

of endless feature films. The drama, tension, action and heroism in these true accounts make anything Hollywood could devise appear pale. Dutch housewife Theresa Weerstra lived the part of a pregnant woman to conceal the real pregnancy of one of her charges. Weerstra padded her underclothes with progressively fatter wads of clothing and then at the proper time "gave birth" so she could harbor a newborn without suspicion. "German Quaker rescuer Olga Halle leaped into the role of 'dear relative' when Nazi guards searched the train on which she and an elderly Jewess were traveling. Halle chatted with the guards, but her companion was speechless. Thinking quickly, Halle told the guards she was taking her deaf relative to Berlin. The guards wished her a pleasant journey. She and her companion escaped."

The rescuers came from all walks of life; they saved one Jew or they saved thousands. Some performed a single act of rescue; others were part of a network scheme. Some are well known like German industrialist Oskar Schindler and Swedish envoy Raoul Wallenberg; most were housewives, farmers, teachers, nurses, telephone operators (who often uncoded spy messages), businessmen and children.

Fogelman relates an extraordinary story of a young Polish girl, Stefania Podgorska, who at age 16 defied her parents and became a rescuer. At age 17, she sheltered 13 Jews and spurned her Polish boyfriend because of fear for the welfare of her charges. She was and remains today a religious Catholic who said that she heard voices that told her what to do. "Thirteen people, and their children and grandchildren, are alive today because a teenager ignored the fact that she would be killed for harboring Jews; 13 men, women and children are alive today because a teenager believed in miracles."

There is Angel Sanz-Briz, the Spanish minister in Budapest, who issued thousands of phony Spanish passports to Hungarian Jews; and Irene Gut Opdyke, who hid 12 Jews in the home of a Nazi major for whom she worked as a housekeeper.

*Conscience and Courage* will uplift you in a wondrous fashion. The noble juxtaposed with the horrible along with the psychological insights are all a tribute to the bravery of the rescuers. As Art Vos, who along with his wife began

his rescue activity as part of the Dutch underground, said: "It is like a tidal wave. When it comes over a village you are lucky you are alive and can help people. You do it. You do not sit and ask yourself, 'Will I do it?' It is part of your body; the will is part of your body. You do it. You feel and you do it."

—Molly Abramowitz

**Fear of Fifty: A Midlife Memoir.** By Erica Jong. New York: Harper-Collins, \$24, 320 pages.

It reads too good to be true. More than 20 years after the *cause célèbre* publication of *Fear of Flying*, the author ends up marrying a great bear of a man who just happens to be an amateur pilot. Fiction anticipates reality. Erica Jong had just finished her final Isadora Wing novel, marrying off her *Fear of Flying* heroine to a flying instructor, her fourth husband.

And if that weren't enough, the real-life husband number four bonds with Jong's showbiz father singing Yiddish music hall songs. But at 50, she has not gone from the Zipless [Expletive] (the phrase that may be her immortality) to a Jewish "Sound of Music." Jong is endearingly honest about her failings. Even as she struggles to make this fourth — and presumably final — marriage work, she makes herself crazy taking diet pills to be thin and young.

Jong warns us early on in *Fear of Fifty* that her memory isn't totally reliable, and she feels comfortable filling in with fiction. But there's the feel of truth in the themes she keeps returning to: her lust for fame; her fear of letting go of a manuscript (though this jumbled one could have used a lot more editing); her mother's being denied her art school's travel prize because she was female; Jong's failed marriages; her joy in motherhood; her attraction to unavailable snake-hipped Italians; her determination to include sexuality in feminism; and her refusal to choose between love and work, the great issue of her "Whiplash Generation."

As Jong gets older, she also gets more Jewish, or at least adds more Jewish concerns to her self-exploration. Some of the most touching parts of *Fear of Fifty* chronicle the decline of her aunt Kitty, "The Mad Lesbian in the Attic." Kitty's mind is gone, her lover has dumped her, and Jong is the only family member who feels the need

to see that she's well cared for at the end of her life. Jong gets her into the *crème de la crème* Hebrew Home for the Aged and concludes: "When we're young and cute, we can hang out with goyim — but as the sun goes down, we revert to knishes and knaydlach." At 50, Jong feels the need to do mitzvahs, like getting her aunt into the Hebrew Home.

Her list of "after 50" Jewish concerns lacks the passion of her enduring need to be famous, though the list bears watching. Jong has started to wonder why "a woman born at the height of the Holocaust should not have been trained to a stronger sense of Judaism." She regrets not having raised her daughter more Jewishly and "not having had more Jewish children to replace those lost among the six million." She's yearning for solidarity with other Jewish feminists and, as a secular Jew, "ready to *invent* a heritage as much as rediscover it."

No matter how much *Fear of Fifty* may feel over-written and under-edited, what emerges is Jong's creative energy: one-part destructive, two-parts creative. Who knows. The next half of her life Jong may be heading for Poland and Russia to uncover her roots and digging into Judaism with the same passion she brought to sex.

—Amy Stone

## NON-FICTION

**Meshugah.** By Isaac Bashevis Singer. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$22, 232 pages.

*Meshugah*, Isaac Bashevis Singer's third posthumously published novel, was originally serialized in Yiddish in the *Jewish Daily Forward* more than a decade ago. Its title then was *Lost Souls*. But, while translating this work with Nili Wachtel, the author hit upon *Meshugah* as an apt title for the English version. And so it has remained.

The time is 1953, the place Manhattan. And in truth, the characters do have more than their share of emotional problems. Miriam Zalkin, a concentration camp survivor, is busily engaged in a love affair with Max Aberdam, a stock market speculator and womanizer, when the book opens. Miriam is 27, Max 67. Both, of course, are married to others.

When Aaron Greidinger, the first

person narrator of *Meshugah* and Singer's alter ego, comes upon our heroine, she instantly falls in love with him too. Aaron is 47. Max is delighted, having arranged the pair's meeting with just this end in mind. Now Miriam can sleep with both men. She promptly does.

Soon Tzlova, Max's maid and one-time mistress, begins an affair with Aaron. Miriam's estranged husband, Stanley, turns up with a gun, finds Miriam and Aaron in bed together, and threatens to kill them. Stanley, let it be noted, is a bit crazy. By comparison with Edik, however, the son of Irka Shmelkes, one of Max's mistresses, the deranged Stanley is a model of sanity. This Edik appears in only one chapter, but he is emblematic of the whole bunch. As his mother laments: "The boy is ill. What he's been through, what I've been through with him, no one will ever know."

Yes, the characters, all refugees, have been driven half-mad by their dreadful experiences during the Holocaust. Diverse as their personalities may be, they do have one thing in common: their love for Aaron Greidinger. Like Russian poets, Yiddish writers often did inspire such devotion in their readers.

As in so many of the author's previous novels and short stories, the protagonist is and isn't I.B. Singer. Aaron looks and sounds just like Singer. He has the same pessimistic outlook on life, an identical lifestyle and the same interests. He too writes for the *Forward*. But Singer, unlike Aaron, never hosted an advice program on the radio. And he had been married since 1940; his protagonists are always single.

This was Singer's method: to begin with himself and then do endless variations. In his work he often recycled settings, situations, obsessions, characters.

Max Aberdam's type appeared as Abram Shapiro in *The Family Moskat*, as Rabbi Milton Lampert in *Enemies, A Love Story*. Singer put this character through his paces here, in service to his themes and story, which is both comic and sad — and makes the point that the world is indeed somewhat like a lunatic asylum.

The book seems both familiar and new. The narrative drive is, as usual, riveting, which was Singer's secret weapon, the one that made recycling

possible. But the author was always wary of repeating himself, and much of his work remained untranslated at his insistence. He may have had second thoughts about *Meshugah*, for the English version done long ago failed to appear during his lifetime.

The protagonist in Singer's *Shosha* was also named Aaron Greidinger. (In that novel his nickname is Tsutsik, not Butterfly.) There he marries the retarded Shosha, for she is "the only woman I can trust." In *Meshugah*, Aaron, confronting a similar problem, reaches a startling different conclusion, one that is new in Singer, and that helps make this book so worthwhile an addition to his oeuvre.

— Isidore Haiblum

**The Way to the Cats.** By Yehoshua Kenaz. Translated from the Hebrew by Dalya Bilu. South Royalton, Vermont: Steerforth Press, \$20, 325 pages.

This is a novel about death. Not death in the literal sense, maybe, although that is very much there in this story, which takes place, for the most part, in a hospital full of sick elderly people. And characters die throughout this painful and very masterful novel by Israeli author Yehoshua Kenaz. But actually it's the story of the slow and impossible dissolution of life, the disintegration of living: the ebbing away, in pieces, of what life once was. The reduction of being to sleep, to numbness, to ridiculousness and despair, to a world full of smells of excrement and disease. This book is about the erosion of limbs, and of hope.

Kenaz, for instance, says of the main character, an unpleasant Mrs. Moscowitz, who has no real life: "Every moment was robbing her of something that was hers, until there was nothing left, only the passionate hatred and the unquenchable thirst for revenge."

The author and Mrs. Moscowitz, the character, a former French teacher whose story he tells, seem to have formed an unusual alliance for a modern novel. He doesn't like her. And neither does the reader. She is petty and mean-spirited, full of the trivial and paranoid injustices, the small dislikeable vanities that seem to be a frequent and terrible side of aging. Her world is unbearably full of herself: her complaints, which are endless, her cruel-

ties, small and constant, and her demands, which are always unmet. No one seems to like her, nor she them. But oddly, the author does his part to justify his character's paranoia: In fact, two of the people who act in a way that she might interpret as kind are scheming, even evil, preying on the loneliness and the helplessness of Mrs. Moscowitz, scheming to take what small money she has, and manipulating her vulnerability for their own greedy ends.

Mrs. Moscowitz, even here in this book that holds no hope, has her moments of love, or if not love, then at least of lust. And they are not infrequent. For instance, Leon, a hospital aide, young and big and surly, strong enough to lift her off her feet when she wants to stand (her legs are weak; she moves with a walker) evokes in her a kind of wanton desire. This does not abate, even though she hears Leon making obscene phone calls on the pay phone close to her room.

And there is Kagan, the book's anti-hero, perhaps. He too has fallen. A French-speaking, courtly older man from Beersheva married to a much younger woman, Kagan courts Mrs. Moscowitz for her shekels, using them to buy liquor. He doesn't care that drinking, forbidden to him by his doctors because he is diabetic, will result in gangrene and the loss of a leg. Kagan is the only character in the book who does anything. A kind of artist, he draws a portrait of Mrs. Moscowitz, a portrait for which she spends hours applying make-up and wears one of her finest dresses. Kagan portrays her as witch-like and deathly, and she is upset. Realizing he can't get money from her again, he does a second drawing: more beautiful, less real.

In a way, Mrs. Moscowitz herself is that peculiar combination of much impossibly real — the reader knows her somehow, with a kind of dreaded familiarity — and not real at all. The world she lives in is a world of petty injustices, some imagined, and some right there, peopled with cruel nurses, selfish neighbors, friends who can only betray.

This is a vivid and unparalleled novel about the most nightmarish kind of end to life — not a golden walk into a bright red sunset, but a parched and painful dying on a dry white lonely desert.

— Esther Cohen