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Legacies of the Shoah in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* and Arnon Grunberg's *De Joodse Messias* [*The Jewish Messiah*]

TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 183–202

DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.11 | ORCID: 0000-0001-9219-3548

This article compares *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) by American author Jonathan Safran Foer to *De Joodse Messias* [*The Jewish Messiah*] (2004) by Dutch author Arnon Grunberg. Both novels contribute to ongoing discussions about Holocaust representation in the face of a generation temporally and spatially removed from the historical events. Both are more experiential than many other Holocaust novels. They are representative of the genre complexity typical of some second and many third generation Holocaust narratives, though Grunberg's work is avant-garde for a child of Holocaust survivors in its use of grotesque humor. It disrupts expectations of what a novel by and about the descendants of Holocaust survivors should be.¹ In addition to playing with genre and temporality, the authors employ humor to bring taboo subjects into their respective narratives as an attempt to “speak

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1 According to Bettine Siertsema, Grunberg may have been influenced by Dutch author Ischa Meijer in that he “violated the norm that you spare war victims” (Presentation, *Comparative Approaches to Twenty-First-Century Holocaust Literature*. September 2020).

the unspeakable.”² Such complexity serves to blur boundaries, not only between literary genres, but also between temporalities and binaries, such as those of victim and perpetrator, superficial and sacrosanct, and love and hate. Further, the novels highlight the generational trauma that is inherited and exists in myriad ways in families of survivors and perpetrators. Ultimately, by blurring temporalities and focusing on what families inherit, these novels emphasize human agency in atrocity and the impossibilities of reconciliation by highlighting the capacity humans have for hurting one another and the limits of forgiveness. Despite their titles, which suggests enlightenment or salvation, both novels acknowledge that “evil [is – author’s note] indeed a problem” but that there is “no possibility of a deeper truth” when writing Holocaust fiction.³

Synopses of the Novels

Everything Is Illuminated was a “New York Times” bestseller and landed the author in the pages of popular magazines like “Rolling Stone” and “Vanity Fair.” Its reach extended far beyond typical literary circles in the United States. This novel features a protagonist named Jonathan Safran Foer (whom I will refer to as Jonathan) who travels to Ukraine in search of a woman named Augustine who saved his Jewish grandfather, Safran, from the Nazis. The novel is loosely based on the real Jonathan Safran Foer’s (whom I will refer to as Foer) travels to Ukraine to, in his words “find out about my family, find out about myself, and somehow express what I found out.”⁴ Foer humorously portrays quirky Jewish character and conveys the understanding of how badly affected children of Holocaust survivors are. Foer produced a deeply moving exploration of third generation identity in which the present is pulsing with imagined memories of those people who and places that no longer exist because they were destroyed by the Nazis. He creates a story so rich with Jewish history and characters that readers are overwhelmed by their absence in the present. The chapters in *Everything Is Illuminated* alternate between Jonathan writing fictional stories about life in Trachimbrod, a shtetl in Ukraine in the 1790s, and Jonathan and Alex, his Ukrainian guide, exchanging letters in which they

2 Judit Elek, *To Speak the Unspeakable: The Message of Elie Wiesel* (Turner Classic Movies, 1996).

3 Arnon Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*, trans. Sam Garrett (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), 3.

4 “Jonathan Safran Foer interview on *Everything is Illuminated* (2002).” *Manufacturing Intellect*, accessed July 22, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2ShZG2vdT8>.

recount their recent journey through Ukraine, which turns out to be more a story about Alex and his family history than about Jonathan's. The story is as invested in Alex's relationship with his own father and grandfather as it is Jonathan's journey. Jonathan's and Alex's grandfathers' stories of the war converge near the end of the novel, drawing a connection between the families despite their spatial divide. Jonathan and Alex learn difficult truths about their ancestors and force readers to contemplate the ethical limits of forgiveness.

As the letters recount, Jonathan is driven around Ukraine by Alex, Alex's grandfather, and Alex's grandfather's "seeing eye bitch, Sammy Davis Junior Junior"⁵ in search of the place where his grandfather lived and where his ancestors were killed by Nazis. The journey takes many days, and the three men awkwardly attempt conversation and navigate meals, which mostly consists of potatoes for the vegetarian Jonathan. When they reach their destination, only one woman with a small house full of boxes of mementos of the past remains. They believe her to be Augustine, the woman who saved Jonathan's grandfather during the war, but she is named Lista. Lista recognizes Alex's grandfather, and when he asks her forgiveness, she will not grant it. Alex and Jonathan learn that Alex's grandfather pointed out his best friend as a Jew to the Nazis during the Holocaust, and his best friend was murdered. Upon returning home, Jonathan receives a letter from Alex's grandfather admitting that he wants the best for his grandsons and that he is unable to forgive himself. Unable to do so, Alex's grandfather commits suicide.

The Jewish Messiah begins with a Swiss teenage grandson of a former SS guard who was killed during Second World War desiring to become the savior of the Jews. Given his messianic complex, he befriends an orthodox Jewish family, begins having a sexual relationship with one of the handsome sons, Awromele, and has a botched circumcision. As a result, Xavier loses a testicle, which he keeps in a jar high on a shelf and refers to as King David. Xavier Radek's parents thought his interest in Judaism would "vanish as though it had never been. Just like Xavier's grandfather."⁶ Yet, Xavier and Awromele maintain their friendship over several tumultuous years. Xavier's parents are divorced, and his father is dead by suicide. Xavier's mother ignores Xavier's suffering, but her boyfriend, Marc, falls in love with Xavier. Xavier paints, mostly images of his jarred testicle and his mother, and eventually, he and Awromele leave their families so that Xavier can go to school in Amsterdam. As adults, Awromele has a series of sexual affairs, and Xavier decides to become involved in politics. Ultimately, the couple move to Israel, where Xavier

5 Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 34.

6 Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*, 8.

rises to notoriety and is considered by many to be the savior of the Jews until he and Awromele are killed by angry mobs for selling nuclear weapons in what has been described as a tragicomic finale.

Both Xavier Radek, the protagonist in *The Jewish Messiah*, and Alex in *Everything Is Illuminated* have fraught and abusive relationships with the parent who was the child of someone involved in the murder of Jews. *The Jewish Messiah* is about the grandson of an SS guard becoming friends and then lovers with an Orthodox Jew named Awromele. Xavier explains that he has so much pleasure in his life that he wants to now “learn about suffering,”⁷ which he has learned to associate with Jews. His conversion to Judaism (which has nothing to do with his desire for religion or forgiveness) is bookended by his desire to be like his grandfather and to make his grandfather proud. At the beginning of the novel, we gain insight into the way Xavier imagines his deceased grandfather, as a man “who understood death’s handiwork without bothering his own family about it, a man for whom words like ‘honor’ and ‘loyalty’ still meant something, a man of morals who clung faithfully to a vision even under brutal conditions.”⁸ And while the teen Xavier misconstrues his grandfather’s actions as an SS guard whereby he “had killed the enemies of happiness the way other people ate oysters”⁹ as principled and honorable, it is clear that Xavier’s mother does not feel the same way about her father; she hides “documents, photos, and a book she had hoped would never be found”¹⁰ and never talks about him, though we learn that she respects him.¹¹ This familial silence leads Xavier to imagine and create fictions about his grandfather. Like Foer’s imaginative reconstruction of a Jewish shtetl in the 1790s entangles the past with the present, Grunberg’s futuristic imaginings of a time when a former SS guard’s grandson is elected Prime Minister of Israel and sells nuclear weapons to enemies of the West radically entangles the past, present, and future and asks readers to think about human cruelty and inheritances of trauma. Both novels interrogate whether peaceful coexistence is possible since they feature a Jewish male and a non-Jewish male who has generational links to Nazi perpetration becoming friends while grappling with forgiveness and reconciliation between Holocaust survivors and perpetrators. A major contradiction

7 Ibid., 10.

8 Ibid., 1.

9 Ibid., 4.

10 Ibid., 3.

11 Of her SS-guard father she thinks that he “may have lived by ideas that were considered objectionable these days, but at least he hadn’t lived like a weakling.”

that emerges in both novels is the tension between pain and humor, with both texts suggesting that pain and humor are requisites to communicate about traumatic pasts that are irreparable and unforgeable.

Temporality in Second and Third Generation Holocaust Novels

In their respective works, Foer and Grunberg use experiential modes of storytelling symptomatic of other works of the second and third generation of Holocaust survivors and perpetrators. They play with temporalities of the distant past, recent past, present, and future, and they use humor to empathetically engage readers in shocking ways. Both novels interrogate the relationship between the historical events and the second and third generation, particularly in their portrayals of how the protagonists inherit traumatic pasts from their parents and grandparents. In her 2013 book, *Second Generation Memory and Contemporary Children's Literature: Ghost Images*, Anastasia Ulanowicz argues that:

second generation memory can be considered a radically disruptive form. It unsettles the distinctions between “present” and “past,” “self” and “other,” and “mind” and “body.” Paradoxically it also calls into question the very category on which it is founded: the family. Both second-generation memory and collective memory “enframe, modify, and recast” individual recollection in relation to ties of kinship, affective bonds, and narratives of inheritance.¹²

The complexity of family and the silences in family histories and their impact on identity development are prominent in these two novels. These second and third generation Holocaust novels suggest that children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors continue to struggle with inherited identities as perpetrators and victims and that second and third generation novelists use postmodern, meta-fictional techniques to “work through” intergenerational trauma as an attempt to forge their identities. This working through is what Marianne Hirsch considers the work of postmemory. For Hirsch, postmemory is “a connection to the past that is not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.”¹³ Thus, postmemory describes a creative act in which the children try to piece together a family narrative punctuated with silences. *The Jewish Messiah* explores the possibilities of relationships between the descendants of grandchildren of Holocaust survivors

¹² Anastasia Ulanowicz, *Second Generation Memory and Contemporary Children's Literature: Ghost Images* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 18.

¹³ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012), 5.

and perpetrators, the silence around what one's parents or grandparents did during the Holocaust, and inherited trauma. Xavier abandons his mother and forges his most meaningful relationship with Awromele in an attempt to forge an identity and kinship beyond the perpetrator-victim binary. Foer acknowledges the inescapable past of the second and third generations in his novel explicitly when he writes: "But children had it worst of all, for although it would seem that they had fewer memories to haunt them, they still had the itch of memory as strong as the elders of the shtetl. Their strings were not even their own, but tied around them by parents and grandparents strings not fastened to anything, but hanging loosely from the darkness."¹⁴ These loose ends are the inspiration for Foer's protagonist to go to Ukraine and attempt to find the woman who saved his grandfather during the Holocaust. In her article "Diaspora, Postmemory and the Transcultural Turn in Contemporary Jewish Writing," Jessica Ortner explains that a journey to Eastern Europe features often in American Jewish writing, but that the result in these "postmemorial works that describe the lost places of one's ancestors, those lost places do not simply provide a referential sense of belonging; they remain places of genocide that have ceased to exist in the way known by the parents' [or grandparents'] generation."¹⁵ Jonathan stands in the place where his ancestors lived and were killed, but there is nothing there of the shtetl he has imagined. The journey does not provide healing or understanding for Jonathan, but it illuminates the role Alex's grandfather played in the murder of his best friend. Alex and Jonathan cannot see the past atrocities that occurred in that place, but Lista and Alex's grandfather remember them and retell them. The binary of victim and perpetrator becomes blurred, and the focus becomes sharing painful memories with one's descendants. The scene concludes with the acknowledgement that for most, forgiveness is untenable.

Maria Karafilis argues that novels can position readers to "approach the past ethically" but that this often "hinge[s] on an alternative temporality that requires a radical entanglement with the past in which the 'now' of an other becomes the 'now' of the reader and hopefully engenders the imagining of other possible futures."¹⁶ In the scene with Lista and Alex's grandfather, the moments of choiceless choices made during the Nazi invasion are relived and shared with Alex and Jonathan. Grunberg and Foer encourage readers to see

¹⁴ Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 260.

¹⁵ Jessica Ortner, "Diaspora, Postmemory and the Transcultural Turn in Contemporary Jewish Writing," *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture* 7 (1) (2016).

¹⁶ Maria Karafilis, "Temporal Derangement and Historical Entanglement in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Alice Doane's Appeal*," *The New England Quarterly* XCIII (3) (2020): 463.

the 'now' of others as their own through the use of complex characters who explore their personal identities in light of their families' experiences during the Holocaust. By blurring the boundaries between genres and literary modes, the authors position readers to respond ethically to narratives about "historical events characterized by referential uncertainty."¹⁷ Alex is uncertain if the story he hears from Lista is true of his grandfather as he has never heard it before. In the last chapter of *The Jewish Messiah*, when Xavier has become the Prime Minister of Israel, Xavier imagines that "His grandfather would have been proud of him."¹⁸ He cannot know this given the death of his grandfather during the war. Both books rely on the specters of grandfathers and how their presence or absence affect their grandsons in their search for identity, in what they are able to comprehend about love and reconciliation, and what they are able to ultimately discover about themselves and conclude about humanity. The genre complexity resists anticipation and understanding, thus creating temporal entanglements of the past, present, and future and engaging with ongoing discourse about how to appropriately represent Holocaust narratives when one is not a survivor or perpetrator but a descendant of those who survived or perpetrated violence. Grunberg's novel extends the temporal entanglement and provides a sadly comical warning of what the future may hold given historical grievances, present technologies, and human cruelty. Attempts to repair the past or receive forgiveness are ultimately unresolved, thus only pain and ironic humor remain.

The Holocaust created a fissure of pre- and post-Holocaust time, and self, that has impacted Jewish identity and culture. The focus on Jewish life prior to the Shoah, like that imagined by Foer, is uncommon in popular literature in the United States. Writing in 2003, Jeremy D. Popkin argues that "The Holocaust survivor memoirs that have become the most widely read usually make little effort at putting their authors' pre-Holocaust lives in any kind of historical perspective ... Any narrative energy expended to depict themselves as persons who had a history and an identity prior to the Holocaust experience would necessarily detract from this impact."¹⁹ Yet, now, there is more emphasis on doing so. In fact, the recently reopened Holocaust Galleries at the Imperial War Museum in London emphasize the rich diversity of Jewish

17 Francisco Collado-Rodriguez, "Ethics in the Second Degree: Trauma and Dual Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 32 (1) (2008): 57.

18 Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*, 449.

19 Jeremy D. Popkin, "Holocaust Memories, Historians' Memoirs: First Person Narrative and the Memory of the Holocaust," *History and Memory* 15 (1) (2003): 58.

life prior to the Holocaust in the first room to highlight the authentic humanity of each person before their individual identities are subsumed by a collective victim identity. Foer's novel allows readers an insight into what such lives may have been like and deeply humanizes the characters, both Jewish and Gentile who peacefully coexisted and intermarried in Trachimbrod. This imaginative part of the novel is filled with interesting characters, especially Jonathan's grandfather, Safran, and a love story. It functions to highlight the rich cultures, worlds, and people that were destroyed by the Holocaust and encourage more empathetic engagement from readers or at least encourage them to "approach the past ethically" with a clear recognition of the distinct human beings and homelands lost. It has a nostalgic aesthetic, as Ortner says, that longs for a past that has ceased to exist.

The novels' emphasis on main characters whose identities are informed by the perpetration of violence towards Jews during the Holocaust by their grandfathers reveals how two descendants of Holocaust survivors (the authors) imagine the identities of perpetrators' grandchildren are influenced by the historical violence in the family's past and then interrogates what possibilities there are for meaningful relationships (both platonic and romantic) to exist between them in contemporary society. In his article, "Ethics in the Second Degree: Trauma and Dual Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*," Francisco Collado-Rodriguez argues that Foer's novel "positions characters and readers as non-referential witnesses" of Holocaust events and that by using "strategies that disrupt a linear presentation of events" authors may "work on readers' emotions and stimulate an ethical reading of a literary work."²⁰ Both novels blur temporal boundaries showcasing the ongoing legacies of the Holocaust for the descendants of perpetrators and victims through the close relationships of two young male characters. Trauma theorists Anne Whitehead²¹ and Cathy Caruth²² argue that fragmented time frames in narrative expressions are a key characteristic of trauma narratives. The entanglement of family histories from the Holocaust with the contemporary setting of the main characters highlights the legacies of trauma that have been inherited including pain and the inability to forgive the unforgiveable. Xavier seeks familial redemption for his grandfather's actions through his desire to be the savior of the Jews, and Alex's grandfather seeks forgiveness from Lista so that he can forgive himself. Neither, however, succeeds and both novels suggests that the inherited trauma – individual and

20 Collado-Rodriguez, "Ethics in the Second Degree," 56.

21 Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004).

22 *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins UP, 1995).

collective – is irresolvable. Rather than forgiveness, compassion may be the ethical response.

Family Histories and Identity

In both novels, readers are positioned to engage ethically with considerations of the descendants of perpetrators. Collado-Rodríguez explains that “literature and film have often recounted massacres carried out by the Nazis in categorical terms, with a clear line dividing good from evil, murderer from victim,” but in Foer’s novel readers grapple with “the truth of somebody who is not only a survivor, but also an alleged collaborator with the Nazis,” Alex’s grandfather.²³ In Grunberg’s novel, readers are positioned to feel sympathy for a woman who is traumatized by her father’s involvement with the SS and witnessing her mother being raped by Russian soldiers while she also remains vehemently anti-Semitic and uncaring toward her son. The novels build on traditions of representation of the Holocaust in ways that had not been so popularly done prior, including the use of the grotesque and humor to jar readers. In doing so, however, the novels succeed in pushing readers to consider the relationship between histories of atrocities, family, identity, possibilities of reconciliation, and futurity. They emphasize the silences filled by encounters with a seemingly absurd past that was horrifically real. The pain must be felt, even if it is inherited.

The books portray intergenerational trauma and its effect on family structures, which in turn influences the boys’ identity formation. Alex is not responsible for his grandfather’s action during the Holocaust, nor is Xavier in *The Jewish Messiah*, but their genealogical connection affects them nonetheless, and it greatly impacts the relationships they have with the Jewish males they meet in the novels. The focalization through Alex and Xavier, rather than the Jewish characters, provide creative imaginings where the Jewish authors attempt to make the “now” of perpetrator’s offspring their own (or the readers’). Xavier suggests that the temporal distance from the war that third generation people experience should mean they do not have to grapple with it anymore. As we read in the novel, “Europe had been at peace for so long by the time he [Xavier – S. M.] was born. The war was far, far away, at least that war was ... experts had already declared that the Second World War was now over and done with, that chapter was finished.”²⁴ The irony is that though “that war” may be finished, the effects of it linger as that war

23 Collado-Rodríguez, “Ethics in the Second Degree,” 62–63.

24 Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*, 2.

drastically impacted the world and people's ideas about humanity and evil. It will never be "over and done with." Collado-Rodríguez argues that Foer's novels similarly "emphasize[s] the now-vast temporal and cultural distance between late twentieth and twenty-first century America and the Holocaust," though it also acknowledges that what was lost during Second World War and the Holocaust impacts the present.²⁵ The authors explore how the war continues to infiltrate family structures and relations between descendants of perpetrators and victims in the present and imagined future.

Xavier is inspired by his kinship. Grunberg writes that "his grandfather could have been his twin brother."²⁶ Xavier's decision to join a Jewish youth association and convert to Judaism is a shock: can we reconcile a German boy converting to Judaism knowing his grandfather was a Nazi perpetrator? Xavier's choices are influenced by his dysfunctional family life. Xavier's mother did not have a loving, close relationship with her father who was killed in the war, her mother was raped and traumatized, and now she and Xavier have a strained and strange relationship. Her love for Xavier is mediocre at best. Grunberg writes, "The mother loved her only child – she was a mother, after all – but she hated him as well. After he was born, the architect had barely felt any desire for her... and she blamed the child for that."²⁷ Xavier's mother and father divorce, his father commits suicide, and she begins dating a man who physically abuses her, named Marc. When Marc breaks her nose, she thinks: "The architect had ignored her... But ignoring was better than breaking."²⁸ She goes on to say to the doctor when he asks if "she had been the victim of a crime," "victims are always culprits, too, and culprits are always victims. No one gets what he doesn't deserve."²⁹ Specific to this scene, she negates the responsibility Marc should take for breaking her nose, while he plays "dumb. No regrets, no pleas for forgiveness, no show at his own wrongdoing."³⁰ The mutual unwillingness of either to hold themselves or each other accountable frustrates readers and contributes to Xavier's lack of accountability throughout his life. It can be read in the larger context of the Holocaust as them having attitudes that former perpetrators or their offspring may have, that no one is innocent and that perpetrators only hurt people who deserve it. Further

25 Collado-Rodríguez, "Ethics in the Second Degree," 62.

26 Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*, 3.

27 *Ibid.*, 122.

28 *Ibid.*, 118.

29 *Ibid.*, 119.

30 *Ibid.*, 118.

their interactions suggest that what is done cannot be undone, so they should move on. There is no space for forgiveness in ignoring the wrongdoing; there is only recurring pain. Marc and Xavier's mother embody an attempt to ignore responsibility for other's suffering, even as they continually contribute to it, which is eventually what Xavier also embodies.

This is a clear example of the novel's revelation of human suffering and cruelty and how Xavier's mother's family history has influenced her personality, but it is hard to feel sympathy for her. In the present, she remains anti-Semitic and racist. When she first meets Awromele, she does not know that he and Xavier are lovers, and Awromele does not know that she is not Jewish. She explains that Israelites despise "us" and when an Israelite looks at her she feels "this horrible pain, an inhuman pain."³¹ Awromele thinks she is speaking against Zionism, but readers see that as a Nazi perpetrator's daughter she inverts the gaze of the Nazi on Jews to make herself the victim. Awromele assures Xavier's mother that Awromele accepts and loves Xavier the way he is, and then she "choked on her own spittle, which she often did when love was mentioned."³² She nor Xavier know how to love others. The worldview that Xavier's mother embodies is that "There's a lot of despising going on. It's something people like to do"³³ and for her, the despising is inescapable. Her family has inscribed that into her. Awromele tries to connect with her because, as he says, "This woman is the mother of my sweetheart."³⁴ Sadly, the worldviews she inherited from her father about Jews and the self-loathing, secrecy, and trauma she endured are passed on to Xavier, but not realized until later in the novel.

To further insult Awromele, the mother says:

The biggest mistake that fascism made was to turn against the Israelite... The Middle East is a powder keg. Before long it will come to Europe. What am I saying? The powder keg is already in Europe. We've tried not to see it, but it's here. It's in our trams, the powder keg sleeps in our homes, it goes shopping in our supermarkets. You, for example, you're part of that powder keg, which will explode in our unsuspecting faces... you are my misfortune.³⁵

31 Ibid., 318.

32 Ibid., 319.

33 Ibid., 319.

34 Ibid., 320.

35 Ibid., 322.

The last statement is a reference to Nazi propaganda in which Jews were often portrayed as the “misfortune” of Germany. Though jarring, she is communicating what she believes to be true no matter how awkward and painful it is. She continues and says, “If the civilized world had let You-Know-Who [Hitler – S. M.] finish what he’d started back then, wouldn’t we be better off today? ... Would the world have been better off if you hadn’t existed?”³⁶ She suggests to Awromele that his parents should have been killed in the Holocaust, but at this point he thinks she is “a Jewish mother.”³⁷ This appalls readers, as Grunberg intends to evoke an emotional response. The book imagines that the second generation of perpetrators have lingering attitudes that what their parents did was in support of some greater good. The text positions readers to recognize that just because “that war” ended, the humans whose beliefs and attitudes inspired it remain and have been passed down to their children with continued legacies of “despising.” Ironically, the Jewish Awromele “had been raised with principled objections to the Jewish state in its present form,” which is one reason why he tells Xavier he does not want to move to Israel.³⁸ Later in the novel, Xavier becomes a Zionist, and Xavier is the person who chooses nuclear war as the President of Israel, so technically, Xavier is his mother’s misfortune, and maybe the world would be a better place if she had been killed in the war.

In *Everything Is Illuminated*, Alex’s father, the son of a Holocaust survivor, is abusive and physically assaults Alex and his little brother Igor regularly. Like Xavier’s mother, he lacks the sentimental attachment to his children that parents who have not inherited such traumas often have. These novels beg the question of whether traumatized parents can raise non-traumatized children, with both suggesting that, at least in the legacies of the Holocaust, intergenerational trauma has real, lasting effects on the grandchildren. Alex and Igor’s parent has not forgiven their grandparent, and their dad takes out his trauma on his children. He does not know how to communicate his pain other than through physical violence and yelling. Alex feels immense pressure to protect his little brother Igor from their father. When Alex hears his brother crying, he writes to Jonathan that he wanted to go tell his brother, “Little Igor, the bruises go away, and so does how you hate, and so does the feeling that everything you receive in life is something you have earned.”³⁹ This quote also reveals that Alex hates his father — the perpetrator of violence — but suggests that

36 *Ibid.*, 323.

37 *Ibid.*, 323.

38 *Ibid.*, 378.

39 Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 68.

the hate changes when you remove yourself from the violence and when you realize your suffering (or the suffering of the Jewish people) was not earned.

Alex introduces his family's business, Heritage Touring, explaining that they provide "a translator, guide, and driver for the Jews, who try to unearth places where their families once existed."⁴⁰ As Ukrainians, their family resides in lands afflicted by Nazis and Russians during World War Two, and though they may not have actively participated in the violence against Jews, they now make their living on its legacies which is one way the past remains influential in the present and the future, as Alex's father wants Alex to take over the business. Alex has other plans and saves his money "in the cookie box for moving to America with Little Igor."⁴¹ Like Xavier leaves his mother, Alex wants to spatially remove himself and Igor from the trauma-induced abuse they experience. Near the end of the novel, Alex finally stands up to his father. As his grandfather recounts to Jonathan in the final letter of the novel: "He told his father that he could care for Mother and Little Igor ... that he could understand if his father had to leave and never return, and that it would not even make him less of a father."⁴² Alex and his father "moved at each other with violence" and finally Alex says to him, "You are not my father" and his father leaves. Alex's grandfather tells Alex that he "had never been so proud" of him and that he does not have to take over Heritage Touring but instead should "Make your own life ... Try to live so that you can always tell the truth."⁴³ Readers learn that Alex's grandfather has lived his adult life having to repress the truth about his actions during the Holocaust. As a result, his personal trauma and survivor's guilt he endures was inherited by his son and grandsons.

The story of what occurred is revealed when Jonathan, Alex, and Alex's grandfather encounter the woman they think is Augustine but who turns out to be Lista. Wendy O'Brien explains that the person who experiences a traumatic event "becomes lodged or stuck in the time of trauma" and "the events become suspended in time."⁴⁴ This becomes explicit when Jonathan, Alex, and Alex's grandfather get to Trachimbrod. When Lista tells the story of Trachimbrod's destruction, Alex tells Jonathan in a letter later that "You

40 Ibid., 3.

41 Ibid., 215.

42 Ibid., 274.

43 Ibid., 274-275.

44 Wendy O'Brien, "Telling Time: Literature, Temporality and Trauma," *Temporality in Life as Seen Through Literature*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Hanover: The World Phenomenology Institute, 2007), 212-213.

cannot know how it felt to have to hear these things and then repeat them, because when I repeated them, I felt like I was making them new again.”⁴⁵ To write or speak history becomes, for him, a regenerative force whereby they are all transported to that moment in time, revisiting the past in the present. Alex’s grandfather challenges the truth of what she is saying, even flat out calling Lista a liar. To the reader, it seems rude, but gradually, readers learn that Lista knew what Alex’s grandfather had done, and he desperately hoped his family would never find out. Grandfather urges her to “Tell him [Alex – S. M.] what happened” in Trachimbrod.⁴⁶ She explains what happened when the General lined them up and “went down the line and told each man to spit on the Torah or they would kill his family.”⁴⁷ Grandfather challenges her saying it’s not true, but she says it is and she goes through how her family was killed in front of her, and no one helped. Grandfather says, “you would not help somebody if it signified that you would be murdered and your family would be murdered.”⁴⁸ It becomes clear that he was one of the Ukrainians who did not help and eventually even ratted out his best friend to save himself and his family. It was a choiceless choice. After Lista recounts the story of what happened when the Nazis came to their shtetl, Alex translates his grandfather’s confession: “Herschel was a Jew. And he was my best friend... And I murdered him.”⁴⁹ When Alex’s grandfather finally asks Lista if she could forgive them, she closes her eyes and shakes her head, suggesting there is no chance for reconciliation. Due to his past actions and their entanglement with this present journey and discovery, Alex’s grandfather is forced to confront what he had so long repressed and has to do so in front of witnesses, one being his grandson. This ultimately leads to his decision to commit suicide because he cannot forgive himself or reconcile his past. The pain of Alex knowing what he did is too much to bear. The narrative positions readers to respond empathetically by recognizing that some hate and guilt does not go away and that there are limits to forgiveness.

Given that one writes about traumatic events after the event occurs, Ross Chambers argues that “aftermath writing has a hauntedness... a double character of untimeliness... a baffling experience of time as, conjointly, the separation

45 Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 185.

46 *Ibid.*, 184.

47 *Ibid.*, 185.

48 *Ibid.*, 187.

49 *Ibid.*, 228.

of the past and present and their continuing correspondence.”⁵⁰ This link between past and present comes to the fore in this section. Lista tells them that Trachimbrod does not exist anymore. It was wiped out, and she has hundreds of boxes all over her tiny house with some labeled, “Dust” and “Darkness.” Keeping these tangible materials from Trachimbrod evidences the people who lived there, but their absence emphasizes the destruction that occurred at the hands of the Nazis. She says that she stays in her house as her punishment “for surviving.”⁵¹ Alex’s grandfather suggests that many who collaborated with the Nazis are not bad people. He tells Jonathan: “I am not a bad person ... I am a good person who has lived in a bad time.”⁵² However, *Everything Is Illuminated* rejects political and religious excuses for what happened in the past, and instead places blame squarely on human beings. Near the end of the novel, Alex’s grandfather is reminded by Lista that the Messiah was supposed to come at the “end of the world,” ... “but it was not the end of the world,” says Grandfather. Lista tells Grandfather it was the end of the world and “He just did not come.” When grandfather asks why, Lista says, “the lesson we learned from everything that happened – There is no God.” She says further “I could not believe in a God that would challenge faith like this” and Grandfather asks, “What if it was man and not God that did all of this?” and Lista replies, “I do not believe in man, either.”⁵³ Lista provides a counter to Grandfather’s belief that peace through forgiveness and reconciliation is still possible, but overall, Foer’s book is more hopeful about the future than Grunberg’s.

Humor and Truth

In addition to grappling with inherited trauma and its effects on the identities of grandchildren, for Grunberg and Foer, humor is a way to explore some of the most absurd parts of history and humanity. In her essay “Once Removed,” second generation author Lisa Reiman-Dobi explains that as a child, she “assumed that the truth must be awfully grotesque for it to be constantly avoided or shrouded in fantasy.”⁵⁴ Grunberg and Foer invent their stories as explora-

50 Ross Chambers, *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 191.

51 *Ibid.*, 189.

52 *Ibid.*, 227.

53 *Ibid.*, 189.

54 Lisa Reiman-Dobi, “Once Removed.” *Second Generation Voices: Reflections by Children of Holocaust Survivors and Perpetrators*, ed. Alan L. Berger and Naomi Berger (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2001), 19.

tions to “fill in the gaps” of what their families did not say about experiences during the Holocaust, which leads to darkly humorous places. They use abject descriptions of sex and violence as a way to, as Dutch scholar Michiel Bot argues, take the sacred and move it away from being taboo. It is silence about cruelty and pain that leads to misunderstanding and an erasure or invalidation of the pain victims endured. These novels, rather than remaining silent about historical atrocities and pain, use humor as a vehicle for truth. Harry Hershfield, a popular radio personality in the 1940s who earned the nickname “the Jewish Will Rogers” said that “Humor is the great common denominator.”⁵⁵ Perhaps then where linguistic, cultural, or temporal barriers exist, they may be overcome, at least in part, by humor. But, using humor to write or speak about the Holocaust can be contentious. In the silence that followed the Holocaust, it must have been unfathomable to combine testimony with humor, and yet, now there are multiple authors who use humor as a way of examining different aspects of the Holocaust particularly as a way of accepting the insolvability of the problem of forgiveness.

Comedian Steve Allen said that “Tragedy plus time equals comedy.”⁵⁶ Both novels explore if the ability to laugh at tragedy functions as an attempt at healing or working through trauma. In both, the laughter elicited works to validate the absurdity of the cruelty humans inflicted upon one another. In *Everything Is Illuminated* Alex writes to Jonathan, “humorous is the only truthful way to tell a sad story.”⁵⁷ Humor implies resignation to the reality of what occurred. It cannot be changed. We want truth to lead to reconciliation, but some truths are too sad and cruel to warrant forgiveness. One reviewer exclaims, “Taking on the most well-guarded pieties and taboos of our age, *The Jewish Messiah* is both a great love story and a grotesque farce that forces a profound reckoning with the limits of human guilt, cruelty, and suffering.” One conclusion is that guilt has limits but cruelty does not, and everyone suffers because of that. With such a bleak conclusion, one may be surprised at the humor with which readers are led there.

Both books satirize seemingly sacred rituals or traditions. Talal Asad argues that to satirize is “a mode of moral engagement... a satire is supposed to deal with prevailing vices” which is one way novels about the past may connect with the present and make us more self-reflexive. Contemporary

55 Lawrence Bush, “August 25: The Jewish Will Rogers,” accessed July 27, 2023, <https://jewishcurrents.org/august-20-jewish-will-rogers>.

56 “Comedy is Tragedy Plus Time,” accessed July 27, 2023, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/06/25/comedy-plus/>.

57 Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 53.

second and third generation authors do not have the same pressure to testify – or to only factually represent the experiences of the Holocaust – that has now been well documented, so they use writing as a way to attempt to piece together family histories that they see as informing their individual, family, and cultural identities and do so in experimental ways that also, as Asad argues *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie did, “intervene in an already charged political field.”⁵⁸ Bot claims that Grunberg’s novels “steer away from the mandate to actively avoid offense in the name of tolerance and respect for cultural difference” and in doing so, Grunberg encourages contemporary readers to reflect on why they are offended and what those offenses tell us about ourselves and our relationship to the past or even our abilities to communicate across differences now. But Grunberg’s novel has a clear refrain that “Communication is pain” and though Awromele suggests that “We all come from the same fountainhead” as humans, Xavier’s mother says that people who are culturally different are “fundamentally different” suggesting that there is little hope for humans overcoming cultural differences to have meaningful dialogue.⁵⁹ The other refrain that supports this conclusion is that the only language that matters is violence. Awromele hears and then repeats the sentiment multiple times: “language as we know it is becoming obsolete. The language of the knuckle, the shoe... that is the language we must speak; otherwise, we will never free ourselves of ourselves.”⁶⁰ When silence or unspeakability is the *modus operandi*, humans find other ways to communicate their pain. Xavier’s mother’s failure to tell him the truth about his grandfather and Nazi atrocities lead him to an ignorant messianic fantasy that endangers humanity. Xavier seems to believe that if he and Awromele can love one another, then surely perpetrators and victims can reconcile, but Xavier ignores all the pain that goes unspoken in all of his relationships, especially with his mother and Awromele. Grunberg’s novel suggests that we will free ourselves of ourselves through mutual annihilation.

In addition to Xavier being the most obviously like Hitler, his conversion to Judaism and then Zionism emphasizes how easily humans can get carried away in their own narcissism and desire for power. The grotesque elements of the book include a botched, infected circumcision and testicle that is kept on a shelf in formaldehyde and referred to as “King David.” Xavier creates a series of paintings with his mother holding King David titled *Mother and*

58 Quoted in Michiel Bot, “‘Translating’ *Mein Kampf*: Arnon Grunberg’s Profanations,” *Law & Literature* 31 (1) (2019): 97.

59 Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*, 316.

60 *Ibid.*, 365.

Testicle. When Xavier becomes a politician in Israel, he tries to convince people that King David is the Redeemer and tells a leader of Hamas in a meeting that “Surveys show that fifty-five percent of the population believe that King David is the Redeemer.”⁶¹ Throughout this entire section, Grunberg’s novel scathes international politics with its lies, manipulations, corruption, and greed. He also tears apart religious faith, mocking those people who write letters to King David, pray to King David, and even hang pictures of King David on their walls.⁶² King David is not a Redeemer. King David is a testicle, but Xavier as “a master in the creation, manipulation, and control of seemingly boundless chaos” has convinced people, as Hitler did, that he is their savior and their futurity.⁶³

Conclusions

Near the end of *The Jewish Messiah*, Xavier finds himself alone with the tattered corpse of Awromele, who is killed by people afraid for their lives after Xavier sells nuclear weapons to former colonies of the West who then aim them with an ultimatum at the US, UK, Amsterdam, Spain, Portugal, Germany, the Balkans, France, and Switzerland. The last prayer Xavier says over Awromele’s corpse is not a Jewish prayer, but a passage from their Yiddish translation of *Mein Kampf*, and he says, “A person can easily change languages... but in his new language he will continue to express his old thoughts, his character will not be changed... We have to learn to speak the language of the future.”⁶⁴ Though Xavier converted to Judaism and changed his language, his inherited despising remained. As a young man, he thought, “The hardest thing is to forgive yourself... forgiveness: And that was what Xavier wanted to grant to the Jews most generously: forgiveness. For all the wrongs they had committed throughout the centuries. For the guilt they had imposed on others.”⁶⁵ Xavier has inherited his mother’s ironic worldview whereby it is the Jews, not the Nazis, who need forgiveness. Bot argues that Grunberg’s book’s humorous tone “provokes readers to contemplate real instances of, among other things, LGBTQ bashing, bullying, and rape in the present,”⁶⁶ which all become part of

61 Ibid., 443.

62 Ibid., 448.

63 Ibid., 448.

64 Ibid., 468.

65 Ibid., 228.

66 Bot, “‘Translating’ *Mein Kampf*,” 109.

the exploration of human cruelty. It is not victims of such cruelties who need forgiving, and it is not their responsibility to forgive, especially in a world that perpetuates crimes of identity.

The imagined reality of the children of Holocaust survivors in the face of their parents' silences and evasions are brought to the fore in Grunberg's novel as he positions readers to ask and imagine what humans are truly capable of in terms of inflicting pain and suffering. The conclusion in this novel suggests that the future is nonexistent because humanity is spiraling into chaos. Writing in this journal in 2020, Monika Rudaś-Grodzka states that

God is not present. The only feasible messiah is collective, in the form of an oppressed and unhappy humanity. There is no point in waiting for a messiah nor trying to guess the date of his/her arrival. Salvation is all about saving the self. This idea can also be found in the thought of Karl Marx, who posited that human beings shape their own histories.⁶⁷

Xavier becomes a god-like figure, like Hitler himself, whose biggest desire was to do something astonishing, so he starts a nuclear war, suggesting, as Lista concluded, that we should not have faith in man, either.

The close proximity of the grandchildren of perpetrators and victims encourages readers to consider whether reconciliation between those whose ancestors were persecuted or killed by the Nazis and those whose ancestors were Nazis or were complicit with them is possible. The irony of the title *Everything is Illuminated* is that by the end of the novel, as Foer explains in an interview, "nothing is illuminated, except that everybody sees things in different ways."⁶⁸ Lista is unable to forgive Alex's grandfather or the other bystanders who watched as a Nazi shot and killed the baby in her womb. By the end of the novel, Alex has told his abusive father that he should leave and never return, which he does. Alex rejects the legacy of his father's violence and attempts to disrupt it. In his final, unfinished letter to Jonathan before he commits suicide Alex's grandfather writes, "All is for Sasha (his nickname for Alex) and Iggy... I would give everything for them to live without violence. Peace. That is all that I would ever want for them."⁶⁹ This is a much more hopeful ending than Grunberg provides.

Grunberg's novel has a much darker vision of the future – one in which humans cannot peacefully coexist. His work suggests that if humanity does

67 Monika Rudaś-Grodzka, "In the Archives of Women's Writing," *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2020): 14.

68 "Jonathan Safran Foer Interview on *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002)."

69 Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*, 275.

not reconcile and heal by learning to truthfully communicate about atrocities, however painful it may be, then we are all doomed – to nuclear war and mutual destruction. Both have open endings, suggesting that even those books about the past have implications for our future. By imagining the past and its relation to the present, *Everything Is Illuminated* highlights their entanglement, as does Grunberg, whose novel goes even further to portray a nihilistic future of destruction to the point where Xavier Radek concludes, “Our only comfort is destruction.”⁷⁰ Near the end of the book, Xavier ends with quite the call out of contemporary readers highlighting the necessity of communicating across differences: “Communication is pain... if it doesn’t hurt, there’s no communication taking place... You have to tell the truth. And truth is nothing but pain.”⁷¹ These novels are painful. Within their pages emerge hard realities about human cruelty, indifference to the suffering of others, and the limits of forgiveness. Though deeply moving and humorous, these second and third generation novels are permeated with pessimism if humans do not learn to communicate across differences and stop ignoring the suffering of others.

Abstract

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Legacies of the Shoah in Jonathan Safran Foer’s Everything Is Illuminated and Arnon Grunberg’s De Joodse Messias [The Jewish Messiah]

This article compares *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) by American author Jonathan Safran Foer to *De Joodse Messias [The Jewish Messiah]* (2004) by Dutch author Arnon Grunberg. Both novels contribute to ongoing discussions about Holocaust representation in the face of a generation temporally and spatially removed from the historical events. Ultimately, by blurring temporalities, focusing on what families inherit, and using humor these novels emphasize human agency in atrocity and the impossibilities of reconciliation by highlighting the capacity humans have for hurting one another and the limits of forgiveness.

Keywords

Holocaust, temporality, second generation, trauma, third generation

⁷⁰ Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*, 470.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 425.