



Article

“To Extract from It Some Sort of Beautiful Thing”: The Holocaust in the Families and Fiction of Nava Semel and Etgar Keret

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Abstract: In literary narratives by Nava Semel (1954–2017) and Etgar Keret (b. 1967), both Israeli children of Holocaust survivors, readers encounter the kinds of searching questions about inheriting the burden of traumatic inheritance, witnessing, and postmemory frequently intrinsic to second-generation literature in other national contexts. However, their works are further distinguished by acute examinations that probe the moral fabric of Israeli society itself, including dehumanization of the enemy through slogans and other debased forms of language and misuses of historical memory. In addition, their fiction measures the distance between the suffering and pain of intimate family memory (what Semel once dubbed their “private Shoah”) and ceremonial, nationalistic forms of Holocaust memory, and the apartness felt by the children of survivors who sense themselves somehow at odds with their society’s heroic values. Semel’s numerous articles, and fiction as well as nonfiction books, frequently address second and third-generation trauma, arguably most impressively in her harrowing five-part novel *And the Rat Laughed* (2001) that spans 150 years but most crucially juxtaposes the experiences of a “hidden child” in a remote wartime Polish village repeatedly raped with that of her grandchild writing a dutiful report for her class in contemporary Israel. Elsewhere, in a distant future, a bewildered but determined anthropologist is set on assembling a scientific report with coherent meaning from the fragmented “myths” inherited from the barbaric past. Over the years, Keret (generally known more for whimsical and surreal tales) has often spoken in interviews as well as his memoir about being raised by survivors. “Siren”, set in a Tel Aviv high school, is one of the most acclaimed of Keret’s realist stories (and required reading in Israeli high schools), raises troubling questions about Israeli society’s official forms of Holocaust mourning and remembrance and individual conscience. It is through their portrayals of the cognitive and moral struggles of children and adolescents, the destruction of their innocence, and gradual awakening into compassionate awareness that Semel and Keret most shine, each unwavering in preserving the Shoah’s legacy as a form of vigilance against society’s abuses, whether toward “internal” or “external” others.

Keywords: Israeli childhood; Holocaust; second generation witnessing; trauma and memory; Nava Semel; Etgar Keret

It has often been observed that a great deal, if not the preponderance, of Israeli fiction is centered on family life. Alongside David Grossman, Nava Semel and Etgar Keret are the preeminent second-generation literary interpreters of the Holocaust in Israel, and in this capacity, reading Semel and Keret alongside one another proves especially illuminating for English-language readers interested in the often neglected role of the Holocaust in the identities of the second generation. Both Semel and Keret have contributed to profound transformations in the Israeli reading public’s growing appreciation of the Holocaust’s complexity as a profoundly consequential factor in the home. Their deeply imaginative and empathic portrayals of the struggle of children or young people growing up in families in which the trauma of “over there” sometimes left them uneasily at odds with their own

Israeli identities, as if they have inherited the vague shame of a “difference” or “otherness” they cannot fully comprehend but which sets them adrift from the normative, heavily masculinized “Israeliness” that ostensibly fortifies their peers. Yet their portrayals of the cognitive and moral struggles of children and adolescents encompass something greater than victimhood. In their works, as the destruction of childhood innocence grow into compassionate awareness, each writer ultimately renders the Shoah’s legacy as a form of vigilance against their society’s callousness toward a variety of marginalized others.

In their moral imaginations, Israel is not so much the Phoenix rising from the ashes of the Holocaust as a reminder that nation-states are at best reminders of how poorly its legacy is understood or applied. In addition, their narratives measure the distance between the suffering and pain of intimate family memory (what Semel once dubbed their “private Shoah”) and ceremonial, nationalistic forms of Holocaust memory, and the apartness felt by the children of survivors who sense themselves somehow at odds with their society’s heroic values or otherwise caught between personal pain and national myths. Moreover, their work invites us to consider fundamental, sometimes uneasy questions about the relation between past trauma and present injustice and to judge what might lie beyond complacency and the status quo.

As Semel recounts it, in Israel’s so-called “silent families”, there were often intimate cues of the trauma survivor parents struggled to suppress, readily discernable by their children. Salient visceral examples of such “non-verbal transmissions” are brought up by Semel at one point in her penetrating series of conversations with Israeli-Irish sociologist Ronit Lentin. Here Semel recalls an early memory of:

my mother listening to the radio at six, at twilight, when Ben Gurion announced in the Knesset that Eichmann had been caught. And my mother standing by the radio and physically shaking. I remember myself pulling at her dress and asking who this man was and she said only the name, Eichmann, I don’t remember anybody explaining to me who he was. Because the man who owned the grocery store, at the end of our street, Brandeis street, was called Astman and I used to, they used to send me to buy half a loaf of bread, which I used to bite at on the way home. I was afraid for a very long time to go to the grocery store and buy bread, because I thought that the man who owned the grocery store was a criminal. By the way, this man and his wife were Shoah survivors. (Lentin 2000, p. 33)

Elsewhere, she evocatively alludes to such instances of the traumatic past bursting through her childhood cognition as “seeping information” (ibid, p. 34).¹ Semel’s mother, Margalit (Mimi) Artzi (nee Liquornik), born in Bukovina, was a survivor of several concentration camps, including Auschwitz.

Though Semel was born in a *ma’abara* (transit camp), she always insisted that she experienced no special privation in her childhood. Though less familiar to readers outside Israel than Keret, Semel’s prolific oeuvre includes the very first collection of “second generation” fiction collection ever published in Israel, *Kova Zekhukhit* (A Hat of Glass [1985]), which appeared the year before David Grossman’s acclaimed *See: Under Love* (Ayen Erech: Ahava).² Semel’s ground-breaking collection, which today is generally lauded by Hebrew critics who credit Semel for launching a vigorous literary

¹ In interviews, Semel refers to a childhood of little understanding except the awareness that adult survivors often used a sort of shorthand or “code word”, “Auschwitz”, and that this word somehow possessed enormous, destructive power. Speaking of her childhood self in the third person, she says that “because some of that secret pact of silence at home was created by the fact that the child feels that she has great responsibility. She was not to misuse her weapon. She has a grenade and she is holding on to the trigger. If you say the word Auschwitz, something bad would happen to your parent. She would collapse, she would cry, she would scream, she would again have a headache. My mother suffered migraines when I was a child. It was one of my worst memories. Locking herself up in her room, in the dark, drawing the shutters” (Lentin, p. 42). See (Lentin 2000).

² Semel was appointed a member of the Yad Vashem Board of Governors, worked in television and radio as well as journalism and was recipient of many awards for her multidisciplinary creative work, including the American National Jewish Book Award for Children’s Literature, the Austrian Best Radio Drama Award, the Women Writers of the Mediterranean Award, and the Israeli Prime Minister’s Award for Literature, among others.

and cultural conversation that continues in Israel to this day, was initially unpopular among Israelis who were simply unaccustomed or even hostile to encountering the complex intergenerational legacy of the Shoah.³ In addition to numerous works for adults, Semel's Holocaust-oriented fiction includes two novels for younger readers, *Gershona Shona (Becoming Gershona [1988/1990])* and *Maurice Havivél Melamed Lauf (Flying Lessons [1991/1995])* portraying the interactions of young Israelis living among Shoah survivors struggling to create new lives in the early years of the state, a time when their very existence sometimes seemed an affront to the heroic ideal of the "New Hebrew".

Semel's extraordinary 2001 novel *Tzchok Shel Achbarosh (And the Rat Laughed)* features one of the youngest protagonists in the canon of the literature of the Shoah, a nameless five-year-old girl whose Jewish parents entrust her to the care of a farming family in a remote village. For nearly a year she is kept in a dark potato cellar with only the titular rat for company—and raped repeatedly by farmers' son. Encompassing 150 years, the novel's five disparate sections and genres (story, legend, poetry, scientific report, and journal), range from the time of that abuse to the Tel Aviv of 1999, to the investigations of an anthropologist in the year 2099, and back again to the past told from the perspective of a priest who rescued the girl. The exquisite fragmentation of these stories perform a powerful interrogation of the imperative to remember while paying heed to the unpredictable and sometimes even dangerous effects of the story on those who willingly or otherwise become its conduits. After this fraught introduction, the second section consists of the granddaughter's retelling in her school report; the third section set a decade later takes the form of a series of poems, putatively written by the grandmother and released by a mysterious website. In Part Four, an anthropologist in 2099 struggles to piece together the origins of a strange myth, or "encrypted historical memory", while Part Five revisits the past through the diary of a priest who has taken in the speechless child and in attempting to restore her is undone himself.

The novel's preoccupation with the fragility and misuses of memory can be traced directly to Semel's formative years. While the Israeli society of her childhood putatively commemorated the Shoah as Yom Hazikaron laShoah ve-laG'vurah (Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day), her generation understood that it was "more the 'Heroism and Shoah day' than the other way round" (Lentin 2000, p. 34) and that the heavily ritualized and decorous ceremonies at her school (an important point of convergence with the perspective of Etgar Keret, as we will see) only increased the distance between her limited understanding and her mother's painful history: "I never, never imagined that I should have gone home [from school], on that very day, and asked my mother directly, because she had been there ... there was a complete dissociation. I think that in this respect I am representative of a whole generation for whom there was a dissociation relating to the ritualism, which undoubtedly was also based on heroic rituals in these years of shaping the Israeli psyche" (ibid, p. 34).⁴ Perhaps like any young person she had been a bit indifferent or oblivious to her mother's personal history. Only years later did it dawn on her that whenever alluding to her younger years, her mother would freely refer to anything up to her 18th year or beyond the age of 23, while leaving a mysterious absence of five years.

Perhaps not unlike the immature society in which she was raised (immured within its mythic tropes of heroism and repudiation of the European past), Semel underwent a gradual awakening that entailed both accepting her mother's greater complexity and her own responsibility to bear witness to

³ As Semel recounts it, there was only one brief and utterly critical response in the wake of *A Hat of Glass'* publication: "Ha'aretz published a small box ... which carried the by-line of someone who ... was 23 at the time. He wrote something like, 'Yesterday *A Hat of Glass* by Nava Semel was published. From what it says on the cover, this is a book about children of, about the second generation, sons and daughters of Shoah survivors. I for one have no intention even of reading it. Haven't we had enough with Shoah survivors and their problems, do their children too need to tell us they have problems?'" (Lentin 2000, p. 54). The response of readers at that time was consistently negative, according to Semel, because she had somehow "'spoil the Israeli stereotype'. How dare I describe, underneath the macho, a trembling Israeli (man), frightened, scared, diaspora-like? I was criticized for having spoilt the beautiful ethos" (ibid, p. 59). Fortunately, in later years this book was widely discussed and reprinted at least three times to date.

⁴ In response to Lentin's insistent probing about the severe alienation and bewilderment faced by her mother's generation of survivors in their Israeli "rehabilitation", Semel rapidly regurgitated a litany of key words and phrases that are highly illustrative of their struggle in an indifferent environment: "'hostile', 'alien', 'no one listening', 'life urge', 'fast rehabilitation'" (Lentin 2000, p. 40).

it, as daughter and artist. Hence, in significant ways, Semel's own journey in response to her mother's traumatic history mirrored that of her society as a whole:

[T]he Israeli climate was, if not hostile, certainly alien and not aware of how to digest these people who arrived with traumas, and with a lot of guilt on the part of the Yishuv (pre-state Jewish settlement) in Eretz Israel. Because, it transpires that some of the facts (about the Shoah) did reach (the Yishuv) and no one wanted to believe them. Plus the fact that the survivors themselves . . . because they felt there was no one listening, they closed up and this suited their psychic state of surviving as a result of a life urge and fast rehabilitation. So they chose to deal with the practical aspects of life. I always think that what saved them from such a large collective trauma, which, by the way, they did not even clarify to themselves, was the fact that very fast they were sucked into the giant vacuum cleaner of building Israel, into the momentum of doing, of practice, of livelihood, of bread, of moving from tents in a transit camp to some apartment block and so on. (Lentin 2000, p. 40)

After the cataclysm of her mother's opening up and Semel's subsequent awakening to the reality that her mother was a far more complex being than she had previously imagined, the painful cognition led to the thematically-linked stories of *A Hat of Glass* (published in 1985 when she was just 25 years old), reflecting a new sense of identity and identification.⁵

At one point during that heady new period of open questioning and disclosures in their relationship, Semel was startled by the visible display of relief on her mother's face that "someone was asking at last" (Lentin 2000, p. 43). In the words of Semel's interlocutor in this revelatory exchange, it was during this period that Semel gradually became confident in her new role as her mother's chronicler and began to insist on identifying "openly as a daughter of survivors and exit the isolation resulting from having grown up in a 'silent family'" (ibid, p. 38). In constructing the missing gaps in the fabric of her mother's story, she was also constructing her own. Not surprisingly, given that fraught history, Semel's work sharply interrogates the limits of language and representation. Hence, when it came to imagining the torment of an aged survivor struggling to impart her story for the first time, Semel renders the near-impossibility of that task: "The old woman has no illusions. Her story is made of stumps. The chances that it will be mended at this late stage are very slim" (Semel 2008, p. 22). Accordingly, the first section of *And The Rat Laughed* begins with what must be characterized as a series of wavering, vacillations, hesitations, and deferral on the part of its narrator, a quality that bears comparison with both with the lived experience of many survivors and at least some its more notable fictional counterparts, perhaps most strikingly throughout the work of Polish-born survivor Ida Fink, beginning with the title story of the latter's *A Scrap of Time* (1987) collection where the narrator announces that she intends to "talk about a certain time" dug out of "the ruins of memory" (Fink 1987, p. 3) while refraining from actually doing so for some pages, as if underscoring the writer's (or her speaker's) apparent incapacity to bring the enormity of what she must describe (the murder of a little boy) under full emotional or aesthetic control.

By way of comparison, here is Semel's first narrator, a survivor living in Tel Aviv, in her early struggle to relate her childhood trauma to her Israel-born granddaughter: "How to tell this story?"; "But maybe there's no need to tell it"; "How should the story be told?"; "[I]t's as if she has no choice but to assume the role of the storyteller" (Semel 2008, p. 3). Until finally, this:

[J]ust as she has repressed the story, so too does she now repress the very question of how to tell it. Because if she were to give it a voice, the story would burst through without her being able

⁵ Dvir Abramovich describes the historical significance and grim impact of this "first Israeli work to give literary voice" to the children of the survivors: "Semel replays the difficulty of children living with survivor parents, presenting their anxieties as childhood fragments from a broken home movie. Sooner or later, each tale focuses on the dark underside of the individual to whom a particular pathology has been bequeathed". See (Abramovich 2003, p. 1142).

to contain it, and its severed limbs would scatter in all directions, unfamiliar even to her Even when she pent it up inside her, the story would stab its way through, jabbing its spikes into her . . . foisting itself on her and dragging her deep into the entrails of the story. (ibid, p. 4)

Even after this reluctant point of acknowledging the impossibility of the story's further concealment, a series of false starts ensue until it becomes clear that there will never be a fully satisfactory form or structure to express what she endured. For a time, her litany of self-questioning ("What good will it do? Why now?") buffers her from the pain revisiting "the story" can still inflict (ibid, p. 5). What she most fears now is that in the very telling, once out in the world, "the story will become incoherent" or "in an effort to disguise its own ugliness will turn into something completely different" (ibid, p. 5). That anxiety seems the essence of Semel's own moral quandary, the urgent necessity of witnessing and the utter impossibility of it, since it is the way of human beings to sanitize, sentimentalize, and conceal what is abhorrent or inconceivable. Indeed, it is the inevitable realization of the protagonist's fears that proves the creative stimulus behind the almost unrecognizable new meanings and distortions her story acquires later, in humanity's distant future. But as the novel begins, in the here and now of sunny Tel Aviv, it seems that the granddaughter, who relentlessly seeks the answers she needs for her family genealogical project for school, must be satisfied.

In the end, the process proves synchronous, for even as the grandmother slowly yields to the girl's pressure, a mysterious "urgency" builds up within: "Maybe it's old age. She cannot afford to let the story disappear as if it never happened" (ibid, p. 5). Yet her will to tell it ebbs and flows; she is nearly paralyzed at crucial moments by anxiety over her toxic narrative's potential to prematurely age or otherwise inflict terrible psychic damage on her granddaughter: "The old woman would try her best to keep the venom from splattering onto the recipient of her story" (ibid, p. 13). The woman's thorny tale is brimming with the kinds of quiet ironies that pass unnoticed upon the first reading and whose prophetic truth emerges only much later such as when she wishes for a more "ideal addressee" than her granddaughter: "Had she been allowed to choose, she would have preferred someone indifferent, unemotional, far-removed from her" (ibid, p. 13). Only an artist of Semel's caliber could conjure such ingeniously twisted and unexpected paths for that wistful hope to reach its perverse fulfillment, particularly in the section titled "The Dream", where anthropologists in 2099 (a time where any form of traumatic memory is automatically excised) use their technologies to try to trace the origins of the troubling myth of "Girl and Rat", one of the cryptic fragments of the barbaric past inherited by their time.

In portraying the teller's plight, Semel gives short shrift to any consoling notion a reader might have when it comes to potentially cathartic or redeeming effects for the survivor in liberating the trauma they've kept hidden: "The storyteller is supposed to gain something from the very act of telling the story. Release, after all, according to the experts, is supposed to bring relief And yet, no gain seems to present itself in the case of her story. The natural act of returning to the past and rummaging through memories brings solace only to those with very different stories to tell" (ibid, pp. 16–17). There is never a hint of redemptive unburdening in Semel's approach to the survivor's subjectivity (nor, as we will, see in Keret's), nor the hope of escaping their fate as "an eternal outcast from the world", their "walled off existence" (Semel 2008, p. 34), just the overwhelming imperative to create a sustaining bridge to the next generation.⁶

Almost in spite of herself, the grandmother's resistance gives way to wrenching flashbacks to her earliest memories of abandonment by the parents she would never see again, her first harrowing memories of being handed over to strangers:

⁶ As Dvir Abramovich perceptively argues, Semel's entire oeuvre is distinguished by its attention to "the recurring comingling of memory, imagination, and fact At heart, it describes the importance and difficulty of communicating the destructive calamity of the Holocaust to the third generation so as to sustain the fading memory and legacy of the eyewitnesses" (Abramovich 2003, p. 1145).

They stood with their backs to her. Her mother did not turn around. Didn't say a word. Not even good-bye. Didn't touch her either. The old woman is almost choking. The story is lodged between her throat and her mouth.

The stranger, the one whom she would come to call the 'farmer's wife', dragged her down the ladder and said, this is where you stay.

They lowered her into a pit under the ground. The little-girl-who-once-was thought that only the worst creatures in the world lived under the ground. Moles and snakes and worms. And the worst of all were the rats. She was worse than any of them though, if she had to be hidden away from all the people up above The little-girl-who-once-was thought: Maybe I'm really dead. Because only dead people get pushed so deep down. (ibid, pp. 17–18)

In spite of years of struggle, never again will she be able to recall her mother's face: "God is a mother who turns her back" (ibid, p. 24) and "All that remained was her mother's back. A locked-body door" (ibid, p. 34). Perhaps in approaching the end of her life, this subterranean time is more real to her than her present. Even though she is now forty years older than her mother had been, the sense of abandonment, rage, and yearning are "as razor-sharp as ever" (ibid, p. 30). After struggling to recount the agonizing rapes she endured at the hands of the farmers' son, Stefan, the grandmother notices that her granddaughter is apparently so filled with horror that she is unable to lift her pen, and yet, this child is critical to the preservation of memory precisely because communication about the past between the grandmother and her own daughter, the girl's mother, has been a failure, its dysfunctional nature like that of many in the second generation (such as Art Spiegelman in *Maus*) who grew up feeling themselves in the shadow of an immensity that threatened to overshadow or stunt their own identities:

The daughter . . . always suspected that her mother was obsessively repeating the story to herself. She claimed that whenever a person becomes immersed in a story, he doesn't bother to listen to anything around him. Perhaps she was trying to cry that she had a story too, one that was no less important than her mother's. (ibid, p. 35)

As noted above, an important theme in Semel's earlier work is the inability of the second generation of Israelis to come to terms with a legacy of vulnerability and suffering that felt so at odds with their own sense of identity. In her story "A Private Holocaust" the protagonist, Dafna, is a young woman raised on kibbutz by survivor parents who flees the smothering weight of the past for a new life in London, rejecting the Holocaust's resonance in both her and her generation's Sabra identities:

Leave me out of all this. Why do you keep dealing with the Holocaust? We lock the ceremonies away for one day in the year. It has been, it is finished, we are another generation, and we are the new children. Don't lumber us with your fur of fears. We are new. Shem, Ham and Yefet. Throwing covers over their father's nakedness. All these things happened in a place far away It does not touch me. I seek to find myself.⁷

Only in the aftermath of suffering the terror of a violent abduction and rape does something shift within her, and she begins to truly empathize with her mother's pain and gradually accept and integrate the once incommensurate halves of her being. By way of contrast, in *And the Rat Laughed*, a hint of conciliatory humor suggests at least a faint prospect of new understandings. When her daughter arrives to retrieve the girl, she is immediately dismayed when she grasps how they have spent their time. The mother (to whom the "story" was never told and belatedly realizes she long resented that withholding), is angered that her daughter's innocence will be sullied, and in this moment, we glimpse the powerful role that acerbic humor has played in the inner life of the old woman, sustaining her over time.

⁷ I'm grateful to Abramovich (2003) graceful translation of this passage from *Kova Zehuvit* (p. 1143).

Mother, don't you go messing up my daughter's head.

For the first time on a blinding afternoon, the old woman actually cracked a smile. The realization that the one she had given birth to had become such an expert at survival was gratifying. (Semel 2008, p. 36)

Though the story's power is excruciating, smothering, she has one perverse, obstinate resource for denying it total victory over her, even if it is edged with self-mockery: "Humor is the only way of undermining the story, making believe that we're standing over its ruins. Even now, the storyteller makes fun of herself: an old woman spending a blinding afternoon in Tel Aviv, in a room with its shutters closed tight. Paralyzed with fear of what she and her story are inflicting on her granddaughter" (ibid, p. 42).⁸ But her deepest anxiety is the fate of the story once released, the violence that might be done to it by future generations, whether in some way her childhood rapist might come to be construed as a redeemer:

The old woman is worried about how the stories are liable to evolve. In a world where stages are glossed over, with no apparent sequence, one must take into account the possibility of changes and reframings. Whatever the next storyteller adds worries her even more than what he may leave out. The Stefan must never turn into the main character, God forbid. (ibid, p. 43)

Semel stresses that the entire chain of transmission begins on shaky grounds. Having unburdened herself, the survivor forces herself to acknowledge her own complicity in the story's uncertain fate: "She and others like her will never be the perfect storytellers. All they can offer is the shell" and "the story has subplots and untold portions, but since the afternoon has lost the final vestiges of daylight and darkness is falling over Tel Aviv, the old woman leaves the untold portions suspended in the twilight. This was the hour when she would, if she could, have chosen to die" (ibid, pp. 47–49). If otherwise almost unbearably grim, each section of Semel's novel nevertheless leaves off with a hint of solitary grace, a sorrowful benediction. Accordingly, just before parting, the old woman, recalling the "treachery" of her parents' abandonment, commands herself: "Hug your granddaughter . . . Face to face, hug her. Don't turn your back" (ibid, p. 50).

But of course the story moves on from there, and in Part Two ("The Legend") the old woman's worry about future embellishments proves all too prophetic as her own granddaughter, whose sunny good nature enables her to assume only the very best of the Polish farming family, renders a grotesque distortion of the past. Since her grandmother omitted the full dimensions of the evil done to her, the Sabra child's school report presents an account consistent with her own goodness (recasting them as "righteous gentiles" who behaved with unsullied altruism). But it is in the futuristic distances of "The Dream", where the clash between the polarities of memory and forgetting moves most imaginatively to the fore, and like the best science-fiction, the narrative's gaze never truly departs from the present, especially when it comes to the tensions that divided Semel's own country as she wrote and until this day. "The Dream" is set in 2099, a time when someone who had suffered as the mythical little girl had would have easy access to healing technology in "one of the clinics for Memory Excision—a

⁸ Later, in Part Two ("The Legend") we come much closer to grasping the critical role nihilist humor plays as a perverse form of philosophic balm, examined from her granddaughter's naïve perspective: "[I]f there's one thing you can't say about my grandmother it's that she doesn't have a sense of humor, although not everyone understands it, especially not my mom. My grandmother, what can I tell you, she laughs at the weirdest things, like people on talk shows arguing about the meaning of life, or the horoscope telling you what's going to happen to you . . . And once we were watching TV together and we saw this expert talking about a technique for controlling your thoughts and your feelings, and another expert was telling the studio audience how to release anger and talking about energy points—you just have to press on the right places and you get rid of all the garbage inside. And she thought it was hilarious. She gave this strange laugh of hers . . . A silent laugh as if it isn't coming from her throat, or from her stomach, or wherever people usually laugh, but from somewhere completely different" (Semel 2008, p. 56).

safe and simple operation . . . Once it is over, the patient resumes normal life, and the memory gap—this black hole they used to refer to as trauma—is completely eradicated” (149, emphasis in original). This speaker, whose speech is filled with jargon reflecting the futuristic forms of knowledge and history preservation of her time, is an anthropologist whose obsessive investigation of the ultimate source of the Hebrew poems that have miraculously survived since 2011 send her on a feverish global journey.⁹

One of her virtual sojourns takes place in The Israel, a curious tiny political entity whose insistence on maintaining sovereignty is atypical for its time. This feverishly present- and future-oriented society is vehemently opposed to preserving any form of ties to tradition or the past. As the anthropologist explains to a colleague, this society is “amazingly vibrant”, “addicted to the present, alienated from anything that preceded its establishment as a sovereign state” and changing its

values and icons at a dizzying pace . . . they always prefer the new to the old, or the not-quite-yet-old . . . The Israel became caught up in the digital revolution with near-theological fervor, maybe because of how it filled the void left when they obliterated their past, including their Zionist ideology and Jewish religion. (Semel 2008, p. 143)

Here, Semel slyly magnifies the novel’s deep engagement with the individual’s struggle between “memory” and “forgetting” to encompass that of the collective, ironically alluding to classic Zionism’s complete repudiation of the Galut and indifference to any historical understanding other than a lachrymose interpretation of the past, in order to form its seamless narrative of Jewish sovereignty in its homeland. Of course, anyone familiar with Jewish history will know that Semel’s futuristic entities, The Israel and Ju-Ideah, not only mirror the societal fissures of her own moment but the disastrous post-Solomonic schism that led to the division of the ancient country of Israel into two warring kingdoms, the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judea.

The anthropologist finds herself troubled by what she considers the locals’ “pathological distortion” of time: “almost every mythological representation of the future is short-term, and includes a cataclysm”, which for some readers may evoke their anxieties about a society perpetually preparing for war, unable to imagine alternatives (ibid, p. 143). However, when she attempts to present her theoretical ideas about their “misperception of time”, even her academic peers in The Israel respond with chilly hostility (ibid, p. 143). Her next virtual sojourn takes her to the adjacent homeland of Ju-Ideah (which apparently resides next to the sovereignty of The Palestine), which consists of a closely-aligned network of religious communities. Since the latter, in stark contrast to The Israel, consider the past “sacrosanct”, the anthropologist is sanguine that she will achieve better progress in her investigation. In the anthropologist’s musings about the strident differences she encounters between the discrete societies (“It’s really surprising to discover such a striking contrast between two entities with the same historical parents” (ibid, p. 143)), Semel stealthily deepens her barbed allegory, underscoring the inherent absurdities in the Jewish State that outsiders might encounter in our own time. In Ju-Ideah, the anthropologist discovers a society “intent on avoiding anything that’s new or different . . . Even the way they dress in Ju-Ideah is old-fashioned, and my quick investigation revealed that it originated in seventeenth-century Poland—the same geographical space where the Madonna of the Rat Church is located” (ibid, pp. 143–44). Alas, here too the anthropologist’s hopes for tracing the origins of the Girl and Rat legend are thwarted, as the libraries of Ju-Ideah contain only “mythological representation [of] male spiritual shepherds known as rabbis” (Semel 2008, p. 144). Convinced that she conceals the true reason for her visit, the elders helpfully direct her to various graves of their mythical heroes that will grant her fertility or longevity.

⁹ The fragmented body of verse composing Part Three (“The Poems”) is discovered online ten years later by a young internet surfer. Initially overwhelmed with horror at what they seem to express, she also feels an inexplicable sense of purpose to circulate them as widely as possible. These fragments are the novel’s rawest visceral distillation of the trauma and degradation endured by the-little-girl-who-once-was.

Unfortunately, as was the case in *The Israel*, this visit abruptly ends in bitter acrimony when the anthropologist attempts to engage in a more constructive dialogue, and they sever her virtual access to their libraries:

When I recounted the Girl & Rat legend, the idea of some link between a Polish-born Jewish girl and the Christian faith was categorically rejected, and the Ju-Ideah elders' initial politeness suddenly disappeared. The beaming was interrupted, and my access to the public sources of information was blocked. My apologies were rejected. When I tried to break into the blocked data stores, I discovered that, despite its longstanding separatism, or perhaps precisely because of it, their data security technology is state-of-the-art. It may even be more advanced than ours. I would never have succeeded in breaking into their REMaker—if they even use REMakers there ... The exile of memory ... What submemoryfolder did they banish the little girl to? (Semel 2008, p. 145)

In their own ways, both societies are recognizable descendants of modern-day Israel, each a dystopian fulfillment of distinct trends disturbingly visible today (and perhaps not only in the Jewish State).¹⁰

Conventional wisdom has it that unlike Semel, or even more widely translated Israeli heavyweights (such as A.B. Yehoshua, David Grossman, or the late Amos Oz), Etgar Keret's writing lacks a serious political edge. Well known as the author of irreverent, Kafka-like fables, the pervasive influence of the Holocaust in Keret's work is not often fully acknowledged. Readers enchanted by his deliriously unsettling and often comic portrayals of the absurdities of the human condition also tend to ignore the surprisingly pervasive role of the Holocaust in his moral and aesthetic imagination. Yet such an assumption overlooks the pervasive role of his often-pointed critiques of normative Zionist masculinities and other social codes. By way of stark contrast to Semel's equally imaginative but decidedly more somber approach, Keret's oeuvre also proves that irreverence can sometimes also serve Holocaust memory; indeed, on more than one occasion, he has implied that it may be as essential as it is inevitable: "I feel that humor has always been the weapon of the weak. It is to protest against a reality which you cannot change but, at the same time, cannot accept". (Silverberg 2019 Quirky narrative elements and irreverent tonal shifts do not mean that his writing does not grapple with the scars left by the Holocaust on the human psyche. Indeed, it is often present in his recent family memoir *The Seven Good Years*, both in his parents' painful ordeals and his own encounters as a Jew in contemporary Europe.¹¹ It seems telling that in reflecting on his early years, Keret recalls that both his Holocaust-surviving parents (his mother lived in the Warsaw Ghetto as a child and his father was a

¹⁰ It is worth noting that Semel's use of multiple genres, temporal shifts, and imaginary Jewish homelands are also employed by her again in the witty and gripping alternative history *Isra Isle* (2005) that builds on the earlier work's deep engagement with the contingencies of homelands and the uses of Jewish memory, a novel Adam Rovner praises as an "Israeli-feminist Yiddish Policeman's Union ... a triumph of the imagination". See his fascinating discussion of Semel's postmodern speculation on the global consequences had playwright and journalist Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785–1851) actually succeeded in creating his planned "city of refuge for the Jews on Grand Island, upriver from Lake Erie and today a suburb of Buffalo, New York" (Rovner 2011a, p. 134). Rovner notes that in this later work, "the factual territory we today call Israel, or as it is referred in the novel, Grand-Palestine, remains a far off, desolate land, "the sleepest place in the world" with few, if any, Jews. Jerusalem is nothing but ruins, a small village whose very name is unrecognizable to the narrator. The prosperous real-world Israel of today thus appears infinitely superior to the backwater of Semel's fictional "Grand-Palestine". On the other hand, the "West Bank" refers not to the contested territory featured on the nightly news, but to an exclusive yacht-filled marina on the shores of IsraIsland. A tranquil and self-contained city-state, IsraIsland appears in contrast to the territorial conflicts that wrack present day, real-world Israel. Semel's novel, like allohistories in general, presents possible worlds "... that point to reformist, utopian futures, or warn against dystopian nightmares" (Rovner 2011b, p. 136).

¹¹ In his memoir, Keret alludes to many "genuine anti-Semitic experiences" he experienced abroad, including many in great deal such as a particularly chilling incident in Budapest where "a Hungarian guy who met in in a local bar after a literary event ... insisted on showing me the giant German eagle tattooed on his back. He said that his grandfather killed three hundred Jews in the Holocaust, and he himself hoped to boast someday about a similar number" (Keret 2015, p. 35). However, he also records happier connections with Europe, such as an eccentric architect's homage in creating the now famous 48-inch wide "Keret House" (the world's narrowest) on the site of the old Jewish ghetto in Warsaw where his mother had lost her entire family.

teenager who hid in a hole with his parents for nearly two years, an experience that left them with atrophied muscles, barely able to walk) were excellent storytellers. While his mother tended to make up stories, his father was less imaginative, at least in a fanciful sense, and regaled his son with tales about the drunks and mafia figures he knew in the immediate postwar years, and those rather than the stories of his mother were what tended to stick over the years. However, in spite of the inherent violence and ugliness inherent in those tales, Keret says in a Fresh Air interview with Terry Gross that his father's stories "were full of love for mankind" (Gross 2016).

Over the years, Keret has directed an award-winning film and published a memoir and several short-fiction collections as well as graphic novels and from time to time; readers could glimpse hints of this traumatic heritage. However, it was only with the publication of *Four Stories* in 2010, a collection of works that first appeared in Hebrew in the 1990s, that it was possible for an English-language audience to fully absorb the enormity of its impact in shaping his imaginative work.¹² In addition to its child-centered fictional narratives alluded, this collection also includes a stirring introduction by acclaimed writer George Saunders, and significantly a lecture brimming with revelations in which he emphatically situates himself as a second-generation Holocaust writer. In doing so, he pointedly contrasts his childhood with the silences endured by Semel—and also includes Savyon Liebrecht, Lizzie Doron and Amir Gutfreund—because both his mother and father were not only quite vocal about their experiences but somehow almost sanguine:

[T]here was something about the way that my parents were able to take those horrible materials and put them in some sort of frame that was almost optimistic. Once, I remember, I asked my mother, "How come, after you've seen such horrors, you still believe in people, and you're so optimistic about life?" And she said, "You know, when I grew up as a little child, I was living in hell. But since then, everything has kept improving" They always seemed to have a way of putting some sort of strength into things, putting their difficult life experience and what they've gone through into context. To extract from it some sort of beautiful thing, too, that can be said about humanity. (Keret 2010, p. 6)

In one way or another each of these works concerns a child's confrontation with language, memory, and incomprehensible trauma such as the horrific suicide of the narrator's father in "A Foreign Language" or the aftermath of a child's acceptance of a taboo gift in "Shoes". Consistent with earlier collections of Keret's fiction, the power of many of these works lies in their brevity, notably "Asthma Attack", which packs a powerful allegory of language in a time of emergency into a single paragraph. Though in each, the Holocaust casts an indelible shadow, "Siren", has proved the most memorable, especially in Israel, where it wields remarkable cultural impact. Set in a Tel Aviv high school, it is one of the most accomplished among Keret's more realist stories (and required reading in Israeli high schools), raising troubling questions about Israeli society's official forms of Holocaust mourning and remembrance, individual conscience and unquestioning, and almost fetishistic reliance on force.¹³ Its impact has been so pervasive that it has been adapted as a short film by Israeli film students and

¹² The publication of *Four Stories* followed Keret's presentation of the annual B.G. Rudolph Lecture in Judaic Studies at Syracuse University and appears in the same series as Betsy Rosenberg's acclaimed translation of Aharon Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939*. All subsequent citations are from this volume unless otherwise noted: Etgar Keret, *Four Stories* (Keret 2010).

¹³ In one of the most startling of his recent stories, a Keret-like protagonist finds himself confronted in his own living room by a zealous fan who points a gun at him: "'Tell me a story,' the bearded man sitting on my living-room sofa commands. *The situation, I must admit, is anything but pleasant.* I'm someone who writes stories, not someone who tells them. And even that isn't something I do on demand. The last time anyone asked me to tell him a story, it was my son. That was a year ago But here the situation is fundamentally different. Because my son doesn't have a beard, or a pistol. Because my son asked for the story nicely, and this man is simply trying to rob me of it. I try to explain to the bearded man that if he puts his pistol away it will only work in his favor, in our favor. It's hard to think up a story with the barrel of a loaded pistol pointed at your head. But the guy insists. '*In this country*', he explains, '*if you want something, you have to use force*' (Emphasis added)". In Hebrew, the reference to "*ha matzav*", the situation, is a frequent, somewhat fatalistic euphemism for the festering situation with the Palestinians and the bearded character who forcefully occupies the narrator's living room wittily evokes a West Bank settler (Keret Etgar 2012).

others on several occasions.¹⁴ In many ways, it encapsulates Keret's enduring interest in confronting powerlessness, alterity, defeat, as well as creative resilience. Perhaps more than any previous story, "Siren" directly challenges Israeli taboos. The story begins with the narrator, a boy named Eli, barely able to suppress his hopeless lust for Sivan who has asked him to save her a seat as their class is led to the auditorium for the official commemoration of Holocaust Memorial Day. Eli listens in quiet desperation as Sivan prattles on about her boyfriend Sharon, who is primed to receive the outstanding student award at graduation and is away taking naval commando tests. Eli is unable to enjoy her proximity for long before she is led away by Sharon's best friend, Gilead. After students called to the podium have "recited the usual texts", an Auschwitz survivor and father of one of the students briefly speaks and they are perfunctorily ushered back to their classrooms (Keret 2010, p. 22). But Eli pauses when he glimpses the school janitor weeping near the nurse's station:

"Hey Sholem, what's wrong?" I asked.

That man in the hall", he said. "I know him. I was also in the *Sonderkommando*.¹⁵

"You were in the commandos? When?" I asked. I couldn't picture our skinny old Sholem in any kind of commando unit, but you never know.

Sholem wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and stood up. "Never mind", he said. "Go, go back to class. It doesn't matter". (Keret 2010, p. 22)

In Keret's gently ironic rendering of Eli's empathic but ultimately failed act of comprehension, we find as deftly devastating a contrast between the sunny, "heroic" Zionist present of the child's Tel Aviv and the horrors of genocide as any writer might conjure. Here, it seems worth noting Keret's account of his father's insistence that Etgar always had all the tools necessary to comprehend the horrors he had experienced long ago: "My father always said to me, 'All the things that I went through during the Holocaust are within your spectrum of emotion. You know what it is to be afraid. You know what it is to be cold. You know what it is to be hungry. Maybe you'll never be as afraid or as cold or as hungry as I was, but I didn't feel any emotions that you don't know'" (Ehrenreich 2006). Hence, the unusual connection the drives the logic of "Siren's" pairing of the old janitor and the protagonist are not quite as counterintuitive as they first appear. Later, after learning from friends that Sharon and Gilead celebrated his acceptance into the naval commandos by stealing the janitor's bike, Eli surreptitiously informs the school principal. Police are called, but Sharon is left off with a warning.

After two days pass, Eli is content that nobody suspects him of telling on them until his love interest, Sivan, warns him that they are on to him and intend to beat him up. A femme fatale if there ever was one, she appears to direct him to an escape route only to lead him directly to his enemy. But just as they close in on him with raised fists, "suddenly, out of nowhere came the sound of the siren. I'd completely forgotten that it was Memorial Day for the Fallen Soldiers. Sharon and Gilead came to attention ... Sharon, with his murderous look and clenched fists suddenly looked like a little boy imitating a pose he'd seen in an action movie" (Keret 2010, p. 24). In the end, the protagonist's impersonal rescuer, the *Deus ex machina* sounding of the siren that paralyzes his vengeful foe while he slips away, seems a ruefully allegorical allusion to the fortunate accidents that enabled a few to escape the genocidal that consumed so many: "I walked to the hole in the fence and stepped through slowly and quietly ... I went on walking home through the streets with all the frozen people looking like wax dummies, the sound of the siren surrounding me with an invisible shield" (ibid, p. 25). Yet more

¹⁴ Undoubtedly the strongest adaptation of these is Jonah Bleicher's 20-min version, which premiered at film festivals in 2013. In the film's publicity releases, the Israeli-born filmmaker said that instantly recognized himself in the introverted timid protagonist, especially in the latter's flight at the end of the story (Bleicher left Israel for many years and was inspired to return to make "Siren"). Keret himself appears in a cameo and it can be viewed on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/65261866>.

¹⁵ Nazi death camp prisoners forced to dispose of the bodies and possessions of those exterminated in the crematoria.

importantly, it underscores the fact that the same immoral youth who steals from an aging Holocaust survivor stands obediently at attention for the state's official ritual of mourning. Moreover, as Bezalel Stern astutely reminds us: "The siren—the official, legitimate, state-mandated manners of mourning, of remembrance—is what Keret continually questions in his stories, what he continually forces his readers to rethink The story of what Israel is, what it could be, and what it should be is told more fluently in this five-page story of two high school kids than in most other hundred-odd paged novels or works of sociology" (Stern 2012). Arguably more than any other Keret story, "Siren" seems to have seized the attention of Israeli literary critics for its unprecedented critique of toxic Israeli masculinity and the pedagogical misuses of Holocaust memory (in ways I see as strikingly congruent with Semel's "exile of memory" in her portrayal of the dystopic insularity of *The Israel*).¹⁶ Perhaps inevitably, the inclusion of "Siren" in the high school curriculum has met with some resistance. In an interview, Keret recalls how:

A group of teachers said, "We will not teach this story". They gave two reasons. One was that you cannot show someone who walks during the siren in a positive light. The second was that the teachers believed that most of the students are not aware of the fact that they're making a choice not to walk during the siren. I said to them, "If they're not aware of the fact that they're choosing not to walk during the siren, it becomes meaningless, because you're reducing it to a reflex, like when you whistle to a dog and it sits. You have to know that you can choose to walk in order to make the choice not to walk". I think the fact that it offended so many high school teachers is very worrisome. The study of the Holocaust in Israel is all about very strong, petrified symbols. The last thing you would want is for reality to dirty those symbols. Nobody, for example, teaches you in school to make a connection between the Holocaust and the crazy neighbor you have upstairs with the numbers tattooed to his wrist who screams at you not to play with the ball. You hate him. He's an asshole. And he's the Holocaust. But it's like two parallel worlds. (Ehrenreich 2006)

The lecture and short fiction included in *Four Stories* do not represent the totality of Keret's imaginative engagement with the Holocaust as a second-generation writer. In another salient example, "A.: Only Through Death Will You Learn Your True Identity", one of his grimmest and most dystopic stories to date, a future is imagined in which a man who has been incarcerated in a strange institution ever since he was a baby dreams of transcendence only to learn that he is a clone fated to a terrible destiny (Keret 2016).¹⁷ In his exploration of extreme forms of dislocation and alienation, Keret's imagination has sometimes been compared to that of Kafka, and in its nightmarish logic, "Only through Death" does bear comparison to the inexplicable sadism of the latter's "In the Penal Colony" (Beckerman 2019).¹⁸ Reminiscent also of Kafka's fables about creatures and hybrids, but with poignant hints of Pinocchio too, Keret's protagonist lives in fervent hope that one day his "instructors" will

¹⁶ Perhaps most representative of these is that of Adia Mendelson-Maoz who underscores the ways "Siren" contrasts: "two prototypes of Israeli masculinity: the narrator-protagonist, a sensitive boy who respects the Holocaust Memorial Day and has compassion towards elderly people, and the antagonist, a strong and violent kid who wants to be a fighter in the army. And while this stronger boy steals from a Holocaust survivor and brags about it, he stands still when the siren for the Memorial Day for Israel's Fallen Soldiers is heard, without being watched or told to do so; the protagonist, on the other hand, is saved thanks to the siren, which he chooses to disregard". Mendelson-Maoz further observes that in this otherwise realist narrative, Keret cannot resist introducing a hint of the magical insofar as "the narrator succeeds in freezing all the people around in order to escape his predator. These two variations on masculinity, the narrator and Sharon, are prototypes of many of Keret's characters: the Diasporic Jew who tries to minimize himself as much as he can, and the macho who is a reminiscence of the Goy, physically strong and immoral, a man who harnesses his physicality and brutality to his devotion to his country. Between these two prototypes, Keret actively chooses the unstable, weak, and cowardly version of masculinity, whether in characters of children and youngsters, soldiers, young men, or fathers." See (Mendelson-Maoz 2018, p. 10). Quotation appears on p. 10.

¹⁷ Etgar Keret's, Hebrew edition of "A.: Only through Death Will You Learn Your True Identity", subsequently published under the title "Tabula Rasa" was awarded Israel's prestigious Sapir Prize.

¹⁸ Keret has often told interviewers that he first began reading Kafka during his IDF service. See Beckerman 2019.

finally acknowledge his growth and grant him freedom to live in the real world, only to learn that he is a clone of Hitler and that he has been brought into existence only at the pleasure of a Holocaust survivor who lusts for the opportunity to kill him. Keret's brilliant achievement is to switch the readers' sympathies, no matter how ingrained their resistance, simply because the clone's "humanity" and yearning to be whole is far more evident than that of the vengeful survivor. Though the protagonist has dreams that seethe with raging emotion and longings, his innate compassion always prevails. Identified only as "A", he resists seeing himself as "Adolf", insisting that he is an "Antoine", and dreams of being side by side with Nadia, the female clone he loves, envisioning them at the moment of his extermination as two artists painting a pastoral landscape in water colors. In spite of this horrific finale, the reader is left contemplating the mysterious beauty of this tragic soul.

In the end, compassionately portraying the cognitive and moral struggles of children and adolescents, the destruction of innocence and gradual awakening into compassionate awareness, both Keret and Semel prove unwavering in preserving the Shoah's memory as a form of timeless vigilance in spite of its psychic toll. Keret's humanizing fiction bears witnesses to the fact that even for those untouched by atrocity, there are abysses in every life, and his own memoir, for all its irreverent humor, demonstrates the possibility of quiet courage, tenacity, and wisdom, especially in the aftermath of one particularly awful week that included his wife's hospitalization after complications resulting from a miscarriage, the sudden recurrence of his father's cancer, and Keret's own narrow escape from a terrifying car accident. Given the grim denouements of their Holocaust works, it might seem banal to suggest that Semel's and Keret's second-generation narratives ultimately point us toward a place that might be called hope. Yet, in the end that is precisely where each writer seems to gesture in spite of everything. Here, that prospect is profoundly illuminated by Semel's anthropologist, "ferreting through discards of history", in her fervent attempt to make Father Stanislaw's diary descriptions of his rescue of the little Jewish girl comprehensible for a new age: "True, a historical scar does not guarantee that the horrific events will never happen again, but the very existence of memory—might still leave us some room for hope" (Semel 2008, p. 155). Or in a similar vein, recalling his father's childhood stories imbued with the exuberance of his immediate postwar escapades in contrast to "the horror and cruelty" he had witnessed, Keret's epiphany that: "beyond their fascinating plots, they were meant to teach me something. Something about the almost desperate human need to find good in the least likely places. Something about the desire not to beautify reality but to persist in searching for an angle that would put ugliness in a better light and create affection and empathy for every wart and wrinkle on its scarred face" (Keret 2010, p. 47). In the end, the enduring intergenerational weight of Semel's and Keret's Holocaust fiction leaves us unsettled about such questions, searching within for answers to the proper conduct of our own lives in the increasingly perilous here and now.

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