THE BLACK TURNIP: AN INVITATION TO POLAND

&

THE "FANTASY OF FLIGHT,"

OR, ESCAPE IN CONTEMPORARY JEWISH NARRATIVE:

READING MY MEMOIR THROUGH THE JEWISH PICARESQUE

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Abstract & Statement of Objectives

This thesis contains two linked parts: (1) my memoir, *The Black Turnip*; and (2) a contextualizing essay, *The "Fantasy Of Flight," Or, Escape In Contemporary Jewish Narrative: Reading My Memoir Through The Jewish Picaresque.*

The memoir, *The Black Turnip,* is narrated by a young, naïve, bumbling Jewish American woman who accepts an invitation to a theatre conference in Poland. While learning more about the country from which her grandfather escaped, she becomes obsessed with Polish theatre. Improbably, she decides to become a Polish theatre artist herself. This story is my own story, drawn from memory.

In the contextualizing essay, I read *The Black Turnip* in the company of four works that influenced my writing: one critical analysis and three narratives. I consider Miriam Udel's *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (2016) and novels or memoirs by Philip Roth (1979), Jonathan Safran Foer (2002), and Roz Chast (2014). I explore how features of Miriam Udel's Jewish picaresque (i.e., escapism, avoidance of adulthood, episodic narrative, etc.) manifest in my memoir and other American Jewish narratives.

Throughout this thesis, I examine the literary strategies that American Jewish writers use to portray the desire to escape from some part of their family, history, culture, or circumstances. I intend for this thesis to be read by fellow writers, especially those working with Jewish narrative, writing from diaspora cultures, or exploring avoidance in the context of cultural memory.

I seek to demonstrate that a writer's escapism can be productive from a literary standpoint, and generative of renewed cultural understanding. I hope this thesis will be of interest to other writers of diaspora literature, especially those who are working with the memory of a shared, complex, and sometimes troubling historic past. This thesis may shed light on the possibilities of a picaresque sensibility for such projects.

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I. Introduction & Methodology

This essay will consider the desire to escape, and take on a new identity, as it manifests in selected contemporary American Jewish narrative texts, including my own memoir. I am reading these texts in the light of Miriam Udel's theory of the Jewish picaresque,[1] and exploring manifestations of the escapist fantasies that she finds in this form.

To begin, I will introduce the terms "picaresque" and "Jewish picaresque" as I use them here. I outline the choices I made in (re)naming myself and my central character, in finding my personal definition of "memoir," and in limiting the scope of inquiry of this essay. Finally, I discuss the tone in which I write, including the use of rhetorical questions, the attitude of authorial self-examination, and the presence of some humor.

What's in the picaresque? Cervantes, Dunn, Giraldi

In February 2016, during the first year of my PhD, one reader suggested to me, in a workshop in our yearly residency, that what I was writing was actually a picaresque. This surprised me. How could my contemporary Jewish American memoir about going back to Poland be approaching the form of

[1] Miriam Udel, *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016)

Cervantes's famous 1605 novel *Don Quixote,*[2] or the other novels about rogues and tricksters that had preceded and followed it? I didn't understand how my book could be a picaresque, and I sought out some definitions for clarification.

Peter N. Dunn writes, in *The Spanish Picaresque Novel*[3]:

> If we refer to so-and-so as a picaresque character… we count on our listeners being able to evoke, however vaguely, the qualities of a literary type…part adventurer, part tramp, part jack-of-all-trades, part confidence trickster… What we are accustomed to look for in these novels is the shape of a whole career, an attitude to life, beyond the novelty of the separate incidents and the variety of occupations.[4]

Dunn defines the genre broadly, to account for centuries of usage since the 1540s. I could see that on an over-arching level, such as the "shape of a whole career, an attitude to life," that it was possible to call, "however vaguely," my unfinished memoir by the ancient name of picaresque. Certainly, there were many episodic journeys and "separate incidents" in *The Black Turnip*; I was even willing to call my narrator an "adventurer." But was she then also a *pícaro*?

I sought out more definitions. William Eggington describes the pre-Quixote antihero of these books, the *pícaro*: "… the social outcast and criminal deviant…the *pícaro* desires only freedom and the satisfaction of his

[2] Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote*, trans. by Edith Grossman (New York: Ecco, 2003)
[3] Peter N. Dunn, *The Spanish Picaresque Novel* (Boston: Twayne Publishers (G. K. Hall & Co.), 1979)
[4] Dunn, 'Picaresque, *Pícaro*', in *The Spanish Picaresque Novel*, p. 11.

basest desires, and has no scruples about how to achieve his goals."[5] However, that definition refers to a time before Cervantes's intervention in the form. According to Eggington, Cervantes, to achieve his own goals, had drawn on the backdrop of the traditional trickster narrative and bent it creatively to his own literary devices: he writes that "[Cervantes] would engage that genre in an entirely different way from those around him."[6] I asked myself if I could, as Eggington claims Cervantes does, "invade [the picaresque] like a parasite"[7] and make the genre work for my own narrative. I didn't have to write about a rogue or trickster; I could just borrow a few picaresque elements.

The Black Turnip had, even in its earliest drafts, some picaresque features: a proliferation of characters and incidents; circular, digressive plotting; pessimistic humor; and a self-aggrandizing protagonist (Dunn's "confidence trickster"[8]). I could come up with examples in which Chana Wolstein seemed as misguided as Don Quixote, though perhaps, I admit, not as appealing. Here were a few things Chana had said: "I didn't want my parents to know I was an unemployed failure"[9]; "I intended to learn as little as possible while I was in Poland"[10]; "I did not mind asserting to Lance that he would find no one better than I was."[11] Chana Wolstein had, as Eggington put

[5] William Eggington, *The Man Who Invented Fiction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 144.
[6] Eggington, *The Man Who Invented Fiction*, p. 155.
[7] Eggington, *The Man Who Invented Fiction*, p. 156.
[8] Peter N. Dunn, 'Picaresque, *Pícaro*', in *The Spanish Picaresque Novel* (Boston: Twayne Publishers (G. K. Hall & Co.), 1979), p. 11.
[9] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation at Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 48.
[10] Weinberg, *The Black Turnip*, p. 75.
[11] Weinberg, *The Black Turnip*, p. 249.

it, "no scruples about how to achieve [her] goals."[12] My protagonist had the hubristic, overblown "attitude to life"[13] that Dunn found central to the genre. Not every page of *The Black Turnip* had a picaresque element, but at the level of what Dunn calls the "shape of [the] whole career,"[14] I saw a resemblance.

Reconciled to the picaresque genre, I searched for a definition written by an artistic practitioner of the form. Novelist William Giraldi wrote, in 2012: "Most picaresque novels incorporate several defining characteristics: satire, comedy, sarcasm, acerbic social criticism; first-person narration with an autobiographical ease of telling; an outsider protagonist-seeker on an episodic and often pointless quest for renewal or justice."[15] Giraldi has the novelist's dislike of being put into a box, and sees the pitfall in his definition: he continues, acknowledging that "those traits set a broad trap certain to snag many a novel that never thought of itself as a picaresque."[16]

Giraldi's use of "snag" and "broad trap" indicates the writer's bewilderment at being put into a genre. The idea of "trap[ping]" could also fit the rogue anti-hero, trickster, or *pícaro*, the central character of the picaresque, and his surprise at the latest set of bewildering adventures that had caught him. Writer and protagonist are caught, together. Giraldi gives a list of possible characteristics that make up this "broad trap" of a genre, but does not imply that every picaresque will have all of them, only "most picaresque novels."

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[12] William Eggington, *The Man Who Invented Fiction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 144.
[13] Dunn, 'Picaresque, *Pícaro*', in *The Spanish Picaresque Novel*, p. 11.
[14] Dunn, 'Picaresque, *Pícaro*', in *The Spanish Picaresque Novel*, p. 11.
[15] William Giraldi, 'What's a Picaresque? The Top Five Novels', *Publishers Weekly*. (20 July 2012) <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/tip-sheet/article/53090-what-s-a-picaresque-the-top-5-novels.html> [accessed 12 May 2018]
[16] Giraldi, 'What's a Picaresque? The Top Five Novels'.

Perhaps, I was starting to hope, a few memoirs would have those "defining characteristics" as well? The doors of the picaresque were wide open, and my memoir had slipped through.

I felt increasingly comfortable situating my memoir within the picaresque genre. However, I still was uncertain about how all the Jewish content in my memoir would work within the form.

Miriam Udel's "Jewish picaresque" and the *Bildungsroman*

A few months after I made the discovery, in our February 2016 workshop, that my Jewish American memoir was perhaps a picaresque, literary critic Miriam Udel published *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*.[17] In her book, which came out in April of the same year, she proposes a genre definition just as fluid as Giraldi's:

> Flexible terminology enables me to articulate a mobile rather than rigid demarcation of literary space that encompasses aspects of genre, poetics (literary form) and affect or sensibility. Essential features of this broader picaresque include contingency and uncertainty, peripatetic movement, the avoidance of linear plots, and the ironic puncturing of sentimentality.[18]

Udel's reckoning with the picaresque comes in the form of another list of suggested characteristics. She uses the term "picaresque" as a modality, tone, or "sensibility" rather than a strict set of boundaries. She even applies the

[17] Miriam Udel, *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016)
[18] Miriam Udel, 'Preface', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*, p. xv.

same modifier, "broad," as Giraldi. Udel resists a "rigid demarcation of literary space." She creates no walls, no moats. Rather, she wants to describe a category that might be entered by something as vague as an "affect." The resulting category was more than "broad" enough for my memoir to fit into it.

Udel is concerned with how the Jewish picaresque constructs itself in contrast to other genres, including the *Bildungsroman*. I will discuss two standard definitions of *Bildungsroman* before talking further about how Udel uses the term in her book. In *A Multicultural Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1999), Gary Carey and Mary Ellen Snodgrass write: "Bildungsroman… literally a "formation novel," which describes the coming-of-age of an untried or naïve youth…"[19] The process of the central character's "formation" or "coming-of-age," or that character's passing from a state of youthful naïveté into a "form[ed]" state of adult maturity, is characteristic. Carey and Snodgrass describe the *Bildungsroman* as a genre of "formation," in which an unformed "youth" discovers their mature, formed, adult identity. In other words, someone who has not yet grown up must grow up. Carey and Snodgrass conclude their definition with a list of sample novels in this genre, ranging from the mid-1800s ("Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850)..."[20]) all the way to the late twentieth century.

[19] Gary Carey and Mary Ellen Snodgrass, 'Bildungsroman', in *A Multicultural Dictionary of Literary Terms.* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc.), p. 25.
[20] Carey and Snodgrass, 'Bildungsroman', in *A Multicultural Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc.), p. 25.

This straightforward definition gave me a point of departure, but I sought more historic context. I found another reading of the term *Bildungsroman* in J.A. Cuddon and C.E. Preston's *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (4th edition, 1999):

> Bildungsroman: (G formation novel[21]) …literally an 'upbringing' or 'education' novel. Widely used by German critics, it refers to a novel which is an account of the youthful development of a hero or heroine (usually the former). It describes the process by which maturity is achieved through the various ups and downs of life. The earliest example is usually taken to be Wieland's *Agathon* (1765-6). The most famous (and most often imitated) examples are Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) and his *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-6)…Novels in English that might be put into this category are Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Jane Austen's *Emma*, Dickens's *David Copperfield*…[22]

These two definitions contain many points of agreement. Both translate the term *Bildungsroman* as "formation novel" in German. Both discuss the idea of "formation" (*Bildung*), "upbringing," "education," or character growth and development. Both describe a plot that contains a focus on maturation. There is one striking difference between the two definitions: the earliest

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[21] 'G' stands for 'German' in this context; the parenthetical in the first line of the definition reads as 'German for "formation novel."'
J.A. Cuddon and C.E. Preston, 'Abbreviations', *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms And Literary Theory*, 4th edn (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. ix.

[22] The Goethe titles mentioned here, in German, are *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship.*
Cuddon and Preston, 'Bildungsroman', in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms And Literary Theory*, pp. 81-82.

Bildungsromans cited in Cuddon and Preston come from the eighteenth century, not the nineteenth—and from German literature.

Cuddon and Preston date the *Bildungsroman*'s origin to the 1700s, and ascribe it to Wieland and Goethe. This additional context made it transparent to me that Central European Jewish writers, especially those living in the Prussian or Austro-Hungarian empires in the 1800s, would have been surrounded by and heavily influenced by these popular German novels. I responded on a personal level to the sight of Goethe's name in Cuddon and Preston's definition of *Bildungsroman*. I had inherited a love of German culture from my father. In my memoir, there is a scene where Chana becomes very excited at the news that Peter Handke's *Kaspar* is being presented at the festival,[23] another where she attempts to stage Goethe's *Faust*,[24] and yet another where she actually contemplates staying in Berlin and working in German theatre instead of graduating from college.[25] German culture is, my father had always told me, a powerfully magnetic force for Ashkenazi Jews, but our attachment to this culture is socially, politically, and historically fraught.

Both definitions describe the Bildungsroman as a genre in which character maturation, growth, evolution, or development occurs. Whether that maturation leads to a happy marriage (*Tom Jones*[26], *Emma*[27]) or an unhappy

[23] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 136.
[24] Weinberg, *The Black Turnip*, pp. 182-183.
[25] Weinberg, 'German trains and German theatre', in *The Black Turnip*, pp. 306-313.
[26] Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*, ed. by Ross Hamilton (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004)
[27] Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. by Fiona Stafford (London, Penguin Books, 2003)

suicide (*The Sorrows Of Young Werther*[28]), the central character in every *Bildungsroman* does lose, eventually, some of the naïveté of his or her previous state. This necessary maturation is not a genre feature of the picaresque. Don Quixote never grows up, and I would argue that we as readers don't want or need him to do so. With these definitions in mind, I had more context with which to understand the historical and emotional weight that Udel's Yiddish-language eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Jewish writers felt, when writing in response to the *Bildungsroman*.

Standard definitions of the genre aside, I will now return to how Miriam Udel reads the *Bildungsroman*, in contrast to the picaresque:

> The *Bildungsroman* conceives of time as linear and events as causally linked, the laying of a life's path brick by brick, tending toward the development of a hero…The *Bildungsroman*, with its ingeniously crafted plot, and its linear causality between one event and the next, implies an orderly world…Above all, the *Bildungsroman* is a genre of progress...The picaresque points instead to a world in which time may alternate between cyclical and linear, events are random, chaotic, and largely meaningless…[29]

To Udel's reading, the progressive-centric worldview expressed by the *Bildungsroman*—"time as linear and events as causally linked, the laying of a life's path brick by brick"—is distinct from the central tenets of the Jewish picaresque. Lofty goals such as "progress" and "development" are not always possible for minority groups in a society. The Jewish experience in nineteenth-

[28] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. by David Constantine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)
[29] Miriam Udel, 'Introduction', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), pp. 9-10.

century Europe was not an "orderly world." The novels that 18th-, 19th- and 20th-century Yiddish-language writers created reflected the "random, chaotic, and largely meaningless" disordered environment in which they had to function. From this point forward in this essay, when I refer to the *Bildungsroman*, I refer to Udel's reading of the genre.

According to Udel, the anti-sentimental Jewish picaresque doubts and disrupts the "dominant European master narratives of progress"[30] which the *Bildungsroman* exemplifies. It also dramatizes the impractical desire to escape those narratives and their persistent aftereffects. Udel writes, while analyzing Isaac Bashevis Singer's antihero Hertz Dovid Grein, in the novel *Shadows on the Hudson*: "Neither superficial happiness nor true maturation is available to Grein, however. All he can hope for is the fantasy of flight: 'Well, I'll just disappear, Grein told himself. I'll leave everything and run away.'"[31] How can Grein run away from Holocaust memory in 1950s-era New York, in a city full of dislocated survivors? He can't, but his sexual explorations and other adventures allow him to pretend that he can. He moves from one apartment to the next, from the bed of one lover to another, never allowing history to catch up with him.

Udel's alliterative phrase, the "fantasy of flight," was a touchstone for me when I was trying to search for the Jewish picaresque in the texts analyzed here. In my opinion, in the broadest sense, the Jewish picaresque genre sensibility shows itself in escapist fantasy. I eventually took the phrase

[30] Miriam Udel, 'Preface', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. xiv.
[31] Miriam Udel, 'Living Serially: Neoteny and the *Polit*', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*, p. 83.

"fantasy of flight" for the title of this essay. I have come to understand this concept, the dream of escape, as a shorthand for the desires of all the narrators, protagonists, and writers I consider here—including those of Chana Wolstein.

What's in a name? Introducing Chana W.

As a memoirist, how do I name or identify myself and my protagonist? How do I use names to expose myself, and how do I use them to hide? I am an American Jewish writer and *The Black Turnip* is the first memoir I have ever completed. As a former blogger, used to writing under my own name, I wrote over three-quarters of the memoir without using any pseudonyms. I finally decided, six months before my final submission point for the doctorate, that it was a good idea to call my narrator "Chana Wolstein." At the same time, I changed the names of all the other characters for privacy.

Giving the protagonist a pseudonym provided me, the writer, with a feeling of simultaneous escape and exposure. In the writing, I indulged in a sense of being safely hidden, like a child under a couch; I was also able to speak more frankly. It was easier to finish the final chapters of *The Black Turnip*, which contain the most upsetting material (Chana gets lost in the Polish national transit system)[32] after choosing a new name for my protagonist to give me some emotional separation from her mistakes and histrionics.

It was easier for me to revisit the memoir, and cut and edit Chana's ramblings, once she no longer had my name. Critic Ben Yagoda has written,

[32] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), pp. 362-407.

in *Memoir: A History*, about the necessity of evaluating narrators of memoir with the same judgment we bring to the real people that we meet on a daily basis. Yagoda argues, "The people we encounter as we go about our lives are always telling us 'true' stories. We read memoirs just as we listen to those people: always poised to judge their intelligence, their insight, their credibility."[33] I agree with Yagoda's call for "poised" skepticism in evaluating memoir, and would take it one step further. The memoirist may also need to read her second and third drafts with a similar attitude of judgment, as if assessing a stranger's veracity or trustworthiness. Where Chana began to lack "credibility" or "intelligence," where she started rambling, raving, or giving in to stereotypes, I could more easily take steps to correct her exaggerations, or shorten her sentences, now that she no longer shared my name.

For a writer, names are always choices. This is the implicit advice that a wise elder writer, E. I. Lonoff, gives to the young Nathan Zuckerman, in one of the works I analyze in this essay—Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer*:[34]

> "How would you prefer to be addressed?" asked Emanuel Isidore Lonoff. "As Nathan, Nate, or Nat? Or have you another preference entirely?" Friends and acquaintances called him Manny, he informed me, and I should do the same. "That will make conversation easier."
>
> I doubted that, but I smiled to indicate that no matter how light-headed it was bound to leave me, I would obey. [35]

[33] Ben Yagoda, 'Truth and Consequences', in *Memoir: A History* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), p. 270.
[34] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979; repr. New York: Vintage International, 1995)
[35] Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, p. 6.

Even in a casual chat, the name a writer uses is part of his persona. Lonoff himself deliberately chooses a more homely, familiar name to indicate that he is placing himself on the same level with his young guest. (Zuckerman, by contrast, gives the master writer his full name in the narration, "Emanuel Isidore Lonoff," to indicate that they can never be equals.) Lonoff is interested in "mak[ing] conversation easier." So am I; I intend my choice of a new name for the central character to facilitate dialogue between myself, Chana, and the assumed readers of this manuscript, in both the reading and the discussion of *The Black Turnip*.

Ultimately, calling my protagonist "Chana" had a liberating effect for me as a writer; the choice gave me a sense of freedom to finish telling the hardest part of the story in my memoir. In addition, the selection of her last name allowed me to tie the character to more aspects of Jewish culture and my own family's history. When Chana became a "Wolstein," my father liked the new name: "We have relatives who are Wolsteins," he told me. It was the first I'd ever heard of them. I had wanted to make sure that Chana's *nazwisko*, or last name, could easily be written in the Polish alphabet: "Wolsztejn." This movement between alphabets was necessary for the character of her grandfather Meyer/Mordechai. I had not expected that, in choosing such a pseudonym, I would end up choosing the real last name of some of my own Polish Jewish relatives, but the correspondence was a surprising and welcome discovery. I committed to the pseudonym, but it was important to me that Chana would still have some authorial presence in the text. For this reason, I

signed the dedication of the memoir "C.W." on her behalf.[36]

Memoir: a definition from personal practice

Every writer who draws on life finds a different way to set herself free in the writing. In an essay in *The Guardian*, novelist Elena Ferrante discusses the anxiety she felt when writing her childhood nonfictional diary: "I thought that when one writes, it makes no sense to be contained, to censor oneself, and as a result I wrote mostly – maybe only – about what I would have preferred to be silent about."[37] For Ferrante, a diary required an uncomfortable degree of truth-telling; she felt incredible freedom when she abandoned her diary and moved towards fiction. For me, a similar jolt of liberation occurred while moving in the opposite direction, and embracing the limitations of memory.

Following memoirist Mary Karr, I made the choice to be limited by the reach of my memory in what I included in *The Black Turnip*. I wrote, to the best of my ability, from what I remembered; I also drew upon notes and journals from 2008-2010, the principal time frame of my memoir. Karr writes, in her guidebook, *The Art of Memoir*: "I would defend anybody's right to move the line for veracity in memoir, though I'd argue for the right to know. But my own humble practices wholly oppose making things up."[38] Karr

[36] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation at Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 7.
[37] Elena Ferrante, 'The Experience of Writing A Diary Transformed Me Into A Fiction Writer', *The Guardian* (3 February 2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/03/elena-ferrante-on-writing-a-diary> [accessed 25 February 2018]
[38] Mary Karr, *The Art of Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015) p. 10.

provides a highly individual working definition, based on her practice, while simultaneously allowing for each author to "move the line," or allow for different proportions of invention and memory in a memoir, as he or she sees fit. Karr's rule of attempting to work from memory, not from invention, has been a productive restriction that has come to define my own personal practice.

In this essay, I attempt to acknowledge the names and respect the conventions by which writers refer to their own work. Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer*[39] and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*[40] are called "novels." Roz Chast uses "graphic memoir" for *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*[41] Looking outside this essay, at other contemporary Jewish narratives, Sheila Heti uses "novel from life" for *How Should A Person Be*?[42] Nicole Krauss, in discussing her recent novel *Forest Dark*[43], questions all of these terms. Here, she discusses why the main character of *Forest Dark* shares her name and is also called "Nicole Krauss":

> It was a natural decision. It felt authentic to me. In a sense, the self is more or less an invention from beginning to end. What is more unreal, what is more a creation than the self? Why do we have such a heavy investment in knowing what is true and what isn't true about people's lives? Why is it even valid to make a distinction between autobiography, auto-fiction and

[39] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979; repr. New York: Vintage International, 1995)
[40] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002; repr. London, Penguin Books Inc., 2003)
[41] Roz Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014)
[42] Sheila Heti, *How Should A Person Be: A Novel From Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2012)
[43] Nicole Krauss, *Forest Dark* (New York, HarperCollins: 2017)

> fiction itself? What fiction doesn't contain a deep reflection of the author's perspective and memory and sense of the world?"[44]

Krauss implicitly draws connections between the naming of a character and the classifying of a text into a genre. She doubts the legitimacy of a "distinction between autobiography, auto-fiction and fiction itself." In her conception of fiction as "deep reflection of the author's perspective and memory," in that "reflect[ed]" sense, 'Krauss'" the character has been named in order to mirror, but not duplicate, Krauss the author. Since this is a "deep reflection," I imagine "Nicole" the character at the bottom of a lake, blurred by the water, with Nicole the author standing at its edge and looking down. Krauss's term "deep reflection" implies a kind of blurriness, and also a profundity, when referring to correspondences between authors and protagonists based, in part, on the self.

For writers and creators of characters, names are, as Philip Roth's E.I. Lonoff reminds us,[45] always deliberate choices, never accidents. Decisions relating to naming and genre can be a significant means of achieving a necessary sense of author-enabling escape, permitting the writing to take place. One author's memoir is another's "novel from life." Alexander Chee writes, in *How To Write An Autobiographical Novel*, "Novels in progress have

[44] Erica Wagner, 'Nicole Krauss: "The self is more or less an invention from beginning to end"', *The Guardian* (20 August 2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/aug/20/nicole-krauss-forest-dark-self-israel-kafka-interview> [accessed 26 February 2018]
[45] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979; repr. New York: Vintage International, 1995), p. 6.

many faces, like an actor playing all the roles in a film."[46] The role that my own "novel from life" ended up playing was the role of memoir; I found this choice, and my decision to work from memory as opposed to invention, to be productively generative for myself and my writing process.

What is the scope of inquiry of this essay?

This is a contextualizing essay, but it is not a process examination. In examples I have seen from other Bath Spa University doctoral students in creative writing,[47] the essay is a time-based narrative. It is a story, often chronological, about how the creative manuscript got written. The writer remarks on challenges faced, and describes how the shape of the creative work changed over time in response.

Upon finishing my creative manuscript, I contemplated such an exercise, a kind of biography of a book. However, since my creative work is itself a self-examination, my retelling of my memories, it seemed unproductive to write another memoir-esque text for the critical essay. There is already some reflection on the challenges of the writing process within *The Black Turnip* itself. Here, Chana tries to abandon her unfinished book:

> The foothills burned in December, last year, when the Santa Ana winds blew through the canyons like a pack of drunk drivers. The streets filled with smoke. I didn't take all of my notes for this book with me when

[46] Alexander Chee, '100 Things About Writing A Novel', in *How To Write An Autobiographical Novel* (New York: Mariner Books (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) 2018), p. 138.
[47] Brenda Yun, *Arrivals and Departures: Lessons From A First-Time Novelist* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2017)

> …I ran away. "This is a great opportunity," I told myself. I was hoping the apartment would be incinerated and I wouldn't have to finish writing the book. "It'd be better off not written," I told myself. "Who cares? What's the point?" [48]

These lines, in a different tone of voice, could have appeared in a process narrative cast as a critical essay. Talking about the process of writing *The Black Turnip* was a subject to which Chana had already staked a claim.

Some process discussion does appear in this essay, but it is not the bulk of the writing. Instead, this essay will be mostly a retrospective examination. I'm looking back at what I have already written, regarding my memoir as a completed object, and considering that object in the context of other works that inspired it or relate to it. My memoir is the central focus, strictly limiting the scope of this investigation. This essay will only consider certain aspects of selected contemporary American Jewish narratives, and only those that were most significant for me during the writing of *The Black Turnip*.

I believe that the texts I examine in this essay can all, to varying extents, be read within or alongside a category created by critic Miriam Udel: the Jewish picaresque.[49] This genre's embrace of escape and avoidance, which Udel calls the "fantasy of flight,"[50] was informative to me as a writer during

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[48] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 17.

[49] Miriam Udel, 'Preface', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. xiv.

[50] Miriam Udel coins this phrase when discussing Hertz Dovid Grein, the *polit* of Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Shadows on the Hudson*: "All he can hope for is the fantasy of flight."
Miriam Udel, 'Living Serially: Neoteny and the *Polit*', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque,* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. 83.

the writing. Jewish picaresque escapism continues to be central to how I understand my own work. In this essay, I will hold up the works that have influenced me to Udel's framework. I will read Roth's *The Ghost Writer*[51] as the escape of the author, Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*[52] as the escape of the survivors' grandchild, Chest's *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*[53] as the escape of the dutiful Jewish daughter, and my own memoir as a combination of all of these escapes.

In this essay, I am engaged in a conversation with myself, as I attempt to understand my own memoir and the works that have inspired it. In this conversation, I make use of rhetorical questions. The device allows me to dramatize the writer's process of inquiry and self-analysis, and to progress from one point of inquiry to the next. Many of the rhetorical questions in this essay, especially in the later chapters, go unanswered. Those are places where my curiosity exceeds my knowledge, the scope of this essay, and, sometimes, my emotional wherewithal to push through the uncertainty to an answer. In these cases, I am acknowledging my shortcomings, but also pointing to an area that might merit my future exploration in a subsequent essay or memoir.

[51] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979; repr. New York: Vintage International, 1995)
[52] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002; repr. London, Penguin Books Inc., 2003)
[53] Roz Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014)

II. Miriam Udel: the Jewish picaresque and the *polit*

A lost book found again: *Shadows on the Hudson*

Through reading Miriam Udel's book, *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*[54], I rediscovered a key to my identity as a Jewish author. This key was the name of an Isaac Bashevis Singer novel I had read when I was a teenager, and had never been able to find again. The book, which had portrayed suicidal Holocaust survivors and made me think of my own grandfather, had haunted me for years. I had even written it into my memoir, without knowing its name. The book, Bashevis Singer's *Shadows on the Hudson*,[55] from which Udel derives key parts of her theory of the Jewish picaresque, takes place in the 1950s. The characters are Holocaust survivors in New York City. They exist in a depressed, sometimes amoral, state:

> Grein leaned his head against the wall, noting how the fumes of alcohol rose from his stomach to his brain…Was he really prepared to leave Leah? Did he really love Anna that much? Was he willing to start a new family with her, have other children with her? […] he had grabbed the wife of Stanislaw Luria and the daughter of Boris Makaver. He would be cursed for what he had done, and bring others grief. He had noted in his diary that whoever violated the Ten Commandments set himself on the road to physical and spiritual ruin, and still he had broken them.[56]

[54] Miriam Udel, *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016)
[55] Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Shadows on the Hudson* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008; repr. New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998)
[56] Singer, *Shadows on the Hudson*, p. 253.

Singer's protagonist Hertz Dovid Grein loses himself in questioning; there are no answers for him. There is only a litany of self-accusation. "He would be cursed for what he had done, and bring others grief," which is to say, he doesn't deserve to live. Judaism provides no consolation, and clinging to old codes of behavior no guideline. To the survivors, prohibitions against bigamy, adultery, and suicide seem meaningless after the slaughter in Europe. They cannot account for their existences. Why have they survived? What are they to do with their lives, unaccountably spared?

Singer's portrayal of turmoil among the survivors' generation, including the impulse to attempt suicide, in *Shadows on the Hudson*, is part of what first led me to be able to understand my own grandfather's suicide, an event which is critical to my memoir. Chana's grandfather's suicide is cast as an inciting incident in *The Black Turnip*. It is discussed in the second chapter.[57] The early placement of the suicide story in the memoir colors her journey to Poland both for the character and for the reader. My relationship to this Singer novel was personal and familial. I had used my memories of *Shadows* as a guide to my own existence, an explanation for my grandfather's death, and a sort of precedent and license to write about the idea of suicidal thoughts in the survivors' generation. *Shadows* had helped me to forgive my grandfather for what he'd done to my father. However, *Shadows* had not, until I found it again in Udel's text, been part of my critical apparatus, because I couldn't remember its name.

[57] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), pp. 23-39.

Something you can't remember can still be part of a memoir. The paragraph below is from the February 2016 draft of *The Black Turnip*. I wrote this before I read Udel's book, which came out in April of that year:

> …ours isn't the only family with a story like this. Far from it…Isaac Bashevis Singer writes about this, often. He writes about New York in the 1950s. The Jews who are alive after the war out there in the Singer novels, by some chaotic miracle, are running around sleeping with people like football players. They have two or three different wives, one or two of whom may be dead. They don't know if their families are alive. And almost all of them are thinking about killing themselves. Why shouldn't they, after what they've been through? What's the alternative, to go on living? What good is that?[58]

Here, I was stuck with "in the Singer novels," since the book might as well have been a book in a dream to me. I only learned that my lost book, whose name I couldn't remember, was called *Shadows On The Hudson*[59] through reading Miriam Udel's criticism. To me, *Never Better!*[60] was more than a critical resource; it helped me to understand myself and my writing at a personal, autobiographical level. Thanks to Udel, the finished draft of *The Black Turnip* now says "Isaac Bashevis Singer writes about this, in his novel *Shadows on the Hudson*."[61] Being able to cite Singer's book by name in my memoir gives me a sense of closure and completion. I feel as if one of the

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[58] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (draft of unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, February 2016), pp. 22-23.
[59] Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Shadows on the Hudson* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008; repr. New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998)
[60] Miriam Udel, *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016)
[61] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019) p. 37.

broken links in my family story has been mended. Having given Miriam Udel credit for the match she made for my own writing, I will now discuss her theories.

Locating *The Black Turnip* in the Jewish picaresque

Miriam Udel's theory of the Jewish picaresque is based on the classic Yiddish modernist novels of authors such as Sholem Rabinovitsh (Aleichem) and Isaac Bashevis (Singer)[62]. I will reiterate her fluid definition for the Jewish picaresque genre, which I used in the introduction to this essay[63]:

> …flexible terminology enables me to articulate a mobile rather than rigid demarcation of literary space that encompasses aspects of genre, poetics (literary form) and affect or sensibility. Essential features of this broader picaresque include contingency and uncertainty, peripatetic movement, the avoidance of linear plots, and the ironic puncturing of sentimentality.[64]

To best discuss the diverse, "broader" Jewish picaresque and its various manifestations, Udel suggests considering the genre as a general modality, tone, or "sensibility." She does not propose a strict set of genre boundaries—

[62] Miriam Udel refers to these writers by their European names rather than their pseudonyms. English-language readers recognize the names "Aleichem" and "Singer" more easily, but Udel's project is to ground these writers' identities in a multilingual, complex Central Europe. I follow her nomenclature but I also annotate it for comprehension.
[63] Dara Weinberg, 'Introduction & Methodology', in *The "Fantasy of Flight," Or, Escape In Contemporary Jewish Narrative* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 418.
[64] Miriam Udel, 'Preface', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. xv.

on the contrary, she writes inclusively. I checked *The Black Turnip* against her "essential features." I could see that I was creating an episodic story composed of serial adventures, with a confused and lost heroine ("uncertainty") who wandered all over the place ("peripatetic movement") and achieved very little. And Chana's over-romantic, ill-conceived attachment to one particular Polish theatre was humorously disrupted when they rejected her. In fact, she got so depressed afterwards that she got lost in the Polish transit system. ("Ironic puncturing of sentimentality."[65]) So far, I thought, there were enough resemblances between my memoir and these works, based on Udel's list of characteristics, to make the analysis justifiable.

From pícaro to polit

Udel proposes a new term, *polit*, for the Jewish picaresque protagonists and for their particular circumstances. I also had to consider if I was going to adopt this usage instead of the more traditional *pícaro*. Here is her definition of *polit*:[66]

> The liveliest and truest path to the heart of this genre is through its protagonist, a character type on whom I bestow the Yiddish word *polit* (refugee, fugitive), a Jewish cousin—several times (and places) removed—of the original Spanish *pícaro*. The *polit* tends to be a socially marginal figure whose story is narrated episodically, usually by himself. The absence of a plot driven by linear causation, and on a more theoretical level, the substitution of the logic of metonymy over that of metaphor, disrupts the European master narratives of progress and reflects a social reality in which

[65] Miriam Udel, 'Preface', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. xv.
[66] Udel, 'Preface', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque,* p. xiv.

> integration is impossible. By tracing the fortunes of this new kind of unheroic hero, we are able to discern a different pathway for the development of Jewish literary modernism in its many languages….[67]

Certainly, I could understand that "*pícaro*." which means "rogue," wasn't quite right for the protagonists of the Jewish picaresque. I could also see that there were moments in *The Black Turnip* where Chana Wolstein, my protagonist and double, behaved like a refugee or a fugitive, or imagined herself to be one. But it still seemed like unpardonable hubris to refer to her as a *polit,* in the Yiddish I don't speak.

Re-reading Udel gave me a way out. She called the *polit,* in her definition, "a new kind of unheroic hero."[68] This, I thought, could work with *The Black Turnip*.[69] "Unheroic" seemed an appropriate modifier for both Chana and her fellow hapless American protagonists. I decided to start using Udel's term *polit,* but I added the adjectives "unheroic" and "American" as often as I could for clarifying purposes. I also focused on the place in Udel's book where she pointed to the *polit* at his moment of greatest stupidity, confusion, and naïveté. In her chapter "Living Serially,"[70] the *polit*-protagonists became almost American, innocent and dumb. In fact, in that chapter, the *polit* first comes to America, in the work of Bashevis (Singer).

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[67] Miriam Udel, 'Preface', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. xiv.
[68] Udel, 'Preface', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*, p. xiv.
[69] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Bath Spa University, 2019)
[70] Miriam Udel, 'Living Serially: Neoteny and the *Polit*', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*, pp. 67-90.

The childish, regressive, escape-addicted *polit* in 'neoteny'

I located the microcosm of the *polit* I sought in Udel's second chapter, "Living Serially: Neoteny and the *Polit*."[71] The word "neoteny" is a term Udel borrows from biology. Here are a few selections from her literary-critical definition of this scientific term: "*Neoteny*, a "holding onto youth"…a tendency to manifest traits typical of the young of the species…thought to convey a selective advantage in many organisms…"[72] Udel argues that for some manifestations of the *polit*—she takes her examples from Rabinovitsh (Aleichem) and Bashevis (Singer)—the unheroic hero behaves in a distinctly childlike manner, on purpose, because it gives him some advantages to do so.

Unlike the *Bildungsroman*, the tale of a young person growing up, the Jewish picaresque may present the picture of an adult regressing and becoming more youthful in behavior. Udel writes, of her two selected authors:

> …The essence of Rabinovitsh and Bashevis's modernist picaresque register is that it resists neatly arcing narratives of progress and development. But the fictions to which we turn in this chapter lay the strongest claim to the picaresque label because they are built around some variation of the *polit*, or Jewish *pícaro.* In each case, the *polit*'s relation to childhood colors and even drives the plot."[73]

[71] Miriam Udel, 'Living Serially: Neoteny and the *Polit*', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016) pp. 67-90.
[72] Udel, 'Living Serially: Neoteny and the *Polit*', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*, p. 69.
[73] Udel, 'Living Serially: Neoteny and the *Polit*', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*, pp. 68-69.

Udel's explication of "neoteny" and the polit in childhood made sense to me in relationship to the texts I had chosen to discuss in this essay. The "relation to childhood" was central to each book. The journeys on which Chana Wolstein, Nathan Zuckerman, "Jonathan Safran Foer," and "Roz Chast" embark could each be read as journeys into childhood. Chana and "Jonathan" travel abroad, to their grandfathers' countries. Since they don't speak the languages of those countries, they are stuck in a childlike state of being unable to communicate and navigate. "Roz" goes back to her childhood home, to deal with her aging parents who treat her as if she were still a child. And Nathan Zuckerman goes to the home of a beloved elder mentor, whose age and wisdom only amplify Zuckerman's youth and inexperience. Zuckerman also spends many pages of *The Ghost Writer* arguing with his parents, who treat him as if he still needs their guidance.

I became more convinced that I had found the right nexus in Udel's work when I found that, in this particular chapter on the *polit*, she analyzed two Isaac Bashevis Singer novels that were formative for me as a young writer and reader: *Shadows on the Hudson*[74] and *The Magician of Lublin*[75]. I have already discussed *Shadows* in the introduction to this chapter.[76] The second book on which Udel bases her theory of the childish *polit*, Bashevis (Singer)'s *Magician of Lublin*, was about a hilarious rogue, a sexually rapacious Polish

[74] Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Shadows on the Hudson* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008; repr. New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998)
[75] Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Magician of Lublin* (London: Penguin Classics, 2012; repr. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1960)
[76] Dara Weinberg, 'Miriam Udel: the Jewish picaresque and the *polit*', in *The "Fantasy Of Flight," Or, Escape In Contemporary Jewish Narrative* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), pp. 433-436.

Jewish stage performer, the traveling magician Yasha Mazur. Here, Yasha acts like a baby in order to get sexual attention from one of his lovers:

> Yasha wanted a bath and Magda promptly began to heat kettles of water for him. She soaped him down in the wooden tub, rinsed him off, massaged him. Magda, like any other woman, longed for a child. She was prepared to bear Yasha an illegitimate one. But he robbed her even of that. He, himself, wanted to be the child. Magda bathed him, petted him, caressed him. He wronged her more than her worst enemy, but when he spent a few hours with her and showed that he needed her, her love for him became more ardent than before…[77]

Yasha allows Magda to care for him; his neediness, his seeming helplessness, is a strategy to get Magda's devotion. "He, himself, wanted to be the child," Bashevis (Singer) writes. Why would Yasha grow up, when he gets everything he needs from behaving like a baby? I could see traces of a Yasha-esque "neoteny" when Chana throws herself into interactions with a distracting man in *The Black Turnip*, an actor she calls the Minotaur.[78] To keep the Minotaur's attention, she behaves in a docile, infantile manner in his presence; she allows him to think, talk, and make decisions for her.[79]

It was eerie to discover *Shadows* and *Magician*, my favorite Singer novels, as Udel's building blocks for the *polit* in "neoteny" or regression into childhood. I felt as if she was writing from inside my own head. The things

[77] Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Magician of Lublin* (London: Penguin Classics, 2012; repr. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1960.)
[78] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), pp. 276-284 and 408-411.
[79] Weinberg, *The Black Turnip*, pp. 409-411.

Miriam Udel understood, by having read widely in the Yiddish diaspora literature, had already made their way, through Singer's novels in translation, into my assimilated American English writing. Udel's book *Never Better*! gave me the words with which to speak about my own work and the work of other writers. In particular, her "Living Serially" chapter,[80] with its characterization of the regressive *polit* in childish "neoteny," and its work on Singer's novels, became my standard framework for how I approached the work of every other Jewish writer I encountered. Udel's theory did not fit all of them perfectly, but I tested it everywhere I could.

Escape as productive in the Jewish picaresque

Udel writes: "In introducing the concept of neoteny, we noted that part of its selective advantage may lie in the tolerance that a neotenous appearance elicits for immature behaviors that would otherwise be suppressed or punished."[81] In other words, engaging in "neoteny" allows a *polit* to get away with a lot of things. When Grein, in *Shadows*, behaves like a childish person, he gets away with sleeping with every woman in New York City. When Yasha, in *Magician*, regresses into "neoteny," he has love affairs with every woman in Poland. When Chana Wolstein behaves like a child, she gets away with having more adventures—at least until she runs out of money.

Chana is frequently trying to run away. Even within one adventure, she dreams of escaping to start a new, different one. Here, she is going with a

[80] Miriam Udel, 'Living Serially: Neoteny and the *Polit*', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*, pp. 67-90.
[81] Udel, 'Living Serially: Neoteny and the *Polit*', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*, p. 80.

group of tourists to see a Polish production of *Macbeth* in an underground monastery, but all she can think about is making another getaway:

> I lagged near the back of Group C. It was already dark, and lights were coming on in the gelaterias and kawiarnias. The air was warm on our skin. It seemed a shame to go indoors. I hung back.
>
> "Maybe," I thought, "I could just ditch them—just peel off here—I could have some time alone in the apartment, with the blog."
>
> […]
>
> I could go for a hot chocolate by myself, at Mleczarnia, and then a beer. I could sit under the oak tree by the old restored White Stork synagogue, with its replastered white walls and its doors that never opened.
>
> […]
>
> The night was perfect for running away. Windy and warm.
>
> "I'll just turn and go," I thought. "They'll never even notice—"
>
> "Chana! Come on! Don't get lost!"
>
> I hurried up. [82]

Her sentences get choppier as she turns her head back and forth, scouting pathways for her escape. "I could just ditch them—just peel off here—" Any escape, any flight, rather than stay with the group! This constant seeking for change is what makes her a childish Singerian *polit*. When I came to understand escapism as productive to the writing of the memoir, and fundamental to a Jewish picaresque plot, I stopped resisting the theme. Instead, I embraced the impulse to run away in the retelling of my memories. My narrator was an unheroic hero, a Udelian *polit*, I told myself. She was

[82] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 147.

following in the steps of her forebears. If immaturity and "neoteny" was good enough for Isaac Bashevis Singer's Hertz Dovid Grein and Yasha Mazur, it was good enough for Chana Wolstein.

In my work, and in other writers' work, I am interested in the moments at which the protagonist articulates what is often, in Jewish writing, a shameful desire—the desire to leave behind obligations to their family and culture, and to gain greater freedom as an actor by fleeing from what is known and familiar. If Yasha and Grein are escape artists, and so is Chana, then I asked myself what sorts of escape attempts and childish "neoteny" I would find in Roth, Safran Foer, and Chast—the authors whose work had influenced mine the most.

III. *The Ghost Writer*: Philip Roth and the Escape of the Author

A *polit* is born: Nathan Zuckerman

Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer*,[83] which I first read when I was a teenager, gave me a sense of permission to speak frankly about intimate, private, and scandalous subjects, especially those relating to the Jewish community. I want to look at how the two texts—Roth's and mine—relate to each other, and see how Miriam Udel's theory of the Jewish picaresque and its protagonist's escapist tendencies comes into play.

The Ghost Writer takes escape as a central subject. It is entirely concerned with one Jewish writer's desire to flee from oppressive convention and constraint. This "fantasy of flight"[84] is, as mentioned previously,[85] a central theme in Miriam Udel's analysis of the Jewish picaresque. However, no one could call *The Ghost Writer* a picaresque in terms of form. It is a short novel, only 180 pages long. It contains one central story narrated in a mostly linear, progressive fashion, and a limited number of characters. Everything

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[83] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979; repr. New York: Vintage International, 1995)

[84] As discussed in the previous chapter of this essay (p. 423) Udel uses this phrase for Hertz Dovid Grein, the *polit* and central character of Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Shadows on the Hudson*: "All he can hope for is the fantasy of flight."
Miriam Udel, 'Living Serially: Neoteny and the *Polit*', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. 83.

[85] Dara Weinberg, 'Introduction & Methodology', in *The "Fantasy of Flight," Or, Escape In Contemporary Jewish Narrative* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 423.

happens in twenty-four hours, in one house in New England, though in imagination some escapes elsewhere occur. Perhaps the most important escape, for Roth, is in the birth of this new protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman. Zuckerman will mirror part of Roth's biography, become a famous writer like his author,[86] and narrate eight more books after this one.[87]

I have come to think that the Zuckerman character perhaps turns into a *polit* in time, throughout the nine-book series, though he isn't one yet in this first book. Critic Claudia Roth Pierpont writes, in *Roth Unbound*, that "Zuckerman is seeking (and outgrowing) a whole series of spiritual fathers—men with big lives or big ideas, men with things to teach him—and betraying the father he loves."[88] This project sounds to me like a messy picaresque quest, full of what Miriam Udel calls a "proliferation of persons and experiences."[89] The word "series" also evokes the non-linear, episodic nature of picaresque composition—what Udel has termed "iteration and repetition instead of development."[90] I am interested in this idea of a picaresque

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[86] Pierpont describes Zuckerman's abrupt rise to fame: "Nathan [Zuckerman] can't walk the New York streets without being accosted…and he has made a million bucks."
Claudia Roth Pierpont, 'Eating Only Words', in *Roth Unbound*: *A Writer And His Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013), pp. 124-126.
[87] The first four Zuckerman books comprise the "Zuckerman Bound" quartet: *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), and *The Prague Orgy* (1985). Five more books where Zuckerman narrates follow: *The Counterlife* (1986), *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married A Communist* (1998), *The Human Stain* (2000), and *Exit Ghost* (2007).
Pierpont, 'Works by Philip Roth', in *Roth Unbound*, pp. 333-334.
[88] Pierpont, 'Betrayal', in *Roth Unbound*, p. 230.
[89] Miriam Udel, 'Living Serially: Neoteny and the *Polit*', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016) p. 68.
[90] Udel, 'Living Serially', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*, p. 68.

stretching across all nine Zuckerman novels, but to develop this concept further is outside the scope of this essay. However, I have come to think of *The Ghost Writer* as "A *Polit* Is Born."

Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer*[91] is narrated by a young, earnest, promising Jewish American writer, Nathan Zuckerman, who makes a fraught pilgrimage to the home of one of his literary idols. This is the first sentence of the book:

> "It was the last daylight hour of a December afternoon more than twenty years ago—I was twenty-three, writing and publishing my first short stories, and like many a *Bildungsroman* hero before me, already contemplating my own massive *Bildungsroman*—when I arrived at his hideaway to meet the great man."[92]

The narrator is looking back at his younger self, with the wry intelligence of someone older and wiser. The evocation of literary categories such as "the great man" and "*Bildungsroman* hero" invites us, with Roth and the narrator, to doubt the young writer protagonist and gently mock his inexperience. To reiterate part of Miriam Udel's explication of the form to which Zuckerman aspires: "The *Bildungsroman*, with its ingeniously crafted plot, and its linear causality between one event and the next, implies an orderly world…Above all, the *Bildungsroman* is a genre of progress."[93] Progress is very attractive to young, ambitious writers. The young Zuckerman, who thinks of himself as a

[91] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979; repr. New York: Vintage International, 1995), p. 3.
[92] Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, p. 3.
[93] Miriam Udel, 'Introduction'. In *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), pp. 9-10.

"hero," is not yet questioning the *Bildungsroman* (he intends to write one!) but his author, Roth, is. By calling Zuckerman's unwritten work-in-progress 'massive', and by attributing this huge book to a twenty-three-year-old author who has only so far written "short stories," Roth wants us to think of Zuckerman as overreaching himself. The writer encourages his readers to expect a humorous reversal of fortune for his overconfident protagonist.

Reversals of fortune are indicative of a different genre identity. Miriam Udel has argued that humorously destabilizing the *Bildungsroman* is one of the significant characteristics of the Jewish picaresque form: "The *polit* implicitly resists the master narrative of development suggested by the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*, and his life's course undermines or even mocks […] positivist nineteenth-century claims about progress…"[94] I see Roth's introduction of a hero who is planning out his own *Bildungsroman* in the first sentence of a book as functioning within Udel's destabilizing, "resist[ing]" mode. The young Zuckerman is far too literal and trusting a reader. He has devoted his life to books. He sees himself as being like someone in a book. And like the *pícaro* Quixote who preceded him, he has allowed books to become more real than life.

Here is Cervantes describing Quixote's relationship to reading: "…He [Don Quixote] gave himself up so wholly to the reading of romances …that all the fables and fantastical tales which he read seemed to him now as true as the most authentic histories."[95] Reading is what leads Quixote, another trusting

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[94] Miriam Udel, 'Introduction', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. 10.
[95] Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *The First Part of the Life and Achievements of the Renowned Don Quixote de la Mancha*, trans. by Peter Motteux (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 27.

reader, astray. Zuckerman is grandiosely "contemplating" an as-yet-unwritten book, similar to his own life, which will explore themes of development and progress, because he has read a lot of *Bildungsromans*. This is not so different from Quixote setting out to become a knight, because he has read too many books about knights.

My own narrator is also a young and over-ambitious writer, not unlike Zuckerman in biting off more than she can chew. I follow Roth in exposing the hubris of the young *polit* who anchors my book, and I even see myself imitating his wry tone at moments. Chana Wolstein's self-important attitude towards her writing leads her into mistakes of her own: "The thought of readers, real readers with their eyes skittering across the Internet, served for me as an incentive to productivity—if not necessarily to accuracy".[96] The fame she receives for blogging is more important to her than presenting an accurate picture of Polish theatre, and she starts building an overblown narrative of development and progress of her own. The "if not necessarily to accuracy" comment has some of the acerbic quality I associate with Roth's narration, when he's poking fun at Zuckerman. For a time, Chana neglects the theatre at the festival to work on her posts.[97] She has become addicted to positive feedback from blog readers. She'd rather be writing than living, and she'd rather write complimentary PR posts than grapple with the feelings Poland is bringing out in her. I hope that, like Roth with Zuckerman, I manage to walk the line between mocking and understanding my narrator. Some of her behavior is amusing, but I wish to be more sympathetic to her than not.

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[96] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 86.
[97] Weinberg, *The Black Turnip*, p. 103.

These two young protagonists, Zuckerman and Chana, cannot hide behind their over-optimistic writings forever. Zuckerman's *Bildungsroman* will never be written. By the end of *The Ghost Writer*, he will still want to write a book, but a very different one. He will no longer believe that his literary idol E.I. Lonoff is a "great man" in the same way he did at the beginning. Rather, he will see both himself and Lonoff as flawed, and will seek to write a chronicle of human frailty that exists in a different mode, a more picaresque reality. Chana, like Zuckerman, will also abandon her blog. After observing a fight between directors, she summarizes the discussion falsely, for the blog, as "We discussed text-messaging and young audiences,"[98] and her trust in the form is shaken: "I was becoming reluctant to let the blog reflect the reality of our visit."[99] Again, I see myself following Roth's example here: the young writer's earnest belief in the power of writing has been shaken. The complexity of what is happening to her in Poland can't fit into cheery 500-word posts boosting the festival. Writing in a way that implies the presence of progress, trying to fit everything that happens to you into a *Bildungsroman-esque* "master narrative of development,"[100] is a limiting mode of thought. Chana's blog and Zuckerman's *Bildungsroman* are no longer helpful to their authors. Writing still matters to Zuckerman, but he is forced to seek out a new and clearer-eyed mode of thinking as a writer.

[98] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 138.
[99] Weinberg, *The Black Turnip*, p. 138.
[100] Miriam Udel, 'Introduction', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. 10.

Writer as voyeur: drawing on the pain of others

In *The Ghost Writer*, Lonoff's lived example shows Zuckerman that writing and the writer's life are not always pleasant. The master writer's home is not free from scandal, secrets, or suffering. While at Lonoff's house, Zuckerman encounters a mysterious young foreign student, a European refugee: Amy Bellette. Nathan spends one night in Lonoff's house. He sleeps in the study and listens voyeuristically to the affair that Lonoff and Bellette conduct upstairs, under the nose of Lonoff's wife Hope.[101] Discovering his literary idol is committing adultery with a troubled student educates Zuckerman about the way that the world really works. Lonoff is no saint. The next morning, Zuckerman observes, after Bellette's departure, an appalling no-holds-barred spousal fight between the Lonoffs. The argument ends with the elderly Hope stumbling out into the snow, threatening to leave her husband.[102] Lonoff runs after his frail wife. He admonishes Nathan, who has offered to help him, to stay behind and take notes for a story, to be based on the fight that has just occurred.[103] Nathan's writing, Lonoff implies, is more important than Hope's survival.

Writing, Zuckerman learns, must be undertaken purposefully, with a different, less naïve, intention. "I'll be curious to see how we all come out someday. It could be an interesting story. You're not so nice and polite in your

[101] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979; repr. New York: Vintage International, 1995), pp. 118-121.
[102] Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, pp. 176-177.
[103] Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, pp. 179-180.

fiction,"[104] Lonoff says to Nathan, approvingly, before going out, frazzled, to seek his wandering spouse. Lonoff implies that the socially deviant act of writing while others suffer, and gaining artistic material from the pain of others, including his own, is more important, and certainly more "interesting," than the socially acceptable choice of helping to save Hope's life. As Lonoff gave permission to Zuckerman, so Roth gave permission to me, and at least two generations of Jewish writers, to spill it. Through Lonoff's advice and with Lonoff's blessing, Zuckerman engenders an entire legion of future young Roths—including me—with the freedom to write.

The Ghost Writer taught me that it was not inherently shameful to do any of these things: (1) to write about myself as a writer; (2) to write about topics that are secret or hidden; (3) to write about the secrets of the Jewish community and Jewish writers. Or even if it was shameful, it was not forbidden, according to Roth. But there was a catch. I could write about these subjects as long as I did so with a deflating humor, with barbed mockery, and with a thick sardonic layer of chronological and authorial distance. Write at a remove, as Roth does, and you can write about the unspeakable. This lesson made *The Black Turnip* possible.

The consequences of telling secrets about a community

Having permission from the great E.I. Lonoff, or even from Philip Roth, to write about the unspeakable, doesn't necessarily ease the writer's interaction with his cultural community or his family. The passage of the novel best

[104] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979; repr. New York: Vintage International, 1995), p. 180.

known to most readers is the letter written by a conservative Jewish judge from Nathan Zuckerman's home town, in response to the intended publication of one of Nathan's early short stories.[105] The short story is raucous; the Jewish characters, including some criminals and gangsters, behave very badly. Nathan's earnest father, horrified by the story in manuscript form, has violated the trust between him and his offspring by showing his son's unpublished work to a big *macher*[106] in the community.

The eminent Judge Leopold Wapter intervenes, in a florid and flattering letter with a devastating postscript.[107] He veils his intentions at first, talking about Ibsen and Socrates and the persecution of artists, and claiming he would never advise someone not to write. He almost appears to be on the side of the writer. But when the letter is concluded, Wapter encloses a series of heavy-handed, moralizing questions about Zuckerman's writing and how it portrays Jews. The "Ten Questions For Nathan Zuckerman,"[108] which I quote in full in the appendix at the end of this essay, begin and end with these zingers:

> 1. If you had been living in Nazi Germany in the thirties, would you have written such a story?
> […]
> 10. Can you honestly say that there is anything in your short story that would not warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or a Joseph Goebbels?[109]

[105] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979; repr. New York: Vintage International, 1995), pp. 102-104.
[106] I would define this Yiddish word as follows: a big cheese, a Mr. Somebody. Someone who makes things happen. A big shot.
[107] Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, pp. 102-104.
[108] Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, pp. 103-104.
[109] Roth, *The Ghost Writer*, pp. 103-104.

Forcing a writer to imagine himself as dwelling in a perpetual state of being in "Nazi Germany in the thirties" may stifle that writer's creative impulses. When one is under perpetual threat, any action that does not contribute towards saving oneself—and saving one's people—could seem unconscionable. To "warm the heart" of famous Nazis is a damaging accusation, for a young Jewish writer; a less ambitious person could have been so cowed by this letter as to never take up pen again. (I, the would-be-author, at twenty-three, receiving such a letter, might have thrown my laptop in the trash.) But not Zuckerman. The outraged young writer will not respond to this letter—or to his father—despite his mother's entreaties; in fact, Zuckerman never speaks to his father again within the pages of *The Ghost Writer*.

Although when I read this I could not imagine actually taking such an extreme response, for myself or for my protagonist Chana, and cutting off my own father if I disagreed with him, I envied the character Zuckerman's freedom to act so decisively. I secretly sympathized with his choice of his writing over his family, even if I think I might have had to make the opposite choice myself in the same situation. I think there is a gender difference at play in my response here, and I will attempt to address this question—the Jewish daughter's response to parental interference as opposed to the Jewish son's—later in this essay, in the Roz Chast chapter.

Imagining an escape from the Jewish writer's responsibility to Holocaust memory

Zuckerman responds to his father's emotional assault, the Wapter letter, with an equally emotional rebuttal. To justify himself as a writer, he takes up the

idea of E.I. Lonoff's refugee student, Amy Bellette, as being the famous, and famously dead, Dutch Jew Anne Frank. There is no evidence for Amy being Anne, or for Anne having survived, outside Nathan's imagination. At breakfast with the Lonoffs and Bellette the next morning, in the most childish act of the book, Nathan allows himself to imagine how proud his family would be, and how willing they would be to forgive him for his short stories, if he brought home Anne Frank to Newark as his bride:

> To be wed somehow to you, I thought, my unassailable advocate, my invulnerable ally, my shield against their charges of defection and betrayal and reckless, heinous informing! Oh, marry me, Anne Frank, exonerate me before my outraged elders of this idiotic indictment! Heedless of Jewish feeling? Indifferent to Jewish survival? Brutish about their well-being? Who dares to accuse of such unthinking crimes the husband of Anne Frank![110]

The Ghost Writer taught me that I should not be ashamed to have my characters desire something shameful, or to experience a kind of joy in articulating that desire. The freedom of being able to write "Oh, marry me, Anne Frank!" was exciting. I wondered if I could imagine myself ever free enough to write something like that. *The Black Turnip* was my experiment in imagining that kind of authorial license.

As I understand him, Zuckerman has been asking himself, all night long, this question: "What would it take for my father and Judge Wapter to accept me as a writer and still as a good Jew?" He would have to present to

[110] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979; repr. New York: Vintage International, 1995), pp. 170-171.

them, saved from extermination, the most iconic and most famously dead Jewish writer of the Holocaust, as his bride. Only that would be good enough. Nothing less than the impossible would do it. In a line that has never left my brain since I read it, Zuckerman bellows, in his thoughts, "Who dares to accuse of such unthinking crimes the husband of Anne Frank!" [111] Who, indeed! This is an instance of the "fantasy of flight"[112] that Miriam Udel finds in Bashevis (Singer)'s characteristic narratives of the childish *polit*—this is the desire to change one's own identity, to escape the fetters of reality.

It was Zuckerman's scandalous act of imagining himself as "the husband of Anne Frank" that first allowed me to give voice to a similarly scandalous counterfactual Holocaust-era history for Chana. She has been in Poland, her grandfather's country, about a week, and has come to envy the Polish directors' connection to their audiences. She finds herself imagining, despite herself, what would have happened if her grandfather hadn't left the country in the 1930s:

> … I was seized with a blasphemous desire for an alternative history. Despite everything my grandfather had endured to leave Poland and come to the United States, despite his outrageous good luck in leaving before the killing started, I started to feel that I would give it all back—I would have reversed his boat-journey, ripped apart the weave of our family, kept him in Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski, risked the death that the rest of the Wolsteins suffered—if I could have only had the slightest

[111] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979; repr. New York: Vintage International, 1995), pp. 170-171.
[112] Miriam Udel, 'Living Serially: Neoteny and the *Polit*', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. 83.

> of chances that he might somehow survive the war, and stay in the country, and have his only child, his son, my father, be born in Poland too, so that I could be born a theatre director in Poland, and have made art for audiences like these all my life.[113]

I never would have written that passage if Roth hadn't written *The Ghost Writer* first. This moment, the realization of her secret "blasphemous desire,"[114] was a turning point in Chana's journey. It was one of the hardest things I had to write in my memoir. I knew I had to articulate her decision to try to keep returning to Poland. She had to admit that she wanted this access to Polish theatre almost more than she wanted her family to have survived. I knew it was necessary to write these words, but I also knew it was shameful to wish for a different future that implied a different past. I feared the day my father would read it. And I knew that I could only write like this because E.I. Lonoff told Nathan Zuckerman, and Philip Roth told me, that the way forward, as a Jewish writer, required courage and the willingness to offend.

The path Lonoff sets Zuckerman on requires acknowledging, not avoiding, our unspeakable, childish desires to change our identities and abandon our heavy responsibilities to history, to our families, and to the tribe. Roth is willing to speak irreverently and even offensively about sacred topics. He tells secrets. His characters offend community big-shots and argue violently with their parents. He imagines that the writer is granted license to

[113] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 111.
[114] Weinberg, *The Black Turnip*, p. 111.

escape from the restrictions of a culture and its boundaries of propriety. In writing *The Black Turnip*, I have tried to take his example as a guide.

IV. *Everything Is Illuminated*: Jonathan Safran Foer and the Escape of the Survivors' Grandchildren

Correspondences: two grandchild narratives

The central plot of Jonathan Safran Foer's first novel, *Everything is Illuminated* (2002)[115] strongly resembles the plot of *The Black Turnip*. The following sentence could describe both books: "Jewish American grandchild, with grandparents from the Holocaust survivors' generation, wanders back into Central Europe, on a misguided quest for redemption. It does not go as planned." Foer's book formed a precedent for my own narrative and my own experiences. In fact, I was thinking about my life in Poland through the context of Foer's novel, before I had even decided to write a memoir.

There are many correspondences between Foer and myself, and also between our texts. We are both Americans, born only five years apart. This makes us generationally equivalent in a certain Jewish arithmetic of memory, counting forwards from the Second World War. The accident of having been born in this generation means that we are both, today, free to do things like return to Ukraine or Poland on a whim. The journeys he and I describe, to the former USSR, in our two books, were much easier for us than they would have been for our parents. In addition, we both imply a link between protagonist and author: Foer's central character is named "Jonathan Safran Foer." Both

[115] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002; repr. London, Penguin Books Inc., 2003)

my memoir and Foer's novel address the desire of the survivors' grandchildren to somehow deal with their grandparents' past.

In this chapter, I am going to argue that Foer's novel has imprinted itself deeply upon my memoir. I see this imprint in the plot, as mentioned, and also in several other places: the use of humor; the theme of ambition and arrogance; writing about nakedness, frailty, and the body; and the presence of a self-centered protagonist. In addition, both his novel and my memoir end with an agonizingly prolonged final quarter, painful for both protagonist and reader, and differing markedly in tone from the preceding pages.

Plot vs. plot: episodic narration with two confused Americans

Both *Everything Is Illuminated* and *The Black Turnip* rely on a serial episodic structure: that is, a picaresque profusion of incident and accident. As the two American grandchildren, "Jonathan" and Chana, wander the lands of their grandfathers, Ukraine and Poland, they are frequently perplexed and easily lost. Because neither one of them speaks the local language, not even a word of it, they are completely reliant on local guides, linguistically adrift, and easily turned astray.

Miriam Udel finds this sort of digressive plotting to be a characteristic and meaningful feature of the Jewish picaresque genre:[116] "The *polit* tends to be a socially marginal figure whose story is narrated episodically…The

[116] Miriam Udel. 'Preface', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016) p. xiv.

absence of a plot driven by linear causation…disrupts the dominant European master narrative of progress...."[117] A story being "narrated episodically," striking out in many different directions, may prevent a young earnest protagonist from ever achieving anything decisive. Chana and "Jonathan" are deeply frustrated by the episodic nature of their journeys. In fact, they think that they must persist through these repeated accidents in order to carry out some kind of grand over-arching quest. Their attempts to justify their questing are exaggeratedly self-important, and productive of humor.

Here is Jonathan trying to explain to his Ukrainian guide, Alexander Perchov, why they are going to the village of Trachimbrod:

> First he [Jonathan] exhibited me [Perchov] a photograph. It was yellow and folded and had many pieces of fixative affixing it together. "See this?" he said. "This is my grandfather Safran…This was taken during the war." "From who?" "No, not taken like that. The photograph was made…The people he is with are the family that saved him from the Nazis." "What?" "They…saved…him…from…the…Na… zis." "In Trachimbrod?" "No, somewhere outside of Trachimbrod. He escaped the Nazi raid on Trachimbrod. Everyone else was killed. He lost a wife and a baby." "He lost?" "They were killed by the Nazis." "But if it was not Trachimbrod, why do we go to Trachimbrod? And how will we find this family?" He explained that we were not looking for the family, but for the girl. She would be the only one left alive."[118]

[117] Miriam Udel. 'Preface', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016) p. xiv.
[118] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002; repr. London, Penguin Books Inc., 2003), p. 59.

It's not easy for Jonathan to get across his point. Perchov misunderstands the words "taken" and "lost." He questions their strategy ("Why do we go to Trachimbrod?") and doubts the possibility of success after so many years. It is a quest that Perchov knows is likely doomed to fail. But Jonathan is determined to find the woman who saved his grandfather. He brusquely pushes past Perchov's questions, slowing down to say "They…saved… him…from…the…Na…zis," as if his guide were a child. Jonathan knows why he is in Ukraine: he is there to find the woman in the photo. Nothing else interests him. Whatever Perchov may think, he's not interested. Here, I am inspired by Foer's use of frustration and misunderstanding as a dramatic tool, and a means to reveal the protagonist's self-centered character in action. I see some echoes of "Jonathan"'s inability to communicate with the Ukrainians with Chana's total failure to get her point across with various Polish train station employees.[119]

With intense focus, similar to that of "Jonathan," Chana wants to become a Polish Jewish theatre director, thereby somehow redeeming the loss of her grandfather. Like "Jonathan," she has come to Central Europe to get something back in return for what was lost. About halfway through *The Black Turnip*, Chana becomes hung up on the idea of gaining access to the rehearsals of Song of the Goat Theatre, even though it is clear they do not welcome outsiders. Here, she nudges her friend into helping her on this misguided quest:

[119] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), pp. 377-379.

> "…Song of the Goat?' She [Adrienne] was polite, but I knew she was shocked. "You want to ask to watch his rehearsals? Here?"
>
> I looked around to make sure none of the other directors were listening.
>
> "I have to try, Adrienne," I said. "It's my only chance. If I go home and I haven't tried to do this, I'll hate myself." I knew she would understand that.
>
> "I don't know if he'll let you," she said. Her face tightened.
>
> "I know," I said. "If I were him, I wouldn't do it! But I have to try."[120]

Chana admits that, if she were the director, she wouldn't let herself in. Despite all this, she can't stop herself. "It's my only chance. If I go home and I haven't tried to do this, I'll hate myself," Chana whines. She believes and implies, without saying it out loud, that her status as the descendant of Polish Jews entitles her to special privileges. This unspoken burden—Chana's being in Poland, and her trying in some way to change or redeem her family's narrative, and her having "only [this] chance" to do it—places enormous weight on the request. Adrienne ultimately gives in to Chana's guilt trip. Like Foer's "Jonathan," Chana can't stop to think about if her plan is a good idea; she's too caught up in trying to do it.

What neither "Jonathan" nor Chana grasps is that digressing episodically from their self-imposed quests, and just wandering Ukraine and Poland without agenda or judgment, might have done more to honor their families' losses than succeeding in their questing efforts. After all, Jewish

[120] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), pp. 205-206.

picaresque accident-based episodic exploration is disruptive of the very same "dominant European master narrative,"[121] in Miriam Udel's phrase, which brought disaster to both Chana's and "Jonathan"'s families. But before that disaster, their families lived ordinary lives in Ukraine and Poland. Those lives would have been full of minor incident, digressions, humorous mishaps, and tiny little episodes that didn't add up to any grand quest or dramatic outcome. I would argue that the Jewish picaresque, a form of resistance to totalitarian thinking, flourishes and becomes most interesting for the reader in the digressions from the quest, not in the quest itself.

One of the most spontaneous accidents in *The Black Turnip* is when Chana's looking for the Wrocław Jewish cemetery with three other Americans, and stumbles, accidentally, upon a view of overweight, naked male Polish sunbathers:

> I came upon the crest of an enormous green hill, and below me, in a small backyard, I suddenly saw four middle-aged men sunbathing naked. Their bulging white bodies were stones against the grass.
>
> "Oh my God," I said. "Oh my God. Look, Lior!" I sprinted after them to share the news. This was the best thing that had happened in days. "Naked guys! Old naked guys! Look!" [122]

This discovery is amusing, but delays their journey. This accidental digression to ponder the "naked guys" prevents Chana from having enough time to visit

[121] Miriam Udel. 'Preface', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016) p. xiv.
[122] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 218.

the Jewish cemetery before her meeting with Jarosław Zając. She is ashamed of having missed this important expedition. From her point of view, the spontaneous encounter with these naked sunbathers is a pointless delay. However, what is pointless for the character may not be pointless for the memoir. The humor helps to relieve tension. The reflection on the human body is both funny and, I would argue, moving. In a post-Holocaust novel, in a post-Holocaust landscape, with a grandiose grandchild protagonist, the impulse to be over-general, and to think about history all the time, can be counteracted by physical specificity. Remembering that we are only bodies, only flesh, distracts Chana. She becomes, for a second, engaged with the present instead of the past or future.

Here, I believe I was influenced by Foer, who includes many physical and sexual events in his book. For example, when he is imagining a scene of a younger man ("Jonathan"'s grandfather) in a sexual scene with a much, much older woman, he catalogues the experience with precision:

> Taking an initiative beyond his ten years, my grandfather pulled her to him, removed, with her help, her black blouse, which smelled so strongly of old age he was afraid he would never be able to smell young again, and then her skirt, her stockings (bulging under the pressure of her varicose veins)…She removed his shorts and briefs, and eased onto him backwards, as if he were a wheelchair.[123]

[123] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002; repr. London, Penguin Books Inc., 2003.), p. 167.

The humor—and also, I think, the horror—of an older woman mounting a ten-year-old boy's erection "as if he were a wheelchair" is characteristic of Foer's exploration of the body. Sex, to him, is a cause for celebration, but also a cause for encounters with morbidity. The close intertwining of nakedness and death is one that I also see reflected in *The Black Turnip.*

The vista of the naked men that Chana accidentally sees was funny to her at first, but becomes much more profound. Upon further reflection, she gets caught up in wondering if what she is seeing somehow reflects what happened in the concentration camps.

> But no, of course not, the vision was wrong, all wrong… […] These big-bellied naked men were too well-fed and happy to have been bodies in a camp.
>
> But maybe if they had been sent to the showers just after arrival, some of them would still be fat? A few?
>
> Maybe this was really what it looked like. Maybe this was exactly it. Maybe someone looking over a hill from a nearby farm could see their naked bodies just like this. Maybe I was seeing a color vision of 1943. Maybe my grandfather's cousins—[124]

This disturbing but important series of thoughts never would have occurred to Chana if she hadn't wandered off the path a bit. Seeing the accidental vista is just as thought-provoking, in terms of exploring her Polish Jewish heritage, as achieving the trip to the cemetery might have been. The accident of seeing the naked men got her thinking. And it also reminded her of the inherent absurdity

[124] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 220.

of her trip. I find this incident to be a welcome break in the increasingly serious second half of *The Black Turnip*, and one of the most picaresque moments in my memoir.

Here is Miriam Udel again:[125] "The picaresque points instead [in opposition to the linear *Bildungsroman*] to a world in which…events are random, chaotic, and largely meaningless, and the hero is either an undistinguished everyman or notable only as a slacker or loser."[126] This plot structure—the presence of proliferating "random, chaotic, and largely meaningless" events—brings humor and variety to the Jewish picaresque. Picaresques have a generative, self-replicating plot structure; one accident begets another. However, the accidents do not necessarily lead to any sort of progress or development. The progress that is being made, in a digressive, recursive picaresque, is precisely in resisting what is defined as "progress."

Chana is ashamed of being "notable only as a slacker or loser," as Udel would put it. She is less famous than all the other directors, younger, and more drunk. Though she doesn't realize it, her exuberant bumbling and naïveté is part of what makes her story interesting instead of dull. Sometimes, as I will discuss in the next section, the *polit* actually succeeds in resisting the picaresque mode, to the extent that the story becomes painful instead of funny and fast-moving. This slowing down, this descent into sadness, happens in the last quarter of both Foer's and my books.

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[125] Miriam Udel, 'Introduction', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. 10.
[126] Udel, 'Introduction', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*, p. 10.

The *polit* in resistance to picaresque serial time

When the *polit*s try too hard to control the course of events, a kind of narrative paralysis can result. Here is the guide Alexander Perchov describing Jonathan, unable to speak, when he finally meets the woman who may have saved his grandfather from the Nazis. She is, improbably, able to give him photographs of Trachimbrod and his family:

> I [Perchov, the guide] gave the hero [Jonathan] each picture as she gave it to me, and he could only with difficulty hold it in his hands that were doing so much shaking. It appeared that a part of him wanted to write everything, every word of what occurred, into his diary. And a part of him refused to write even one word. He opened the diary and closed it, opened it and closed it, and it looked as if it wanted to fly away from his hands.[127]

"Jonathan," aghast, finds himself unable to process the serious moment in which he finds himself. Futilely, he can't choose between writing everything down and not writing at all. In a sense, the book is frozen. This self-doubt and paralysis, this failure to act on the part of our usually active protagonist, reminds me of Chana feeling her brain filling up with cardboard, when she is ignoring reality on a train going the wrong way.[128] To prevent narrative collapse and social awkwardness, Perchov has to take over asking all the questions. The humor of the writing is lessened; the story goes into slow-

[127] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002; repr. London, Penguin Books Inc., 2003), p. 154.
[128] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), pp. 372-373.

motion. Jonathan's over-determined, over-earnest agenda—trying to make, perhaps, a *Bildungsroman* out of a picaresque—has the potential to lag the narrative, and create complications for the characters.

The suffering incurred, when the *polit* persists in forcing a *Bildungsroman* plot into a picaresque and slowing down the pace of the formerly episodic plot, is not only for the characters—it is also for the readers. One of my readers of the first full draft of my memoir told me that *The Black Turnip*'s last quarter was absolutely agonizing to read. She had found it difficult to finish the book. When Chana got stuck in the train station, the reader started to feel trapped, along with her. In response, in my final round of revisions, I cut several chapters and over fifty pages from the end of *The Black Turnip*. I don't think that the "agonizing" feeling that the reader reported was entirely a mistake—after all, the character is in agony. Similarly, I think the sense of Jonathan's complete paralysis, in the face of meeting the woman who saved his grandfather, is natural and necessary. But there's only so much agony and paralysis a reader can be asked to endure with the character.

As an example of the "agonizing" part of *The Black Turnip*, here is Chana first realizing she is on the wrong train. She ignores it, to her peril:

> The language on the signs, which should have been German by now, was still Polish.
>
> I did nothing. What was there to do? I was stuck. Nothing could be done about it. No one would help me. No one would speak to me in English. I would do nothing. I would live and die on this train for the rest of my life before I asked a Polish person for help. Hadn't it been Polish

> people who had gotten me into this mess? With
> their beautiful irresistible theatres?[129]

The *polit* in the grip of regressive "neoteny" immaturely blames the "beautiful irresistible theatres" of Poland for her troubled situation. Chana falls into more stereotyping; she's making negative assumptions about an entire culture. These assumptions are based in the painful history of her grandparents, and are reincarnated in the mouth of their grandchild. "Hadn't it been Polish people who had gotten me into this mess?"[130] she asks. On the contrary; Polish people tried to help her at every turn. When she finally gets onto the right train, it will only be because of the help of several more Polish people.

Both Chana and the character "Jonathan" try to force preconceived expectations and desires into a place where they are strangers. They each try to create a grand *Bildungsroman*, progressing towards a goal. The serial episodes, the little adventures and accidents along the way, are not enough for them. Perhaps their intentions were good; perhaps they both sought a kind of redemption for their families who had to leave Europe, who were forced out, by coming back and reclaiming influence and agency in these lands. But the traveler who tries to control the landscape of his journey is often dull, frequently endangered, and flounders badly without help.

[129] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), pp. 372-373.
[130] Weinberg, *The Black Turnip*, p. 373.

Trying to please the ancestors

Perhaps Chana's defining mistake was in being seduced, as Nathan Zuckerman and "Jonathan Safran Foer" were before her, by what Miriam Udel might have called the grand "totalizing narrative"[131] of Jewish family history. All three protagonist-*polit*s attempt to redeem the losses of the Holocaust through foolish heroic individual action. Nathan Zuckerman, "Jonathan Safran Foer," and my narrator Chana Wolstein all desire the approbation of their elders, to an excessive degree. They want to be praiseworthy; they want to achieve great things; that desire leads them into hubris. Perhaps the archetypal Jewish picaresque *polit*—a refugee or fugitive, disassociated from his family—would accept the accidents, which befall him with a kind of resigned acceptance and fatalism. But earnest striving young American Jewish protagonists desire to be praised—and that desire to achieve leads them into a baroque degree of folly.

The American *polit*'s deep self-regard distinguishes him, or her, from the Singerian *polit*s Udel used for her theory of the Jewish picaresque. The American Jewish picaresque requires even more naïve arrogance. Zuckerman, "Foer," and Wolstein aren't suicidal like Hertz Dovid Grein in Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Shadows on the Hudson.*[132] They're far too ambitious—as is Chana—

[131] "What I call the Jewish picaresque presents a form of resistance to totalizing narratives…disrupts the dominant European master narrative of progress and reflects a social reality in which integration is impossible." Miriam Udel, 'Preface', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. xiv.

[132] Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Shadows on the Hudson* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008; repr. New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), p. 253.

to want to die. “Look at me,” the American polit says to his or her parents. “Look at me, Mom and Dad! Am I not worthy of your praise and attention?”

That question brings me to my next and final author in this essay, Roz Chast, who takes the Jewish child’s fraught relationship to their parents as the central subject of her memoir.

V. *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*: Roz Chast and the Escape of the Dutiful Daughter

Introducing Roz Chast: from *New Yorker* cartoonist to graphic memoirist

Cartoonist Roz Chast, born in New York in 1954, has drawn cartoons, mostly for *The New Yorker* magazine, for over four decades. I will introduce her work before discussing her 2014 memoir, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*[133] Chast's typical setting, as in the below "The Guiltateria,"[134] is New York City. She often writes from a secular Jewish background, and her work is crowded with the voices of a loving, overbearing, worrying family.

[image removed from this digitised version due to potential copyright issues]

[133] Roz Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014)
[134] Roz Chast, 'The Guiltateria', *The New Yorker* (April 2, 2018), p. 41.

Chast writes about guilt, Schadenfreude, envy, food, overbearing mothers, and the presence of nagging questions ('Don't you want to at least TRY the soup?'). But the Jewish cultural context that informs the tone of her writing is usually assumed, not explained, in her cartoons.

When my family reads Chast, we pick up on the presence of *Yiddishkeit*, the culture brought by Yiddish-speaking European Jewish immigrants to the United States and the diaspora. Neal Gabler, in his introduction to *Yiddishkeit: Jewish Vernacular & The New Land*, writes:

> *Yiddishkeit* may be thought of as an attitude: broad, even coarse, tough-minded, clear-sighted, unpretentious, and even spitefully honest…these were qualities that had helped Jews cope with a hostile world…[135]

Gabler's list reminds me of Miriam Udel's explication of the Jewish picaresque as a form of "resistance to totalizing narratives."[136] The "spitefully honest" Yiddish humor he describes was a survival strategy in the "hostile world" of prewar Central Europe. Chast, who was born in 1954, is much closer to the prewar *Yiddishkeit* sensibility than I am; its characteristic tone appears in her writing. She doesn't have to write about religious subjects to be a culturally Jewish writer. She only has to quote the voices of her family.

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[135] Neal Gabler, 'Introduction', in *Yiddishkeit: Jewish Vernacular & The New Land*. Eds. Harvey Pekar & Paul Buhle. (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2011), p. 10.

[136] "What I call the Jewish picaresque presents a form of resistance to totalizing narratives…disrupts the dominant European master narrative of progress and reflects a social reality in which integration is impossible." Miriam Udel, 'Preface', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. xiv.

Sometimes, rarely, an explicitly Jewish topic does appear in Chast's pre-2014 work, as in the below "Seder Plate at Ye Olde Yankee Inne":[137]

[image removed from this digitised version due to potential copyright issues]

Much more often, however, the *Yiddishkeit* underpinning her sarcastic humor is subtextual. My family and I didn't need a Seder plate in every cartoon to get the point. We felt that these jokes were our jokes, and we suspected that the devilled eggs were probably from the same recipe that Grandma Sadie

[137] Roz Chast, 'Seder Plate at Ye Olde Yankee Inne', in *Theories of Everything: Selected, Collected, Health-Inspected Cartoons By Roz Chast, 1978-2002* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2006). This volume does not have page numbers, but this cartoon appears about ¾ of the way through the book.

Lefkowitz used. We felt included in her work.

As a young reader of Chast, I reacted to her cartoons in each new issue of the *New Yorker* as if they were portraits of my family. I felt that an image of the cartoonist herself, such as the below "A Note On The Author,"[138] was almost like seeing a photograph of myself:

[image removed from this digitised version due to potential copyright issues]

She was, I believed, reading my mind. How could I not identify with the witty, worried, joking, bookish, writer daughter of worrying Jewish parents?

[138] Roz Chast, 'A Note On The Author', in *Theories of Everything: Selected, Collected, Health-Inspected Cartoons By Roz Chast, 1978-2002* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2006). This volume does not have page numbers, but this cartoon is the second to last image in the book.

I am far from being the only person who appreciates, or sees herself in, Roz Chast's world. In addition to two volumes of selected cartoons (*Theories of Everything*[139] and *The Party, After You Left*[140]) she has illustrated books for many other writers. I find that her work speaks to writers and bibliophiles, to New Yorkers and urbanites, and to anyone who has ever had or has been in a family. For example, the below "Mom's Mortuary"[141] might amuse many different readers with experience of mothers or motherhood:

[image removed from this digitised version due to potential copyright issues]

[139] Roz Chast, *Theories of Everything: Selected, Collected, Health-Inspected Cartoons By Roz Chast, 1978-2002* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2006)
[140] Chast, *The Party, After You Left* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004)
[141] Chast, 'Mom's Mortuary', in *The Party, After You Left* (2004). This book does not have page numbers, but this cartoon appears about 30 pages into the book.

My own reading of this cartoon, however, is personal, familial, and Jewish. In "Mom's Mortuary," I hear another version of Nathan Zuckerman's mother, still fretting over dangers her family left behind in Europe, still seeing disaster everywhere. Despite the greater safety of the Jewish diaspora in their new countries—America, Australia, Argentina—a discernible thread of powerful, culturally specific, inherited worry is still present.

The fears that a Jewish daughter inherits from her parents, especially from her mother, are a subject I share with Chast. Here is my narrator Chana in *The Black Turnip*, scared on a tram car full of loud German soccer fans:

> "Mom," I thought, "you were right, okay? You were right. There are people waiting to rape, assault, and kill me basically *everywhere*, on all public transportation, in every parking lot. […] You were right, Mom! Life is too dangerous! Numerous things in life are better avoided! […] I'm so sorry that your only daughter turned out to be such an idiot, but at least know that she got some sense knocked into her brain before she was killed—"[142]

Chana's line "Numerous things in life are better avoided!" could almost have been one of the tombstones in Roz Chast's "Mom's Mortuary."[143] Although my narrator is terrified, there is a Chastian humor that sneaks into the fear—she quips, "I'm so sorry that your only daughter turned out to be such an

[142] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), pp. 322-323.
[143] Roz Chast. 'Mom's Mortuary', in *The Party, After You Left* New York: Bloomsbury, 2004) This work does not have page numbers or an index, but this cartoon appears about 30 pages into the book.

idiot." My narrator is more worried about what her mother will think of her than she is about surviving her predicament. Like Chast, I, too, was informed by an inheritance of Jewish guilt, worry, and fear. Her writing about family was an important guide for me when I started writing about the Wolsteins.

The end of avoidance

Jewish families, their worries, and their fear of illness and death were always present in Roz Chast's work, but her 2014 memoir[144] brought these subjects to the foreground, despite her parents' objections:

[image removed from this digitised version due to potential copyright issues]

[144] Roz Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014)

After decades of writing, and hundreds of published single-panel standalone cartoons, Chast wrote a two-hundred-page graphic memoir about her aging parents' illness and death.[145] The memoirist's answer to the titular question—asked by her plaintive, defensive father, with his arms crossed on the cover below—is a firm "No." Not only can the subject of death not be avoided any longer, but Chast is going to write an entire book about it.

In *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*[146] Chast abandons the standalone one-panel joke for a longer sequential narrative.[147] She engages with Jewishness as an explicit subject, and she writes about her own family. Scott McCloud, in *Understanding Comics*, distinguishes between cartoons—fleeting single panels—and longer-form sequential art, "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence,"[148] which he calls "comics." He writes, "Single panels…are often lumped in with comics, yet there's no such thing as a sequence of one."[149] By going beyond her "sequence of one," by adding more panels and pages, Chast gives herself space to tell a longer, messier, more complicated story: the story of a Jewish daughter and her parents. The portrayal of the intimate, over-close, almost co-dependent daughter-parent relationship in Chast's memoir[150] strongly influenced my

[145] Roz Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014)
[146] Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (2014)
[147] The longest comics collected in *Theories of Everything* (2006) and *The Party, After You Left* (2004) are pictured on two facing pages; in *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, Chast asks her readers to turn a page.
[148] Scott McCloud, 'The Vocabulary of Comics,' in *Understanding Comics* (Northhampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), p. 20.
[149] McCloud, 'The Vocabulary of Comics,' in *Understanding Comics*, p. 20.
[150] Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (2014)

portrayal of the same relationship in my own.

What we talk about when we don't talk about death

On the first page of her book, the Roz Chast character tries, unsuccessfully, to nudge her parents into a discussion of certain unpleasant realities:[151]

[151] Roz Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014), p. 3.

[image removed from this digitised version due to potential copyright issues]

Since she can't say the word "death," her parents are free to merely shrug, or to materialize little question marks over their heads.[152] Her parents respond by laughing and brushing off the hypothetical. In a family where humor is a consistent coping strategy, a dutiful daughter's attempt to bring up a serious

[152] Roz Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014) p. 3.

subject can easily be brushed aside.

Although the character has been silenced, on the first page of her own book,[153] the memoirist will persist. As the book continues, Chast's parents no longer control the subjects in the scene, or the space in the panel:[154]

[image removed from this digitised version due to potential copyright issues]

Here, over half of the space in each panel is given to Chast's narration. Every panel is topped with a summary telling us how to read the scene below; some panels, like the last, are all summary. Chast has the power to shut her characters out entirely. Despite occasional interruptions (her mother butts in: 'You don't know what trouble is!') Chast firmly controls the page, the contents of the panel, and the narrative.

Chast's manipulation of visual space, where her commentary on her parents is given more weight in the panel than what her parents actually say, reminds me of a scene in *The Black Turnip*. Here, Chana asks her father for money for a plane ticket home:

> "How much do you need?" my father asked me, in a pained but acquiescent voice.
>
> I hated it when he said that. Somehow, it made it worse.

[153] Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, p. 3.
[154] Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, p. 6.

> How could I possibly give him a number? A theatre person like me, I thought, needed everything and deserved nothing. My parents had already financially supported my idiotic theatrical bunglings more than was sane or reasonable. I was the youngest child, and I had been spoiled. I was the worst child, and—
>
> "Uh—like, three hundred and fifty?" I said.
>
> […]
>
> "I'll send you five hundred," said my father.
>
> I hated myself. I did not deserve my parents, I did not deserve their love, I was unworthy of their generosity, and I certainly did not deserve any more of their money.[155]

Chana's unheard, inner observations take up more space than the conversation does. In between each terse sentence spoken by daughter or father, an entire paragraph of inner turmoil interrupts the scene. Both *The Black Turnip* and *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* take place, in great part, inside the mind of the narrator. Honest conversations that can't be held between parent and child can happen between writer and reader. Making a space for those unspoken internal thoughts to be articulated is one reason for a daughter to write a memoir. When expressing their own thoughts in background narration, Chast and Chana both have the freedom to be more explicit, articulate, and pointed, and to analyze their parents' behavior instead of succumbing to it. They can, at least, try.

On the second page of *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*[156], Chast is determined to make some sense of what she knows about her parents. They refuse to speak to her, but she can talk about them all

[155] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 287-288.
[156] Roz Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014), p. 4.

she wants. She heads the page in exaggerated print, with a big capital I: “It was against my parents’ principles to talk about death…” The sentence reminds me of a headline from a frustrated teenager’s journal. There is something sarcastic and adolescent about the tone and the enormous capital letter I. Even the wash of soft pink behind the panels feels like an eye-roll.

[image removed from this digitised version due to potential copyright issues]

Chast, not her parents, is directing the shape of the narrative here, from the visual layout to the rapidly shifting movement through time and memory. Even the background color choice is part of her manipulation of the tone of this scene. And yet, the parents are still determining the subject matter, by refusing to talk about certain things—such as Elizabeth Chast saying to a young Roz: “I’m Jewish. Daddy is Jewish. You’re Jewish. End of story.”[157]

[157] Roz Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014), p. 4.

The memoirist may control the display of information, but since she wants to talk about family, religion, and beliefs about death and the afterlife, the information she has available to display is limited. Her content comes from the things her parents say, and they don't say much about these subjects. This "You're Jewish. End of story" panel is the only place in the 228 pages of this book where one of the characters says the word "Jewish" out loud in dialogue, in a scene,[158] and it is a moment where Chast's mother is trying to shut down an uncomfortable conversation. To discuss death is to discuss Jewish belief; to discuss Jewishness in the twentieth century is to discuss death. A daughter may try to write about these unspoken subjects, but how can she? What does she have to write about, when some things are never discussed openly?

The reluctance to have a conversation is a kind of conversation itself. If all a daughter learns is that her parents won't go there, she has still learned something. The short, two-to-three-word sentences Elizabeth Chast uses ("You're Jewish. End of story."[159]) remind me of the way that my character Chana Wolstein's father Terry talks to her sometimes. When he's discussing a photograph of relatives killed in the Holocaust, he says, "Wiped out. All of them."[160] Terry doesn't say "End of story," as Chast's mother did, but he walks out of the room, which has the same effect: stopping the dialogue.

However, the memoirist has the power to continue the conversation

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[158] Though Chast's disembodied narrative voice will use the word "Jewish" in other instances in *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant*? (p. 6, when discussing her grandparents, for example) the pictured characters do not use it in-scene, in speech bubbles, or in quoted text, except for this one place, discussed here, on p. 4 of the memoir.
[159] Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, p. 4.
[160] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 39.

beyond what the parents are willing to say. Chast and I get to portray, in our books, the frustrated children whose questions aren't being answered. Since our parents won't talk to us, we also get to try to answer those questions on our own. However, we may not always choose to share the answers that we discover. The children, "Roz Chast" and Chana, who have grown up with a legacy of concealment and avoidance, turn into memoirists. In turn, the adult writers continue the familial pattern of hiding some information. Just as our own parents held back some things with us, we may withhold the full story from our readers. In these moments of deliberate withholding, I find another connection between my work and Chast's.

The writer denying satisfaction to the reader

One kind of avoidance or concealment, for a graphic memoirist, can be in a retreat from the graphic. The first time in Chast's book where there are two full facing pages with no images, no color, and no illustration[161]—just black-and-white handwritten text—occurs the night after George Chast has predeceased his wife Elizabeth. The widow Chast comes home to spend the night at Roz's house and, overnight, suffers an episode of "loss of bowel control,"[162] leading to Chast's downstairs bathroom being trashed. Chast writes, "The walls, the floors, the rugs were covered with excrement. Her clothing, her hands, and the sofa were caked with it. It was beyond

[161] Roz Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014), pp. 162-163.
[162] Roz Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014), p. 163.

imagining."[163] For the entirety of the two facing pages where this scene takes place, Chast gives us only text. Since the scene is, Chast tells us, "beyond imagining," she will restrain herself and not imagine it visually:

[image removed from this digitised version due to potential copyright issues]

As a daughter, I respect Chast's decorum. But as a reader, every time I come to those two pages, I question the absence of images as a narrative strategy. Elsewhere, Chast does not shy away from the use of other upsetting or embarrassing images. She will draw dead bodies in a realist style in this book—she includes multiple highly detailed sketches of her mother's face distorted by death[164]—and pictures people overcome with anxiety having graphic and embarrassing panic attacks.[165] Chast does not mind making her readers uncomfortable, visually, or showing sickness and debility. But she

[163] Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, p. 163.
[164] Roz Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014), pp. 211-222.
[165] Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, p. 88.

chooses no images at all where the most horrific accident in the book happens. As a reader, I felt abruptly pulled out of the narrative.

In questioning my frustration at Chast's omission of images from the most devastating scene in her memoir, I looked at a parallel passage in *The Black Turnip*. Here, my narrator Chana Wolstein discusses her paternal grandfather's suicide, and explains that she doesn't know how he died:

> I have had many people tell me that I ought to obtain the police report; that I had some kind of responsibility to know if it was pills or a rope. "How can you not know?" they asked me. It's because people don't like holes in stories. It bugs them. If this was a TV show, they would see the body. They want to know. But I really didn't want to know. "If my father had wanted me to know *how* my grandfather killed himself, he would have told me," I used to say, and I would cross my arms over my chest like a monument of denial. [166]

Readers of this passage had objected. In a book where the central voice was predicated on a sense of radical honesty, where embarrassing personal secrets were unveiled on every page, where pseudonyms had already been deployed for further privacy, how could I withhold this last bit? So many people objected that I decided to include their point of view in the book: "How can you not know?"[167] To some extent, I understood the objection. It seemed that something in this omission broke a contract between memoirist and reader. Why write the memoir, if not to tell all, and especially the most painful parts?

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[166] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 29.
[167] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 29.

If I frustrate my readers, then I would say that, yes, my narrator is sometimes a frustrating person. She has an agenda, and when it comes to her family, she still abides by her father Terry Wolstein's rules. We should be aware that there are hesitations for her, and moments of agonizing, and pain. Chana breaks a contract with the readers: the confessional writer's contract to divulge. She chooses, in this moment, her family over the book. A memoirist cannot choose family over the book too often, but I would argue she can get away with doing it once every few hundred pages.

Choosing the book; choosing the family; choosing both

If my omission of the manner of Meyer's death weakens the text of *The Black Turnip*, then it is a weakness I have chosen and I must live with. Similarly, I think that readers of *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* can get over the two image-free pages,[168] even if some of them, like me, find them a bit jarring. As a reader, I question the choice, but as a fellow daughter of a mother, I can't argue with her decision. "My poor, poor mother!"[169] Chast cries out, on one of the two imageless pages. This language was different from the way in which she usually speaks: it was out of place, melodramatic. It didn't sound like the writer Roz Chast. I felt it wasn't her voice. But sometimes, at the moments of greatest vulnerability, even a comic memoirist becomes, again, the dutiful Jewish daughter, and speaks in clichés.

[168] Roz Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014), pp. 162-163.
[169] Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, p. 163.

In a memoir, we expect to hear from both the narrator, who looks back on these events with the benefit of hindsight, and the character, who is trapped within the scene. Memoirist and critic Sven Birkerts, in *The Art Of Time In Memoir*[170], writes, "I need to give the reader both the unprocessed feeling of the world as I saw it then *and* a reflective vantage point that incorporates or suggests that these events made a different kind of sense over time."[171] For Birkerts, the tension and balance between these perspectives is what defines the genre. However, sometimes, at a moment of great emotional stress, one viewpoint or another may strongly prevail. In these moments of weakness, the narrator could end up privileging either the "reflective vantage point" or the "unprocessed feeling" to the exclusion of the other. Feeling overwhelms reflection; reflection squashes feeling. A graphic memoir has two imageless pages. A suicide method is left unexplained. The reader feels, perhaps, that something is missing. But can a memoirist avoid such moments entirely?

I am inspired by Chast's willingness to portray her own weaknesses. She sometimes doesn't know what to say about Jewishness or death, any more than her parents did. But her inability to express or to picture certain things is part of her narrative strategy. She showed me that through errors, avoidance, denial, omission of key information, and consuming worry about one's parents, one could still write. Roz Chast's example allows me the Solomonic choice of betraying both the memoir and my parents at the same time. I don't have to choose which one I will let down, my family or my art; I expect I will disappoint both of them severely, but I will not give up on either one.

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[170] Sven Birkerts. *The Art Of Time In Memoir: Then, Again*. (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2008), p. 23.
[171] Birkerts, *The Art Of Time In Memoir*, p. 23.

VI. Conclusion

In this conclusion, I return to considering the use of escapism in *The Black Turnip*, and the relationship between escape and survival. I will discuss the significance of my own reliance on humor. Using the theories of Marianne Hirsch,[172] I will say what distinguishes, for me, writing from the second generation after the Holocaust as opposed to the third. While examining Hirsch, I step from a critical mode into a personal mode; I discuss how I feel about the discovery that a picaresque, escapist mode seems to inescapably characterize my memoir-writing. Finally, I will conclude by saying what significance I believe this project, and its focus on escapism, may have for other writers in the diaspora.

Is escape possible?

My narrator, Chana Wolstein, grew up thinking of escape as necessary to Jewish survival. In the below quote from the February 2016 draft of *The Black Turnip*, my narrator, as a young child, remembers her first encounter with a Holocaust survivor, and the naïve question she asked during their meeting:

> "So how did you escape?"
>
> She [the survivor] looked at me. Her eyes were so old the color had settled in them as if at the bottom of an hourglass.
>
> "I survived," she said.
>
> She had only gone on living until her camp was liberated. This had not occurred to me. Until that

[172] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012)

> moment, I had believed that every survivor must have carried out some kind of elaborate escape with tunnels and walls and rope. But no. She had only gone on living. Was that enough? Somehow, I felt she would have had to do more—to really get away. I believed her, and yet I didn't believe her.
>
> Was surviving enough?
>
> If you survived, had you also escaped? [173]

Chana, as a child, couldn't believe that anyone so important as a living survivor could have somehow failed to "escape," but only "survived." This disturbs and confuses her. "Was surviving enough?" she asks. Surviving seems anticlimactic. Escape is, in her mind, what Jewish stories—especially Jewish Holocaust stories—are all about. "You must have escaped," Chana insists. It disturbs her to think that this person sitting before her simply waited through years of a concentration-camp existence. Chana's misunderstanding is not only about her reluctance to confront horror; it is rooted in her childish reading of the legends of Jewish culture.

In the Jewish community, we proudly retell the escape of the Jews from slavery in Egypt each Passover, and from the evil king's advisor Haman each Purim. We construct the narrative of our own cultural existence around regularly celebrating our many exciting, heroic escapes as a people. We don't talk as much about the many other Jews who survived simply by managing to live through a slow, tedious, agonizing period of suffering. Those stories are harder to tell, and less triumphant. As I continued to revise, Chana's Hebrew-school-age misunderstanding seemed less significant to me, and I ultimately

[173] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (draft of unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, February 2016), p. 439.

removed the episode from the book. I chose to focus on her more adult realization that survival, or endurance, is an important kind of Jewish escape.

Part of how Jewish people survive seems to be by becoming accustomed to certain mental escapes, or evasions, of our own: denial, avoidance, shutting down questions, silence. Roz Chast's father begs to avoid a conversation about death, and thus gives her the title of her book:[174]

[image removed from this digitised version due to potential copyright issues]

In the above panel, George Chast asks to skip the conversation about death, not because he is thoughtless or silly or has never considered it, but on the contrary, because death and its likelihood obsess him. As his daughter knows, death scares and troubles him. He can't bear to say its name aloud.

[174] Roz Chast, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014) p. 6.

Is escape possible in such an environment, when the things we are fleeing are the ideas in our own heads? How can Jewish writers ever escape the pressures of Jewishness, or the heavy obligations to our immigrant ancestors or families? How can we writers try to remember or understand the very things our parents are begging us to forget? How dare we write about them? As autobiographical novelist Alexander Chee asks his students, "Is the person listening more important than you? Or is the story you would tell more important than you?"[175] How can we escape the responsibility to conform, to toe the line, embodied by characters like Philip Roth's Judge Wapter?[176] We can't. All we can do is survive these things—and keep writing.

For both Chana and "Roz Chast," managing to write a memoir, especially if it discusses subjects that their parents won't speak about, is a kind of escape from an oppressive, burdensome silence. Terry Wolstein doesn't want to talk about his father's suicide; George and Elizabeth Chast won't discuss death or Judaism or illness. The writers' parents want to escape the conversation entirely. But Chana and "Roz Chast" want to, if I may use an awkward and duplicative phrase, escape from the escape from the conversation. They want to have the conversation. If their parents won't talk to them, they'll move the conversation into their books.

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[175] Alexander Chee, 'On Becoming An American Writer', in *How To Write An Autobiographical Novel* (New York: Mariner Books (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt): 2018), p. 257.
[176] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979; repr. New York: Vintage International, 1995), pp. 102-104.

What's with all the jokes?

I didn't know that *The Black Turnip* was going to be a comic Jewish picaresque when I was writing it. But the readers who encountered early drafts, from my fellow PhD students to my supervisors to guest lecturers in our forums and workshops, all remarked on the text's humor to a degree I found to be astonishing. This concerned me. I ought to be, I told myself, more somber in the face of the memories of lost Jewish Europe. It wasn't my intention to be writing a stand-up routine.

I knew from both my research and my father's experience that for some of the survivors' generation, their fears had been so powerful that they managed to pass those fears on to their children. Theorist Marianne Hirsch investigates this phenomenon in her theory of postmemory: "How is trauma transmitted across generations, I began to wonder? How is it remembered by those who did not live it or know it in their own bodies?"[177] This seemed to me to be a worthy question, much more important than the question I was asking of both myself and the works of Roth, Foer, and Chast: "How do well-off American Jews, two generations after the Holocaust, deal with a lingering sense of depression and avoid taking on any real responsibility?" Learning about Hirsch's work had helped me to understand my father. However, postmemory theory didn't give me everything I needed to understand myself or my fellow contemporary American Jewish writers.

[177] Marianne Hirsch, 'Introduction', in *The Generation of Postmemory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 11.

Crucially, Hirsch limits true "postmemory" to the second generation after a traumatic event. She writes:

> "Postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. [178]

This sort of second-generation inherited memory might apply to my father and Roz Chast and Philip Roth and Marianne Hirsch and Art Spiegelman, but not to me or to Jonathan Safran Foer. Those of us in the third generation after the Holocaust had no inherited traumatic postmemory, only distant and fragmented stories. It seemed to me that I was caught up in envy, not of the victims, but of their children—the generation of my parents. Their generation, the children of survivors, seemed to possess unique access to a mode of memory and an awe-inspiring ability to write about it. I was envious of "the generation of postmemory"—the phrase forms the title of one of Hirsch's books[179]—as well as their perspective on history, and their writing.

Ultimately, I couldn't get away from the reality of the generation in which I had been born. The fact was that I wasn't experiencing postmemory. Like Foer, my increased generational distance from living Holocaust memory

[178] Marianne Hirsch, 'Introduction', in *The Generation of Postmemory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 5.
[179] Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012)

gave me both the privilege of avoidance and the ability to do things like actually go back to Central Europe. Instead of remembering, reliving, or retelling traumatic events, Chana Wolstein was more taken up with escape and avoidance. She experiences the past through fragmentation, through episodic flashes of recognition, and through a great distance of time and space. It's not just that she fears a direct approach (although she sometimes does); it's that the events of the Second World War are now so far away that a direct approach isn't always possible.

The disconnected, random-seeming, episodic nature of Chana's approach to Poland—she's like a Martian, as she says of herself in Katowice[180]—brought up a lot of inadvertent humor, and I stopped trying to avoid the humor when it happened. Recognizing my work's humor led my early readers to direct me away from postmemory and towards the picaresque. Looking for a theory that focused more on humorous escape and avoidance than on traumatic memory led me to Miriam Udel, and discovering her theory allowed me to surrender to the narrative drive of humor. Eventually, Marianne Hirsch's work disappeared from this essay. I stopped trying to take the jokes out of *The Black Turnip*. I put more of them in.

On not writing about postmemory

Although I had accepted that I was a picaresque writer, I hadn't stopped thinking about Marianne Hirsch's theories. I had the opportunity in March of 2018 to hear her speak at the Glendale Central Library, in Southern California,

[180] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), pp. 377.

at the opening of an exhibit concerning the inherited memory of the Armenian genocide.[181] At the end of the lecture, during the question period, I asked her to say something more about the third generation after a traumatic event. I was asking her, in effect, to say something more about me.

She acknowledged that postmemory meant much to later generations as well, and said that some of her students had written on this. 'But where does it end?'[182] she asked. Hirsch implied that for people in later generations to remember in the same ways, and with the same intensity, as those who came before, is perhaps neither possible nor desirable. Maybe, I thought, listening to her speak, the focus on escape and avoidance and denial that I find to be central to my work, as well as the work of authors who have inspired me, is a productive evolution of how we in later generations remember, and how we process trauma at a greater distance.

Chana learns something in *The Black Turnip*, even if she doesn't achieve her goal of becoming "Chana Wolstein, Polish theatre director." She finds out that when one is down on one's luck, sometimes the least likely of places contains unexpected solace. Here she is, in the Warsaw train station:

> …Hadn't Poland itself been responsible for twisting the arms of the compass, sending me east instead of west, deeper into its territory? And honestly, hadn't that attempt been friendly rather than otherwise, when regarded properly?

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[181] Marianne Hirsch, 'Forty Days and More: Connective Histories'. Public lecture. (March 17, 2018.) Downtown Glendale Central Library, California. (In conjunction with opening of 'Non-Linear Histories: Transgenerational Memory of Trauma', an art exhibit.)

[182] Hirsch, 'Forty Days and More: Connective Histories'. Public question-and-answer session following public lecture. (March 17, 2018.) Downtown Glendale Central Library, California.

> I mean, come on, right? As my Grandma Sadie would say, every time my family got in our car to drive back to the suburbs, "Where are you going? You just got here!" Clearly, I thought, Poland had felt me trying to go to Dresden, and had proposed, instead, Katowice.
>
> "Don't leave!" Poland, the country (P-O-L-A-N-D) had said. "What's the rush? You just got here!"[183]

In her self-involved, egotistical transports, Chana does something interesting: she personifies Poland and gives it the voice of her beloved Jewish grandmother, Sadie Lefkowitz. This kind of love, the love that demands you eat even when the food is unappetizing, and that you stay, even when you want to go, is the love of Jewish grandmothers and mothers. It is oppressive, but it is familiar. Chana suggests that this love is also something she experiences from and in Poland.

This feeling that she belongs in Poland leads to Chana's resolution at the end of the book: "I'm going back. I have to."[184] Why do you have to visit your grandmother? Because she will be disappointed if you don't show up and eat her deviled eggs on Passover. It's an obligation. Why do you have to go back to Poland? Because Poland is family. Because Poland will be sad if you don't come visit. Why does a grandchild go back to visit a country where terrible things happened to their grandparents' generation? Because that was a long time ago, and the increased distance from those events creates an opportunity, if not for healing, then perhaps for understanding and perspective.

Chana's father Terry Wolstein will never visit Poland himself—he's

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[183] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 404.
[184] Weinberg, *The Black Turnip*, p. 411.

part of Hirsch's "generation of postmemory," and it would be too painful for him to see it. He's too close. Chana is further away, and so she's able to go back. On the one hand, she can never understand the country as well as her father does. On the other hand, because Chana is more distanced, she perhaps has fewer preconceptions about what she will find in Europe. Except for when she gets trapped on tram cars or stuck in train stations, when she falls back into a vortex of inherited fear, she generally is open to discovering what Poland is today, and what it means to her as the descendant of Polish Jews.

Survival through escape and escapism: productive humor

For the Jewish writers I read and emulate, the tendencies of the Jewish picaresque, such as joke-telling, avoidance, escape-seeking, and episodic plotting, allow them to persist despite the weight of inherited traumatic memory, or postmemory. This ability to persist through humor is why I read Jewish picaresques, and why I write them. I feel a sense of recognition and appreciation of authors who do the same, who explore the Jewish tendency to escape, avoid, deny, and repress, and who never miss an opportunity for a joke. Survival is, perhaps, for some Jewish writers, composed of an episodic, picaresque chain of loosely connected, doomed-to-fail, serial escapes.

After Marianne Hirsch spoke, in Glendale, and after all the questions had been asked, I waited to greet her at the end of a line of admirers. "I just wanted to say," I said, "your work has meant so much to me. Thank you for writing." I was already starting to cry. She asked me what I wrote about, and I

was only able to say "Poland."[185] She understood. Sniffling, I pulled myself together to say one more thing to her. 'I hope you will write for many more years', I said, and I left, with my unprofessional tears, and went and ate hot wings and celery sticks with friends at a sports bar in downtown Glendale, because it was St. Patrick's Day. For me, in my writing, in my life, and in my writing about my life, it's never just the genocide lecture; it's always St. Patrick's Day at the same time. I'm never far from stumbling over another joke, or another inappropriate juxtaposition between sadness and absurdity. I can't get out of the Jewish picaresque mode, and that mode is comic. I have come to accept this tendency in my memoir; I've stopped avoiding picaresque escapism, and instead, I'm trying to understand how it works in my writing.

Grandchildren: the impulse to escape, and the impulse to return

Neither Chana nor "Jonathan Safran Foer" want to forget about Holocaust memory. On the contrary, remembering and honoring that period of time is a central preoccupation for both characters. But the friendships they form with young Central European characters like Alexander Perchov and Marysia Grodzik—friendships that would have been logistically impossible for their parents, who couldn't have traveled to the former Soviet Union—bring a different dimension to their experience. By the time Chana and "Jonathan" return to Europe, young people have been born in Poland and Ukraine who

[185] Marianne Hirsch, 'Forty Days and More: Connective Histories'. Public question-and-answer period following public lecture. (March 17, 2018.) Downtown Glendale Central Library, California. (In conjunction with opening of 'Non-Linear Histories: Transgenerational Memory of Trauma', an art exhibit.)

never knew the war, or only lived under Communism when they were children. Inevitably, their experience is different. Chana and "Jonathan" will never forget what their parents and grandparents went through, but they cannot—nor should they—attempt to recreate those experiences or the feelings that accompanied them. Moving forward and forming new friendships is not only productive for the character and the text; it is productive for the writer, and for the world.

I'm in the third generation removed, as Jonathan Safran Foer is, from the traumatic events of the Holocaust. We, as writers, are so far away from everything that happened to our grandparents in Europe that our efforts to connect with that history are culturally fractured, distanced, and misplaced. That break in continuity brings in a kind of humor, even when we may not want it to be there. Since I myself can't get the humor out of my work, I have come to think of it as productive. I look for it and I emphasize it. If I keep on writing any story, even a story about crying at Marianne Hirsch's genocide lecture, if I keep on going, I know the joke will show up.

When something is so overwhelmingly difficult to write about that one would rather run away than address it, I find that writing about the impulse to run away, and engaging in Miriam Udel's "fantasy of flight,"[186] can actually open a new door to the difficult subject. This has been my experience with *The Black Turnip*. Indulging in picaresque escapism has led me to more, not less, writing about challenging topics. In fact, my exploration of escape has helped me to finish my book, and to find humor in some very dark moments. I hope

[186] Miriam Udel, 'Living Serially: Neoteny and the *Polit*', in *Never Better! The Modern Jewish Picaresque* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. 83.

that this thesis will be a model for other diaspora writers who wish to engage with the fraught subjects of their families' countries of origin. For me, I have found that avoidance and digression and episodic plotting, the constant escapes of the picaresque, brought me to new perspectives on history.

I imagine a future where more "Jonathan"s and Chanas are going back to Ukraine and Poland, meeting Alexanders and Marysias, getting into confused episodic picaresque adventures, and writing books about contemporary life in Central Europe. I imagine new, living connections between the grandchildren of the Jewish diaspora and their families' former countries in Europe and elsewhere. I may be an idealist, but I'm not ashamed of it. As Terry Wolstein says to his daughter, at one point in my memoir, "By your being there [in Poland] you're continuing something that never should have been broken."[187]

[187] Dara Weinberg, *The Black Turnip*, (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bath Spa University, 2019), p. 102.

Appendix – Judge Wapter's "Ten Questions For Nathan Zuckerman"

Excerpted from Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*[188]

The sheet of questions prepared for me by the Wapters read as follows:

TEN QUESTIONS FOR NATHAN ZUCKERMAN

1. If you had been living in Nazi Germany in the thirties, would you have written such a story?
2. Do you believe Shakespeare's Shylock and Dickens's Fagin have been of no use to anti-Semites?
3. Do you practice Judaism? If so, how? If not, what credentials qualify you for writing about Jewish life for national magazines?
4. Would you claim that the characters in your story represent a fair sample of the kinds of people that make up a typical contemporary community of Jews?
5. In a story with a Jewish background, what reason is there for a description of physical intimacy between a married Jewish man and an unmarried Christian woman? Why in a story with a Jewish background must there be (a) adultery; (b) incessant fighting within a family over money; (c) warped human behavior in general?
6. What set of aesthetic values makes you think that the cheap is more valid than the noble and the slimy is more truthful than the sublime?

[188] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979; repr. New York: Vintage International, 1995), pp. 102-104.

7. What in your character makes you associate so much of life's ugliness with Jewish people?
8. Can you explain why in your story, in which a rabbi appears, there is nowhere the grandeur of oratory with which Stephen S. Wise and Abba Hillel Silver and Zvi Masliansky have stirred and touched their audiences?
9. Aside from the financial gain to yourself, what benefit do you think publishing this story in a national magazine will have for (a) your family; (b) your community; (c) the Jewish religion; (d) the well-being of the Jewish people?
10. Can you honestly say that there is anything in your short story that would not warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or a Joseph Goebbels?

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After my PhD defense in the fall of 2018, the committee requested that I expand the above references section and provide a separate list of selected further reading for the benefit of future researchers. The following list is divided into sub-categories by genre. The books which most influenced me in this project often contained at least one of these features: a darkly humorous tone; elements of picaresque form; a profusion of characters, locations, or subjects; the theme of a young adult's hubris; a travel narrative gone wrong; or a fraught relationship with parents, religion, and death. The majority, but not all, of the works listed here are by Jewish authors, or reflect on, in some way, the history of the Central European Ashkenazi Jewish diaspora. However, I strove for a balance between reading works which were closer to my own personal ethnic and religious community, and those which were more distant, to widen my perspective on my work. I hope these texts are as useful for other writers embarking upon similar projects as they have been for me.

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