may as well go all the way. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is a biting condemnation of a crazy world, and his offhand jokes and observations of absurdity are perfect. Art Spiegelman's graphic Holocaust novels motivated me to write less and show more, even in a silly tale. For Spiegelman, a shrug of the shoulder, a blink of an eye, can tell an entire story.

"Comrades" is based on the story of a woman whom I visited as she sat shiva. She described her prickly sabra father who moved to America to live its Dream, and her attempts to escape by moving back to Israel. In *Comrades*, Adina Zion will return to the kibbutz she and her husband had fled years earlier, to pay a condolence call to her former boss. She had moved there to escape her difficult father and New York. But the harsh social reality of kibbutz life gradually closes in on the sensitive soul of Adina. Stunted by the real or imagined nastiness of her fellow workers, she loses her unborn child and ultimately her mind.

Using symbolism and imagery, this story will be told in a close third person narrative. It will utilize location and psychology as part of the story, with the setting almost becoming a character in the story, and as a backdrop for the protagonist's emotional state. The rich detail will serve to underscore the emotional process of coming to terms with the past and present.

Arundhati Roy's flowery, grandiloquent writing aside, I appreciated her powerful use of scenery to set the tone in *The God of Small Things*. Mary Robison's sparse writing, be it in the tilt of a wig, or the deftly described cruelty of an angry daughter, and of a good life about to be cut short, gently unpacks the scene in "Yours." I hope to imbue that palpable sense of longing. We see it on Alison and Clark's twig-and-leaf-littered porch, we hear it in Clark's sad reverie, we feel it in the eyes of the Jack-O-Lanterns that stare back at us over Clark's shoulder. The delicate unfolding of a powerful, surprising love story inspired the brevity and tone of *Comrades*.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* showed me how to use dialogue to convey the underlying emotions without spelling them out. Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* showed me how to compress time to make a story flow better. The authoritarian nature of the kibbutz collective is to be fashioned after George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and Heller's sardonic *Catch-22*. (In a subtle nod to Heller, one of the kibbutz committee members is named Major.)

The centerpiece of my thesis will be "Misheberach," a magical realism novella about a young Orthodox Jew who doubts God. After a brief, intense religious epiphany in his youth, Cemmie Green takes upon himself to recite the Misheberach (prayer for the sick) for a stranger. Yet Cemmie grows into disillusioned adulthood. He maintains the image of a halachic Jew with all its social trappings, along with his covert frat boy life. He perseveres in praying for this sick woman long after he's abandoned belief in the divine that underpins the prayer. His ultimate disenchantment would seem complete, if not for the surprise ending that will make us realize that perhaps there is a God, and all of us may even be endowed with those divine powers. If only we knew it.

The assimilation begun by early Jewish immigrants to the US was a goal at the turn of the 20th century. When I came of age in the 1980s, it was a source of soul searching for the struggling Modern Orthodox movement that was created in response. As a teen I devoured works of Jewish American authors like Bernard Malamud, Phillip Roth and Herman Wouk, which illustrated some of these

theological issues. The current contours of that discussion encompass Open Orthodoxy vs. Hareidization, Social Orthodoxy vs. committed Judaism.

In Roth's "Conversion of the Jews," Ozzie Friedman is a contemporary amalgam of the centuries-old philosophical debate between rational, scientific thinking (naturalism) and spiritual, religious belief. From Thales to Kierkegaard, from Maimonides to Kant, the question of 'is there a God?', persists. Misheberach ruminates on these themes, but like Kurt Vonnegut in *Player Piano*, or Richard Adams in *Watership Down*, I plan to cloak the cultural theme entirely within the story. The goal is to fashion Cemmie after Ozzie; at once questioning, awe-inspired, doubtful, and spiritual.

Keret's P.T. in "Fly Already," much like Roth's Itzie Lieberman in *Conversion*, encourages his jumper to jump off the building, and we laugh as we root for them both. Since Cemmie's double life eventually catches up with him, the difficulty will lie in making this flawed protagonist into a likeable figure. I will try to imitate Keret's surreal plot twists, at once engaging and believable. The piece will be written in a third person narrative, where dramatic irony, or narrator omniscience is utilized for the surprise ending a la Yann Martel's *The Life of Pi*.

In "A Killer App," tech worker Ido Schrem is nearly killed in a terrorist attack—and he is fed up. He creates a wildly popular application that can detect murderous intent in people. Inspired by the Sarona Market attack in 2016, the story of Ido's ultimate failure will be a cautionary tale that encapsulates the reality of life in Israel. A bright, shiny technology sector that brims with successful entrepreneurs who want to enjoy life, juxtaposed against the horror of near-daily terrorism.

Sharp action and crisp third-person narration of the terrorist attack will pull the reader into this allegorical novella immediately. The pace will slow just enough to allow the reader to ponder the moral and human dilemmas that technology increasingly presents in our daily lives, while laughing at some of the more absurd derivatives of trying to apply technology to human emotion.

Here I will try to employ Hemingway's Iceberg Theory, where what is omitted is given over more powerfully than what is explicitly stated. Elements from other

works that influence the Killer App idea include "Love and Hydrogen," where Jim Shepard slows time down as the Zeppelin begins to self-destruct. The terrorist attack is heart-stopping, but it unfolds unhurriedly as people are shot. When a bullet enters Anders' head in Tobias Woolf's "Bullet in the Brain," we know he is instantly dead. But we linger a bit. The unsympathetic Anders gains our pity, and ultimately our affection, for that gently drawn out nanosecond where we meet a young boy in a dusty baseball field and his long-lost love of words.

A morality fable in the same vein as Phillip K. Dick's *Minority Report*, however, this story will aim for satire and not adventure. Ido is an idealist-turned-opportunist. Like George Saunders' unnamed caveman in *Pastoralia*, we root for Ido when he is critically injured, and we like him for trying to save mankind. But we laugh at him and lose faith in him when it all goes to his head and his creation spins out of control. Like Daniel Keyes' Charlie Gordon in *Flowers for Algernon*, Ido is out of his league. Ido's 'beast' will turn upon him; this Icarian adventure ends badly.

To render the unraveling process, I will look at David Benioff's *City of Thieves* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, as much for their satire as for their poignancy. Etgar Keret's "Fly Already" successfully sprinkles the story with surprising details and subtle humor. My goal is to be able to keep Ido likeable while he messes everything up.

III. Shape of Project

Misheberach will consist of four stories ranging in length from 10,000-25,000 words.

Since there is no single thread running through the stories, they will be grouped for symmetry. The project will start with "Happy Birthday to You," a lighter entry in to the collection. Then comes the titular "Misheberach," the longest and perhaps weightiest of the collection. This will be followed by the relatively shorter "Comrades." Finally, the longer and more complicated "A Killer App" to complete the lineup.

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