

## **A Long Night's Journey Into Day**

A review of *Awake in the Dark*

by Sandee Brawarsky, *Jewish Week*

The characters in Shira Nayman's debut collection of stories have few if any relatives, scant clues to uncover their history. These are stories that begin in the present and reach back to World War II and the Holocaust, reclaiming memory. "Awake in the Dark" (Scribner) is a work of quiet power, with haunting twists and feelings that linger.

Other writers who are themselves the sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors have turned their experiences growing up amidst unfathomable loss into fiction.

As Nayman explains in an interview, she is the descendant of Jews who left Europe "Lithuania, Russia and Poland" in the early 1900s, fleeing pogroms for South Africa, where she was born.

As a young child, her family moved to Melbourne, Australia, where she grew up in a close-knit Jewish community of exiles. Almost all of her friends were the children of Holocaust survivors, and she lived amidst their stories and their silences. The trauma of the Holocaust was a large presence in her childhood, leaving a deep imprint on her psyche and her heart. She knew which of her friends' parents had had previous families that they lost, who had numbers carved into their arms and who never spoke of that time. It's as though she has inherited their memories.

The title seems fitting in many ways; many of the characters are wide awake and searching amidst dark secrets; they are energetic insomniacs, determined to unlock mysteries. For some, horrors occur in the blackness of night, and they have no choice but to be awake. The title could also be inverted, for they also face darkness in the daytime hours, burdened by things both known and unknown. Like the stories, the title also has a mystical quality.

The well-written book includes a novella and three stories. They feel almost interconnected by their themes, with motifs repeated between them, but each story features distinct characters and circumstances. In each piece, daughters yearn for the hidden facts of their parents' lives and their own identities; they sense that the pieces they have learned over the years don't add up to the truth. In the opening story, "The House on Kronenstrasse," first published in *The Atlantic Monthly's* fiction issue, a young woman in New York follows her mother's deathbed wish that she return to a house in Heidelberg.

There, she discovers a hidden crawl space, and learns that her own origins were different than she had believed.

Nayman, whose English still carries the ring of Australia, has a master's degree in comparative literature and a doctorate in clinical psychology; her educational work and experience enriches these pages. She explains that with her interests and sensibilities, she has been "a psychologist since the day I was born. The training sharpens your instruments."

In the novella, "Dark Urgings of the Blood," a psychiatrist tries to treat a religious woman having postpartum symptoms, and the patient believes that their histories are linked. That story, she says, is the most autobiographical in its descriptions of the therapist's childhood, particularly her involvement in a Jewish youth movement and the depiction of her friends' parents and their traumas.

While working on other fiction projects, Nayman had the "life-altering experience" of reading Amos Elon's book "The Pity of It All: A History of the Jews in Germany, 1743 – 1933" and was inspired to write these stories.

"It was such an amazing, brilliant book, not just the historical analysis, but it was like an emotional archaeology of the homeless Jews. It was related to my own background, and to that of many Jews in Australia, a story of displacement, from one non-home to another non-home," she says.

"Elon was writing about Jews who were very cosmopolitan, the opposite of being ghettoized. They were citizens of the world." She was moved to tears by the issues of Jewish identity raised by the book, and by the tensions of alienation.

To Nayman, the past is far from over.

"My life is infused with memory at every moment, in a fluorescent-heightened way. Writers strive to write about the fluorescent aspects of their experience, and memory is often in that realm. It really fascinates me, troubles me, pains me," she says.

She has learned from her patients that memories of trauma, when they are vivid, are not only remembered but are relived. Her next book, a novel, takes up this theme.

In the stories in "Awake in the Dark," time is fractured, with time frames shifting back and forward. She says that she writes in the present tense because she wants readers to feel it's happening now.

She adds, "It's happening in Darfur and other places."

Religious Jews appear in several of the stories, and she admits that while her own lifestyle is not one of Jewish practice, she is intrigued by people of unshakable faith, who seem in touch with deep meaning. Nayman, who attended a Jewish day school in Melbourne, says that in her own childhood, the Holocaust was a huge shadow, and she experienced her Jewish heritage as full of pain. As a parent, she made the decision "not to impose that on my children." But she is writing about it, and she admits that she's full of contradictions.

Works by German philosophers often appear on bookshelves in these stories, and these works are indeed an interest of the author. As a fiction writer, she's particularly drawn to novelists who are philosophical and intellectual.

When she talks about her writing life, she echoes the theme of displacement. Nayman, 46, has a home in Brooklyn that she loves, and which she shares with her husband and two children. But finding too many distractions to be able to write there, she moves about the city with her computer, in search of a comfortable corner in which to work. She finds that the café's of her Cobble Hill neighborhood have

become wall-to-wall writers, and she prefers to be alone. In recent years, she has also worked as a marketing consultant, but now is taking a leave to write full time.

Until recently, Nayman hadn't heard the expression "2G," which many grown-up sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors have come to use to describe themselves. While on her book tour this fall, she has encountered several 2Gs who tell her that she has channeled their experiences.

In the stories in "Awake in the Dark," characters bury their parents, wash dishes, drive their cars at high speeds and confidently use tools to literally crack open places they shouldn't be looking; they live daily lives that are at once altogether ordinary and astonishing. The stories also have elements of coincidence, when characters' pasts and present come together, when events within the stories and in separate stories seem to run on parallel tracks. Nayman also depicts moments of kindness, hope, redemption and, ultimately, truth.