

Chasing Raquel

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

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Introduction

The title of this project, *Chasing Raquel*, is taken from a short story that I wrote in early 2010 about a frustrated adolescent who makes a final attempt at social acceptance in his high school before switching to a different school. The story was also the last I wrote in the fiction writing workshop at Bar Ilan before embarking on my own series of formative transitions. Writing this story forced me to reflect on many of the changes I had experienced in my life. I reflected back on a time during the tenth grade when I was in the midst of switching from American public school to a Modern Orthodox Jewish school, and I was struggling to find acceptance in the public school social order before it was too late. As I looked back on those experiences while composing the story, the writing process helped me discern striking parallels between my adolescent transfer from public to parochial Jewish school and my more recent move from the United States to Israel. After the Spring semester ended in 2010, this story continued to be the lens through which I looked at my experiences as an American immigrant to Israel writing about my experiences of code-switching and cultural adaptation based on my own past. That story led me, eventually, to the proposed thesis consisting of non-fiction prose that explores the themes I first began to tackle in that last writing workshop many years ago.

Aims and General Description

The proposed thesis will consist of a collection of interconnected nonfiction prose accounts of personal events from the past six years of my life during which I undertook a series of wholesale shifts of geography, profession, and social milieu. How a writer mediates such fundamental change in creative non-fiction will be the focus of the thesis. The project will contain some sections akin to expository writing, but the purpose of these sections will be to add further layers of context to the personal experiences described in the memoirs.

The proposed series of memoirs will be about how, during my years of early adulthood, I confronted that which was missing from my childhood. The central theme of this project is the quest for acceptance and belonging. I will attempt to reach a nuanced understanding of this vital yet elusive concept by tracing it through different stages of my life, from the “cool” and “nerdy” tables in a middle school lunchroom to the geopolitical heart of one of the world's most intense international conflicts.

Conceptual Background

There is a paradox inherent in the craft of memoir, which is that while you are writing a true story, it is also an artistic expression and complete work of stylized language. It is nearly impossible to remember enough detail to make a purely factual recounting of a past event seem vivid enough to be engaging literature. There is often conflict between the precise facts and the artistic or expressive goals of the writer presenting the facts while striving for literature. In the proposed thesis, I will grapple with that contradiction in connection with my own past and writing. I will also show how various theorists of life writing have dealt with it.

In *Writing Life Stories*, Bill Roorbach states, “There are a lot of good reasons to change names, to combine characters, to compress time in a dark memoir, even good reasons to create episodes ... but a readerly indulgence of your making things up in specific instances doesn't mean you'll get indulgence for lying in big ways.” Roorbach stresses that it is important to have a disclaimer if you know that you will not be retelling events in a purely factual way. I find Roorbach's commonsense position to be relevant for my goals as a writer. My main focus as a writer is how well I express the ideas, struggles, and experiences behind the specific events that transpired, and I consider these objectives to be more important than being wholly faithful to the truth. Yet this melding of narrative fidelity with literary creativity is not unique to the practice of autobiography or even limited to creative non-fiction. In fact, my approach to memoir is inspired by sources far beyond the purview of life writing.

One classic piece of literary fiction that has had a profound impact on my interpretation of events in my life as regards this project is a critical essay on Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* called “A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress” by Sandra M. Gilbert. This essay describes the personal journey that the novel's protagonist, Jane, makes across numerous

locations, where each location represents a particular stage in her personal journey. This model of personal discovery and growth mapped across a vast geography structuring a piece of writing resonates with me as a reader and writer. It helped shape my approach in planning the proposed thesis.

Another (unrelated) Gilbert, author Elizabeth Gilbert adopts a similar structure in her autobiographical work, *Eat, Pray, Love*, in which she describes a year of personal discoveries across three countries, where each country represents a different type of experience and a different station in her journey toward personal discovery. Although wildly different, both these works helped me to find similar patterns in my own journey through numerous addresses across Israel, the USA and Thailand.

An additional idea developed in “Plane Jane’s Progress” that has enabled me to unearth intriguing and creatively fertile aspects of my own experiences is the protagonist’s hidden dark side, powerfully represented by Bertha, Rochester’s insane first wife whom he keeps locked up in the attic. According to Sandra Gilbert, Jane’s alter-ego represents her inner refusal to accept the social repression and ill treatment that she receives from other characters on account of her being poor and female.

Jane’s dark side first reveals itself through an uncontrolled outburst during her childhood when she is made to feel that she doesn’t belong with “normal children” (343). Gilbert writes, “As Jane’s anger and fear about her marriage intensify, she begins to be symbolically drawn back to her own past” (357). This very much parallels my own experience of having unresolved issues from my adolescence resurface as I struggled to find my place in the world of adults. Just as Jane recounts, “something spoke out of me” (343). I find an alternate voice

through the medium of social media that expresses a certain negativity and desire to reject that is never expressed by my real-life self.

Jane's dark, hidden identity is not relinquished until she acquires the necessary level of independence to reject her husband, Gilbert argues. She writes, "For having left Rochester ... and repudiated the unequal charade of marriage he proposed, Jane has now gained the strength to begin to discover her real place in the world" (364). After the demise of Jane's alter-ego as represented by the death of Rochester's first wife, it is now possible for Jane to reunite with Rochester in a healthy and mutually fulfilling marriage. This transformation parallels a central point in my own story where I switch from "chasing after" friendships to rejecting others on the social level and then later find this to be an important step in acquiring the necessary level of personal independence to be able eventually to form genuine connections with other people.

Shape of the Project

The proposed project will be divided into two sections. The sections will be called “Book I: Politics” and “Book II: Religion.” This parceling into two sections is not a chronological division. Rather, these two sections are separated according to setting and theme. “Book I: Politics” will deal with events that occurred while I was living in a city and pursuing the typical life goals of career, education and social success. “Book II: Religion,” on the other hand, will focus on periods when I wandered off the beaten track and spent time in tiny communities surrounded by wilderness. Book I is mainly focused on internal and external struggles while Book II is focused on times of reflection and gaining new perspectives about the events and conflicts that are dealt with in Book I.

The overall plot that will develop from the beginning to end of the thesis is my personal progression from “chasing after” others to fill what’s missing in myself, to acquiring the strength to reject others, and then finally to discovering how true happiness begins from within and then can spread to others through genuine friendship. The second of the three stages, acquiring the ability to reject, means that you have acquired a certain level of faith in your ability to draw strength from yourself and have proven to yourself that you can survive emotionally without the support of others. In the final stage, I begin to acquire a new ability to approach new relationships in a more genuine way, from a place of security and integrity. Here I describe the contents of these separate but interrelated sections in greater detail:

“Book I: Politics”

Book I focuses on the transition I make from being unassertive and eager to please to wavering between aggression, healthy assertiveness, and rejection of others. These stories will focus on how this transition manifests itself in the realm of political discussions as a

reflection of the broader personal transformation that I went through during my first four years in Israel. The stories in Book I will document parallels between feeling hesitant about expressing political opinions and the struggle for confidence to succeed in professional life, and the quest to conquer demons from my adolescence in order to succeed in the various challenges of adult life.

The final piece of Book I will recount a brief period of time when I lived in Jerusalem before suddenly leaving my apartment and rejecting not just my former roommates, but all of the communities that I had tried to join. Book I ends in a dark place of self imposed exile, the place from which I begin the process of rebuilding in Book II.

"Book II: Religion"

All of the events recounted in Book II transpire in small and isolated communities. Although this section will deal with many ideas connected to Judaism and Eastern spirituality, the true sacred texts are the desert, the forest, and the magical people whom one meets when traveling in such small and peripheral places.

The first piece in Book II, titled "Secrets of the Desert, Part I," will take place roughly two years before the end of Book I on Kibbutz Ketura in the Arava valley, where I lived from March to June of 2011. This piece will tell the story of rejuvenation, breaking down boundaries, and encountering a range of fascinating personalities. This piece will also deal with reflections about friendship and acceptance during a time when I sought refuge from the tribulations of an "adult life."

The second piece, "Secrets of the Desert Part II," will pick up where *Book I: Politics* leaves off. After having rejected society for a life of "farm hopping" through numerous small

and unknown communities in Israel, I come to the difficult realization that the source of my problems has nothing to do with politics. I then begin the process of discovering what true friendship is while living on Kibbutz Neot Semadar in the Arava Valley and Moshav Idan, south of the Dead Sea.

The next piece, entitled “A Place Called Nowhere,” takes place on the quietest of the farms I visited, in Kfar Hanagid, outside of Yavne. During this lonely stage, I attempt to get back in touch with my now happily married ex-girlfriend, which represents my final attempt at searching for happiness inside of another person.

The final piece, “Secrets of the Forest,” will describe brief anecdotes of experiences at three farms in Thailand and one in the USA scattered between August of 2014 and May 2015. This piece will describe my encounter with Eastern spirituality and the idea that love and happiness come from inside of one’s own self.

Works Cited

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