

Memorandum

To: Director, European Office,  
Harvard University Press

From: David G. Roskies

Fax: 212-749-6345

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Subject: Acceptance Speech for the Katherine Briggs Folklore Award

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Here is the text of my little speech.

Let the best man win.

David G. Roskies

Dear friends from afar:

Today's award ceremony bears eloquent testimony that folklore remains the universal language of humankind. Just look at the geographic scope, the cultural diversity, and the thematic range of the nine works that were shortlisted for The Katherine Briggs Folklore Award! The modern Yiddish storytellers who form the subject of my book would have rejoiced in this international conclave.

The yearly Katherine Briggs Award also testifies to the staying power, nay, the regenerative power, of folklore in the modern world. This was a faith that animated the Yiddish writers from Eastern Europe -- all of them first-generation rebels and revolutionaries. For if ever there was a people thrust into the maelstrom of history, it was the Jews of Europe. Against the backdrop of secularization, political upheaval, and geographic dispersion, the prodigal sons of this people set out to create a new, secular Torah out of the folklore of the Jews.

In order to carry out this ambitious program, the born-again storytellers who are the heroes of my book betrayed the past in the name of ethical values and aesthetic sensibilities that were totally inimical to the folk. Yiddish storytelling in modern times was not the art of ecology. It was an act of triage, a radical surgery, a last-minute rescue operation predicated on the knowledge that there was no going back except as moderns.

Modern Yiddish storytelling, I argue, achieved a synthesis that the German-Jewish critic Walter Benjamin thought impossible: between the layered world of experience and the alienated world of facts. It was an heroic act of

trriage organized by those who just yesterday had abandoned the old House of Study and therefore knew just how weak its rotting foundations were. What they salvaged from the ruins -- a story here, a dream-tale there -- was designed to be better than the real thing: tougher, leaner, and more resilient in the face of historical and demographic upheavals. And their timing was just right, standing as they did at the threshold of a century in which their people, the Jews, were to lose more, first out of free will and then under duress, than many peoples have ever possessed.

I thank you for honoring their achievement.

David S. Lunnie