

## **On Geography & Identity : a Q&A with Shira Nayman**

Q: You are an Australian, living in New York. One of the themes you take up in your new book, “The Listener,” is the ways in which national identity can be deeply integral to the individual’s psyche and sense of self. Do you see this as connected in any way to your own personal geographical history?

A: All my life, I resonated with the theme of historical homelessness (though I’d not have thought of it this way), which might be seen as a deep vein in Australia’s history: the story of white Australia, which of course centered on the experience of deportation, and the shameful treatment of the first Australians, who were stripped of their rightful home, exiled from their culture and place within their own shores.

What happens when one is ripped from one’s soil, roots severed and left hanging, wounded, in the air? Or, what happens when one never had a rightful sense of belonging and home in the first place—and still, one is forced to leave, or flee? Questions of national identity are brought into particularly dramatic play during times of War, when one is called upon to defend one’s country, or to fight in far off places in the name of one’s country. What happens to personal identity under conditions such as these? What are the internal rifts—the sundering of self—that can result?

These are all questions that have long fuelled my desire to write fiction. From an early age, I felt an aching sense of homelessness that didn’t always make sense to me. My response to this has perhaps been to roam the world, searching; I have traveled widely and lived in numerous countries—Israel, Mexico, France, and mostly in the United States.

My training and work-life also reveal a bit of a restless, nomadic spirit; I started out in Medical School, completed a B.Sc. in Physiology and Psychology, then a doctorate in Clinical Psychology, a post-doctoral Fellowship in Psychiatry, and an M.A. in Comparative Literature (with a year-long certificate in Jewish studies along the way). I’ve worked as a psychologist, a marketing consultant, and as a teacher of both psychology and literature, while also building a career as a writer. Perhaps in my work-life, too, I have been on a search, trying to find the right “home” for myself.

Thinking about it now, I wonder if for me, the journey itself is home; after all, being a wanderer is a way of life, an identity of sorts. I’ve long loved Wallace Stevens’s poem, “The Snow Man,” from which the title of my new book, “The Listener,” is drawn (the title has other resonances as well, principally that of the role of the chief psychiatrist in the book who makes a career of listening).

A poignant meaning of the poem for me is the idea that a sense of identity—and belonging—might accrue to the person with “a mind of winter”: a person who connects with the more nebulous aspects of life, who is in touch with uncanny silences and experiences of distance and removal, who perhaps stakes their claim to being in the kinds of “homeless” realms I have explored in my fiction.

The poem, which begins:

*One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;*

ends as follows:

*... the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place  
For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.*

As I copy down these words, I find myself thinking again of the haunting, beautifully unproprietary home-making of the Aborigine's original, nomadic way of life: being deeply connected to everything and yet needing to take possession of very little, of continual roaming and yet profound belonging, a belonging that is all-encompassing and yet needs no label, no name, and, until the white man appeared, for which one never needed to—was never made to—fight. Warless, nature-bound, soulful; a self-ownership that was also selfless, that involved belonging not to oneself, but to the rhythm of time.

And, closer to my own personal history are thoughts about the historical condition of many Jewish people—the cliché of the wandering Jew, putting down new roots in ever far-flung places (my grandparents were Lithuanian, my parents South African, I am Australian, my children are American).

One thing I've learned through my writing is that Home is a condition of the spirit: often troubled and conflicted, but always exerting a powerful gravitational pull. It grounds us in some strangely compelling way, even if that ground, to return to Wallace Stevens' imagery, is as uncertain as a shifting snowbank, or heavy cold mist, or glittering ice on bare branches.

In "The Listener," my characters have to grapple with the historical circumstances of their own sense of "home." Their painful, personal journeys are defined fundamentally by nationality—by where each was born, and by what each is called upon to do in the name of his/her country.

Wars occur between nations, but in a way, at the individual psychological level, every war is also a civil war, taking place within each person whom war affects. In this sense, no war is ever over. I suppose my book, "The Listener," is in part about this kind of troubling, socio-historical, but ultimately vividly personal and internal reality.