

פּוּרִים

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

FORWARD

## 'Born-Again' Storytellers

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one thing after another failed the Jews of Europe, storytelling flourished. Jewish artists and writers literally reinvented tradition by rediscovering and reinterpreting conventional forms of Jewish self-expression, as Mr. Roskies, a professor of Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary, eloquently argues. Mr. Roskies examines the life and work of Rabbi Nachman and the widely divergent writers who followed in his path: Isaac Meir Dik, LL, Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, Der Nister (Pinckes Kahonovitch), Itzik Manger and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Particularly interesting is Mr. Roskies' tracing of stories' eventual movement into autonomy from sacred texts. In earlier times, of course, the rabbis insisted that Torah was "the book of life, the source of law and lore." Commentaries and *aggadic* tales served to elucidate *halacha*, Jewish law, or something else in Scripture. The "emancipation" of narratives from the Book of Books was, Mr. Roskies writes, "totally at odds with the self-understanding of rabbinic Judaism." The reason Chasidism was such "a fertile ground" for tales was its idea of God's immanence in everything, even stories told by "lowly peasants." To Mr. Roskies, modern Yiddish storytelling begins with rabbi-poet Nachman, the mythic hero of his own numerous tales who "turned his craft into a source of prayer ... to be recited by the faithful."

But Rabbi Nachman's influence extended far beyond the religious world. Mr. Roskies deftly documents the extent to which sophisticated Jewish writers, intellectuals and artists, often alienated from the sources of tradition, "betrayed" traditional stories and songs, synthesizing the old and new until they were virtually indistinguishable. "Through their seekers and saints, wise men and simpletons, rabbis and merchants, flunkies and fakes, they redrew the map of redemption, either from history or through history."

Betrayal, to Mr. Roskies, is creative when "it draws from the life of the collective and feeds back into it." The phenomenon of "self-conscious modernists" reinventing themselves as "latter-day folk artists" was, Mr. Roskies points out, by no means an invention only of Yiddish storytellers, graphic artists and musicians from Eastern Europe. Modern Hebrew literature practiced "creative betrayal" as well. From poet Chaim Nachman Bialik to novelist S.Y. Agnon, "conservative revolutionaries" created "a surrogate world of perfect wholeness." Through each life of these "born-again storytellers" runs an uncanny pattern of rebellion, loss and "negotiated" return as the writer sets out to rescue or reinvent "roots" from a Jewish traditional culture, filtering it through modernist sensibilities.

For many a Yiddish writer, reader or audience, storytelling functioned as "a modern guide for the perplexed," a vessel through which shards of the Jewish culture that had been lost, shattered or destroyed could be salvaged. The literary heroes of this fascinating book are those modern Jewish revolutionaries, rebels and immigrants — "predators feeding on the seemingly unusable past" — who creatively reappropriated Jewish folk sources, producing stylized Yiddish folk tales, ballads, love songs, Purim plays and monologues so artfully camouflaged that these artifacts were perceived as the real thing, "an authentic expression of yidishkayt" into which historical and spiritual crises were dramatically reflected and re-enacted.

LL Peretz's "Stories in the Folk Vein," Mr. Roskies believes, advanced the art of Yiddish storytelling "by pitting ... the medium against the message. It had no sacred holiday tales with an upbeat, though secular message than he used the form to reveal the extent of his own ambivalence." Peretz's "Holiday Fables" included a socialist seder, "sans miracles, stripped of all national significance, even devoid of Passover prayers." But after the Jewish left abandoned religiosity, they still yearned for "a usable secular past," so holidays "were turned into folk fests." Mr. Roskies' enlightening chapter on Sholem Aleichem shows the deep influence of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. He credits Sholem Aleichem with inventing the modern Yiddish holiday story, because he "understood that the folk apprehended the great myths of creation, revelation, and redemption through ritual objects and local custom ... the transcendent power of Jewish myth" that Jews witnessed and experienced on Sabbath holidays.

After the upheavals of World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution and the Ukrainian civil war, Yiddish tales and ballads were "re-dressed in modernist drag," and the "third generation" of Yiddish storytellers (Manger, Der Nister, Singer) "re-treated the received traditions — Jesus, Satan, and Elijah; Hans Christian Andersen, Reb Nahman, and Peretz — as if they were treasures of the ancient regime: a set of symbols waiting to be looted." Mr. Roskies ends by examining how Jewish storytelling reacted to 20th-century ruptures of time and space — the Holocaust, Jewish storytelling being transplanted to Israel and to America. Why, he asks, didn't the whole story draw to a close after the death of "the last of its big entertainers" (I.B. Singer) and the dispersion, or even extinction, of Yiddish speakers?

One reason is that there remained one more generation of gifted Polish-born storytellers, including Abraham Sutzkever, Y.I. Trunk and Yosi Bergner, and Yosi Birstein, who miraculously lived through the war and went on to write highly autobiographical poems, memoirs and tales. Another reason is that Yiddish storytelling, an art form that reflects Jewish spiritual, personal, philosophical and historical crises, is still being transmitted, only not in Yiddish. Mr. Roskies cites Yosi Birstein, who delivers three-minute short stories (*tsurtsarin*) on Israeli radio in Yiddishized Hebrew, and Steve Stern of Memphis, Tenn., whose books include the charming "Lazar Malkin Enters Heaven," as examples of those who have "made themselves into the folk's repository, salvaging both its wisdom and its folly." Thus, despite alluding in his subtitle to Yiddish storytelling as a "lost art," Mr. Roskies is hardly a pessimist. His evocative title comes from a 1946 poem by Jacob Glatstein that asks, "Who will live you, over a bridge of longing/Only to return again?" Despite overwhelming historical and geographical discontinuities, Mr. Roskies does indeed imagine a return, or at least a longing for return, that continues to make stories a bridge that spans the generations.



Illustration by Yonia Fain in Abraham Sutzkever's "Where the Stars Spend the Night", 1979.

A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling  
By David G. Roskies  
Harvard University Press  
419 pages, \$37.50



COLLECTION FISK UNIVERSITY, NASHVILLE/COURTESY WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART  
PORTRAIT OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER: Stetheimer's 1928 portrait of Alfred Stieglitz, one of her first champions.

## The Upper West Side's Grandma Moses

A Cult Figure of the Jazz Age Returns to New York With a Whitney Show

By SCOTT BALDINGER  
The last time Florine Stetheimer had a major New York show, it was 1946, the year after her death. The site was New York's Museum of Modern Art. The curator was Marcel Duchamp.

Stetheimer was a kind of Grandma Moses of the Upper West Side. She combined androgynous primitivist figurative images and decorative elements from the theater arts

with the vibrant palette of a Matisse. Despite the startling originality of her painting, her work was considered unfashionably decorative in the modernist era. It was confined to sporadic cult appreciation, particularly among gay cognoscenti (Andy Warhol and Henry Geldzahler were keepers of the Stetheimer flame). This year the artist is coming out of the closet for good. Art consultant Jeffrey Deitch curated a show inspired by her work last spring, and New York dealer Holly Solomon is preparing one for the fall. Most sig-

nificant is the show at the Whitney Museum that opened this week, the first major Stetheimer exhibition since Duchamp's posthumous tribute. For those still unaware of the artist, Whitney curator Elisabeth Sussman says, "They're going to be astonished. There are 20 great paintings that are going to enter the canon, 10 at the very least." Stetheimer, who died in 1944 at the age of 75, came from a haute bourgeoisie family of German Jewish descent. Except a sojourn in Europe before World War II, she lived with

Even Cows Get the Blues:  
Jeffrey Masson's Pet Theory

By ROBIN CEMBALEST  
When Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson was growing up, he had a lizard he brought to the movies. He also had a praying mantis that only consumed hair and spit and gave birth to thousands of babies in the family living room. At one point he had a parrot, but his dog ate it.

Not quite the impact of the disclosure that he'd slept with thousands of women. But then, Mr. Masson is a bit more wary of journalists these days.

Still, the self-identified "former psychoanalyst," whose stint as projects director of the Freud Archives led to Janet Malcolm's infamous New Yorker profile — and his ongoing \$7 million libel suit — is back on the interview trail.

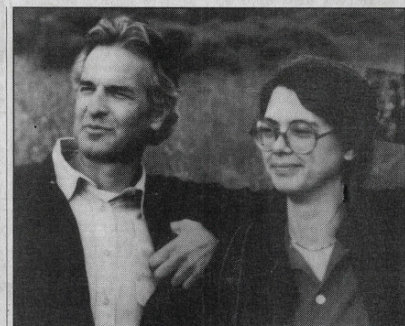
This time he's touting "When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals," recently published by Delacorte Press. Written with Susan McCarthy, a biologist and journalist (whose own favorite childhood pet was a toothy possum named William F. Buckley Jr.), the book asserts that animals indeed experience fear, hope, love, friendship, grief, sadness, joy, rage, cruelty, compassion, shame and a sense of aesthetic beauty.

This might seem like old news to animal trainers, pet owners or read-

ers of Maimonides — who wrote that there is no difference between humans' love for their young and animals' love. But it is not accepted in the scientific community, where suggestions that animals might feel are usually met with the dread charge of anthropomorphism.

The taboo didn't bother Mr. Masson. He started researching animals' emotions in 1989, when he was already five years into his case against Ms. Malcolm. (A lower court ruled in her favor last November; he is currently preparing an appeal.) By then Mr. Masson, who had been discharged from the International Psychoanalytical Association, had thoroughly bashed his erstwhile profession in several books with titles like "The Assault on Truth," "A Dark Science Weep," "The Emotional Lives of Animals," and "Against Therapy."

"Since I was now a writer," I could write about anything I wanted," he told the *Forward*. "I didn't belong to any academic discipline, so I couldn't be chastised for this. I'm sure I will be chastised anyway, but I don't care anymore." For all his bravado, the 54-year-old author seems surprisingly tame. Sitting with Ms. McCarthy in the lounge of the New York Hilton, with his sun-animal setting off his salt-and-pepper



ABOVE: KENT HARVEY/LEFT FROM THE SHOW THE FOX AND THE GRAPES ALSO THROUGH THE AGES, THROUGHOUT AUG. 27 AT THE PIERPOINT MORGAN LIBRARY, N.Y.  
ANIMAL INSTINCT: Above, co-authors Jeffrey Masson and Susan McCarthy. Left, the mole and her son, detail of illustration from Charles Bennett's "The Fables of Aesop and Others: Translated Into Human Nature," ca. 1660.

hair, he was agreeable to look at, though he hardly projected the charisma of the Casanova he had claimed to be.

The man whose sex life, as told to Ms. Malcolm, had been repeated and ridiculed ad infinitum was in no mood to discuss his personal affairs. "I would describe myself as a close friend of Catherine MacKinnon," he said robotically of his relationship with the feminist professor and anti-pornography activist, who was identified as his future wife when they appeared in a (relatively) steamy pictorial in a New York magazine article about them two years ago.

her family in a brownstone townhouse on West 76th Street and then moved to Alwyn Court after the death of her mother in 1935. In both residences, she held frequent safe-haven salons for the artists and writers of the day, many of them noted homosexuals such as the critic Henry McBride and arts patron Carl Van Vechten. Independently wealthy, she supported Duchamp when he was penniless, was encouraged by Alfred Stieglitz and corresponded with Georgia O'Keeffe on mundane matters such as the laundry and other household chores.

She kept a studio on West 40th Street, off Bryant Park, until the day she died, but, oddly, refused to show her work publicly — perhaps fearing the scorn her decidedly offbeat painting may have elicited. (In 1916 she had one gallery exhibit of her early, more academic paintings. It was not particularly well-received.)

"In America there was nobody like her," Ms. Sussman says. "Her paintings look so fresh today; there's no angst." Ms. Sussman, who curated the show with Barbara Bloemink, director of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in Kansas City, cites some of Stetheimer's influences as the symbolism of Aubrey Beardsley; the wildly colored visionary work of William Blake; the ballet designs of Leon Bakst; and perhaps Gustav Klimt, since she saw Secessionist exhibits in Munich before World War I.

As Stetheimer once wrote in one of her many poems, "My attitude is one of Love's all adoration for all the fringes/all the color of the trindle creation." She had "a tremendous interest in decoration," Ms. Sussman says. "There's hardly a painting where you don't see lace or a rug or a dress or, in the frames, decorative scallops or barber shop polls or capitals. No painter I know tried to synthesize those elements, but that was her goal. She wanted to do decor."

The Whitney exhibit, on view through Nov. 5, includes all of the artist's major works, among them a 1923 "Portrait of Marcel Duchamp" in which the artist sits by an Arielle-like succubus in a stark white room, surrounded by a frame consisting of the repeated letters MD, designed by Duchamp himself. "Portrait of Myself" (1923) is a Beardsley-like portrayal of Stetheimer as a Salome-like flapper. Her much-admired "Cathedrals of Manhattan" series demonstrates her love of the staggole wonderment of New York between the wars, as does "Spring Sale at Bendel's" (1921), in which shoppers and clerks pose in a tableau that can be described only as a Hieronymus Bosch design for Florenz Ziegfeld. Even the more intimate "Heat" (1919), a portrait of Stetheimer with her two sisters and her mother, brings to mind the avante-garde chic of an André Serban production of Chekhov.

The theatrical look, content and feel of Stetheimer's work was not accidental. Her fascination with the ballet and theater led to numerous theatrical commissions, most famously her all-white and cellophane set designs for Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's all-black opera "Four Saints and Three Kings." Photos of the production were owned by the Whitney by artist Philip Taaffe's Stetheimer admirer.

Mr. Taaffe is one of a number of artists who are displaying a fascina-

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# 'Born-Again' Storytellers

*Turning to Tales When All Else Fails*



FROM 'A BRIDGE OF LONGING'/YIVO LIBRARY, N.Y.

**'CREATIVE BETRAYAL':** Sophisticated modernists were often drawn to folk material. Here an illustration by Russian avant-gardist El Lissitzky for Leyb Kvitko, 'White Russian Folktales,' 1923.

By **SUSAN MIRON**

**T**he time has come for me to begin telling stories," Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav announced to his Chasidim in the summer of 1806. "They say that stories put you to sleep," he added, "but I say that through stories you can awaken people from their sleep." The grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, Rabbi Nachman was the first

*Ms. Miron writes frequently for the Forward on cultural matters.*

major Jewish religious figure to place storytelling at the center of his creative life. As David Roskies points out in "A Bridge of Longing:

## Arts & Letters

The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling," Reb Nachman "turned to storytelling when all else failed, when he could not reveal his messianic program outright."

In the decades to come, when  
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