
Jewish Literary Heroes: Individualistic Dreamers

ERIC WASSERMAN

A woman in my youth declared during our breakup, “I’ll never again date a man with an artistic temperament!” At that young age, I was a slightly built, short haired, not-so-nice Jewish boy who had an affinity for wearing khakis, short-sleeved collared shirts and Converse sneakers. Artist was as far from what I thought of myself as professional baseball player. But she was right, of course.

Today, my fiction writing students often ask how many tattoos or piercings I have (they correctly assume I have none). My usual reply (so Jewish) reverses and complicates the question. The students without tattoos are often the more original writers; their externally expressive classmates are relatively normal people, while those with true creative impulses are internal freaks desperately trying to conceal it. I know, because during my own college years, I was likely a visual distraction of normalcy on a campus of provocative exterior extravagance, but I was consumed by stories in my head begging to bleed out to the page.

My Jewish-American literary heroes have always been internal individualistic freaks masked in exterior normalcy. Both Philip Roth (an obvious influence) and Delmore Schwartz (a painfully underappreciated writer my new kitten is named after) appear relatively plain. Roth has always looked as if he regularly raids his local Brooks Brothers’ casual wear section. But if one knows anything about these

artists — and, I stress, artists — they are fierce individualists in ways that absolutely no exterior societal rebel will ever become.

To be a Jew is to be born into otherness (in a positive way). But to be a Jew born with the creative impulse means you are the other of otherness. There is a video I have watched many times of former American poet laureate Robert Pinsky in Jerusalem reading one of my favorite poems by the late Israeli writer Yehuda Amichai, the heart-wrenching “Once a Great Love.” Pinsky, with his immaculately groomed hair and warm smile, looks like a man I would trust to do my taxes. And Amichai, like the two living giants of Israeli prose, David Grossman and Amos Oz, seems to have been a man of comfortable sweaters during his time. No tattoos or piercings there. But the artistic otherness within runs deep.

Prague’s favorite Jewish son, Franz Kafka, once wrote, “The tremendous world I have inside my head. But how [to] free myself and free it without being torn to pieces. And a thousand times [I’d] rather be torn to pieces than rather it in me or bury it. That, indeed, is why I am here, that is clear to me.” So with this otherness comes the struggle of aloneness that all Jewish literary heroes seem to share. I always tell my aspiring student writers that if they are incapable of spending a great portion of their lives in a room by themselves, they should probably start a garage band instead.

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Literary writing by its very nature is, for the most part, an individual sport. But what is so very interesting about the fictional characters of my Jewish literary heroes is that they exude both otherness and aloneness.

Nathan Zuckerman, one of the most misunderstood characters in all of American literature, is often assumed to be Roth's fictional alter ego (Zuckerman appears in nine of Roth's 27 novels). But I do not share that assumption; I believe Roth is infusing Zuckerman with his own otherness and aloneness. In my favorite of the Zuckerman novels, *The Counterlife*, the most moving moments are when Zuckerman is alone — especially when we are alone with him, deep inside his psyche, as he tries to come to terms with his otherness and his individualism. He is loyal to his fellow Jews and yet he must be even more loyal to his individualism. After reading Zuckerman declare, "I don't have to act like a Jew — I am one," I feel like cheering him on as he challenges the collective whole.

In Shwartz's masterpiece, the profound and haunting short story, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," the nameless narrator sits alone in a movie theater literally watching the long ago courtship of his own parents unfold on the screen before him. When the narrator shouts at the screen, "Don't do it. It's not too late to change your minds, both of you. Nothing good will come of it, only remorse, hatred, scandal, and two children whose characters are monstrous," there is, of course, no response; his celluloid parents do not hear him or his desperate warning. The first time I read this story, I had an almost physical reaction of personal identification; me, the lifelong movie junkie,

seeing myself sitting in a movie theater, the place that has served as my personal synagogue of refuge, alone and confronted by the origin of my otherness. Our nameless hero is both like and not like his parents. He is the other of otherness, and he knows it. His individualism frightens him, but we know it will be embraced.

What these Jewish-American characters represent is what their literary Jewish-American authors deplore. Cute, adorable Jewish families might exist in Broadway musicals, but not in the world most of us live in. Though I may have wanted to adopt Joel Fleischman's humorously quirky Jewish parents in CBS-TV's "Northern Exposure," I certainly didn't get them. Neither did Pinsky, whose own mother didn't attend his or his brother's bar mitzvah. In "Growing Up Jewish," a video on bighink.com, he reflects: "I didn't have a nice old Jewish mom and dad...like most people, they were weird."

All Jewish writers (myself included) share the burden of being unfortunate individualistic dreamers. We are born into a collective people and are both blessed and cursed with an inner otherness all our own. That is because we have artistic temperaments; we are freaks in disguise. And so my Jewish literary heroes are in the end not so different from the characters they create. In a religious and ethnic culture that often encourages the collective and the wished-for-life over reality, they challenge that collectiveness with not just their own fierce individualism but also the individualism of their characters. I want my Jewish literary heroes to be crafting characters that get under people's skin. If they fail to do that, they aren't really doing their job. 

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