

## FICTION

**Nightfather.** By Carl Friedman. Translated from the Dutch by Arnold and Erica Pomerans. New York: Persea Books, 133 pages, \$18.50.

*Nightfather*, a first novel about the Holocaust by Carl Friedman, a Dutch woman who is also a poet and translator, was published in 1991 when its author was 39. She herself was not a Holocaust victim, but the child of one. It is this dual viewpoint of victim and offspring that infuses *Nightfather* with its remarkable power and poignancy.

Many books about the Holocaust, regardless of their virtues, are difficult to read — the subject matter is simply too painful. *Nightfather* is an exception. For 40 short chapters — narrated with poetic lyricism by the young daughter of a survivor — the reader is held spellbound. Two stories are told here: that of the father, a man still haunted by his concentration camp experiences, who must compulsively speak of them, and that of his wife and especially his two sons and daughter, who must listen. The stories begin to merge and become one, until both father and children are seen as victims of the Holocaust, although only one was in a camp.

So, in the opening chapter we are told: "Camp is not so much a place as a condition. 'I've had camp,' he [the father] says. That makes him different from us [the children]. We've had chicken pox and German measles. And after Simon fell out of a tree, he got a concussion and had to stay in bed for weeks.

"But we've never had camp."

By *Nightfather's* end, camp, like a dark cloud, has also enveloped the children. They still live in the everyday world, that of school, friends, the zoo, toys, outings to the country. But the father's world of brutality, the gas chamber, starvation, and the crematoria become theirs too, making them different from the other children around them.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" our teacher asks.

"Invisible," I say. "So the SS won't catch me."

"It's the wrong answer. Other hands go up. The teacher points but everyone shouts at once.

"A captain!"

"A nurse."

"A fireman." "

Yet, the children of *Nightfather* never lose their innocence. And this is a saving grace. For the father's story, as incident is piled on incident, becomes harrowing. "We had to work twelve hours a day or more," the father says, "and all we got to eat was beetroot soup and a lump of bread." There are tales of suicide, of murder and mass murder. Each chapter is a lesson in survival, and in death, for most in the camp, of course, did *not* survive. Those who remained alive, dreamed constantly of escape. Even *after* the war, they still dreamed.

So, when the father takes his children riding in a secondhand car he has just bought, and they come to a wooded area, he stops the car:

"He gets out. We stay where we are and watch him jump across the ditch. Then the woods swallow him up.

"What's he up to?" Simon wonders nervously.

"The usual," I say, "just a little escaping." Simon winds down the window.

"I can't hear a thing. Only birds."

"You can't hear escaping," I whisper. "Escaping has to be done very quietly, otherwise it doesn't work."

"And what about us?" he says.

"I was sucking my thumb. What does Simon know about such things? Far away, hidden by all that foliage, my father is running. There are twigs and beetles in his hair. Perhaps he won't come back until after dark, his clothes torn. 'Great woods!' he will say sweaty and out of breath.

"But here he is already. He isn't even panting.

"For you," he says. He sticks a handful of blackberries through the window.

"Lucky they didn't find you," I sigh, as he gets ready to start the car. He looks around in surprise.

"Who?" "

*Nightfather*, too, surprises. This Holocaust novel never descends to the obvious. The reader, time and again,

finds himself in unexpected emotional terrain, brought there by the unique twining of two stories that become one. Not only has the father made his camp experiences live for his children, but through the alchemy of art, these experiences are now the reader's, too, and they are not to be forgotten. But the horror has, again surprisingly, been ameliorated — strikingly in the last chapter, but also throughout the entire novel — by love.

— Isidore Haiblum

**A Diving Rock on the Hudson.** By Henry Roth. New York: St. Martin's Press, 432 pages, \$23.95.

Henry Roth's wild and compelling anger and intensity, as well as his honest painful chronicling of the early part of his life (he's now in his late 80s) make for the kind of wonderful reading that all books should be. He is a difficult and thoughtful writer. His books are memories, moving and clear, of a Jewish immigrant boy's transition from the world of Orthodoxy and Yiddish to the confusing world of tenement America, an America of ghettos and hard work, constant confusion and occasional joy.

This book, part two in his coming-of-age fictional autobiography [part one, *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, was reviewed in the May-June 1994 issue of *Na'amat Woman*], tells the story of Ira Stigman, New York City adolescent, Yiddish-speaking, anxious, hustling in minor ways, familiar, yet oddly haunted. The book is its own narrative: Roth tells the story of his past in classical novel form, and then writes a response to that past, from 60 years later. His responses are written to his computer, his soul, his other self. He calls his computer Ecclesias.

His story-telling is coupled with reflection. What he's haunted by is the secret center of his life, memories that he can only bear to recount at the age of 80, of his urgent and disturbing sexual encounters with his younger sister Minnie. Ira and Minnie have sex when their mother, doting and dominating, goes shopping on Sunday mornings. Their father is working as a waiter, so



he isn't around very much. And then Ira, seized by a consuming desire that drives him nearly mad, meets Minnie in their parents' bed. Minnie will not kiss him, but she does repeat obscenities, exciting and unbearable both, in Yiddish.

Sex with his sister is the center of Ira's life. He knows it is wrong. To deflect his desires, maybe, he goes into Harlem, where he has sex with a prostitute he meets. But that doesn't help. He still wants Minnie, and feels compelled to attack her, to succumb to this intense torrent of desire that seems unalterable. Even 60 years later, the reader can feel the power of the memory: "Even at this late hour, and yours truly a man near eighty; for these things are like to one who has sniffed the cocoo, and never lost the beatitude; that was the worst of it, the ambivalence of sin, if you call it that, of depravity, the amphi-balance of it, the Escher fugue, the optical illusion, the Hyde-Jekyll slide, the fleur du mal."

There seem to be three women in Roth's life — his sister Minnie, his mother, and his wife, who he calls M. He says little about her, although he praises her patience, and her constant devotion. With his mother, he is harsh, and now, repentant. She looms in all his books, books, large and unyielding, loving and stifling, right there in front of him so big he is forced to ignore her, and to hurt her often. He will not go to his own high school graduation, for instance. Although she pleads with him, saying she's never been to one, and it's something she's always wanted. Years later, he's sorry.

"Alas, my mother. She breaks my heart sixty years too late, Ecclesias.

"— Indeed? Pity all mothers of such sons. The whelp treats its dam better than you did yours, my friend. But you're too late. The grave is a barrier to all amends, all redress."

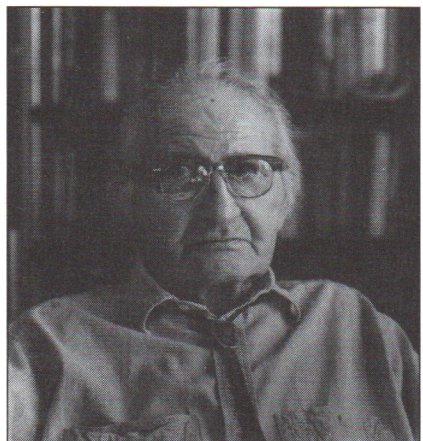
Roth comes of age in other ways in the novel — through work, through his friendships with Jews who are immigrant sons, through a friendship with Larry, a Jew so American that Ira is surprised when Larry reveals this truth. Ira passes through high school in a daze. He is thrown out of one school because he steals a beautiful fountain pen. Then he goes to DeWitt Clinton, large and anonymous. He is lost there, and doesn't find himself until his first year at City College. He was also accepted

to Cornell, with a scholarship, but was afraid of the assimilation Cornell implied — the distance and the unfamiliarity. City College was the home he couldn't bear, but couldn't leave.

In college, Ira found literature, and this discovery gave him a calling that preoccupied him immeasurably for all of his life. "Ah, he bent over his scrawl. You scrawled a world out of words, and in turn the world you scrawled brought you to life. You glowed, rereading it, something the same way you glowed after you solved a geometry problem. You had to rise to a glow in order to solve it. Afterward, after the glow faded, you wondered, what the hell was all this about? How did you solve it?"

Henry Roth is a wonderful writer. He is a careful chronicler of the painful complexities of Jewish immigrant life, of dailiness and sexuality, of the endless struggles we have to understand our lives, and then, to live them.

— Esther Cohen



Henry Roth

**Murder On a Kibbutz: A Communal Case.** By Batya Gur. Translated from the Hebrew by Dalya Bilu. New York: HarperCollins, 350 pages, \$20.

The widely acclaimed Israeli mystery writer Batya Gur is at it again. Her two earlier mysteries, *Saturday Morning Murder*, a *New York Times* notable book of 1992, and *Literary Murder*, were very well received in both Hebrew and in English translation. Keeping with the tradition of other well known serial mystery writers, Gur too has created a dashing police chief, Moroccan-born Chief Inspector of the

Jerusalem Police, Michael Ohayon.

In *Murder On a Kibbutz*, the reader is not introduced to Inspector Ohayon (now promoted to head Israel's National Department of Investigation of Serious Crimes) early in the story. Instead, the background and development of the kibbutz now celebrating its jubilee year is explored. The scene is viewed initially through the eyes of Aaron Meroz, a quasi-outsider — he was adopted by the kibbutz as a child, but left to become a lawyer — and now is MK Meroz, a member of Israel's parliament.

Aaron comes back to visit his childhood friend Moishe Ayal, who is now kibbutz manager, and to witness the jubilee celebration on Shavuot. The tradition of secular festival celebration is strong on the kibbutz, and quite different from Aaron's current frenetic life in Tel Aviv. "He wondered for the thousandth time, as he did whenever he visited the kibbutz, why he wasn't living here in this harmonious peacefulness, rearing children and working the land and celebrating the seasonal festivals, enveloped by this all-embracing feeling of belonging and togetherness." These musings are short-lived.

Aaron is aware of the changes in the 30 years since he left the kibbutz. The agricultural economy is now supported by a product made from a cactus plant — face cream. "No one else seemed to be showing any recognition of the absurdity of celebrating an agricultural rite where only the manufacture and sale of face cream made it possible to go on working the land." Aaron also soon realizes that his friend Moishe's seeming calm is a cover. The problems of kibbutz manager are many, and Moishe downs large doses of medicine for a raging ulcer.

The materialistic concerns of the younger members is of growing concern to the older, more idealistic original settlers. They see the socialistic frame they organized eroding. The members now live in houses with "refrigerators and gas stoves, coffee grinders and mixers and blenders."

The reader becomes increasingly caught up in a web of foreshadowing. Gur promises conflict and delivers; she suggests contradictions and she raises questions and then smuggles in the facts. Murder is in the title, after all, so who will it be? Also, who among the characters, many of whom are disgruntled