

The Last Days of Tel Aviv
A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing
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הימים האחרונים של תל אביב

הצעה לתזה בכתיבה יוצרת
המחלקה לאנגלית
אוניברסיטת בר אילן

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אבן פלנברג :מנחה
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INTRODUCTION

On a rainy June morning last summer, a refreshing respite from the rising heat and intensifying humidity of Tel Aviv, I wandered the streets of Schöneberg, one of the many districts of sprawling Berlin. I came upon a plaque at Nollendorfstraße 17 proclaiming that Christopher Isherwood, the British author, had lived here between March 1929 and January/February 1933. Most exciting to discover was the fact that he and I share a birthday.

At the tiny, independent bookstore across the street, piled with German volumes save for three rotating racks of English titles, I bought two Isherwood books: *Goodbye to Berlin*, a collection of semi-autobiographical stories from his time spent in Berlin, and *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, a novella of a peculiar man caught in the shifting political tides of Weimar Germany.

In the former I met Sally Bowles, who I already knew from her stage and screen appearances in the musical *Cabaret*. It was through her unconcerned, self-absorbed eyes that I experienced a masterfully chilling literary portrayal of the collecting clouds of political turmoil in pre-Nazi Germany. Not because she saw them forming, but precisely because she didn't.

Most of those who are drawn to live in Israel are those for whom the country holds strong personal significance – whether historical, religious, spiritual, political, and/or cultural. Through them, we understand this country's many facets and allegiances, particularly when they clash against one another, or against cultural behaviors already at play here, or against the perspectives of those from the outside, internationally, looking in. Israel therefore inevitably becomes defined by these many conflicts, small and large, and a seemingly endless supply of opposing narratives.

But as I learned from Sally, sometimes there is something to be learned from the one who stumbles into the chaos, blithely unaware of the tension that surrounds him or her. Sometimes, in the obliviousness of the outsider and his or her complete lack of investment and ideology, we can see the situation in a new way, gain insight and, through this stranger, perhaps catch the glimpse of an approaching storm.

AIMS & GENERAL DESCRIPTION

My thesis will take the form of a novel, following a cast of characters through a scandalous year in Tel Aviv. Through the eyes of an American woman who has been living in Israel for seven years, we follow the antics of a young, brash dancer who epitomizes the city's hedonistic spirit. In the process, we explore the nature of loneliness, the struggle to construct an identity outside of one's familiar settings, and the courage it takes to be vulnerable. Our narrator is a journalist and as such, the novel will be written in the style of realistic fiction, influenced by long-form journalistic non-fiction. Several chapters will take the shape of interviews with key players in the unfolding drama. Our outrageous protagonist, the young dancer, maintains a distance as we come to know him only gradually through those who have interacted with him until we zero-in on the young man himself. Of course, with most good creative non-fiction, the story is always partially about the writer and his or her own self-discovery. Our narrator finds that she is slowly revealing herself in surprising ways as she gets closer to her dynamic subject.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Christopher Isherwood published *Goodbye to Berlin* in 1939, detailing his experience as a British ex-patriot living in Weimar Germany through a series of encounters with the locals he met. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the stories in this collection is *Sally Bowles*, the tale of a young, fellow Brit who arrived in Berlin to become a cabaret star. The outrageous Sally paints her nails green, falls madly in and out of love, and suffers an abortion, all while maintaining visions of wealth and fame and staying gleefully oblivious to the political turmoil that grows around her.

Nearly 20 years later, in 1958, Truman Capote published *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, the story of Holly Golightly, a young country girl who becomes a New York society fixture and muses on the wonders of Tiffany's jewelry as she hops from one wealthy patron to another, while ignoring

a troubled past that eventually catches up with her.

In theme, there is a direct link. Holly Golightly may very well be the American daughter of Sally Bowles. In both stories, a young, innocent, yet ambitious woman inserts herself in a big, vibrant city and uses her charm and looks to realize a dream of decadence and easy privilege. In each, though somewhat of a foreigner, she somehow comes to define her time and place – Sally capturing the last moments of innocence before Berlin spiraled out of control, and Holly becoming an icon of all that New York stands for.

In structure as well, the two are closely related. In each, the story is told through the first-person account of a young, male journalist/writer who is either a fellow boarder (as in *Sally Bowles*) or neighbor (as in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*). Both profess a type of attraction to the heroine, though the characters are also underscored with hints of homosexuality and can be seen as thinly veiled fictionalized versions of the two authors (the narrator in *Sally Bowles* is named Christopher but the story is fiction, not a memoir). Each is intrigued by his woman's antics and both are charmed to find themselves brought into her world.

Though the two men sometimes are at odds with the objects of their fascination, and though both Sally and Holly ultimately slip out of the men's lives suddenly and permanently, they have somehow made a lasting mark – on these men, on their city, and on their respective eras.

My thesis will continue the legacy of Sally Bowles and Holly Golightly by introducing their literary grandson, Joseph Drum, and his temporary home in the new international playground of Tel Aviv, exploring both the character's and the city's search for identity.

Joseph Drum is a young American dancer who has arrived in Israel as a new member of the junior company of Israel's premier contemporary dance troupe. He is swept away by the beaches (always a few feet away), the endless nights (and a bar & club scene with which to fill them), and the accessibility of everyone from celebrities to politicians. Away from the structure of

life at a performing arts conservatory in America, Joseph Drum allows himself to be tossed in whatever direction feels most exciting and potentially worthwhile, being shaped along the way by the twists and turns, bumps and bruises. In the process, *davka* as an outsider, he encapsulates Tel Aviv's hedonism, indifference, and self-consciousness as well as its innocent intentions and genuine heart.

In a reversal of the character roles of Isherwood and Capote's novellas, Joseph Drum, a young, gay male, becomes the outrageous protagonist who thrills, provokes, and taunts the (female) journalist/writer who follows him.

In addition to *Goodbye to Berlin*, Isherwood's novella *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* also follows a mysterious character in Weimar Berlin through the eyes of a mostly passive friend. In this novella, encroaching politics take on a larger role. As Booker-prize winning author Alan Hollinghurst, himself an influence on my writing, says of Isherwood's Berlin stories, "a critical moment in history is caught in a series of such encounters, and in challengingly cool prose." I add Isherwood's *A Single Man* to my list of resources in order to best capture Isherwood's direct but elegantly descriptive literary style. Peter Parker, Isherwood's biographer, describes it as his "most profound and most skillfully written book." Additionally, Isherwood's own memoir about his time in Berlin, *Christopher and His Kind*, will provide an understanding of how he translated his experience in Germany to the stories on the page.

Capote's masterwork, *In Cold Blood*, serves as inspiration for blending the worlds of fiction and non-fiction. Joseph Drum's story will be told through the eyes of a journalist, partially through interviews with figures in his life, and thus will take on a journalistic, investigative tone that takes its cue from the mix of prose and reporting that made *In Cold Blood* such an innovation.

The collection of essays *The New Kings of Non-Fiction*, edited by Ira Glass, similarly offers stellar examples of how a journalistic, investigative approach is by no means exclusive to fine, engaging fiction.

Edith Wharton's classics *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* and their respective heroines, Lily Bart and Undine Spragg, will inform the theme of social ascension in my work while Alan Hollinghurst's Booker Prize-winning *The Line of Beauty* provides a devastatingly realized example of a young, gay man of modest upbringing navigating high society, attempting to discover his own identity along the way.

SHAPE OF PROJECT

The novella will be divided into approximately eight to ten chapters, each named after a café in Tel Aviv (and one in Jerusalem). In each, the narrator encounters characters that have interacted with Drum and discovers a new angle to his story. In keeping the setting primarily to scenes of social interaction, I intend to highlight the constant momentum of the city and present it through the lens of its most vibrant settings. Moments of solitude, quiet, and reflection are intentionally few and far between. Every scene, though it may describe private, intimate moments, is set in full view, on the public stage. Because everyone needs to take a breath, our narrator will find herself alone in quiet, isolated places for a least a short period at the end of most chapters.

The epilogue will take the form of the article that our narrator ultimately publishes about her experience with, and understanding of, our protagonist, Joseph Drum. It will draw from evidence gathered throughout each of the preceding chapters and introduce additional evidence that changes our understanding of the events leading up to this point. The final chapter will be simultaneously reflective and investigative, tying together some loose plot points, and giving us further insight into the characters we've met along the way. This final chapter, however, is not intended to answer every question. In fact, it may complicate questions or pose additional ones.

In the end, Joseph Drum and Tel Aviv may be no less mysterious than they were at the beginning.

CHAPTER 1. Suzanna, August – We meet Joseph Drum, the young dancer, on stage. Our narrator is in the audience and is struck by his performance. Following the show, the narrator finds herself at the same, long table as Drum on the outdoor patio of the restaurant Suzanna. They are at opposite ends and never speak. But through his fellow dancers, we are introduced to him.

CHAPTER 2. Café 1887, October – Our narrator is reading the daily paper at Café 1887 in Neve Tzedek and discovers a gossip item about Drum and a certain Israeli television star, Yossi Berman. A few weeks later, she attends another performance of Drum's.

CHAPTER 3. Rothschild 12, November – The narrator meets Lily, Joseph's roommate, by chance, through a mutual friend. Lily recounts her first impression and the experience of living with him. She reveals telling comments, quirky personality traits, and his self-professed goal of "making a mark" in Tel Aviv.

CHAPTER 4. Landwehr, January – The narrator discovers Drum again in the papers, this time linked to Itai Ruttenberg, an Israeli pop star. A week later, she is there again, meeting Yossi Berman, who recounts his brief fling with Drum and what happened subsequently.

CHAPTER 5. Café Hillel, early April – The narrator has been following the antics of Drum and Ruttenberg, who have become tabloid staples over the previous months but apparently have recently split. She meets with Anat, the editor of a newspaper that has been covering the story and proposes a larger feature.

CHAPTER 6. Rothschild 12, late April – The narrator meets again with Lily, Joseph's roommate, who reports that he has moved out and is unaware of his whereabouts. She recalls the past few

months of his relationship with Itai and sheds light on his financial problems. He still owes her a month's rent.

CHAPTER 7. Tmol Shilshom, June – A prominent conservative politician has just been outed by a leftist magazine because Joseph Drum was seen leaving his apartment, several times, late at night. After Drum's visibility in the media, that can only mean one thing. Our narrator sits with a political insider from the politician's office, off the record, and tries to uncover what happened.

CHAPTER 8. La La Land, July – The narrator and Joseph Drum meet for the first time.

EPILOGUE: Joseph Drum's Year-long One-Night Stand

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