

12-4-2012

Reviews/Interviews

Adam Sumera
University of Łódź

Wit Pietrzak
University of Łódź

Monika Kocot
University of Łódź

Fadia Faqir

Maria Assif
University of Toronto

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digijournals.uni.lodz.pl/textmatters>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sumera, Adam; Pietrzak, Wit; Kocot, Monika; Faqir, Fadia; Assif, Maria; Ravvin, Norman; and Majer, Krzysztof. "Reviews/Interviews." *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*, no.2, 2020, pp. 291-316, doi:10.2478/v10231-012-0071-6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts & Humanities Journals at University of Lodz Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture by an authorized editor of University of Lodz Research Online. For more information, please contact agnieszka.kalowska@uni.lodz.pl.

Reviews/Interviews

Authors

Adam Sumera, Wit Pietrzak, Monika Kocot, Fadia Faqir, Maria Assif, Norman Ravvin, and Krzysztof Majer

Adam Sumera

University of Łódź

**Capital Ellowen Deeowen: A Review
of *The Making of London: London in
Contemporary Literature* by
Sebastian Groes (Houndsmills:
Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011)**

“No, Sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life,” is probably the most often quoted saying of Dr Johnson. I am not sure whether a similar statement could be made about books dealing with London. There must be hundreds of them. Yet Groes’s book stands out thanks to its treating not the town as such but London’s facets reflected in contemporary British fiction. The list of writers analyzed here is shorter than a dozen: Maureen Duffy, Michael Moorcock, J.G. Ballard, Ian Sinclair, Peter Ackroyd, Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith and Monica Ali. But the analyzes are put in the context of numerous other writings about London, starting with Joseph Conrad (“a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and greatest, town on earth” from *Heart of Darkness*; qtd. in Groes 279) and naturally including Dickens, T.S. Eliot, and many, many more.

The main body of the book consists of nine chapters devoted to particular writers (Rushdie and Kureishi share a chapter, as do Smith and Ali). With the exception of the section on Rushdie, where he analyzes only one novel, *The Satanic Verses*, Groes deals with several novels of a given author, so the number of texts discussed is considerable. This is further enriched by the critic’s erudite references to books by other novelists who have or have not dealt with London. Surprisingly, the former category includes Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim*, thanks to Jim Dixon’s complaint: “Why hadn’t he himself had parents whose money so far exceeded their sense as to install their son in London? The very thought of it was torment” (qtd. in Groes 170). The latter includes even more famous names, such as Dostoevsky or Gide, but the most often-mentioned seems to be James Joyce, whose work appears to be the source of many influences traced by Groes.

Although the author's intention was not to focus on London in the 21st century, quite a few books analyzed here were published after 2000, including McEwan's *Solar*, published as late as 2009, so the volume is not only comprehensive but also very much up to date.

Groes observes that what "the fiction of contemporary London writers share is that they all capture the contemporary by reacting to often rapidly changing politico-economic and socio-cultural contexts" (9). For that reason matters connected with Thatcherism and New Labour are prominent and the names of Thatcher and Blair appear even more often than those of Derrida, Foucault or Homi Bhabha. The impact of 9/11 is another examined motif as in McEwan's *Saturday*, for example.

Still, politics is only one of many aspects discussed here. As Groes states, the "key postmodern tropes present the city as text, as narrative, as palimpsest, as a narrated labyrinthine space that can be circumnavigated with the eyes and mind" (14). He elaborates on this idea via Freud, who claimed that the city was not a good metaphor for understanding the human mind and that imagining various versions of Rome alongside one another was "unimaginable and even absurd" (qtd. in Groes 123). Groes opposes this view, saying that writers such as Duffy, Sinclair or Ackroyd do precisely that thing, that they "use the idea of the palimpsest—a surface of vellum or parchment used for writing on more than once—as a guiding principle because it shows that imaginative writing *is* able to contain many different versions of the city within the same space" (123; original emphasis). He analyzes how Ackroyd's *Plato Papers* approaches London through linguistic defamiliarization contained in attempts by Plato (living in AD 3705) at interpreting twentieth-century reality. For Plato, Harry Beck's London Underground map, drawn in 1935, is "a painting of great beauty. . . . Notice how the blue and red lines of light reach out in wonderful curves and ovals, while a great yellow circle completes the design" (qtd. in Groes 133). Defamiliarization plays an important role in a number of novels discussed here. In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie spells out London as "El-lowen Deeowen." Zadie Smith's and Monica Ali's novels present a variety of Englishes spoken in multicultural London. In Maureen Duffy's *Capital*, a Neanderthal goes through an area that in time will become London; what is astonishing is Duffy's use of the names from the future London (as seen from the perspective of the Neanderthal): "Neanderthalensis stood shivering in Whitehall. . . . As he moved up towards Piccadilly he pulled handfuls of black crowberry fruits. . . . His slightly bent stance made it easier to lope along than to walk and he was soon at Hyde Park" (qtd. in Groes 27). Suddenly, what has seemed obvious needs reconsideration.

Groes meticulously follows intertextual hints included in the discussed novels, for example, providing Rushdie's "El-lowen Deeowen" with a gloss

that “both ‘ellowen’ and ‘deewen’ contain the word ‘wen,’ the nickname of London’s sprawl” (200).¹ And this is not always limited to some further meaning implied by a given phrase but can also involve structural comparisons. For example, McEwan’s use of a quotation from Saul Bellow’s *Herzog* as the epigraph in *Saturday* is for Groes a pretext for comparing the mode of narration in both novels—the comparison turns out to be fruitful.

But perhaps Groes sometimes pushes his insights just a little too far—as when he concludes that the surname of David Markham, a character from J.G. Ballard’s *Millennium People*, by its sound, suggesting “mark them,” must be a reference to William Blake’s poem “London” in which the narrator walks through London to “mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe” (87).

The Making of London is another book in a series of Groes publications. In Continuum’s *Contemporary Critical Perspectives* series he edited a volume of essays on Ian McEwan (2009) and co-edited two more, on Kazuo Ishiguro (2010) and Julian Barnes (2011). His monograph *British Fiction in the Sixties: The Making of the Swinging Decade* will be published in 2012.

Although the volume makes a valuable read one has to regret that gone are the days when a reputable publisher took care to publish a faultless book. About a dozen misprints, sometimes causing grammatical mistakes, are definitely too many.

¹ He probably means William Cobbett’s words from his *Rural Rides*: “But, what is to be the fate of the great wen of all? The monster, called, by the silly coxcombs of the press, ‘the metropolis of the empire?’” (vol. 1, 43). *Google Books*. Google. Web. 25 Oct. 2011.

Wit Pietrzak

University of Łódź

**Deconstruction and Liberation:
A Review of Simon Glendinning's
Derrida (New York: Oxford UP, 2011)**

Any short introduction to one of the most elusive thinkers of the last several decades must face the formidable question of whether it is feasible to form a unified account of a philosophical endeavour that is inherently pitched against unity of any kind. Flying in the face of such criticism, Simon Glendinning's *Derrida* wins a balance between recounting "what Derrida had in mind"—an anathema to the philosopher's intellectual progeny, and engaging the texts in a creative discussion that does not shun loose threads and open-ended postulates.

The market has been suffused with introductions to Derrida, Nicholas Royle's (*Routledge Critical Thinkers* series) being perhaps the most reader-friendly, if rather alien to the task of deconstruction itself; yet Glendinning's differs in a significant way. It offers a seemingly light approach to the writings of the father of deconstruction, beginning with a discussion of a photograph of Derrida in lieu of a ponderous biographical litany of dates and events. However, what may strike one as a facetious gesture develops into a deconstructive re-reading (pre-reading) of what it meant for Jacques Derrida to be Jacques Derrida "the father of the philosophical movement of deconstruction." Glendinning keeps returning in a Shandyan manner to a basic detail of Derrida's life, the date of his birth, and never manages to present a full account of the philosopher's life story. Instead, the text weaves itself into a patchwork of insights into Derrida's past, in which he returns as a presence of the founding date just as Paul Celan did in *Shibboleth*.

Glendinning's musings over Derrida's biography set the tone for the rest of the book. If there is no finite biography but a perpetual return to the starting point, there is also no writing that may claim to have an origin or an end. This does not mean that nothing can be written without an infinity of contexts at hand to challenge the sense of the words. Derrida does not preach the end of philosophy; rather, "something like an interminable

task of thinking ‘after philosophy’ is brought into view in his work; a task that would open the philosophical heritage (which will have typically presented itself as heading towards an end) to its own ‘beyond’” (Glendinning 14). It is at this point that Glendinning commences his reconstruction of Derrida’s key postulates. The return to philosophy is explicated as a task of ceaseless exploration of ostensibly finished contexts in order to explode them and unravel their discontinuities; this in turn instigates writing as the actual background for the comprehension of language, as the play of dissemination inherent in written texts represents the intrinsic feature of all idioms. This endless play of signifiers in turn leads directly to the non-concept of *différance*: “The idea of a ‘movement of *différance*’ is . . . best understood as working to subvert and replace a tempting and deeply intuitive conception of *identity* and *difference*, a particular conception of *what makes something what it is and different to another thing*” (Glendinning 60, original emphasis). Nothing is ever the same or identical with itself, for all identity exists only inasmuch as it is defined against the differences from other things as well as from itself and is indefinitely deferred. Therefore, what Derrida seeks to illustrate with his neologism is the fact that only in difference can identity be glimpsed. This notion derives from the ontological difference Heidegger put between Being and beings, but it serves Derrida as a means of jettisoning the Western metaphysics of presence.

Glendinning aptly fuses the many various texts spawned by Derrida into a coherent picture of deconstruction; almost, it may seem, too coherent. For a newcomer to the Derrida corpus Glendinning makes the philosopher more accessible than Derrida himself would have liked. Glendinning professes that he wishes to “show up the rigour within a text that might otherwise seem wilfully obscure” (57). However, such violence may not be necessary in introducing Derrida, in that the variety, the frequently-irreconcilable threads of thought, could be said to retain a characteristically Derridean charm. What the book, *pace* its brevity, fails to appreciate is the disseminating potential within such “notion-like” words as *différance* or writing; yet in return it paves the way to the fortress of deconstruction and makes it clear that on this intellectual journey there are only entrances and hints at paths, which soon melt into thin air.

Glendinning’s book comes into its own most notably with two vital points it derives from Derrida’s writings. The first could roughly be taken to represent the earlier Derrida who has only just managed to remake his intuitions into a vision that hinges on a paradoxical quest for meaning which can never be attained; as there are constant deferral and difference between things, so these things can never substantialize fully. If there is such a thing as a “presence of meaning,” it only functions as a horizon for which we perpetually strive. Indeed, no text can be realized as finitely to

hand; as a result, what we take to be an elucidatory text which constitutes a gloss on a particular problematic issue turns out to be just a promise of a prospective elucidation. Every text is thus “a kind of preface to what remains to come” (Glendinning 35). It is this idea that appears to be at the core of Glendinning’s argument, even though that position granted to any of Derrida’s conceptions must necessarily seem dubious because deconstructive reading thrives on undermining precisely such conceptual frameworks.

It is the other tenet of Glendinning’s that distinguishes his book in that he sees in the later, more politicized Derrida a preacher of an open-ended notion of man:

In our time, we need to shift decisively from thinking in (classical messianic) terms of an end of Man in which we *finally learn how to live* to (but holding on to something of that messianism) learning to endure interminably learning how to live, learning to live without the promise of *finally* learning how to live. (Glendinning 95, original emphasis)

This concluding postulate proffers a fresh insight into deconstruction perceived not as systematic eradication of all stability, which condemns man to an ineluctable death in a limbo, but as a disillusioned re-valuation of the nature of man’s being. In the absence of the transcendental signified, man must become what Odo Marquard calls “*homo compensator*,” one who makes up for the loss of finite meaning by ceaselessly creating contingent theories and sets of assumptions.

Glendinning thus amplifies an aspect of Derrida’s work which so appealed to Richard Rorty, for whom the French philosopher was an exemplar of a Bloomian strong poet, capable of revising the vocabularies of contemporary humanities; according to Rorty, Derrida opens philosophy to the play of “accidental material features of words.” As a result, deconstruction becomes a path of thinking that gives up on the hope of obtaining some final goals of thinking, for it is aware that all such goals will be mere contingent amalgams of prevalent vocabularies; instead, and Glendinning puts it in no uncertain terms towards the end of his book, Derrida posits a constant recontextualization of the *conditio humana*. It is this aspect of Glendinning’s introduction to Derrida’s writings that turns a simple introduction into a serious exercise in deconstructive thinking.

Monika Kocot

University of Łódź

**Authenticity, Transdifference, Survivance:
Native American Identity (Un)Masked:
A Review of *Native Authenticity: Transnational
Perspectives on Native American Literary
Studies*, ed. Deborah L. Madsen (Albany:
State U of New York P, 2010)**

Authenticity is one of the more controversial terms in the contemporary lexicon describing race and ethnicity, and one of the most often used concepts invoked in support of political claims to cultural autonomy made by Native American tribes in the United States today. The definition of “authentic” tribal identity, the criteria for judging the racial status of a person, seems to be historically contingent on an ongoing U.S. colonialism. The debate concerning Native American authenticity is, in the words of Jace Weaver, “a process rendered more dysfunctional by the fact that for many years, for its own colonialist reasons, the United States government intruded itself into the questions of definitions, an intrusion that still has a significant impact on Indian identity politics” (qtd. in Madsen 16). Today’s Native America is a collectivity of people whose existence is simultaneously shaped by colonialism, neocolonialism, and postcolonialism. The high percentage of persons with mixed heritage makes the question of individual and cultural identity even more complicated.

Native Authenticity: Transnational Perspectives on Native American Literary Studies neatly inscribes itself in a theoretical debate on Native American authenticity and identity, and, even more importantly, it becomes a part of a transnational turn in Native American Studies, in terms of both the questions being asked and the resources deployed to answer them. Some of the foremost transatlantic scholars of Native Studies in North America and Europe share their insights on the concepts of “Indianness,” indigenism, the hermeneutic basis for articulating Native tribal sovereignty, and the politics of appropriation as experienced in their lives and identities as well as in the writings they make and study, while offering

comparative perspectives upon Native Hawaiian, Chicano, and Canadian First Nation literatures, to “negotiate the discursive space opened by diverse reimaginings of indigenous identities” (vii).

Madsen’s exhaustive introduction offers a methodological framework for the discussion on various faces of “Native Americanness,” and right from the beginning one might notice that the editor foregrounds, as it were, or emphasizes the importance of political and social viewpoints on American Indian authenticity, while anthropological or philosophical aspects, equally significant to the discussion, are left out. Such a perspective will be further accentuated throughout the anthology. Obviously, this might be seen as a major methodological drawback—especially in comparison with the volume *Transatlantic Voices. Interpretations of Native North American Literatures*, whose range and depth of discussion outshines *Native Authenticity*. However, those in favour of postcolonial studies may interpret it as a way of narrowing down the perspective to what is currently being explored in the discourse of human sciences.

The notion of original ethnic culture and identity seems to be bound in complex ways to the equally fraught term “essentialism.” Madsen expands upon the definitions of tribal identity and tribal membership which can be measured by blood quantum, by place of residence, or by cultural identification. She emphasizes the apparent conflict between pressure from neocolonial essentializing practices and a politics of cultural sovereignty, which demands a notion of “Indian” essence or “authenticity” as a foundation for community values, heritage, and social justice. Like the contributors to the volume, Madsen notices that the articulation of Native identity through the prism of Euro-American attempts to confine “Indian” groups to essentialized spaces is resisted by some Native writers, while others recognize a need for essentialist categories as a key strategy in the struggle for social justice and a sense of Native sovereignty.

In the words of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, “how the Indian story is told, how it is nourished, who tells it, who nourishes it, and the consequences of its telling are among the most fascinating—and, at the same time, chilling—stories of our time” (“American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story.” *American Indian Quarterly* 20.1 [1996]: 57). At the core of Madsen and all the contributors’ reflections lie the questions of how to define a Native Indian or any other native writer/storyteller, who is legally entitled to do so, and how it may affect the story and its reception. Also, a great deal of attention is given to the scholarly terrain of Native American literary studies, in particular the differences between Native and non-Native readings of indigenous literatures.

It needs stressing that the arrangement of contributions to the volume makes it a precisely pre-thought, self-complementary whole. The reader is

guided from “the questions about the questions of ‘authenticity,’” through “cycles of selfhood and nationhood,” “the x-blood files,” transdifference, “traces of others in our own other” to survivance. Thus, it is possible for the reader to see the change of the paradigm: from “Indianness” to “Postindianness”—as Vizenor’s trickster hermeneutic discourse of survivance provides a powerful strategy for subverting monologic U.S. colonial structures of oppression.

Engaging the complex politics of Hawaiian authenticity versus Native indigeneity, Paul Lyons negotiates conflicting demands upon personal and tribal identities. The author also discusses the dynamic and unobvious nature of indigenous Pacific writing that simultaneously resists confinement to the past while exploring specifically Pacific forms of perception and, consequently, storytelling. David Moore’s essay offers a historical overview of relations between authenticity, individual and community identity formation, and tribal sovereignty in Native American writings; the diachronic perspective he takes enables him to see what he calls cycles of selfhood and cycles of nationhood. The emphasis here is on the foundational role of tribal sovereignty in the politics and culture of authentic “Indianness.” That issue is further developed in Lee Schweninger’s “Back when I used to be Indian’: Native American Authenticity and Postcolonial Discourse,” in which the author argues that borrowing from postcolonial studies in order to theorize issues of authenticity can help readers of Native American literature to understand and address the postcoloniality of the U.S. Analyzing the writings of Louis Owens, Mark Turcotte, and Gerald Vizenor, Schweninger identifies literary strategies by which authenticity can be resisted without reinstating it through essentialization. The problem of reading the rhetoric of “Indianness” is also taken up in Malea Powell’s “The X-Blood Files: Whose Story? Whose Indian?” with special attention given to indigenous responses to imposed colonial measures of authenticity such as blood quantum and federal recognition. Powell explores the highly charged definitions of “real,” “fake” and “Indian-like” Indians in the works of acknowledged Native American theorists and writers. In her “Modernism, Authenticity, and Indian Identity,” Joy Porter offers a literary portrait of Frank “Toronto” Prewett, a Canadian (and allegedly Iroquois) war poet of World War I. The author discusses the nuances of the reception of Prewett’s poetry in British modernist literary circles.

In “Transdifference in the Work of Gerald Vizenor,” Helmbrecht Breinig develops his theory already introduced in *Transatlantic Voices*. Discussing Vizenor’s poetry and fiction, he argues that where the negotiation of identities across cultural boundaries is concerned, transdifference refers to moments of contradiction, tension and undecidability that run counter to the logic of inclusion and exclusion. Transdifference does not

300 | only apply to a synchronic co-presence of discordant affiliations but also to the diachronic process of identity formation in which one situation of transdifference is succeeded and, as it were, overwritten by the next, in a long palimpsestic chain. The next two chapters, Juan Bruce-Novoa's "Traces of Others in Our Own Other: Monocultural Ideals, Multicultural Resistance" and Richard J. Lane's "Sacred Community, Sacred Culture: Authenticity and Modernity in Contemporary Canadian Native Writings," offer another comparative perspective on authentic "Indianness" and this time attend to the issue of the formulation of Native identities in "border" communities: indigenous Mexicans and Canadian First Nations peoples. The volume concludes with an intellectually stimulating conversation between the acclaimed Anishinaabe writer, theorist and scholar Gerald Vizenor and A. Robert Lee. The interview develops the issues articulated in their collection *Postindian Conversations* (1999), with the focus on the subject of Native authenticity.

Given the range and depth of the analyzes, the volume should be seen as a significant addition to the field of Native American literary and cultural studies, offering a resource for students, and scholars on both sides of the Atlantic.

Literature, the Arab Diaspora, Gender and Politics

Fadia Faqir Speaks with Maria Assif
(University of Toronto)

Maria Assif: Fadia, thank you for finding time in your packed schedule to talk about your work, life, literature, mainly in the context of marginality and marginalia, the main theme of the second issue of *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*. Edgar Allan Poe states: “In the marginalia, too, we talk only to ourselves; we therefore talk freshly, boldly, originally, with abandonment, without conceit.” Would you agree? How do you think about the marginalia of your drafts, of your texts?

Fadia Faqir: I totally agree with that statement. The most unusual plants like creeping thyme and alpinines grow in cracks and crevices. Unregulated, they flourish and create their own beautiful patterns. This applies to literature. If you are out of the metropolis or the centre then you are unaware of what is acceptable or fashionable and are not influenced by the opinions of critics and the chattering classes and therefore free to roam, create unrestricted. There are no critics or audiences in my study and I don't cater to anyone and pursue nothing,

except that elusive shape I am trying to unearth or sculpt in my art. Some authors become mainstream, and the pressures of that alter their expectations and their writing and even corrupt some of them. The centre, the metropolis, the middle and upper classes in the UK or the Arab world do not hold my attention. Only the outcasts, the marginalized, the misunderstood, the ostracized are interesting and are worth representing because they bring with them conflict, ambiguity, complex realities. Marginalia is a fertile land.

MA: A quick survey of some of your texts directs us to different characters who seem to live on the margins of society. In *Pillars of Salt* (1996), the main characters are Maha and Um Saad, both of whom are forced to share a room in the Amman mental hospital to which they have been confined before and after the British Mandate of 1921. The focus on mentally ill female characters is not new in world literature (Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* are prominent examples) but is quite original in

the Arab literary scene. What I find particularly fascinating is how you associate mental illness to gender politics in an Arab context and how you relate the two to the British colonization of Jordan in the twenties. Equally important is how you take characters who are doubly marginalized, such as Maha and Um Saad (because of their gender and because of their social class), to the centre of the narrative in a setting, a mental institution, which is often unspoken about and simply forgotten about in society.

FF: *The Bell Jar* is why I became a novelist. When I read it, it opened up so many possibilities for me at a content and form level. I have always been fascinated with madness, perhaps because I was close to losing my mind myself twice in my life. Since I read R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, representing it became easy. Laing's views on the causes and treatment of serious mental dysfunction, greatly influenced by existential philosophy, ran counter to the psychiatric orthodoxy of the day by taking the expressed feelings of the individual patient or client as valid descriptions of lived experience rather than simply as symptoms of some separate or underlying disorder. If you treat patients as if they are sane with their own unique modes of communication, then following closely the mind of Shadeed as he descended into

madness through a stream of unconscious is possible.

One of the tactics of an oppressive society is to brand those who challenge power as mad and confine them to asylums. In *Pillars of Salt*, whether you are living in an urban or rural environment, you end up on the wrong side of a patriarchy that banishes you for your transgression. The novel also argues that patriarchy colluded with colonialism and occupation, and they are both in the business of subjugation and repression of the subaltern. The late Angela Carter, who taught me at East Anglia, described *Pillars of Salt* as "a feminist vision of Orientalism." It portrays the vulnerability of women in an embattled traditional culture through the stories exchanged by two patients in a mental hospital: one has obediently surrendered to her husband's choice of a younger wife; the other has seen her marriage fall victim to political violence. The histories of Maha and Um Saad, which mirror the Jordanian experience during the British Mandate, are framed and echoed by the comments of "The Storyteller," who relates them to us in a flamboyant style. The narratives of the two native women, the core of the novel, are in direct conflict with the shabby accounts of the "foreign" storyteller.

What the novel does—it confines foreign occupation to the margins and challenges the master narrative by placing the story of women at the centre. The unreliable

storyteller, a representative of occupiers and patriarchs, is restricted to the margins. Describing what he calls “white mythology” Derrida wrote, “[it] has erased within itself the fabulous scene that has produced it, the scene that nevertheless remains, active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible design covered over in the palimpsest” (213). My task, as an author, is to recover what “nevertheless remains, active and stirring, inscribed in white ink” and tune my ear to the silences in grand narratives.

MA: How do you solve that paradox between the central position of women in your texts versus their second-class status in some Arab societies? Do you think that actually they are on the margins of Arab societies? How is that marginality, in this case, defined and explained?

FF: All citizens of the Arab world, whether male or female, have obligations towards the state, but they do not enjoy many political, civil and social rights. Female citizens are less equal than their male counterparts. The majority of Arab women are second-class citizens, dependent and subordinate. Similarly to many other Arab countries, women in Jordan cannot pass on their citizenship to their children or husbands; they are still discriminated against by the legal justice system and the judiciary; they need permission from their legal guardians to choose their place of residence or

join the labour market. Their right to divorce is still not included in the Personal Status Law, which is mostly based on selective interpretation of the Qur’an and the Hadith (the prophet Mohammad’s sayings and deeds).

These are facts on the ground. I place them at the centre of my narrative to redress the balance and write in their role in our modern histories, where women’s contribution to the society and the economy is totally erased. It is a drop in the ocean, but each Arab woman is the ocean within the drop, as Rumi wrote, and that ocean is still yet to be painted.

MA: Still in the context of marginality, some of my favourite characters in your novels are male! In *Nisanit* (1988), you paint the Israeli interrogator, David, in a human light, referring to his family history of pain and violence in the Holocaust, which you seem to suggest echoes the torture he inflicts on Shaheed, the Palestinian guerrilla fighter. The latter is also humanized, as he lives his love story with Eman, the main character of the novel, and he descends into madness, in one of the most atrocious and agonizing moments of torture.

FF: Hopefully what I write is not propaganda or reductionist. *Nisanit*, a socio-political novel, did not please anyone. It showed the Israeli point of view and is critical of their jails and of how they

304 treated Palestinian prisoners; it also featured a tactical blunder by the Palestinians, so there is an implied criticism of the Palestinian leadership; and Eman's narrative, set in an Arab country, exposes violations of human rights there: random arrests, summary justice. Nobody, whether Arab, Palestinian or Israeli, is exempt from blame. In the novel, they are all equally humanized and equally blamed. All characters are anti-heroes and victims of history and geography.

I also believe the truth cannot be caught from a single perspective. You arrive at *a* truth, not *the* truth. If you create a multi-layered narrative and you have different points of view, then you are more likely to capture the complexity of the issues you're dealing with. I felt the constraints of being a journalist in the past and tried to move away from reportage to multi-layered, multi-perspectival, hopefully more sophisticated modes of representation.

MA: In your third novel, *My Name is Salma* (USA, *Cry of the Dove*), published in 2007, I see a shift in your writing topics. You are still interested in marginalized or silenced characters and themes, but this time, you cross the Atlantic and you focus on (dis)locality, in-betweenness, or what I may refer to as "the Trans-Arab outcast"—in the form of Salam/Sal/Sally. The novel is not only about dysfunctional characters, such as Salma, the woman who is struggling with who she is, with

the threat of honour killing, and the haunting memories of the child she left behind but also the drunkard, racist landlady. It is about a raw image of the UK and the challenges it faces in relation to immigrants and immigration. What was behind that shift, if you see it as such?

FF: No doubt that there is a shift in Salma. For a start, it is set in Britain as opposed to the Arab world and depicts the immigrant experience. It is also told in the first person. The discontinuous narrative of Salma's life is constructed as a mosaic in which each tile is self-contained but helps to create a whole. The reader is taken back and forth in time. The novel maintains a duality of identity and puts the past and present next to each other.

No linear narrative can tell Salma's story. She manages to escape from a prison in the Levant and sails away towards another type of prison, where she ends up an asylum seeker on the streets of Exeter. She arrives on the shores of Britain totally unequipped to face an alien society, which is suffering from post-empire depression, and learns its languages and subtle codes. On the way to her destiny, she meets people who are considerate, others who are exploitative, Christians who are either fundamentalists, applying the letter of the Bible, or imaginative and compassionate. Although this mirrors her own experience of religion, she is full of doubt and dissent.

I wanted to hold a mirror to British society and the way it treats immigrants, but I did not want to reduce or simplify; therefore, the English landlady is one of the most tragic figures in the novel. She fell in love with an Indian man and couldn't be with him. She tried to live normally in England but failed and became an alcoholic. Grief and its repercussions happen to all my characters and they try to cope, most of the time unsuccessfully.

I find in-betweenness, dislocality and displacement quite interesting and fertile grounds for fiction, because they intensify feelings. You are exposed to so many experiences in such a short time and that makes the terrain more unique. Initiation or rite of passage are universal themes, and at such junctures wonderful narratives blossom.

MA: Let's go beyond particular texts this time and try to reflect on the general picture. I am thinking about *In the House of Silence* (2008), which you edited. For readers who may be unfamiliar with the book, it is a collection of autobiographical writings by 13 leading Arab women authors. Through these testimonies, the women describe their experiences and expose the often difficult conditions under which their narratives were woven. Why do you think that listening to these experiences is important? What does it mean to you to give a voice to these women writers to speak about their writing processes—a topic that

tends to be on the margins of serious academic endeavours, even for male writers?

FF: In the Arab world the tradition of writing on writing is virtually non-existent unlike in the West. Personal testimonies shed light and sometimes contextualize the fiction. Also, the book attempts to document Arab women's struggle to become authors and be heard. They are role models for other women. Their success shows that no matter how hard your circumstances are, you can become an author and ultimately achieve your goal.

On a different level, describing the writing process might be useful for those who intend to write or just started writing. It does not demystify that magical process but contextualizes and illuminates it.

Finally, writing on writing is no longer on the margins of academic endeavours. If you look carefully, there is a plethora of works on the subject published in respectable houses. Some authors elevated it to higher aesthetic levels. Umberto Eco's *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*, for example, is a gem of a book.

MA: All of your novels are in English. One may argue that this places you, and other Arab diasporic writers, on the margins of the Arab intellectual scene in particular and the Arab social setting in general. One may even add that you, along with

other immigrant authors, are on the margins of the mainstream literary scene of the hosting countries. What do you think about that equation? Do you ever think about your status, place, and placement in the world?

FF: When writing, you never think about status, place or rank. If I carve a space in the English culture for what I call “Arabs Writing in English,” then that would be great. The aim is to push the English language to the limit and give it some Arab hues, through selection of vocabulary, syntax and repetition, etc. Something similar to what Indian authors had done. It will take many generations of Arab writers writing in English to achieve that and I see myself part of that exciting process. Our writing is rooted in English literature, but the species of flower are different, more colourful hopefully. So you can see that I perceive my project as much larger than being on the margins of this or that society. Moreover, as a writer, whether at the bottom of the heap or at the top of the scale, you continue to write. It is an obsessive-compulsive disorder and you cannot stop regardless of the outcome.

MA: As it was discussed at the beginning of this conversation, you seem to be passionate and preoccupied with Arab gender politics. Some may see the recurrent coming back to these related topics as hurting the cause of Arab women and

the body of Arab women literary texts overall. It is almost a validation of the prevailing conceptualization of Arab women as repressed by their male chauvinist counterparts, instead of emphasizing a message of hope and a more powerful self-representation.

FF: Self-representation is the aim, but until that is achieved, many speak on our behalf. There are so many books about Arab women that are not worth the ink they are written in, such as Miranda Miller’s *One Thousand and One Coffee Mornings*. It is about Saudi women today, but even the title is orientalist.

It is important to diagnose the “women’s question” in order to solve it, and because of that writing on discrimination, whether familial, legal or societal, against Arab women, is essential and a prerequisite for reform. What is perhaps paramount is the intention behind the writing. Is it criticism for criticism’s sake or it is diagnostic with the eye on medication and cure? I write about Arab women and societies because I see myself part of them and I care deeply about them, but the challenge is to write in such a way that makes the task of those who want to prove that Arab women are victims and oppressed or to justify wars against Arab countries really difficult. It is a tightrope I walk everyday and a difficult balancing act.

I am not in the business of writing propaganda or fabricating messages of hope. Fact finding,

complex reality description, aiming for a truthful representation will lead to ways out for us. Dressing up issues or fabricating messages of hope distorts and deforms and leads nowhere.

MA: In one of your interviews, you refer to the inevitability of politics in Arab literary production. Don't you think that such an obsession does not allow Arab writers to entertain an art for art's sake attitude, i.e. experiment, with a care-free attitude, with style and form without thinking about taboos and politics, in its general sense? Do you see it possible?

FF: Living under oppressive regimes, Arab writers have no option but to engage in politics. In the absence of serious opposition authors turn into dissidents to fill the gap. There is no art for art's sake in the Arab world yet and long may it continue. Much of the writing I see in Western Europe is simply navel-gazing and will consume itself. One day writers might stop being political activists in the Arab world, but that day is way down the line. The democratization process has just begun and it will take years for us to land safely. Moreover, writers and intellectuals will always challenge power by exposing its invisible and insidious tactics of repression. That will never change; only the rules of engagement will.

MA: I cannot finish this conversation without asking about the 2011

Arab Spring. The first images of some of these revolutions, such as in Tunisia and in Egypt, seemed to be male-dominated. Only weeks later did we see more female presence in the streets. How do you explain such an absence/presence?

FF: Although Arab women are active participants in the Arab uprisings, menfolk are not supporting them. Not one single slogan called for equality of Arab women or drew attention to their inferior position. Most Arab men and some women fail to see gender equality as part and parcel of the process of democratization. The "women's question" is key to unleashing liberal and modernist forces in the Arab world, but old practices and prejudices prevail. Therefore, Arab women face many challenges.

The state has tentacles in most women's organizations and NGOs. Usually, leaders of such organizations are stooges of the state. Like other civil organizations in the Arab world, women's organizations need to be "de-regimentized"—a painful, perhaps long, but necessary cleansing process.

Many Arab women are collaborators in their own demise. Women of the Arab world are divided along political and interest group lines, rather than united by common aspirations and objectives. Many believe that women's organizations are weak because they see themselves as rivals: bickering and manoeuvring for position. They need

to unite instantly to fight for key positions in future governments.

One of the most important institutions in the Arab world is the family, where patterns of oppression are normally produced and reproduced. Normally, the Arab father (or the Arab ruler) aims to superimpose a consensus through “ritual and coercion.” After demonstrating in Arab capitals, women went home to an archaic structure. Some were energized by the uprisings and decided to divorce their abusive husbands only to find that the whole system is tipped against them. Family Laws, mainly based on the Shari’a Islamic Law, give them few rights, economic or otherwise, and the legal justice system is male-biased.

Separation between mosque and state is a prerequisite for true liberal participatory democracy and gender-equality in the Arab world. Although the Muslim brotherhood was forced to disavow a long-held principle that neither a Coptic Christian nor a woman could run for president of Egypt, many of their members will oppose nominating, let alone electing, a woman. See also the position of Islamists in Tunisia or virginity tests conducted on arrested female demonstrators in Egypt.

A positive outcome of the “Arab Spring” is that women learnt a number of tactics and strategies of civil disobedience, and the skills are being used at every level: familial, local, national and even internation-

al. Women in the Arab world today are fighting for labour rights, better schools, roads, clean water, etc. The road is long and the perils are many, but in the fullness of time, the outcome is guaranteed: Arab women, the last colony, will be liberated.

MA: Many Western journalists read these revolutions as the wrath of marginalized streets and youth. Would you agree?

FF: The Arab uprisings are about food, freedom and above all dignity. In Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, one finds resonance with the misery engulfing the Arab world, where the have-nots, or what Larbi Sadiki calls the khobzistes, struck back at the state and targeted its symbols. In Yemen, Tunisia and other Arab countries people are fighting back because they are hungry.

In Fanon, one reads about “the poor, underdeveloped countries, where the rule is that the greatest wealth is surrounded by the greatest poverty.” There is also collision between big businesses and profiteers with the regime and corruption is rife. This led to the rise of a cartel culture where capital rules and where ordinary citizens are totally powerless. One of the slogans of Jordanian youth was, “I am not hungry! I am robbed!” Also the total monopoly in some Arab countries inflated prices of commodities and imposed extortionate profits. So the Arabs became servants

rather than stakeholders in their own countries.

Arabs are also hostages of their regimes and subject of their capricious violence. Both young and old were/are disenfranchized and regularly humiliated by the security apparatus. The uprisings and resist-

ance are a bid to restore dignity and self-respect. Finally, the Arab world broke the barrier of fear enforced by marginalization and destinies were transformed. Protests in the streets of Arab capitals are not about dollars; they are mostly about dignity.

WORKS CITED

Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982. Print.

Eco, Umberto. *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*. Trans. W. Weaver. Netherlands: Secker, 1985. Print.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove, 1994. Print.

Faqir, Fadia. *In the House of Silence*. London: Garnet, 2007. Print.

---. *My Name is Salma*. London: Doubleday, 2008. Print.

---. *Nissanit*. London: Penguin, 1988. Print.

---. *Pillars of Salt*. London: Quartet, 1996. Print.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Yellow Wallpaper." 1892. *Literature: A Portable Anthology*. Ed. Janet E. Gardner et al. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford, 2009. 70–83. Print.

Laing, R.D. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. London: Tavistock, 1994. Print.

Miller, Miranda. *One Thousand and One Coffee Mornings*. Canada: Scholarly Book Services, 2002. Print.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. 1963. New York: Faber, 2005. Print.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "Marginalia." *EServer Books Collection*. U of Pennsylvania, 2011. Web. 6 June 2011.

Absent Fathers, Outsider Perspectives and Yiddish Typewriters

Norman Ravvin (Concordia University) Talks to
Krzysztof Majer (University of Łódź)

Krzysztof Majer: What seems crucial to your novels and stories is the idea of the past, often uncertain and discovered only gradually by the characters, sometimes at least partly by chance. In *Lola by Night*, the eponymous Lola, who has become hugely successful as a writer under a pseudonym, notes in one of her books that “the past is like the manicured hand of a corpse, sinking its nails into the arms of the living.” This is a very unsettling image, combining as it does the inevitability of remembering with a suggestion of unwholesomeness, perhaps even disease. To what extent does this image reflect the meaning of the past for your characters?

Norman Ravvin: It’s true that my four books of fiction, as well as the travel collection *Hidden Canada*, are in part motivated by excavations of the past. In most cases this means a Jewish past, in some cases my own ancestral past in Poland, and then, in *Hidden Canada*, the Canadian past. I think overall this has been a work of recovery for me, and, as well, a work of examination and explanation. Since I feel these historical

tableaux are worth knowing, and inform the present, I’ve used them to underwrite my fiction. The darker image you suggest, as an unsettling presence of the past’s influence, is likely a shadowy aspect of what I’ve tried to convey. But I think, overall, I view this kind of writing work as neutral, in the sense that recovery is a kind of compulsion, sometimes with negative or challenging repercussions, but more broadly a necessary effort. It’s the old feeling that to know oneself one must know one’s past, or the past that is crucial in leading to the situations you find yourself in.

KM: To continue exploring the issue of the past: a recurrent motif in your work is that of a quest, often connected with the character’s origins. This becomes one of the premises of *Lola by Night*, but is also visible in your short stories: in “Sex, Skyscrapers, and Standard Yiddish,” writer Norman Flax tries to find his missing muse Lola; the narrator of “Doomed Cinema” seeks out his cousin Mark, a link to his family’s past; in “A Jew’s House,” Erenberg returns to Poland to find the place

where his family lived before the war. In your newest book, *The Joyful Child*, a journey to visit a European great-grandmother in the Canadian prairies becomes an important element of the plot, while Paul's life in general has "a tumbleweedy quality to it." Your characters seem unable to stay in one place; barely rooted in where they find themselves, they seem to thrive on movement, which is often—for a variety of reasons—directed towards their past. I know that the writers associated with the Beat Generation have been a huge influence for you: is the motif of movement in search of meaning, which seems so essential to your characters, in any way indebted to Kerouac?

NR: It's interesting to see you, correctly, pin down the importance of quests in my writing. I generally tell myself I'm not in any way a genre writer, and though I recognize the readerly pleasure generated by genre, I won't be guided by it. Obviously this is not the case, as quests recur and recur and recur, though they are often, I think, thwarted or end in some darkly comic existential trap or failure. For a long time I was also interested in male characters who could not move; by which I mean, they were overthinkers, inhibited in their ability to accomplish their goals. To view this from another perspective, my own life has led me from city to city in Canada. So even though I lived in my native city till I was eighteen,

then in Vancouver for six years and Toronto for ten, and I've now lived in Montreal for eleven years, the focus in my own experience on movement has been strong. I also find travel inspiring in my search for ideas for fiction. You may be right that Kerouac's *On the Road* is a book that fed these different interests and inclinations in my own experience. Back and forth he goes across America, but with such verve and inspired observation. It's a kind of guidebook to keeping your eyes open.

KM: Sometimes the object of the quest in your books is the missing or distant father, or the idea of a father. In *Lola by Night*, the main character tries to untangle the riddle of her father's death; in the short story titled "Expatriate," the protagonist traces a painting which used to belong to his father and then makes a pilgrimage to a certain Parisian square. Two fathers in the same family vanish into thin air in *The Joyful Child*, leading Paul to observe that "his inheritance consists of things that suddenly slip away." The father is certainly an obsession in Jewish writing, as we know from Kafka, Schulz or even Philip Roth, and the motif is often traced back to the stern God in Judaism. Do you see yourself in that respect as part of the Jewish tradition of writing?

NR: Finding fathers; losing fathers; missing fathers; loving fathers;

312 leaving fathers; all of these have been recurrent themes for me. Before I was a father myself I thought of these things from the son's perspective. Now that I am a father this has shifted, and I view things from both positions—that of father and son. There are writers who handle this theme in startling ways. Roth is one. I was struck by his notion of his father as a source of authority, of a kind of authority that he could not ever see himself commanding. I can relate to this in certain ways. I often think of the male line of inheritance on my father's side as a kind of totem, using the names, the faces, the types of men who run back beyond me, to try to envision a line of change and relationship in male types and roles. I certainly feel this line of inheritance in a way that I cannot in relation to my female ancestors. My notion of this totem is of one that is Jewish, in the way that the Canadian natives have their own kind of totems reflecting ancestry. So yes, this is an aspect of my work and thought that investigates Jewish ancestry alongside personal ancestry.

KM: To a large extent, Canadian literature still seems preoccupied with exploring its own (admittedly vast) geographical space and its own (admittedly complex and multicultural) identity. In this sense, however, your fiction is not typical. Your characters represent a variety of nationalities and inhabit a wide range of geographical spaces

outside Canada. Americans, Poles, Serbians and Spaniards, to name just a few examples, populate the pages of your books, traversing the expanses of North America as well as European cities such as Moscow, Paris, Warsaw or Barcelona. Canada is often seen through foreign eyes. For instance, in *Lola by Night*, the dominant perspective is that of Lola, the Barcelonian writer, who drifts through Vancouver; in the short story "Sex, Skyscrapers, and Standard Yiddish," Flax, an American, fantasizes about Canada, knowing very little about it except for the rumour that "in Canada . . . you could flush a toilet from here to doomsday and you wouldn't use all the water they had in their rivers and lakes." Together with the characters' distinctive uprootedness, this extraneous perspective seems to heighten the sense of not-belonging and detachment. Is that in any way indicative of your perception of Canadian (or perhaps North American) space?

NR: Your sense of my atypical strategies in the context of Canadian writing seems correct and convincing. I do tend to set up narrative point of view from the outside, to look in at either a Canadian theme or a Jewish one. I am more interested in viewing certain subjects from the outsider position, since I think this allows for fresh thinking and an avoidance of clichés. I mistrust confident canonical claims. I don't trust writers or critics who make

broad claims to speak for a national group or identity. So any way I can position myself outside such claims and look back at a character's experience is satisfying. So yes, my perception of Canadian space demands a critical distance. I guess this reflects some sort of distanced relationship that I myself maintain towards the mainstream culture. Still, it's strange to say this, since I don't have any wariness or doubts with relation to my Canadian identity. The strategy you notice in my fiction is more a narrative strategy than one that reflects personal doubt or discomfort.

KM: In addition to the extraneous perspective, there is also the question of how your non-Canadian characters view their own original environment and their history. Next to Spaniards (Lola) and Americans (Flax), you have also written, for example, about Serbians (Ifo Negic in "Everything but the Head") and Poles (Peter Klosowsky in "A Jew's House"). I understand that the novel on which you've been working for the last few years, *The Typewriter Girl*, is set entirely in Poland and involves Polish characters. I found "A Jew's House" particularly interesting on account of such decisions: you chose to tell the story of the appropriation of Jewish property from a Polish perspective, but also decided to maintain temporal distance from the actual events in making the character a descendant of those directly involved. These,

I believe, are courageous, but also risky gestures.

NR: You push me to think further on the above issues, by asking about my way of choosing points of view that are atypical in stories related to the Polish Jewish past. My approach to this material is, I think, entirely idiosyncratic. Though I teach Holocaust literature and am familiar with its strategies, its genres, its challenges, I'm not interested in writing it myself. And I'm not interested in parroting the conventional community line on Jewish identity, whether this has to do with the wartime, with Israel, or other issues. So I have ended up designing characters whose Jewishness is quirky, tentative, hidden, and then more recently, I've worked hard to look at Polish Jewish history from unlikely points of view. *The Typewriter Girl* is my most extensive effort on this front. I'm in the process of rewriting it for what is the third or fourth time, so there are obviously some challenges there I've not surmounted. The fact is these approaches may not ever prove to be an easy sell with audiences who have certain expectations regarding certain themes.

KM: We began by talking about the past and I would like to return to this issue. Running through your books is a strong sense of distrust of modern technology, coupled with a nostalgia for an earlier, simpler, idealized mode of life. In *Lola*

314 *by Night*, the Wired City project becomes a source of fear; your writer characters (e.g. Flax in “Sex, Skyscrapers, and Standard Yiddish,” Herbert Rossman in *Lola*) never touch computers, and swear by typewriters instead. In fact, typewriters as artefacts, and especially the very rare Yiddish variety, recur in your fiction so often that they practically become emblems of nostalgia. Flax is a typewriter salesman; in my favourite portion of *Lola by Night*, Rossman tries to buy one of those ancient devices from the bizarre Yiddish Typewriter Cabal; in *The Joyful Child* a connection is made between printed books and typewriters as similarly endangered species. I’m guessing that *The Typewriter Girl* will contain more of those?

NR: I am not sure when the resistance to modern technology took hold for me. I used to be fairly normal on this front. I moved along with the crowd. But maybe it became such a crowd mentality phenomenon that it was inevitable I’d make a break. I think, too, the changes have come too quickly, often needlessly, and to the detriment of artisanal skills and the true pleasures associated with reading, listening to music, driving, and so on. I’m not entirely satisfied with the idea that the ease and speed and versatility that come with technology like the computer or the cell phone are paramount. I think they contribute to the death of things we ought

not to let die, whether this has to do with certain kinds of solitude, of physical labour, of creative acts. I still compose on paper with a pen. I drive a forty-year-old car and a twenty-five-year-old bike, and get great pleasure out of them. I don’t want to be called by my colleagues as I walk down the street to buy a newspaper. And I do still want to read the news on a piece of paper. So, the objects you ask about—especially typewriters—are tokens of things lost, of ways of working that were good enough, even richer in certain ways than our new ways of working. And of course a Yiddish typewriter is all the more heartbreaking, since its linguistic culture is largely lost today, too, not just its technological flavour.

KM: I know that you happen to own a Yiddish typewriter and that you’ve considered using it to write a piece of fiction. Although you’ve described this idea in rather humorous terms, the admiration for the object seen in your other books suggests that there may be more to the idea, especially considering the rich history of Yiddish writing in Montreal. A nod to ghostly ancestors? I use this Gothic metaphor in the vein of your own comments on Yiddish literature becoming a “ghost story” for contemporary readers.

NR: A number of influences have directed me back, again and again, to Yiddish. The language operates,

315

for me, as a source of knowledge about pre-war life. It opens a great literature from that era and after, both in eastern Europe and North America. And it provides a link, for me, with my Polish Jewish forebears. Yiddish language and culture are also an alternative to more mainstream pillars of ethnic identity, to use a phrase from the work of Canadian Jewish historians. I have, to an extent, organized my own sense of Jewish identity around Yiddish. So the typewriter is really a bridge back to writers like Singer, who gives us Warsaw and New York, and I. L. Peretz. But you're right that the typewriter I happen to have been given is a link to an important Montreal writer and educator, Yaacov Zipper. The idea that I could close a circle and "be" a Yiddish writer (which of course is impossible), by way of using the typewriter is fanciful. But it presents a provocation, a challenge. In my story collection *Sex, Skyscrapers, and Standard Yiddish*, I play with the ethos of a Yiddish writing life in the title story. The joke is extended by the fact that the main character is a Yiddish typewriter salesman (how, I think now, did I come up with this?) but wants to be an English-language story writer. These motifs allow me to contend with ghosts, as you say, to re-imagine the writing life and contend with a tradition. I suppose the risk inherent in this is that stories centred on such themes retain a strange, ghostly quality themselves.

KM: In *The Joyful Child*, you have decided for the first time to combine the word with another medium—in this case the melancholy illustrations by Melanie Boyle. The packaging of the novel and the positioning of the illustrations—often between paragraphs—may suggest a book addressed to children or young adults; I was reminded especially of Norton Juster's *The Phantom Tollbooth*. I wonder to what extent the new strategy is connected with the subject of the novel, that is a relationship between a father and a son. Until now, children as characters or subject seem to have been largely absent from your fiction, excepting the main characters' flashbacks. My question is twofold: firstly, how has working with illustrations changed your approach to the text? And secondly, is *The Joyful Child*—which seems fraught with similar concerns as your previous books of fiction—also intended for younger readers? If so, what modifications in the treatment of your subject has that required?

NR: *The Joyful Child* became an illustrated book late in its development. But all through final stages of writing and then of trying to sell it, I imagined it as an illustrated book. This might come in part from my focus in it on children, on the books that children read, and then on my own experience reading to my sons. Picture books are lovely things. In recent years, graphic novels have brought some of this pleasure to

adult readers, too. The illustrations for *The Joyful Child* deepen the narrative, I think. They slow the reader down and give him or her something more to muse about. They offer little motifs and decorative suggestions. My choice of a publisher followed in part from my notion of the novel being an illustrated book. I thought this would both appeal to Gaspereau Press and that they would handle it well in making the book. This latter idea proved true. The novel's not intended for young readers, though a very precocious young person might find in it interesting things regarding parents and children, family life and the way these relationships change. My young son is reading it now. I do not know what aspect of it hits him or what part of the novel he can appreciate and understand. But he's working his way along.

KM: Finally, I want to ask about your dual position as scholar and writer. As an academic, you are primarily interested in Canadian Jewish writing; being a Canadian Jewish writer makes you part of that particular field of academic inquiry. I believe that to a certain degree these are, and perhaps must be, rival occupations, especially as far as time and other resources are concerned. What I'm interested in, however, is the extent to which these two activities feed into and enrich each other.

NR: It's a good challenge to try to consider how academic work feeds

creative work and vice versa. Certainly the groundwork—reading, getting to know a tradition, a national culture and so on—is good for both. My academic focus, in recent years, on Jewish Canadian writing lives, helps me hold a mirror up to my own goals and to understand where I might stand in relation to established figures. Academic work, too, leaves, at times, spaces in which creative work can happen. Because an academic is in certain ways his own boss, he can find time to write. But then there are long periods when the demands of the two kinds of work provide distraction rather than focus. I believe it's hard for most writers who have “day jobs,” as the saying goes. I am presently in a long period, though, when I've managed to keep the writing moving, regardless of academic demands. I think I decided about two years ago that I'd better fall into step in this way or I'd be very miserable. So, to paraphrase Allen Ginsberg, whenever I'm able, I put my shoulder to the wheel. Writing work is where the real pleasure is, and it's healthful too. I'm happiest when the writing is moving in its way forward.