

Darkness Visible : Shira Nayman's characters chase the ghosts who haunt them

An interview with Shira Nayman, by Michael Standaert, *Nextbook* 23 October 2006

The women in *Awake in the Dark*, Shira Nayman's debut collection of stories, seek answers to their existential questions in their parents' lives. An Orthodox mother learns that a treasured gift from her father was taken from a baby whose death he witnessed in a concentration camp. When an American professor takes up residence in her childhood home in Heidelberg, she discovers a hidden crawl space—and finds that she's not exactly who she thought she was.

Nayman, a psychologist, peels away layers of identity, leaving exposed her characters' secrets and the hidden parental pasts that have shaped them.

All of the stories in *Awake in the Dark* focus on lost, buried, or mistaken identity. What brought you to these issues? And what is it about modern Jewish identity, and specifically the Holocaust, that lends itself to the crisis of identity?

The whole idea of how identity is formed and how time or history, in different landscapes and contexts, influences this is something I've been very interested in for a long time—the age-old question, the feeling of historical homelessness that Jewish people and many other diaspora people feel. That sense of cultural displacement or displacement from the country in which one lives is something that intrigues me in digging through how people come to their sense of self.

In your stories, daughters uncover their parents' true identities, learning about themselves in the process. You seem to be suggesting that these daughters are correct in wanting to know about the buried pasts, even though their discoveries are often damaging.

I think it boils down to the question of how we become who we are. Obviously one's personal family history is so influential to building an idea of self. Psychologists endlessly talk about that. But one thing I haven't seen a lot written about, at least in professional journals, is the question of secrets. What happens when the people around whom your own identity is formed have all these private fears and secrets that you have no access to? How are you going to develop a sense of self when there is not just a blank but a blank where behind it is possibly something scary? It connects, for me, to rather profound, even instinctual things. Children are often afraid of the dark, or afraid of what's hidden, of monsters under the bed. It's almost primal, fear of the unknown, of danger lurking. I'm driven by how the person's identity is formed against that backdrop.

The question about what right does the child have in respect to a parent's past—that's something many people can relate to. In a way I give my characters the feeling that they have full rights. How can I become me if I don't know who you are? But from an intergenerational point of view, do we ever really know our parents? When we look at these 50- or 60- or 70-year-olds, to imagine them as glorious,

sexual 23-year-olds at the height of their youthful splendor—that's almost impossible to envision as an adult child. Can we ever know our own parents? My gut feeling is no.

Are these stories autobiographical?

The community I grew up in, in Melbourne, was comprised mostly of Holocaust survivors. Almost all of my friends were children of survivors; being in their homes left a lasting and painful impression. My parents' parents fled pogroms in Eastern Europe in the early 1900s, landing in South Africa, and my parents immigrated to Australia when I was a baby. Their relatives, however, remained, and were murdered by the Nazi regime.

Also, I was inspired by a book by Amos Elon called *The Pity of It All: A History of the Jews in Germany, 1743-1933*. Although it has "Jews" in the title I think it has universal questions about identity. I grew up in a very close knit Jewish community and left at 17—quite a young age—and spent a year in Israel, and then left more decisively when I turned 21, when I came to the United States. Really, at that point, I stopped living any life that had anything to do with Jewish life. I married someone who is not Jewish. I had nothing in my life that was in any daily way Jewish. Reading Elon's book, I had an extraordinary feeling, it was almost as if I was having that feeling of unity and connection with an entire history of people. He writes mostly about German Jewish intellectuals, artists, writers, people who themselves felt quite cut off from Jewish life, some of whom had converted. Yet they had this gripping connection to Jewish culture, thought. I almost felt like I was discovering a whole new continent of countrymen, and read the book with tears dripping down my face. By the time I closed the last page I had written notes on the back page and had pretty much outlined *Awake in the Dark*. I mapped out enough stories for three volumes.

Why did you leave that close-knit community?

I think I suffered under the weight of all the pain and trauma associated with the Jewish history in which I was steeped in my youth. I did not consciously choose to break the ties with my background, though I do recall feeling the need to break out into new worlds. In my writing life, I have come to see how very deep my ties are to my Jewish heritage, and how undeniably Jewish I am in my soul.

In the final story, "Dark Urgings of the Blood," a psychologist, the daughter of a survivor, treats an Orthodox woman having a breakdown. In the process, she experiences a breakdown of her own and begins to profoundly identify with her patient. Have you found yourself unable to detach from the struggles of your patients?

I loved being a psychologist. I worked only with patients in psychiatric hospitals, patients with severe mental illness. I did have questions: Why are we calling you crazy, and not me, given that we're all human beings with the ability to experience crazy things? The power relationships bothered me. I spent much of my time being a patient advocate, which is not what I'd really gone into it to be.

Everything I write is completely made up, but experientially that story is probably the most autobiographical thing I've written. Where I describe my first encounter with a psychiatric patient,

where he comes up and strokes the glass—that was like a transcription of my first day on a psychiatric unit. All the things about growing up, the Jewish adolescence and the Youth Movement, and all those feelings about being connected but estranged, and being confused about Jewish identity—that’s all autobiographical. Some people have seen my stories in this book as rooted in the Holocaust, and of course they are in many ways, but for me, the question is how we find ourselves in this modern world against the backdrop of the culture from which we come. The backdrop is the Holocaust and World War II, but, for example, the new novel I’m working on is set in a psychiatric hospital. It comes more at the questions of identity and madness, and how these interweave for people on different sides of the psychiatrist’s chair.

Hidden places recur in *Awake in the Dark*. There are lots of physically hidden items, later uncovered, that help along the characters’ discoveries of their identities.

It’s a child’s fascination with secret objects, stumbling upon clues, discovering mysteries. It’s both the child and the reader in me, following some sort of mystery and trying to unravel it. Although what I write is probably considered literary fiction, I like to feel that I’m pulling the reader along and giving them something to unravel. It keeps me interested in the writing as well. Your browser may not support display of this image.