

Just plain sophisticated folks

A BRIDGE OF LONGING: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling by David Roskies. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press. 419 pp. \$37.50.

By Jeff Green

APPLIED to modern Jewish history, the word "irony" is pathetically weak. However, it is ironic that Yiddish literature, once a medium of Jewish expression with mass appeal that sidestepped the educated elite, is now preserved mainly in university departments of Jewish studies such as that of the Jewish Theological Seminary, where David Roskies teaches.

Another irony, central to Roskies's argument, is that the Yiddish writers who affected a folksy manner, adopting the narrative voice of a naive storyteller, were among the most sophisticated and worldly of men.

"My book is all about loss and reinvention," writes Roskies. "Its protagonists are modern Jewish revolutionaries, rebels, and immigrants who tried to salvage for a nontraditional audience forms of the culture assumed to be traditional." To a large degree the "folk" they discovered were invented by themselves in their effort to restore lost authenticity to a culture in deep crisis.

The first literary figure to adopt the voice of the naive storyteller was anomalous in every respect: Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1810). Strictly speaking, he was not a literary figure at all. Rather he was a Hassidic religious leader, who in response to frustrated messianic longings began to tell stories in order to convey spiritual messages that could be imparted in no other way. Starting with a chapter on Nahman, which he calls "Master of Prayer," the title of one of his stories, Roskies describes a lineage of Yiddish storytellers extending from the 19th century through the Holocaust.

The second storyteller, Isaac Meir Dik (1814-1893), was a *maskil*, a rationalist partisan of modernization, who used the

Yiddish story, of which he wrote hundreds, as a means of spreading that ideology. Roskies calls Dik "The Master of Lore."

His third subject, "The Conjuror," is Isaac Leib Peretz (1852-1915), a dominant figure in Yiddish and Hebrew letters. In his long, active career, Peretz adopted the figure of the storyteller to express his own deeply ambivalent feelings about the Jewish tradition, using and reshaping traditional myths without allowing himself to believe in them.

Roskies calls his next author, Sholem Aleichem (Solomon Rabinovitch, 1859-1916), the "Mythologist of the Mundane." He writes: "By 1900, Sholem Aleichem had put in place a fixed repertory of stories so artfully fashioned that no aspect of contemporary Jewish experience would remain outside its purview. ... All this allowed the author to deconstruct the course of current events into its constituent parts: the dissolution of the community, the family, and the individual."

As Roskies sees it, Jewish culture had been falling apart since the early 19th century. The Jews were cruelly persecuted by the hostile gentiles among whom they lived, and their tradition was also collapsing from within under the strains of modernity: "What began in Sholem Aleichem's mind as a series of *pekleh*, or personal sob stories, became, after his own self-imposed exile and subsequent run-in with death, a vast panorama of dissolution."

The following chapter, "The Storyteller as High Priest," describes the work of Pinkhes Kahanovitch (1884-1950), who adopted the pseudonym *Der Nister*, "the Hidden One." *Der Nister*, a secular modernist, joined a group of avant-garde poets and artists in Weimar Berlin but then made the fatal error of returning to the Soviet Union. He wrote fantastic tales with a private symbolic system adapted from folk stories, heavily influenced by Russian and German literature.

After *Der Nister*, Roskies

describes Itzik Manger, the nom de plume of Isidore Hefner (b. Czernowitz, 1901; d. Tel Aviv, 1969), whom Roskies calls "The last of the Purim Players." Manger developed the ballad form in Yiddish and mined the Bible to produce a synthetic but convincing body of poetry that sounded like folklore.

Then Roskies discusses Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904-1991). Roskies calls the chapter "The Demon as Storyteller," and traces Singer's career before the Holocaust and then in response to it: "the layering effect of Bashevis' demonic tales is used ... to cover up the multiple losses of faith and community, story and collective memory, that heralded the birth of secular Jewish culture." Roskies is especially good at bringing out the differences between Singer in Yiddish and in the English versions.

The final chapter, "The Estate of Memory," mainly describes the work of three storytellers who responded to the Holocaust in three different ways. Yehiel Isaiah Trunk wrote *Poland*, a seven-volume Yiddish recreation of the world that was lost. Abraham Sutzkever, who lives in Tel Aviv, wrote fantastic, miraculous and tragic stories. And Yosel Birstein, a Jerusalemite, began telling Yiddish stories in Hebrew.

YOU DON'T have to be a Yiddishist to benefit from *A Bridge of Longing*. Knowing that the books he writes about are largely inaccessible and unfamiliar to most of his readers, Roskies describes them and quotes from them extensively. He also provides vast quantities of background material with effortless grace. Moreover, Roskies is concerned with far more than literary issues. The unusual illustrations he has chosen to accompany his exposition, graphics by Eastern European Jewish artists, complement it by showing that the spirit present in the texts was shared by visual artists.

His book can be seen as a his-

tory of secular Jewish culture in Europe, not a comprehensive history, but a metonymic one. He examines a very significant strand of that culture in detail, with the purpose of shedding light on the whole. The key process in his account is "creative betrayal." He sees his Yiddish writers as "betraying" the normative, religious Jewish tradition (even Rabbi Nahman, who broke with the ordinary forms of Jewish discourse) in order to create new art that will serve something of the purpose of the tradition.

A very lively and entertaining writer, Roskies is often elusive in expressing his ideas and summing up the messages he draws from the writers he discusses. This elusiveness is intentional, allowing him to remain true to the writers he presents. He avoids reducing them to a pre-conceived theoretical framework and permits them to express all the contradictory urges that led them to turn to literature as a means of expression rather than to expository essays or scholarship.

Although the destruction of living Yiddish literature and its audience by the Nazis is never far from his mind, he does not treat earlier writers as though the Holocaust were the inevitable, catastrophic end. The picture of Jewish culture that emerges from his book is rich in paradox, a welter of lively voices, humor in the face of catastrophe and hope won from despair (as well as despair following hope), an amalgam of inner contradictions too multifaceted and incoherent to exist. Nevertheless, it continues to exist and to renew itself.

A Bridge of Longing is entirely Jewish in its concern, yet it is far from a parochial book, for the process of creative betrayal that Roskies explores is one that takes place in every modern literary culture, from the rural England of Thomas Hardy and the rural American south of William Faulkner through the Trinidad of V. S. Naipul, Akira Kurosawa's epic films about medieval Japan, and the Latin American settings of Gabriel Garcia Marquez.