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Collected Stories

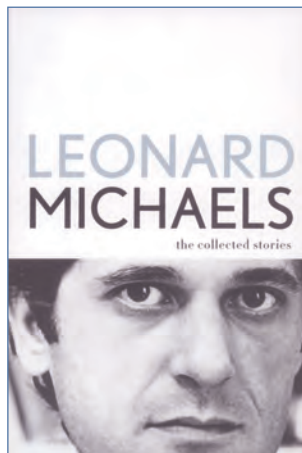
by Leonard Michaels

REVIEW BY GERALD SORIN

We continue to be in the tricky business of trying to define what we mean (and don't mean) by "Jewish writer." Any writer who is a Jew? Only a writer who includes Jewish "content" in his or her work, whether or not he or she is Jewish? Or a writer whose work, when deconstructed, reveals "Jewish" meaning and values, with or without Jewish specificity? Does such a writer exist?

Leonard Michaels, who constantly experiments with ways to tell his stories – stories with a broad range, and which frequently eschew any claim to realism – has always been hard to pigeonhole. Now that we have his posthumously published *Collected Stories* it is clear that all along Michaels has been, among other things, a Jewish writer in every sense of the term. The stories suggest strongly that Michaels has, from the start, been reflecting on the condition of being Jewish in an urban universe of chance and formlessness and on the meaning of being a moral man, a *mentsh*, in a culture apparently boundless.

This assessment may come as a surprise to those readers who are too quickly repelled by Michaels' seeming preoccupation with sexual aggressiveness, infidelity (among other forms of betrayal), and the apparent rationalization of some very bad behavior. But not so hidden in all of this nastiness (as in the writing of Bellow and Roth, and John Updike, too) is the search for *mentshlikhkeyt*. In "City Boy" (*Going Places*, 1969), Phillip Leibowitz and Veronica Cohen fornicate, on Veronica's command, after she hears that Mr. Cohen, who earlier had caught the couple in their first hot go-round, has suffered a massive heart attack. "We sank," Phillip says in the very last line, "into the rug as if it were quicksand." Michaels, early in his career, had a desire to



shock, to appear hard-boiled, to demonstrate a fashionable nihilism. But he does not celebrate these desperate, alienated protagonists; they are clearly lost – sinking in "quicksand."

A more compassionate Michaels shows up in "Murderers" (*I Would Have Saved Them if I Could*, 1975). Here, a younger Phillip tells us that his family came from Poland, "then never went anyplace until they had their heart attacks." Phillip, not being "poor in spirit" or "frightened" like his immigrant elders, wants to go somewhere, somewhere out toward the

George Washington Bridge, "beyond which was darkness." "I wanted proximity to darkness, strangeness," he says.

With three of his Jewish friends, Phillip clammers to the top of a water tower to spy on their rabbi as he makes love to his wigged, but otherwise nude, wife. One boy masturbates as the naked couple dance privately to a rumba. But the youngest boy, trying to stop himself from sliding off the roof, catches his ring on a nail head: "...[T]he ring and ring finger remained, the hand, the arm, the rest of him was gone." Phillip and the other survivors are sent to summer camp for disciplining. The counselors, one with a metal plate in his head, are veterans of World War II, and "whatever you said to them they seemed to be thinking of something else." At night Phillip listened to owls. "I'd never heard that sound," he said. "The sound of darkness"

These brilliant juxtapositions – the narrowness of immigrant life against the insatiable American appetite for sex and possibility, and the ultimate, seemingly inescapable sorrow – are accomplished in fewer than four pages. It seems, though, that Michaels sometimes worked too quickly. There are in this collection too many fragments, too many post-modern parables, aphorisms, and surrealistic nightmarish paragraphs – some of which are incomprehensible. In these pieces Michaels attempts to blur the border between fiction and non-fiction, especially when he demonstrates how a diary entry can tell a tale. But he strains

for profundity with a naïve (or swaggering) faith in the value of publishing private notations made while waiting for the pot to boil. Here is the whole of “Ma”: “I said, ‘Ma, do you know what happened?’ She said, ‘Oh, my God.’” The end. And what does Michaels mean in “Being Moral,” a six-liner about a woman who worries while she brushes her teeth that people are going hungry? But “being moral is a luxury, isn’t it?” she asks herself. “No, it’s asking the question. That’s why I spend my time stealing, fucking, and taking dope.” Finis.

Then again, Michaels is capable of giving us “The Subject at the Vanishing Point,” a literary gift worth quoting in full:

My grandfather – less than average height – had bad teeth, gray hair, nervous cough, tinted spectacles, delicate fingers, and a gentle musical voice. To appear confident and authentic, worthy of attention by clerks in the visa office, he memorized the required information – his mother’s maiden name, the addresses of relatives in America – and walking down the street, he felt constantly in his coat pockets to be sure that he had photos of himself, wife, daughter, enough money for the required bribes, and the necessary papers – documents from America, passports, birth certificates, and an essay by himself in praise of Poland – when a pogrom started. Doors and windows slammed shut. The robots were coming. Alone in a strange street, he couldn’t tell which way to go. At every corner was death. Suddenly – for good or ill isn’t known – somebody flung him into a cellar. Others died. He, bleeding and semiconscious, hidden in a cellar, survived the pogroms. That day he didn’t get a visa to leave Poland. He was a tailor – short, thin-boned. Even in a winter coat easy to fling. He crawled amid rats and dirt, collecting his papers. When night came and Poland lay snoring in the street, he climbed out of the cellar and ran home. Wife and daughter ministered to his wounds. All thanked God that he was alive. But it was too late to get a visa. The Nazis came with the meaning of history – what flings you into a cellar saves you for bullets. I don’t say in the historical dialectic, individual life reduces to hideous idiocy. I’m talking about my grandfather, my grandmother, and my aunt. It seems to me, in the dialectic, individual life reduces not even to hideous idiocy.

Michaels’ work deepened as he gradually abandoned the paragraph for longer stories and moved away from surrealism. In *To Feel These Things* (1993) and *A Girl With a Monkey*

(2000) are several gems, including “Honeymoon,” a compelling coming-of-age story that captures the rhythms and flavors of the Jewish Catskills better, I think, than any writer from Abraham Cahan to Philip Roth. And Michaels’ debt to Yiddish, the only language he spoke until elementary school, shows wonderfully in sentences like these: “I felt envy, a primitive feeling. Also a sin. But go not feel it;” and, “Perhaps a girl with so much needed someone like him – a misery.”

Michaels could occasionally fumble even in these later stories. “Viva la Tropicana,” for example, is an unrealistic, sensationalist mish-mash about Jewish gangsters and Cuban mistresses, in which Fidel Castro plays a cameo role. Despite Michaels’ anger and unhappiness over the way his novel, *The Men’s Club* (1981), was transformed into a film (1986), he seems to have written “Viva la Tropicana” with an eye toward Hollywood. In terms of Michaels’ literary reputation, would it have been wiser to publish “Selected Stories” with more judicious choices, rather than the complete *Collected Stories*?

There is nothing wrong, however, in bringing together in one place all seven of the Nachman stories. Michaels started writing these extraordinary stories in 1997 and was still at work when he died in 2003. Nachman, a brilliant mathematician who lives a quiet, often withdrawn life in pacific California, is in many ways the opposite of the driven, hungry, and frenetic New Yorker Phillip Leibowitz. Nachman (of Bratslav no doubt) “wasn’t especially sensual;” his need for ecstasy was satisfied by solving (or more precisely trying to solve) mathematical problems and playing the violin. Unlike Leibowitz and several other protagonists, Nachman did not believe that “experience, for its own sake, is the highest value....”

Nachman was clearly Leonard Michaels’ mentsh; but he seemed at times to be concerned with moral boundaries to the point of obsession. In “Nachman Burning,” for example, our hero touches the thigh of a Vietnamese hairdresser with whom he is (secretly) madly in love. She is clearly interested in sleeping with Nachman, but he agonizes later about whether he has stepped over the line. In “The Penultimate Conjecture,” a celebrated mathematician in a public demonstration claims to have solved a famous long-term problem, but Nachman, listening, knows “Lindquist had failed. In his bones and blood, in his teeth and the roots of his hair, Nachman sensed the conceptual error.” But he cannot bring himself to speak up, and later he broods over whether or not to put a pin in the mathematician’s balloon. In yet another

story, “Of Mystery There is No End,” Nachman is witness to the infidelity of Adele (with whom he may himself be in love), the wife of his very best friend, Norbert. Should Nachman tell? Should he bring such unbearable news to his friend? He “hammered the dashboard with his fist and shouted an obscenity. In the twenty-first century, in Los Angeles, a great city of cars where no conceivable depravity wasn’t already boring to high school kids, Nachman, a grown man, found himself agonized by an ancient moral dilemma.”

Eventually Nachman tells Adele that he must inform Norbert. And he takes her to task when she says she was “helpless” to resist the affair. “There are limits,” Nachman sternly insists. “I think you mean morals,” Adele quips. “OK, morals. Yes, morals. You have something against morals?” *A gute frage* – and together with all the Nachman stories, a refreshing, even redeeming (though unfortunately untimely) conclusion to Leonard Michaels’ career. [JR](#)

EXCERPTS

The black bread should be Pechter’s, but the firm went out of business, so substitute bialys from the bakery on Grand Street between Essex and Clinton, on the right heading toward the river, not SoHo. With your thumb, gouge and tear bialys open along the circumference. Butter bialys. Insert onion slices. Do this about 3:00 A.M. at the glass-topped table in my parents’ dining room, after a heavy date in Greenwich Village. My parents should be asleep in their bedroom, nearly twenty feet away. Since my father is dead, imagine him. He snores. He cries out against murderous assailants. I could never catch his exact words. Think what scares you most, then eat, eat. *The New York Times*, purchased minutes ago at the kiosk in Sheridan Square, is fresh; it lies beside the plate of bialys. As you eat, you read. Light a cigarette. Coffee, in the gray pot, waits on the stove. Don’t let it boil. Occasional street noises – sirens, cats – should penetrate the Venetian blinds and thick, deeply pleated drapes of the living room windows. The tender, powdery surface of the bialys is dented by your fingertips, which bear odors of sex; also butter, onion, dough, tobacco, newsprint, and coffee. The whole city is in your nose, but go outside to eat the last bialy while strolling on Cherry Street. The neighborhood is Mafia-controlled; completely safe. You will be seen from tenement windows and recognized.

Smoke another cigarette. Take your time. Your father cries out in his sleep, but he was born in Europe. For a native American kid, there is nothing to worry about. Even if you eat half a dozen bialys, with an onion and coffee, you will sleep like a baby. [\(PAGE 152\)](#)

Plato says the face is a picture of the soul. Could this be true? I thought how noses, teeth, ears, and eyes – in the faces of Evelyn’s ancestors – flowing through the centuries, had combined to make the picture of her soul. But then she had her teeth fixed and her ears pinned back. A face is more like a work than like a picture. It has a sort of etymology. Ancient meanings, drawn from the experience of races, from geography and weather, from flora and fauna, collect in a face just as meanings collect in a word. In Evelyn’s face, I saw the travels of Marco Polo, the fall of Constantinople, the irredentist yearnings of Hungaro-Romanians. How many ancestors vanished when Evelyn had her teeth fixed? In Evelyn’s face I saw the hordes of Genghis Khan invading Poland. Among them was a yellow brute, with a long mustache flowing away from his nostrils like black ribbons. He raped Evelyn’s great-great-great-grandmother with his fierce prick, thereby giving a distinctly slanted plane to Evelyn’s cheekbones, her nicest feature. [\(PAGE 188\)](#)

There may have been waitresses in the Catskill resorts, but I never met one. Since women guests far outnumbered men, waiters and busboys were universally hired to make up the shortage. At the honeymoon resort there was no shortage, but the dining-room staff was all men, anyway. I don’t know why. Maybe the atmosphere of newly married bliss forbade hanky-panky among the help.

Latin music was the rage in the early fifties. You would hear the dining-room staff singing in Spanish: rumbas, mambos, cha-cha-chas. We understood the feeling in the words, not the words. We called Latin music “Jewish.” The wailing melodies were reminiscent of Hebraic and Arabic chanting, but we only meant the music was exciting to us. A fusion music, conflating Europe and Africa. In mambo, Spanish passion throbs to Nigerian syncopation. In Yiddish, the German, Hebrew, Spanish, Polish, and English words are assimilated to a culture and a system of sound. The fox-trot and lindy-hop we called “American.” They had a touch of Nigeria, too, but compared to mambo or Yiddish, they felt like “Jingle Bells.” [\(PAGE 234\)](#) [JR](#)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) In the 1990s, Leonard Michaels said: “My writing tends to be terse and quick, usually about urban types and the kind of psychological violence they inflict on one another. I have no philosophical or political messages. My work depends on traditional beliefs.” Do you think that there are “messages” that can be inferred in these stories, especially if several are read together? Is there in Michaels’ dependence on “traditional beliefs” an inclination, conscious or otherwise, to leave readers with a message, after all?
- 2) In “Crossbones,” a couple preparing for a visit from the woman’s father suddenly and without apparent reason do significant physical damage to one another. A week later they are hobbling up the steps of City Hall to get married. What are the source, meaning, and consequences of this display of explosive anger?
- 3) What kind of game is being played in “The Deal?” What do the boys really want? Is the young woman tough or naïve, or both? Did the conclusion surprise you? What techniques does Michaels employ to build toward this ending?
- 4) Seemingly crazy things happen in Michaels’ New York: a Talmudic scholar slips on an icy street and, lying on the sidewalk, is assumed to be a drunken derelict; a telephone caller, trying to reach a friend, instead has a “conversation” with someone burglarizing the friend’s apartment; a seemingly desperate naked young man is prevented from going on the subway for lack of a token; a cabbie who graduated from college with honors, but chose to make a living driving, is gratuitously beaten by a group of passers-by. How plausible does all this seem to you? How do these incidents make you feel? What is Michaels telling us about life in urban America?
- 5) Several stories, including “Listening,” “Some Laughed,” “Finn,” and “Nachman From Los Angeles,” deal with various aspects of academia. From these stories alone, what do you think Michaels’ teaching experience at University of California, Berkeley, might have been like?
- 6) In “The Captain,” Phillip Leibowitz and his wife Mildred go to a party (a night full of racial and sexual tension) the theme of which seems to be, “There is nothing left not to do, is there?” Strange things happen, but did Phillip and Mildred know, when accepting the invitation, what would take place, even if not the

particulars? Discuss their motives, their relationship, and their “values.”

7) “Nachman” begins: “In 1982, Raphael Nachman, visiting lecturer in mathematics at the university in Cracow, declined the tour of Auschwitz, where his grandparents had died, and asked instead to visit the ghetto where they had lived.” Why is this sentence important? What gives it its power?

8) Do you think Nachman, in “The Penultimate Conjecture,” will ever tell the mathematician Lundquist that his proof is wrong? Why or why not? And what does this tell us about Nachman? Can you illustrate your point(s) by references to the other Nachman stories?

9) In *Time Out of Mind: The Diaries of Leonard Michaels, 1961–1999*, Michaels wrote: “Courage is continuing to perform your daily tasks, and being hopeful despite the odds, not inflicting your fears on others, and remaining sensitive to their needs and expectations, and also not supposing, because you’re dying, nothing matters any more.” Substitute “sick” or “in deep trouble” for “dying,” and think about whether any of the protagonists in these collected stories behave “courageously,” or at least try to do so. JR

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