The Fordham Center on Religion and Culture

GROWING UP CHOSEN:
JEWISH WRITERS AND THEIR CHILDHOOD

Pope Auditorium
Lincoln Center Campus
113 West 60th Street, New York City
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MODERATOR
Anne G. Hoffman
Professor, Department of English, Fordham University

PANELISTS
Joshua Halberstam
Philosopher, ethicist, and author of
A Seat at the Table: a Novel of Forbidden Choices; and
Schmoozing: the Private Conversations of American Jews

Myla Goldberg
Novelist, short story writer and author of
Bee Season, The False Friend and Wickett's Remedy

David Roskies
Professor of Jewish literature, Jewish Theological Seminary,
and author of *Yiddishlands: A Memoir*

MARGARET STEINFELS: Good evening. It's nice of you all to come out on a hot, rainy night. Who would think on December 6th it would be 60 degrees? Anyway, thank you all for coming. I want to welcome you to this evening's conversation "Growing Up Chosen: Jewish Writers and Their Childhood."

I am Margaret Steinfels, Co-director of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture. Again, we are happy to see all of you here tonight. Before we begin, I will make the usual — I guess I'm going to say the usual request. But I am going to implore you to turn off cell phones and anything else that beeps, chirps, sings, or plays Beethoven's Fifth. Thank you.

The cards and pencils on your seats are for your questions. Please write those at any point in tonight's proceedings when you have a question. Hold them up and our wonderful Fordham students — please raise your hands, Fordham students — will pick them up from you. We ask that you write as legibly and as succinctly as possible.

So let us begin. We have all had childhoods, and some of us love to tell stories about those childhoods — sometimes exuberant stories. These may include profound or painful insights, but also exaggerations, illusions, and out-and-out fabrications. As you all know, it happens.

Tonight we look at another aspect of using the past to tell a story — writing about it.

Novelists and memoirists are not expected to "tell the truth" in a wholly factual sense, though sometimes what they write is true.

Tonight we have for our enlightenment, edification, and perhaps our amusement, writers willing to talk about what you can do with a Jewish childhood. Each of them will read a selection from his or her work and then talk to one another about how they transformed a childhood memory into a story.

And by the way, you may have noticed the books, at least some of the books that they have written, are available for sale outside in the lobby, and they have agreed after we are finished to sign those that you ask them to sign. Now I'd like to introduce Anne Hoffman, our Moderator and Fordham colleague, who will, in turn, introduce the speakers and lead them in discussion.

Anne Golomb Hoffman grew up in Brooklyn and attended a Jewish day school through sixth grade, before transferring to public school. The Hebrew that she learned as a child formed the basis for her interest in modern Hebrew literature, a field that she encountered first as an undergraduate at Cornell, and when she went on to earn her Ph.D. at Columbia she wrote a dissertation on Franz Kafka and the Israeli writer S.Y. Agnon, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970. She has published widely on Hebrew literature, gender studies, psychoanalysis, and narrative, with a particular focus on representations of the body. She is interested in narrative in all its forms and functions. Over many years of teaching, Anne has enjoyed the opportunities for interdisciplinary research and teaching that Fordham offers. And I could also add that she is the maestro of the Jewish Text Group that meets monthly here at Fordham. With great pleasure, she also says, she teaches courses on the city in literature and art, 19th and 20th century novels, psychoanalysis, feminism, literary theory, and everything you'd want to know anything about.

I also would like personally to thank Anne for generously sharing with me her ideas for organizing this gathering, which has been in the works for about two years, and which has led me to read many, many wonderful novels. We have the top of the cream, so to speak, here tonight from that reading. So thank you very much, Anne, and I turn over the command post here.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Thanks, Peggy. It's a real pleasure for me to be here tonight and to be with you. I think we will all enjoy so much hearing the stories, the readings, and the reflections of our three wonderful writers. I think that Peggy Steinfels began to talk to me about this subject after putting together a really interesting program of Catholic writers writing about their childhoods. So there is a sense in which one can certainly do an interesting interreligious, cross-cultural study of different groups, different faith communities, ethnic groups, and how each uses storytelling as a way of self-understanding and as a way of understanding one's place in the world.

We record the stories of our elders. I know my mother is here tonight, and my daughters and I have been recording her reflections of her childhood in Vienna. These are forms of narrative understanding, I think. With that in mind, I'd like to introduce the first of our speakers. I will introduce each, and each will read from their work. I also want to mention that their books are available outside and they will be signing books after the evening's panel.

Our first speaker tonight is Joshua Halberstam. Joshua Halberstam grew up in Brooklyn, where he went to Yeshiva from elementary school through high school. He continued his

Talmudic studies in rabbinical school. He also managed, sometimes surreptitiously, to attend Brooklyn College and later New York University, where he received his Ph.D. in Philosophy. Josh Halberstam has taught philosophy at NYU and Teachers College of Columbia University, and presently teaches in the Communications Department at Bronx Community College of the City University. Along with his academic career, Dr. Halberstam has had a prolific writing career. In addition to fictional works and professional writing in philosophy, he has authored half a dozen books and dozens of articles in a broad array of areas, from ethics and social issues to education and Judaica. He has also been a frequent guest on national television and radio, including four appearances on *Oprah* and several appearances on NPR's *All Things Considered* and *Talk of the Nation*. Depending on whom you talk to, each of those has relative stellar quality. He has also lectured at leading universities, including Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

The background for Josh Halberstam's most recent book, *The Seat at the Table*, a novel about Chassidim in Brooklyn circa 1970, is a world that is very familiar to him. He is a scion of the leading Chassidic dynasties. His family traces unbroken generations of illustrious rabbis on both his father's and mother's side back to the 16th century, and he is the grandson of the first Chassidic Rebbe in Boro Park, Brooklyn. This past year, Halberstam received a National Endowment for the Arts grant to translate Chassidic stories from Yiddish to English. Here's Josh Halberstam.

JOSHUA HALBERSTAM: Thank you, Anne and Peggy.

I'm going to lead off here. Let me just set up a little bit about this reading that I will be doing. I was cursed with a happy childhood. This is no small impediment for a writer, if you just ask of the many authors who are nourished by unmitigated anger. Now, it's true that one hears wafting from the chambers of psychology halls that no childhood is truly fully happy, that they are all infused with real insecurities and imagined terrors.

Well, I'm going to submit that mine was a happy childhood, although, alas, the terrors were certainly no less real than the insecurities. The trick to it all is to avert with successful aversion. I had read an interview not long ago with Akira Kurosawa, where the famous, renowned filmmaker says that to be an artist is to never avert your eyes. Perhaps that's true of artists.

But I learned from the adults around me that sometimes it's critical to look the other way. In my case, I learned from my parents the importance of turning away from their recent horrific past in Europe during the war and to look toward America of the future. Yet, at the same time, it also meant for them avoiding looking at the glistening opportunities that beckoned here in modern America and keep themselves attuned to their rich religious past. It was all very confusing but somehow nourishing and somehow comforting.

And so it was for Elisha, the protagonist of my novel *A Seat at the Table,* from which I'm going to read to you now. The novel is a roman à clef, which is fiction traceable to a real life, in this instance my own. Elisha and share similar histories, fairly similar trajectories, though with the power invested in me by the state of authorship there are differences. He is tall, dark, handsome, and — darn him — forever young. And like me, as Anne mentioned, he was a scion of Chassidic dynasties, the Yiddish Chassidic world in which I grew up, and so can deeply appreciate what is involved in leading it.

I must say that when I read Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, it seemed like a plaything to me, because his supposedly deviant Chassidic main character remains an observant Jew, and

that's some deviant. In this regard at least, my novel is sort of *The Chosen* on steroids. But here's the other thing about happy childhoods. It also provides the elements for particularly complicated adolescences — you know, the disappointments are going to be all the more devastating, and the longing, having once belonged, is all the more lacerating.

Elisha enters this scene in this particularly early part of the narrative and the latter part of his teenage years. His cheerful childhood is receding. He's still a fervent Chassid. He's taking classes now, however, in college and he has had a tingling and lingering conversation with a vivacious dimpled girl from Wisconsin. He is ready to divest his Chassidic cloak, but he is unsure how protected he will now be from the strange winds of the outside world.

In the ensuing exchange with his father, whom he truly reveres and loves, he is — and it's a bit atypical because it's a more philosophical exchange, but I think it sets up the conflict that will take place in the rest of the novel. I'll read pieces of this, so it won't read totally fluidly. The opening epigram is from the Rebbe of Ostrovich, who says: "A father gives more of himself to his son than the son to the father. It was always like this. Adam had no father."

It begins as follows: "The next evening, Elisha walked into the bathroom, locked the door, and stood in front of the mirror. The scissors quivered in his hand. Are you ready, ladies and gentlemen, for the revised Elisha? Was he?

"He pursed his lips and exhaled a long column of air. In a moment. As soon as his wrists stopped trembling.

"With his finger behind his right ear, Elisha flipped his *payis* onto his face. Then the same with the left ear. The *payis* draped his cheeks, reaching his chin, the sacred frames of his Jewish face. A tear drifted down to his chin, its trajectory parallel to the sidecurls grasping his temples. He stroked the thatch of hair as he would the head of an innocent child and put the scissors back on the ledge. Another minute to say goodbye to who he was.

"This isn't drastic, he calmed himself. Shearing off one's *payis* isn't eating shrimp, not in the same league as lighting a fire on the Sabbath. Even the most orthodox Jews don't wear *payis* and, anyway, can't one always grow them back? Sure, he had his questions, but his core beliefs were solid as bedrock. He could still call himself a Chassid, with or without these adornments. And no, no, no, this had nothing to do with the girl on the ledge, the delicious tingle he felt thinking of her. But he could not be the spokesman for a world he no longer wished to defend. He'd free himself of this harness that proclaimed he would not turn right or left, when, in fact, he wanted to turn in every direction.

"Elisha checked the bolt on the door, picked up the scissors and snipped off the bottom edge of his right *payeh.* Another long exhale and he amputated the entire lock of his hair. He stared at his reflection for a full minute, one payeh still gripping his face, daring him.

"'Forgive me, Tateh,' Elisha whispered. He cut off the second sidecurl. 'This is about my life, not yours.'

"Elisha made his way down the corridor to his father's office, the Talmud in his hand as heavy as when he tried to lift it as a four-year-old. He turned the doorknob and saw his father at his desk reading. Elisha waited.

"'My God!' his father said, aghast.

"Elisha remained standing, voiceless.

"'So you did this, after all,' his father said.

"Elisha walked into the room, his head still lowered.

"'I thought we talked about this,' said his father. 'Weeks ago. You said it was a passing notion.'

"'Apparently, the notion stayed put.'

"'But why?'

"'I had to, Tateh.'

"'Had to? There is no such thing as had to. You chose to.'

"'All right then. I chose to.'

"'I must say I'm not really surprised. But right before the holy days of Rosh Hashanah?'

"'I thought of that. Believe me. But I'm not ashamed. Not for me, not for God either.'

"His father covered his mouth but the anguish was still visible in the narrowed eyes. 'Tell me,' he said, slowly, parsing his words. 'Is this the beginning of something or the end?'

"'The end. Only the *payis*.'

"Elisha finally looked up to meet his father's gaze. 'I didn't mean to hurt you.'

"'This isn't about me,' his father said.

"'No, it's not. And I'm still who I was.'

"'About that I'm not so sure. And I'm not so sure you believe that either.'

"'But I am. In what matters,' Elisha said, more to himself than to his father.

"Elisha sat across his father's desk and turned to the page they were to study, feeling his father's mahogany eyes still drilling toward him. How startling this must be for him, Elisha thought: after all these generations, ten, twenty, perhaps all the way back to King David, and it is *his* son that cuts off his *payis*.

"Elisha raised his head in times to see a crinkle form around the edges of his father's eyelids, his lips parting in the genesis of a smile.

"'What?' Elisha asked.

"'I was just recollecting an incident in Poland.'

"'Poland?'

"'I was a child, no more than nine or ten. We were in *cheder*, our tiny one-room schoolhouse. Someone had gotten hold of an atlas, and we all crowded around it. What a find! We turned to a page that had a picture of Chinese boys in braids. Back then the Chinese wore braids that reached way down their backs. 'How strange they look,' we smirked and cackled, all the while twirling our *payis*. Suddenly — who knows why — I stood back from the circle, realizing the oddity of it all.'

"'And behold you now,' Elisha said, pointing to his father's full beard.

"'Tradition requires commitments.'"

I'm going to skip a little ahead here because I want to make sure I don't go over fifteen minutes. So let me just finish up. This is after an exchange between father and son.

"'One has responsibilities.' Elisha shook his head. 'Responsibilities can't be imposed. You have a right to accept or reject them.'

"'Right?' replied his father. 'That's all I read these days, this right, that right, everything's a right. Well, I have news for you. A person comes into the world with duties . . . to himself, to his family, to his community, and to his heritage. Rights or no

rights.'

"'I don't agree,' Elisha said with a brazenness that astonished both of them. 'One chooses obligations.'

"Elisha's father bent forward and pressed his lips together so hard they went white. 'Listen, Elisha,' he said, his eyes riveted on his son's, 'perhaps I'm being naïve, but I have faith in you. I trust you will always know who you are, where you came from. What I worry about is your children . . . if they grow up without your imposed background. And yes, let me assure you, appearances do matter. External features — like *payis* — aren't trivial. I'm also sorry the Chinese boys no longer wear braids. They've lost something important too.' Elisha's father adjusted his new reading glasses and opened the book on his desk. 'But enough talk. It's time to study Torah.'"

. . .

"'Where were we holding?'

"'Three lines before the next Mishah,' Elisha said, pointing to the appropriate place on the page.

"His father would always be his dearest teacher. A double blessing portending double anguish. But for now the two joined in the distinctive singsong that accompanied the reading of rabbinic texts and were soon transported to the lush four cubits of Torah where nothing else mattered, not politics, not Chinese braids or *payis*, not even a young woman with a single dimple."

Thank you.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Thanks, Josh. That was a wonderful window into the world of the novel.

Our next speaker this evening is Myla Goldberg. Myla Goldberg grew up in Laurel, Maryland, escaping — I think that's her verb — to Ohio to attend Oberlin College. After graduating in 1993, she spent a year living in Prague, a city of Jewish mysticism, before moving to New York City. Her best-selling novel, *Bee Season*, her first novel, was a *New York Times* "Notable Book for 2000," winner of the Borders New Voices Prize, and a finalist for the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, the New York Public Library Young Lions Award, and the Barnes & Noble Discover Award. It has been adapted to film and widely translated. Her second novel, *Wickett's Remedy*, grew out of her fascination with the 1918 influenza epidemic. Her third novel, *The False Friend*, concerns a woman trying to untangle a twenty-year-old memory and explores the complexities of moral judgment, the fallibility of memory, and the adults that children become.

Myla's short stories have appeared in *Harper's* and *Failbetter*, among other places. Her book reviews have appeared in *The New York Times* and *Book Forum*. In addition to her novels, she has written an essay collection and a children's book. She sings and plays accordion and banjo in the Brooklyn art-punk band, The Walking Hellos. She writes and teaches in Brooklyn, a few blocks from where I grew up, where she lives with her husband Jason Little and their two daughters. It's a great pleasure to welcome Myla here tonight.

MYLA GOLDBERG: Hi, everybody. I'm going to start off with a reading part. I don't think you need to know much before I start reading. All you have to know is it is Friday night and Eliza and her family are at Friday night services.

"Toward the end of the silent Amidah, Aaron and Eliza play a game called Sheep that both claim to have invented. At the Amidah's beginning, Rabbi Mayer tells the entire congregation to rise. The congregants are supposed to remain standing for as long as they wish to pray, sitting down when they have finished. A lot of people actually do begin

by praying, but most stop soon after they start. They become distracted by thoughts of the evening's prime-time television lineup or by how awful the perfume is of the old lady with dyed hair who always sits in the seat under the air duct so that the smell of her goes everywhere.

"Because of this, knowing when to sit down is a problem. People want to appear prayerful, but they also want the service to end in time for "Remington Steele" or "Dallas" or "Falcon Crest." After a period that is short enough to move things along but long enough to seem respectable, they look for a cue. That is what Sheep is all about.

"The best nights to play Sheep are bar mitzvah Fridays. The synagogue is filled with people whose nephew or cousin or boss's son is becoming a man the next morning. These people occupy the back half of the synagogue even though there are seats available up front. When they stand for the silent Amidah they never know whether to focus on the prayer book or upon a distant point, looking thoughtful.

"The key is to make scraping noises. When Eliza or Aaron chooses the moment they feel represents the perfect prayerful/let's-get-on-with-it ratio, they rattle their chairs and rub one or two of the chair legs against the floor to make it sound as if more than one person is actually descending. Their efforts carry to the back where if it is determined that if the front rows are sitting, the other rows are allowed to sit down as well. Once Eliza timed it so around three-fourths of the congregation followed her into their chairs like an elaborate chain of dominoes. Even Aaron had been forced to admit that she'd set a new record.

"This Friday night, not being a bar mitzvah, neither Aaron nor Eliza nets any followers, the regulars making it a point of pride to have a unique time to reseat themselves. Three prayers, a Mourner's Kaddish, and two responsive readings later come the weekly announcements, which precede the final prayer. It's the same as usual—Sisterhood meetings, Sunday school classes, and singles' retreats—until Saul includes a special announcement.

"'Eliza Naumann has won the honor of representing our district tomorrow in the bee finals for our area. We wish her mazel tov and best of luck.'

"Then he moves on to something else about adult education, as though what he has just said is the most normal thing in the world. Eliza starts smiling so hard her cheek muscles hurt. Aaron makes a point of not looking at her.

"After the last prayer, everyone proceeds to the back room for *oneg*, where a table is waiting with tea, coffee, juice, and cookies. Eliza loves *oneg*, even though the juice is watered down and there are better cookies at home. On the cookie plate are always a few chocolate wafers, but the majority are chalky shortbreads that crumble into little pieces unless the whole thing is ingested at once. On someone's birthday, there is a store-bought cake sparsely decorated with candy flowers.

"The trick is to get one of the wafer cookies or, if it's a birthday, a slice of cake with a flower. This takes practice. Eliza and Aaron can't just race to the back room after the last prayer and grab what they want. They have to wait until Rabbi Mayer has come to the table and said a prayer over the food. In a way, this is lucky because sitting in the front row would put them at a distinct disadvantage if it were first come, first serve, especially with the Kaplan kids, who always sit in the back.

"The key to snagging a good cookie is placement. Eliza puts herself nearest to the side of the cookie plate with the good cookies on it, then casually rests her hand by the edge of the plate. As soon as the prayer is over, her hand is in prime position.

"Getting a flower is trickier. An adult always cuts the cake and there is a line. Eliza never knows what slicing method the cake cutter will use, so it is hard to anticipate where in the cake line she should be to net a flower. It is generally smarter to notice which adults get flowers and to casually ask for one. This is especially effective with women, who usually make a show of handing over their flowers in the service of the diet of the moment. With men, it isn't as sure a bet. They may hand over their flower to prove what great guys they are, but they are just as likely to make a joke about not giving over their flower to spotlight their lingering youthfulness in the face of galloping middle age. Eliza has a standing cake agreement with Mrs. Schoenfeld, who doesn't have children of her own and likes to think that giving Eliza her occasional flower gives them a special bond.

"The pre-bee service happens to fall on a birthday week, so there is cake. When it's Eliza's turn, Mrs. Schwartz, who is the de facto slicer and prides herself on not playing favorites, actually cuts a piece out of sequence in order to give Eliza a flower, saying that it will bring luck.

"Aaron tells himself he isn't jealous. Dad's announcement is no big deal. Eliza deserves the attention, she usually doesn't get any, and the state bee is important. Except that Aaron has been to the state science fair a few times and [his dad] has never told the congregation about that. When Mrs. Schoenfeld offers him her flower, he declines. He's too old to care about such things.

"Once Eliza loots the *oneg* table, she generally drifts outside to play tag until it's time to go home. Usually this is no problem, but tonight grownups want to talk to her. Mrs. Lieberman corners Eliza by the Siddur table and kisses her on both cheeks. Eliza wonders if her lipstick has left pucker marks.

"'This is a wonderful thing that can open doors to wonderful places.'

"Eliza misses the first half. She has been watching Aaron, an *oneg* pro, walk outside with neither cake flower nor good cookie, a sure sign that something is amiss. She feels a strange mixture of anxiety and pride at the thought that she may have something to do with it.

"Mr. Schwartz announces he is going to quiz her, one spelling champion to another. Up close, he has a brown front tooth and more wrinkles than Eliza thought. He sips his tea so loudly that she has to repeat NEIGHBOR three times before Mrs. Schwartz comes to her rescue, admonishing Phil for tiring Eliza out before the real thing. The sound of Mr. Schwartz's until now unknown first name allows Eliza to picture Mr. Schwartz in some place other than the synagogue, wearing something other than a brown-striped tie with a stained tip.

"Eliza is steps away from freedom when George finds her. George, who lives in the apartment complex nearby, isn't Jewish but comes to services every Friday and attends Saul's adult education classes. Eliza once overheard him talking to her father about religious conversion, and George's belief that if he is going to do it, he wants to 'go all the way,' but that he isn't sure that he is "strong enough." Eliza has no idea what George was talking about, even though Aaron has told her he was once in the bathroom when George was peeing and saw that George was uncircumcised.

"George tells Eliza she will be representing not only her district tomorrow but Her People. George holds Eliza's shoulders as he speaks and spits in his earnestness, the wetter syllables arcing harmlessly over Eliza's head.

"'For centuries, the Jewish nation has been persecuted and exiled. Tomorrow is your chance to manifest the same spirit that has kept the Chosen People alive and faithful through their wanderings in the desert. What you're doing is courageous.'

"Eliza's eyes are at the level of George's zipper. She squelches the urge to shout, 'Uncircumcised,' though still unsure of its meaning. Instead she silently spells the word. She smiles and nods at George as the letters dance and swirl inside her head until they are perfect, the word that is George's secret spelled out in all its mysterious glory."

. . .

The reason I chose that portion to read to you is, unlike the reader you just heard before me, this is the opposite of a *roman à clef* class. Like, that's basically the only thing in this whole book that has anything to do with my actual childhood. I was raised an observant Reconstructionist, if that's not an oxymoron to anyone out there. What that meant is I went to Friday services pretty much every Friday; I went to Sunday school, got bat mitzvahed. The game of Sheep is my invention and is what I did to forestall absolute boredom. And also, the *oneg* strategies were in fact my own.

But one thing that has been interesting to me as I've written more and more and thinking to myself in terms — when *Bee Season* came out, I was informed that I was a Jewish writer writing Jewish books. This actually came as a surprise to me. I was like, *Oh, I am?* If you look at *Bee Season*, that may make sense, because it's about a Jewish family. There's a Jewish mystic that comes along later on. But I wasn't sure how else it might apply to me because I had never thought of myself that way.

So when I was invited to be a part of this panel, it was actually perfect timing, because really for the past ten years I've been thinking long and hard about what the effect of growing up Jewish and considering myself Jewish has upon my writing.

My second book doesn't have a single Jew in it. My third book does have one. But what does that mean? If a Jew writes a book with no Jews in it, is it still a Jewish book and are they still a Jewish writer? These are things I wonder.

What I've come to realize was the effect of my Jewish childhood and the books that follow is my Jewish childhood instilled a very strong sense of Jewish cultural and philosophical and historical identity in me. I'm very secular. I'm not at all a religious person. But I do consider myself spiritual and have very strong ties to the cultural, historical, philosophical, and intellectual elements.

What I discovered is certain themes keep popping up. Mostly for me it's the theme of *Tikkun olam*, which translates into "the fixing of the world." There's the idea that we as Jews have a duty to make the world a better place, to fix it, because what we have inherited is broken. In every single one of my books, that crops up. It's obvious in *Bee Season*, because Miriam kind of adopts the idea of *Tikkun olam* to kind of explain away her own troubling actions within the context of the family.

But in *Wickett's Remedy*, the book with no Jews in it, Lydia, who is an Irish-Catholic girl who grows up in a South Boston tenement, takes it upon herself to try to figure out why

the flu epidemic is killing as many people as it is, and so she is using *Tikkun olam*.

In my third book, my main character Celia, who also is not Jewish, has spent her entire life working for charities and trying to make the world a better a place to kind of compensate for something she did as a child.

So that has been really fascinating to me. It is one of several themes that I realized are running through my books that I didn't realize were there that are really directly traceable to being raised as a Jew. So I'm now comfortable with the idea that *All right, yeah, I'm a Jewish writer even when sometimes I write a book that doesn't seem overtly, obviously Jewish, because what I'm thinking about the lens through which I'm looking at the world is very much shaped by the fact of my Jewish childhood and by the very strong sense of Jewish identity I have when I write.* So there you have it. Thank you.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Thank you, Myla. That was wonderful. Our last speaker is David G. Roskies.

David is a native of Montreal and a product of its Yiddish secular schools. His home growing up was a salon for writers and artists. At sixteen he co-founded an international Yiddish movement, called Yugntruf, which still exists. At seventeen he left home to pursue studies at Brandeis and the Hebrew University. At twenty-one he became a card-carrying member of the Jewish counterculture. Maybe he'll tell us more about that. The Holocaust is a major focus of his writing. A pioneer in the field of Holocaust commemoration, his *Night* W*ords: A Midrash on the Holocaust,* was first published in 1971. It has gone through several editions and was adapted into Hebrew in 2007.

In 1984 Harvard published his *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*. This book won the Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize from Phi Beta Kappa, and it has been translated into Russian and Hebrew. There is a companion volume, *The Literature of Destruction*, that appeared in 1989. And he has been working on *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide*, co-authored with Naomi Diamant, which will appear in 2012. Awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1985, David Roskies began studying the modern Jewish return to folklore and fantasy. The fruits of his labors are *The Dybbuk and Other Writings by S. Ansky*, which appeared in 1992, and *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (1995). Turning to storytelling himself, he has published *Yiddishlands*, an irreverent and yet very loving memoir about the Yiddish worlds in which he was raised. That appeared in 2008. *Yiddishlands* won the Canadian Jewish Book Award in the Yiddish category. David Roskies holds the Sol and Evelyn Henkind Chair in Yiddish Literature and Culture at Jewish Theological Seminary, and he is Professor of Jewish Literature at both the Seminary and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Welcome, David.

DAVID ROSKIES: Thank you very much.

The chapter that I chose to read from *Yiddishlands* is actually anomalous. It is from the second part of the book. Here in this chapter we are on the road. We are not sitting at a table. Here we allow my mother to speak without interruption, the way it wasn't in real life, when we weren't allowed to get up from the table until she had finished speaking. Here we get the lyrical and hysterical flow of mother's monologue. I make no attempt in this chapter to re-craft her speech into a manageable text with a beginning, a coherent plot, and a planned ending.

Once upon a time, I had wanted to write the whole book in her voice. After all, I wrote

this book in order to keep my mother's memory alive. The book is as much about her as it is about me.

But this as Mission Impossible. I was not Shlomo Leipham, I wasn't Yaakov Shabtai, and no reader would feel obligated to stay seated at the table. No reader had the patience I had at every meal, every day for seventeen years, to listen to mother carry on and free associate.

This chapter is also different because it isn't just Mother and me. We're on the road to Cape Cod, a trip that in those days took us a day and a half, and there are four of us in the car: my father is at the wheel, my mother is next to him, and my sister Eva and I are in the back of the Oldsmobile. The year is 1958. I'm ten years old.

There is one more thing about these trips. My mother knew many songs in several languages. How many we were to discover much later. But she sang very rarely, only on Chanukah and sometimes on Pesah if the seder went without a glitch, which was not always the case. Here, however, on our yearly trips to Cape Cod, it was nonstop. To keep Eva and me from going stir crazy, mother opened up a room or two in her treasure house of song — songs mixed with memories, memories mixed with longing and rage.

It was this chapter that gave me the idea of including a CD of her singing, which is at the back of the book. I wanted to give back her voice in Yiddish, Russian, and a snippet of Polish. Cape Cod:

"Didn't we see? Rushing her like that almost made her forget to hide her jewelry in the cedar closet! *Sheyn voltn mir oysgezen*, think if we hadn't brought along the wet face cloth, it's already so hot and we have such a long road ahead, a good thing we're already past the Canadian-U.S. border, she worries that something might be wrong with our passports. When the border patrol looked at our luggage he refused to believe we were only going for two weeks. Are we comfortable back there? There's plenty of room at her feet for the extra pillow.

"Too bad, I say to myself, we didn't take the Mercier Bridge to cross the border at Malone, catching a glimpse along the way of the giant tepee outside of Caughanauwake, but then it would have meant stopping at Huntingdon, tempting Father to drop by the factory for a bit, not just another delay, but another chance to be reminded of how Mother put her foot down when they came to Canada: Never again would she live in a factory town . . . four years in Krosno were enough, when the day's entertainment was a walk into town and back, every mother pushing her own perambulator, you had to prove to the other mothers how dedicated you were, and after Krystyna died in childbirth she hardly had anyone to talk to . . .. So let's sing a Chastúhka, shall we?

Po úlitsa khodíla
bolsháya krokodíla
aná, ana, golódnya bilá!

"What a relief to be singing so soon the song that never fails to raise our spirits, 'A great big crocodile went walking on the street and she was ever-so-hungry.' Guess what she read in the *Tog-morgn zhurnal* yesterday? That this was David Bergelson's favorite Russian song and he sang it to his granddaughter just before the Soviet secret police came to take him away.

"The subject of Krosno comes up anyway, after we safely cross the border at Champlain, because Father compliments her on her new summer hat. What a laugh! It reminds her of Shmuel Dreyer's visit when he came to Krosno to check up on her after they were

married. He comes in, Dreyer does, looks around, then compliments her on their dining room table made of inlaid wood. *Vos vúnderstu zikh*? Papale said after Dreyer went back to Vilna. "What else was there in our apartment to single out for praise?" Just so, her summer hat.

"Who, indeed, were we the envy of? Certainly not of the other Roskies. See how Papale bends over backward not to provoke his brothers, or any of her sisters-in-law, may they live and be well. So as not 'to tear their eyes open' he refuses to buy a new Oldsmobile, will drive this one into the ground. See if we don't have a flat tire as we had last summer.

"Why, we should have seen the Packard they had in Czernowitz! King Carol didn't own a finer car. Papale begrudged himself a chauffeured sedan, but as director of Caurom he had no choice, until they arrived in Lisbon and were waiting for a ship. There was a ship at anchor that could have taken them to Uruguay. Papele said no. If they were to quit Europe, it had to be for a country where all citizens were equal. Uruguay, he maintained, was like Romania, with a corrupt government, a tiny elite, and a peasantry still enslaved to the land. Papale was always such a democrat. Not like his brothers who walk all over him. That brother of his, a gangster without a revolver, took everything they had to ransom his wife and daughters, wouldn't let Binyomin in as a partner, had him banished to Lindsay instead, to get him out of the way . . .. If only Daar hadn't died on the eve of their arrival to Canada, they could have gone into business with him and let the Roskies stew in their own juices. Time for a Bundist song. Papale, you sing the chorus."

B'nich mir asnide lal lagita, gita
Negafalen freidn ma fita, fita
F'nem ma voist gansa vata,
Lai gai vainan autes mahta
. . .
I am a little tailor of the best.
Chorus: The Best!
I sew for the Rebbe a fur vest.
Chorus: Fur vest!
I take out all the cotton and pads
and stuff it up with a bunch of old rags.
Yam-ba-ba-bam, yam-ba-ba-bam
Yam-ba-ba-bam, yam-ba-ba-bam.

"Hearing Father sing is always a good sign. And Eva, in tenth grade already, tries to draw Father into a conversation with her knowledge of Canadian history. Isn't the Quebec peasantry, she asks, enslaved to the Church? A tiny English-speaking elite runs the banks and heavy industry, just as the Germans did in Romania. The Jews are stuck in the middle. Canada doesn't even have its own constitution. We're still subjects of the Queen!

"'How can you compare them?' comes Father's reply. 'The queen is but a figurehead. The government, industry, the universities, are open to all. You can grow up to be whatever you want, Evale, an historian, a novelist, even a politician.' 'Only she can't become queen!' I pipe in, giving Mother the opening she needs. 'Once, on Queen Elena's birthday, she tells us, it was decreed that all of Romania had to hang out purple banners. But there was a poor Jewish cobbler in Bucharest who couldn't afford to buy a swatch of purple, so he took his wife's purple bloomers and hung them out the window. 'Look!' screamed the Iron Guards, 'the Zhids are making fun of us,' and they started a terrible pogrom against all the Jews.

"'Their hatred of us,' says Mother, was nothing compared to our own self-hatred.' Now

that she's onto her favorite subject, we know what's coming next, the song of the Jew-girls, the 'Zhidúvkes':

Those Jew-skirts are damn perverse.
Gabbing all in Polish like Yiddish was a curse,
So's nobody should ever tell
They're a gaggle of Jew-gals.
They think Polish is the real parlez-vous,
Yiddish just a dumb cluck's howdy-do.
Peylish iz bay zey a shprakh
Yidish iz a miyese zakh.

"These self-haters get what they deserve in the last stanza when their noses, the one thing they cannot camouflage, give them away, and that awful word *camouflage* is worse than any swear word. It reeks of rot, like that slimy phrase, *Malheur de richesse*, which she reserves for the people she hates the most: the all rightniks in her midst, the nouveaux riches, by which she means the Jews of Westmount, the exclusive neighborhood to which they moved upon arrival in 1940, in order to be close to the other Roskies brothers. It was the last thing *she* wanted, but what choice did she have? Until the day she attended a wedding at the Shaar Hashomayim, a 'temple' these Westmount Jews built themselves. It was the middle of the war and the news from Europe was very bad. Who even thought of making a fancy wedding in those days? As the bride starts walking down the aisle, the musicians strike up Mendelssohn's 'Song Without Words,' and Mother is shocked. Why that very melody? It had been set to words by Avrom Reisen after the playwright A. Vayter was killed in the pogrom of 1919, dragged out into the street by Polish Legionnaires and shot at point blank, right through his girlfriend who was trying to shield him with her body, and at the funeral all the youth of Vilna and all the leaders of the community walked behind the bier and sang:

The loveliest songs, the loveliest melody,
Do not sing them when fortune's rising,
Sing them during decline.
Ring out, sounds of glory,
Though the spring has passed us by,
Though the sun has long since set
Though the poet is dead.

"How could they pollute this sacred hymn by using it for a mere wedding procession? Then and there Mother decided she had had enough. She was moving us to a Jewish neighborhood, away from all this hypocrisy. So on account of Mendelssohn's song we moved to Outremont, where she enrolled us in the Folkshule, and our Yiddish teachers raised us to be the proud Jews that we are.

"She was right. Just outside of Lake George we have a flat tire, in the very spot where we were stopped for speeding the year before. What is it about Lake George? When will they ever finish building Interstate 87 so that we can pass it by? I bet it's our Quebec license plates that tip them off. It takes forever to get the tire changed, and from the sheepish way that Father takes out his wallet we know he must be paying through the nose. Either because her worst fears have already come true or because she always calms down when the going gets rough, Mother now abandons the *tishlider,* the Bundist songs, and the hymns. It is time for Aleksandr Vertinsky, the most popular song writer of their youth, and these songs she will sing in both Russian and Yiddish, in the translations nonpareil of that Vunderkind, Leyb Stotsky, who did them just for her, for Masha, the Nightingale, and to prove to all those assimilationists that the youth of Vilna sang in Yiddish not because they couldn't sing Russian but because Yiddish was their special price, their

world.

Drink my girl, *Trink-zhe mayn meydele,*
my sweet young thing, *tsartinke, eydele,*
This lousy wine, *ot dem farzoyertn vayn.*
Both of us are destitute, both depressed,
Mir, fil gelitene, beyde farbiterte
Happiness is not given to us,
mir kenen gliklekh nit zayn.

"And what a world it was, full of lovers drinking their bitter wine, doomed to eternal unhappiness and scorn but always in such perfect rhyme.

"Mother has worked her magic, just as she did on that March night in the Zakret forest, when she bewitched Father with another one of Stotsky's translations, from Polish that time, not from Russian, because it is getting late and we must stop for the night at a motel, which father laughingly pronounces 'motl,' like the Yiddish name, and everything will have to come out of the trunk. And tomorrow, after a huge breakfast, we will set out again. Eva and I glued to opposite windows, locked in fierce competition after we hit the Mass Pike, over who can spot the most exotic license plates, she calling out Oklahoma, and I coming back at her with Mississippi. And this will keep us busy until we exit at Route 3 and begin our approach to the Cape. Here we will be met by the caravans of soldiers from some secret army base nearby, those handsome GIs who once liberated Paul Trepman from Bergen-Belsen, and to one of whom, with an amputated leg, cousin Sonia joyously gave up her virginity on the ship that brought her to America, the only civilian in a POW exchange, just before the end of the war. They wave to us from the back of their U.S. army trucks, yelling Quebec! Hey, Quebec!

"We are almost safe now, and for two weeks we will live in a wooden cottage with a shingled roof, and Mother will sit for hours in her forest of pine trees reading the Yiddish papers, the pines that must remind her of some other place, Druskienniki, perhaps, or the dacha in Ritro, the place where Father asked her to sew a button onto his coat because he had to visit his sick mother, and Beyliss, seeing them walking together, said, *Fun aykh vet zayn a sheyn porl,* you will make a beautiful couple someday, even though they weren't even going out yet and she was still involved with Seidman."

ANNE HOFFMAN: That was beautiful.

We are going to move into the next stage of the evening. I am going to ask each of the writers to comment on their choice of reading, and we'll see what questions come up. But I also want to invite people in the audience to use the index cards and pencils to write down your own questions. There are students circulating who would be happy to pick those cards up from you, and we'll have time of questions from the audience in the last part of the evening.

I'm happy to join you over here. I know I have a lot of questions of my own. But I think we might ask each of you maybe to reflect — Myla already began the conversation — telling us a bit about the reflections that were stimulated in you by this invitation and your thoughts about yourself as a Jewish writer.

I wonder if I could ask each of you. In the readings that you shared with us you really are showing us something very central to your craft, and that's your ability to create the perspective of a child from within a family. You don't have to answer my question, but it is something I would like to ask each of you, to reflect on what kinds of work go on for you in creating that perspective, either on a personal or a literary level. We can start with

Josh.

JOSHUA HALBERSTAM: Okay, sure. Thank you and welcome to our side of things here.

Storytelling was always very important in my childhood because storytelling is always very important in Chassidism. I grew up in that world. Actually, my father used to tell Chassidic stories on the radio, on a station called WEVD, which some of you may be aware of. It stands for Eugene V. Debs. In 1928 it was created by the Socialist Party and then five years later sold to The Forward. It was a Yiddish radio station.

After the war, more traditional Jews with survivors came to America, and the programming changed a little bit. Every week my father would tell Chassidic stories, which is really weird for me, because I was always late going to Yeshiva. In Boro Park, where I grew up, every store would be playing this radio station. I'd hear my father's voice right behind me and I was late and it was freaking me out.

So I grew up hearing Chassidic stories. Chassidism teaches that, as the Breslov rebbe said, while it's true that a story can put you to sleep, it could also wake you up. In fact, one of the early Hasidic rebbes said that while it's true you have to be clever to write a story, you have to be a lot cleverer to hear a story.

So this was always part of our lives. In Chassidism telling stories is akin to prayer. There are a lot of Chassidic stories about storytelling. So I grew up in this world where it was okay to tell stories, and in fact it was almost a requirement of growing up. I would visit my grandparents, who were, as Anne mentioned, Chassidic rebbes, and there would be thousands of people there.

Just parenthetically, our family is rather large. This is a very strange thing. If you write my name down, Halberstam, and then "wedding" and go on YouTube, you can see some of our weddings. At the last wedding in our family we had 23,000 people at the wedding. It was at Marine Park at the hangar, the airport over there.

MYLA GOLDBERG: Did you have salmon or chicken?

JOSHUA HALBERSTAM: This is quite a catering feat, I've got to tell you.

We're trying to supplant ourselves here. So there's a lot of stories that go around between all those kinds of people. So I have, as they say in the language, *Kein Ayin Hora*. As of this morning, 264 great-nephews and –nieces. So it's a huge family and there are a lot of stories about it. I'm sure that had a lot to do with my continuing this tradition of storytelling.

The other parts of the tradition I didn't keep, my parents are not so happy about, but the storytelling part has continued.

MYLA GOLDBERG: I come to storytelling from being just a reader, an avid, avid reader as a child, and knowing from a very early age I just wanted to write. I think the writing impulse for me — there's very few things that you can do as a child that give you any sort of power. But when you write something and you hand it to them and then they read it, they can't do anything else. You can't read and talk on the phone and you can't read and fold the laundry. If you're reading that's all you are doing. So to be a child and to write a story and to hand it to someone to read, you're making them do something. It's

really exciting. So that was a part of, I think, why I wanted to be a writer.

The other part was just the idea of escape and creating my own worlds and creating my own realities. I came to that first as a reader and it was really cool. The only thing I discovered that was cooler is making up the worlds myself.

And then, I guess, the other part of me for writing came from wanting to understand why people act the way that they do.

The world was a very confusing place for me growing up. I was often picked on as a kid. I was a nerdy child, just as I'm a nerdy adult — but I get picked on less now, which is nice. But I think one of the reasons I turned into a psychologically-driven writer is my interest in trying to understand people and why they do what they do.

I think, perhaps because of all of those things, I remember my childhood very intensely. So when I turn to write about childhood it's pretty easy to do.

Now, that said, that kind of sets up a conflict, because I told you that in *Bee Season* that's not my childhood in there, and it really isn't. Like the part that I read you really is pretty much the only actual thing that happened in my childhood.

When I write I make a big distinction between autobiographical fiction and personal fiction. I'm very interested in personal fiction. I am not at all interested in autobiographical fiction. Personal fiction for me captures the essence of an emotional experience or a psychological experience or an intellectual experience and then distills it into characters and stories that are different from my own. They are a patchwork, perhaps, of people I knew and people I've observed and people that I've made up.

So certainly there are huge aspects of my Jewish childhood and Jewish upbringing in *Bee Season*, it being about a Jewish girl growing up in a Jewish family. But none of it is one-to-one. The reason I'm a fiction writer is I don't want to tell you about my life. I don't know you. Maybe if we got to know each other for a couple years, then we could talk.

But the impulse for me for writing is to understand myself, understand my world, but to do it in a way that makes me feel safe. Self-revelation doesn't feel safe for me. That's why I love fiction so much.

DAVID ROSKIES: I was born into a huge family saga. My mother's entire family perished and my father's almost entire family survived the war. That was the great divide between them.

The way that this loss was compensated for was that my mother never stopped talking about that part of the family that had perished, so that for me growing up they were the most alive presence that I knew, and I really mean that.

My grandmother, Fradl Matz, who died at the age of fifty-six in December of 1921, was a dominant presence in our life. She was the moral compass of our life. A life-size portrait of her hung over my parents' conjugal bed.

JOSHUA HALBERSTAM: That's why you look like her, right?

DAVID ROSKIES: And her words of wisdom were invoked constantly.So I wasn't much of a reader. I didn't really need to read. I was completely over-stimulated by sitting

at the table, as I said, three times a day — that's breakfast, lunch, and dinner — for seventeen years.

I wasn't exaggerating. You couldn't get up until my mother had finished speaking. The only exception was that at lunchtime it was the lunch break, and when the school bus honked its horn, then I was free and I could go.

But in fact I preferred sitting at the table listening to her stories oftentimes than going to school. Because what did you learn in school? "See Jane run. She Dick fall. Dick and Jane go up the hill." When you're at home listening to your mother, you're learning about the betrayal and the love and the unconsummated love and the forbidden love and the filial love. At the age of ten you're already an expert at love.

And you're learning about this world which is larger than anything and much more interesting than anything you'll ever learn and read about until you're much, much older.

So the two of us essentially colluded. I still have report cards from elementary school where I am absent more days than I am present. Whenever I pretended to have a cold, she said, "*Dovid*, stay at home." Then she had her captive audience.

The truth is that I always knew I would write this book. But I also knew that so long as my mother was alive I couldn't write this book, because she was the single most dominant presence in my life. I began writing it the day after I got up from the *shiva*, from the seven-day mourning period. I wrote for two years and I completed a first draft. Then I spent another six years revising it because I knew that this was it, I wasn't going to write another book like this ever again, so I wanted to make it as good as I could.

The first part is called "Table Talk." It's me sitting at the table listening to her stories. The scope of them is from the middle of the 19th century. Her memory went back to 1878, to her mother's wedding. And it ends, there is a point at which these stories end, and they end in 1940. There is a before and there is after. History for my mother ended when they came to Canada, because everything of lasting beauty was destroyed. That became part of the mythology that I grew up with.

The second part, from which I actually read to you, is called "Talking Back." That actually is much more about my childhood and Montreal and coming of age. It's kind of the bildus roman.

The third part is called "Jewspeak," where I leave home, looking for whatever remnants I could find of this amazing past that I was raised on.

So this is the book that I always wanted to write, and I feel extremely privileged that I was able to do it.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Thank you. I want to follow up with a question that maybe grows out of some of what you've been talking about. I wanted to ask each of you, if you think about Jewish writers and Jewish writing, certainly what comes to mind is traditions of Jewish learning and devotion to Jewish texts and how the activities that surround texts really inform communities. I think in different ways this enters into the writing that each of you has done. I wonder if I could ask you to think about that with us.

JOSHUA HALBERSTAM: Obviously, this question about what's a Jewish writer is the standard question that anybody can ever answer. As Myla was saying, is it about writing

about Jews, or is it writing by Jews?

But I do think texts actually, at least in my life, were crucial. I was personally — and again I agree with Myla that writing novels that are autobiographic makes for bad therapy and bad writing. It's not the way to do it.

On the other hand, writing fiction is the best way to tell the truth, as we all know. But, unlike nonfiction, which I write, fiction has to be plausible. The real world isn't. But when you're writing fiction, the story actually has to be plausible, which is kind of paradoxical.

I've had this contradiction with texts because I studied Talmud for a big chunk of my life. There the text is very analytical and you have to be very logical.

The storytelling part is the more creative part and it's more loosey and emotional. This has always been a problem in my life, because I'm sort of perched between. Like the kind of philosophy that I do is hard-ass logic, analytic philosophy. I don't understand any of this French — what we call "frog fog."

So there's real complications over here. I do that kind of philosophy, and yet when I'm doing that, I figure *Hey, but I want to be able to be more creative.* So then you write fiction, then you go, *Yeah, but it's not logical.* So you're really stuck in the middle.

My training in texts was very much like that, because I'm learning Pilpul, a really analytical story of Talmud, in the Lithuanian-style of yeshivas that I studied in, and yet when I went home to the Chassidic world it was all that joy and dancing and storytelling and creativity. Which texts informed your life really I think has a tremendous effect on the future writing.

Like David, I was a guy, I didn't read a whole lot, and I was busy playing punch-ball in the streets and following the Brooklyn Dodgers into oblivion. That was much more part of my life. Apparently, that continues to be a problem. Women read a whole lot more than guys do.

But once you get older and started discovering literature, the world opened up. So those became very important texts for me as well.

I'm sure everybody else has their own little text story and context.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Myla, can I ask you specifically about spelling and Jewish mysticism? It's such a fascinating dimension of your book.

MYLA GOLDBERG: Yes, sure. *Bee Season* ends up concerning a lot about the teachings of Abraham Abulafia, who is this very wacky Jewish mystic, who kind of was — you know how we have like "The Idiot's Guide to Cooking"? He kind of wrote "The Idiot's Guide to Mystical Transcendence," except that he did it back in the 14th century or the 15th century, at a time when the only people who were supposed to try to achieve transcendence had to have studied lots and lots and done all these certain things.

What Abulafia said was: "No. Actually all you have to do to achieve transcendence — it's still very difficult — is if you say certain words and you spell them out letter by letter, chanting them in a certain way, accompanied by certain gestures, this practice alone can allow you to achieve transcendence, to reach *shefa*, an enlightened state of being, to

basically commune with the divine.

Now, when people read *Bee Season*, they think that maybe I'm a big studier of kabbalists or a follower of the mystics. No. Actually I had an extra elective when I was at Oberlin. There was this class on Jewish mysticism that sounded kind of wild to me. So for my two electives that semester I took economics and I took Jewish mysticism.

It just happened to have been taught by an incredibly dynamic and charismatic professor, named Elliot Ginsburg. So when he started talking about Abulafia, I didn't think *Oh, it's fascinating; I want to write a novel about this man someday*. No. It's just I thought, since I was an aspiring writer, a guy who said that words have the power to create and destroy, I related to that. I'm like *Yeah, that's really cool*. So it just must have sat in my back brain.

Fast forward years and years down the road. I am starting to be interested in spelling bees because I read an article in *Granta* that talked about spelling bees in terms of all the kids who lose rather than the one kid who wins. That changed. It's like *Oh yeah, we all lose, we're losers, I relate to that*.

I had just come back from a spelling bee. Thank goodness for the back brain. Some people call it the subconscious, the unconscious. I think of it as the back brain. It's where all of our really deep thinking goes on. We're not always aware of that thinking. It kind of gets brought out to us in moments when we're not expecting.

That's what happened to me with spelling and mysticism. My back brain had conveniently remembered. I had just seen an event where children, one after the other, got up and spelled words perfectly letter by letter, according to certain methods. My back brain said, "Hey, didn't we hear about some guy who was doing this centuries before, this word-by-word, letter-by-letter thing?

So I woke up one morning and spelling bees and Jewish mysticism just kind of fused in my imagination. That was really the springboard where *Bee Season* took off.

Although I was very much raised Jewish and observant in a Reconstructionist way, I didn't study Talmud, I didn't go to yeshiva, the texts. In fact, once *Bee Season* actually won a Jewish award, and I had to have dinner with the judges afterward. They were like, "Yes, we can tell that you were very influenced by Malamud." I'm like *I have never read him*.

It has been very interesting when I encounter people who think certain things about what my background must be based upon what they are seeing in the book.

So the influence of texts is important, but for me it's a much broader thing. Because I grew up in a largely secular community — I belonged to a synagogue but my friends were as much Jews as non-Jews — my influences are very, very diverse and mixed. So they just come from all over.

DAVID ROSKIES: Texts play a very important role in my life and also in this book. Besides the chapter that I read from, there is another chapter in that middle section of which I am particularly proud. It's called "The Soirée." It describes the literary salons that my mother conducted in our home. My place growing up was underneath the piano. Just sitting under the piano, I was exposed to scholars and poets and writers discussing work.

Montreal was also the home of Yiddish writers, and there was a real concentration of Yiddish talent among our teachers and in the community at large. Anyone who came to visit would give anything to be invited to my mother's salon. That's one of the ways in which she lorded it over people, because she decided who was in and who was out.

I knew that I would have to describe what this literary salon was, because it represented — Yiddish for me was never an immigrant culture; it represented high culture. It was something that I always aspired towards, which is why it's the field that I entered. But how would I describe this?

I wrote many, many versions of it, and it read like a term paper about Yiddish literature. There was no story to it. It was dead in the water.

And then there must be something called the Muse because she visited me. The Muse said as follows: "You can describe the salon exactly the way you have, and who the players are, how they convene, the living room, and the whole setting. And you can describe a debate and discussion of a recently published book. The book that they will be discussing is this book — that is, all the Yiddish literati of Montreal sit in my mother's living room and take apart this book and, in a very honest, forthright way, say what's wrong with it. Because it's not their book. It's not the way they would have written it. They take it apart. By doing that, the reader understands their point of view, their intelligence, their critical insight into life." That's how I tried to bring the literary salon to life.

The second way that texts work in this book is that I wrote a chapter written in rabbinic midrashic style. I imitated the style of rabbinic midrash in a chapter called "Male Bonding," which is a tribute to my teacher of Talmud, who was a Lithuanian-born scholar. He was the grandfather that I never had. He was the closest person I knew to a saint.

I couldn't do it directly. So I thought *How can I bring this man to life? Maybe by doing it in the language that he taught me, which was the language of rabbinic interpretation.*

So I did. I told the story of how I studied with him and our relationship through texts, and I think I — I tried at least to convey the love that I had for this man.

The third part is about a group of — I mentioned earlier the Jewish counterculture. I was part of this group of latter-day Abulafians in Somerville, Massachusetts, the first of the so-called Havurat, which was a kind of co-educational-religious-musical commune — and it's the 1960s you remember — around the corner from Tufts University. It was a community of young rebels who were brought together through the study of Jewish texts.

What I tried to do there — it's the only chapter in the book that isn't written in translation, by which I mean every other chapter is really spoken in another language and I'm translating from that language. I'm mediating conversations that happened in other languages into English. That was the only chapter which happened in English.

We spoke this 19th-century spiritual English. Nobody speaks English like that anymore. So I tried to the best of my ability to recreate the way we spoke, and spoke about life and about texts and how we tried to reinvent Judaism in the light of these texts that we were rediscovering.

JOSHUA HALBERSTAM: Just a comment. I want to ask you about that one. Here

you and I probably share something that maybe Myla doesn't, growing up in another language, as I did and you did.

There's this wonderful line by Goethe, where he says, "If you only speak one language, you don't speak any." He's not talking about language. You never know whether this is just peculiar to me, but if you know two languages, two cultures, then you can test one against the other.

Like you, growing up, and the rhythms and the cadences are all in the Yiddish that I have or in the yeshiva-talk that I had, and then writing a novel about it — my novel also takes place in the early 1970s, so the outside world is really beckoning. Of course this guy has the non-Jewish girlfriend.

My editor told me that there are only three plots in the world: "There's *Romeo and Juliet* and that's two of them."

So you're coming out into the world. You're still thinking like a yeshiva boy, and yet you're out into this world, and this girl is from Wisconsin, and who is more exotic, he to her or she to him? So you keep on hearing these languages. As you're doing that, you're subjected to this constant translation in your head from one culture to the other.

It's an advantage in writing. I think Beckett says that he wrote in French because it was harder. So he was able to write more carefully because it wasn't his natural language.

This becomes an interesting problem when you're writing about a secular world. So there's an ongoing translation. I don't know whether you feel that. You escaped this, Myla.

DAVID ROSKIES: Well, it was a source of tremendous frustration, because I wanted to bring my mother alive through her speech and the richness of her speech.

But you have to understand one thing: in our family we were allowed to mix milk and meat. Our home was principally not kosher. The one thing we were not allowed to mix was languages. We were not allowed to do that. So if you are speaking Yiddish you have to speak Yiddish, and if you are speaking English it's English, and you weren't allowed to mix and match. So that set the bar very high. My mother kept to that and we all tried to.

That meant that when I was trying to recreate her speech, I couldn't do it in Yinglish. That would have been unthinkable, heretical. So I had to maintain a purity of English and somehow convey her speech.

The only way I could think of doing that is by creating a tremendously dense narrative, which is very associative and it's all over the place, just to give the sense of her personality.

In fact, the title of the book — it came out in Hebrew, and it has actually a better title in Hebrew than it does in English. In Hebrew, *In the Language of the Mother Tongue*. So it really is about language as land, as territory, as home.

The last thing I want to say about this is that the six years that I spent were very well spent. But the book had to be written in English after all. What I realized is that only by writing it in English could I finally liberate myself from my mother.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Great. I wonder if I can follow up with a question to Myla that picks up on the commonality that came out between you and David Roskies in terms of counterculture. I'm thinking about the character of the father in *Bee Season*, whose mysticism I think is a product of counterculture of the 1960s. I wonder if you have any thoughts about that.

MYLA GOLDBERG: Yes. There were a few too many acid trips basically in the case of the father in *Bee Season*. I'm sorry. Can you repeat? You want me to talk about that in relation to which?

ANNE HOFFMAN: Well, I just think it's such an interesting aspect of that novel. It's sort of like every person in that novel has their particular relationship to mysticism.

MYLA GOLDBERG: That's certainly true. The book for me is about the fact that — I'm fascinated by families. How can you not be? We're all from one. In this particular family, everyone is looking for the same thing, which is to say something to raise them above the banality of daily existence but they're looking for it in very different places. The tragedy of the book is they are not aware that they are all doing the same thing. If they were aware of that and were able to talk about it among themselves, they could perhaps be a family in the true sense of the word. But, instead, they are kind of four people who happen to be living under the same roof, very lonely, very isolated.

I think that's so much the case with families. There's love there very often, but that love is either not expressed or it is expressed in ways that don't come across to the other person as love. We end up being very isolated in our own houses together. That was something I was very interested in exploring, and the idea that the way to find meaning in life is the way to find something that raises you above just the daily grind. In the case of Saul, it is through mysticism.

Although, I guess, going back to what you guys were saying about Yiddish, the closest I get — my grandmother was raised Orthodox, and so she was fluent in Yiddish. But then she married someone who was not as observant, and so it didn't get passed on to my father, and that was pretty much the end of that.

But what you were talking about in terms of wanting to capture your mother's voice lies at the essence of the craft of fiction, like how do you write an effective voice. This is nowhere near the same thing as Yiddish is its own language, but there are many literary languages. The language of dialogue is an utterly different language than the language of expository or narrative prose. So one of the huge challenges I think when writing is to make voices that come alive and really do capture the spirit of a person.

JOSHUA HALBERSTAM: I want to ask you, Myla, because in your novel one of the things that's fascinating is the role of secrets in families. I know that is in your work too, David. Here this mother plays this really fascinating role in *Bee Season*, where she ends up turning out to have had a history that nobody in the family relates to.They say the definition of a dysfunctional family is a family.

But secrets I think are an interesting theme in this. Every family I suppose has one. I just wondered if you wanted to say something about that.

MYLA GOLDBERG: I think secrets are the heart of all of our books really. Elisha's secret is huge, and then he finally — this scene that you read, when he's cutting off the *payis*, then it's not a secret anymore, is it? It's out there. But we all have our secrets.

You had the teacher who said there's only three story lines. There's kind of maybe only one, which is, "I have a secret." If you look at every book, what a book is about is the revelation of self in one form or another to other people, and that self is a secret in one sense or another of the word.

JOSHUA HALBERSTAM: I just want to say one other thing. One of the other things along with secrets that families do or don't do is accept the fact after the secret is disclosed to continue the family.

Just parenthetically, I'll say something about the title of my book, since we're talking about this. One of my great-grandfathers was a Chassidic rebbe who had three lines about the Haggadah, which is what you read at the seder. One of them is he asks the question. There are four sons. I don't know if you're familiar with the Passover seder. There's the wise son, the wayward son — I like that word — then there's the foolish son, and the one who's not even able to ask questions.

He says, "Why is it in those four orders, in that particular order?" He says, "Because the wise son says to the redactor of the Haggadah, 'I don't mind spending the night with my evil brother. It would be interesting. But if I have to sit next to the stupid kid' — so that's why the order starts with the wise son.

The thing that he said that is more serious was the wise son's line in the Passover Haggadah is he says to the assembled, "I am out of here, man. I have nothing to do with you." This is what the *rasha*, the wayward son, says: "*Mah ha'avodah hazos lachem*? — I'm out of here; this is your community, it's not my community."

The rebbe said, "Here's what we tell him. We said 'You think leaving is up to you? I've got news for you. This is not a decision that you can make. Like it or not, you are in the Haggadah, you have a seat at the table with your brothers, and you're one of the four sons, and there's always a seat here. I can hear your secret that you want to leave, but you're still here, you're still in the family." That's the sense I also got from the end of *Bee Season* and David's work also, is that when all is said and done, the family somehow stays, reigns supreme somehow, and you bring that out really well there.

DAVID ROSKIES: I have a little bit of a different perspective. There were no secrets between me and my mother. None of her stories was age-appropriate, none of it. And I was privy to all of her secrets.

I know this is bizarre, but the second chapter is called "Café Rudnitsky," which describes in minute detail a meeting between my mother and the great love of her life, the man that she didn't marry. The only thing that I change is his name. I call him Boris Seidman. I recreate as best as I could but based on the things that she told me of this clandestine meeting and how it was meticulously planned. My father never knew about it, but I knew every detail.

So you ask yourself: Why was she confiding that in her youngest son? Ah, well, therein lies a story.

So it was exactly the opposite, that I had too much knowledge and privy to too many secrets. The book actually goes along with that idea until the last sentence of the book, when I basically admit that having spent all of these years and all of these pages and all of this effort to try to unlock my mother's life, I really didn't know very much about it and that most of it she took with her to her grave, because really, in the end, what do we know

about our parents, and particularly our immigrant parents, and particularly our immigrant parents who lost their whole life before you even came into the world?

ANNE HOFFMAN: I wonder if I can ask each of you to reflect on the importance of names in your narrative. I think I thought first about this in relation to Josh's novel. I was curious if you could comment on your choice of the name Elisha for your protagonist.

JOSHUA HALBERSTAM: That actually came pretty easily, the name Elisha. For one thing, in my family there's the name, there are Elishas around. I like the name, although I wouldn't give my son the name Elisha because it's also a female name — Alicia de Larrocha — too risky. But there are two other things about Elisha that I like.

First of all, there's a very famous person in Talmud. There is a story about four rabbis who went into the garden. It's not clear what that means, the *pardes*. Most scholars think it means that they studied Hellenism. Some people think it means *kaballah*. One of them remained the great rabbi Rebe Akiba; one of them became insane, Ben Zoma; Ben Azzai, one of them, died; and the fourth one was Elisha ben Abuyah, who was also known as Acher. He was "the other." He actually became a heretic.

Interestingly, even though he was a heretic, his rulings are accepted in some places in the Talmud. So he was an interesting character for me because reading the Talmud you had a heretic.

The other reason for Elisha, there's an Elisha in the Bible who was the assistant of Elijah, and that Elisha was bald. So I figured, hey!

MYLA GOLDBERG: Naming characters — what's very interesting is when I talk to readers, some of them have thought a lot more about my character names than I have.

In the case of *Bee Season*, I once had a reader who came up to me. He had done an entire biblical exegesis explaining why I had clearly named each of the four characters in this family in *Bee Season* what I had named them. It sounded great. I was like *Wow, that's really cool!* I was thinking of none of that when I was naming my characters.

It's a very instinctual process for me. And it's much, much easier to name a literary character than it is to name, say, a child, because with a child you have to decide right away. Maybe you're going to name your child Charles, and then a year later you realize he's really a Bobby, and you're stuck. You're done. The nice thing is a book takes a while, so I live with my characters over time and I can really decide what it is I think they are.

It really has to do with just the way things sound. I'm very, very interested in words and how they sound, the emotions or feelings that certain sounds together bring up or the associations.

Although often I can't name a character; I have to have a character name a character. So in the case of *Bee Season* I couldn't name Eliza because I had to come up with what her parents would name her, since her parents were characters in the book.

That's also the case in my new book, *The False Friend*. I couldn't name Celia because her parents are characters. So I had to come up with the name that her parents would give her.

So sometimes naming can have a couple of filters going through it, which are always fun.

ANNE HOFFMAN: And the father renames the family, right?

MYLA GOLDBERG: Yes. They become Naumann because his father had assimilated them and he wanted to go back.

ANNE HOFFMAN: So naming has a whole story attached to it.

MYLA GOLDBERG: Sure.

JOSHUA HALBERSTAM: David, you realize that names in religious traditions — and not just religious traditions — in most cultures the way you have an identity is by getting a name. So kids find a stray dog, the way it becomes a pet is when you give it a name.

In Jewish tradition, if you are very ill, they will give you a new name. So conferring a new name in most cultures — names are who you are. So it's not trivial. It's a really part of your identity, as you're suggesting. And sometimes they name themselves.

DAVID ROSKIES: I have only one comment to make, since I use the real names of people, with the exception as I already mentioned of my mother's true love, whom I call Boris Seidman.

But there is one other chapter about the Jewish counterculture. Many of these people went on to become very famous, illustrious scholars. I describe them in less than illustrious ways.

There is one scene in particular about an acid trip which I heard about, and I describe it exactly as it was told to me, and I used the real names. I actually asked permission from the people involved and they had vetted it.

But, when it was already in print, they said, "No way are you using my name. No way! No way!" It would have jeopardized a forty-year friendship. So I had to find names with exactly the same number of letters in them to substitute for the names that they really had.

ANNE HOFFMAN: So, David, you're using real names. But who's named what carries enormous weight in the world that you are creating in your narrative. Do you want to comment on names as a factor? [No response] Okay, fine. Actually, we have a question from the audience asking: "What is the Jewish counterculture?" Would you care to elaborate slightly on what you have already said? And others might add.

DAVID ROSKIES: Well, as I experienced it — this is not a sociological or scholarly answer — there was this moment in time when a group of young people decided that to be rebellious was to be authentically Jewish and that the only way to live an authentic Jewish life was by living completely iconoclastically, recreating everything from the ground up, and that the existing institutions were bankrupt.

The founder of Havurat Shalom was a very eminent thinker and scholar, Art Green, who once proclaimed TV dinners to be morally *tref*, morally un-kosher.

So that's where we were coming from, that that bourgeois consumer culture was morally *tref* and we were going to recreate Judaism in our own radical image. That's for starters.

But how do you do that? You need a model. As you've heard, here is Abulafia. You have

to draw from something that is available.

The genius of this particular group was that the model they claimed was Hasidim — and not real Hasidim; not contemporary Hasidim; not your Hasidim, Josh — but going back to the founders of the movement, to the Baal Shem Tov, and particularly to an amazing figure named Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. He was the perfect choice of our forbearer because the Breslov Hasidim were called "the dead Hasidim." They were the only dynasty, until very recently, who didn't have a living rabbi. Once he died, that was it, you were a follower of the original rabbi, and you were a "dead Hasid." That meant that anyone could claim to be a follower of Breslov.

That was perfect for us, because if we had claimed to be any other dynasty, like Lubavitch or Satmar, then the real Satmar would have come and smashed our windows. I mean who ever heard of such a thing, smoking pot and coeducational learning and sitting on the floor Eastern style? It was radically eclectic. We were taking from here, there, and everywhere.

The third part of it — some of you may be familiar with this — the crowning work that came out of this counterculture was *The Jewish Catalog*, which was a do-it-yourself Judaism. That came out of the Whole Earth movement. It was basically taking from the surrounding culture and saying, "We can do that too." And so in order to live a full Jewish life, you have to learn how to bake *challah*, you have to learn how to make your own candles, you have to do everything yourself; and you have to create the community yourself, you have to create the liturgy yourself. And so that's what we did; we created a new Jewish counterculture.

JOSHUA HALBERSTAM: Myla, you're the kid among us. The counterculture days were so different for me. It's really stunning.

I had come from a Chassidic world. No way we wanted to be part of that stuff. Are you kidding? We're going to San Francisco where it's sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll. You guys are smoking pot and using it for *kiddish*. Forget the *kiddish*, let's just go right to the pot. It was really strange.

I didn't even know that this world was going on over there. It would have been very, very strange. So the same age basically, but very different countercultures. We did the real one.

MYLA GOLDBERG: And I would say that what you are talking about, which is just coming up with your own sense of Jewish identity, what it means for you to be Jewish, happens with every generation but it just happens in different ways.

I would say that in Brooklyn you've got a lot of communities right now that are striving toward a new sense of definition that is more in line with their spiritual beliefs. That may not resemble what generations past defined as what it means to be Jewish in terms of practices, in terms of who can be in a community and who cannot, who can lead a community and who cannot. So that's an ongoing process.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Okay, thank you. That actually leads into a question that seems to have come up from several people in the audience. It actually has to do with the title of tonight's panel, "Growing up Chosen." None of the people seated up here actually chose that title. It really came from our organizers in the Institute for Religion and Culture. I wonder if I could ask each of you to think about what that title means or what your

relationship to it is.

JOSHUA HALBERSTAM: Perhaps I can begin.

When I meet friends of mine who are modern Orthodox and they say, "We all grew up Orthodox," there's a real big difference between the way I grew up and the "chosenness" of growing up as a Chassidic kid and modern Orthodox. It is very hard to convey this to people.

I actually believed that I had *the* truth — not one of the truths, I grew up with *the* truth — that 99.999 percent of the world had it wrong, but I had a trunk-line that went straight from my father to his father to his father, all the way back to Moses, and anybody who deviated was getting it wrong. That's incredibly empowering and incredibly nuts. But it is what you grow up with, and I really had this.

This, despite the fact that I grew up in a world where if we're so chosen, what we were chosen for was also for Auschwitz. I really learned that Europeans crossed their sevens by reading the numbers on all my uncles' and aunts' arms, the ones who survived the camps.

This was a real sort of cognitive dissonance. Here I am, the chosen, I lucked out to be born into exactly the right family that had *the* truth, and yet we were chosen for other sorts of things. That feeling was very strange as a child.

I walked around with a yarmulke, and I had incidences, of course, all the time, but that's okay because I had come to a family that was chosen to have the truth.

That I'm sure has remained in that community. It's very complicated.

MYLA GOLDBERG: That's a term I have always had a lot of trouble with.

I think at base I consider myself a humanist above all else. So for one group to decide that they are chosen suggests — the first thing that comes to my mind is superiority or difference or exclusion, and that just goes against my base humanist instincts that everyone has something chosen about them. It doesn't matter where you are from or what your heritage is. There are very, very special and individual things about every heritage. So that has always been a term that troubled me.

Also, as a writer, I think the biggest and most important thing to do as a writer of fiction is to promote and spread empathy. I think with the words "being chosen" that automatically is a barrier to empathy, because it is suggesting that there are things that others won't be able to have access to or understand. So it's a term that I tend to avoid.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Interesting. So maybe there's a kind of historical baggage that comes with it that each person really has to negotiate a relationship to. David?

DAVID ROSKIES: I don't have any problem with that because it runs through my life from the beginning all the way through.

I quote my mother saying, which she did, to me, "*Mayn óysgebetener bay Got*," "You are God's gift to me," she said, because I was her child of old age. Old age, you understand, was forty-two. But that was considered old to give birth. There were two children born in Europe and two born in Canada. I was the last born, the *mizinik*, the youngest, and doted

on by everyone. That's what she told me, "*Mayn óysgebetener bay Got*." If your mother says so, it must be true. So I believed her.

Now, obviously, that becomes extremely burdensome, because most of the time you don't feel worthy and you feel like you're faking it, like you're bluffing, and in what sense are you God's gift to anybody. However, it stays with you and you have to struggle with that. That's one thing.

The other was the Yiddish connection. It started at a very young age. I'm five years old, and one of the writers who comes to visit is Avrom Reisen. Avrom Reisen, it's like Walt Whitman coming to visit your home, one of the founders of Yiddish literature. He was a disciple of A.L. Peretz. He lived a very long life. I took an immediate liking to this man because I thought he was my *zaydee*, he was the grandfather that I didn't have. And we hit it off.

So Avrom Reisen goes back to New York and gives a speech to the Workmen's Circle in New York. He says, "There is still a hope for Yiddish culture because there are little Yiddish-speaking boys like David Roskies in Montreal."

This is reported back to me by my mother. So I'm five years old. There must be something going on here.

Now we flash forward. You heard mention that at the age of sixteen I started a Yiddish youth movement. So obviously I took these things very seriously, probably much more seriously than my parents had intended. This really happened, what I'm about to describe.

We had the inaugural meeting of Yugntruf on Fifth Avenue and 86th Street, at the former building of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. I describe it as it was. It was all very exciting.

There were more young people than older people in the audience, which was most astonishing. The mean age of the people there was about eighteen. We were really going to change the world and convert everyone to speaking Yiddish.

When it was over, I was introduced to someone whom I had heard about all my life, a man named Max Weinreich, who was the *éminence grise* of Yiddish scholarship, a legendary figure. Max Weinreich complimented me on the speech that I had given and whatever. And then he said, "*Fraynd Roskies, di yidish-forshung darf aykh hobn*, the field of Yiddish studies needs you." I was sixteen years old. I was dreaming of a career as a filmmaker. I had all kinds of Utopian plans. But Max Weinreich said that the field of Yiddish, which didn't even exist — there was no field of Yiddish — he recruited me for something that actually had no basis as of yet. So that's why I'm here. I was chosen.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Great. To stray slightly, we have a question for Myla that focuses a bit on spelling. When you chose the setting of spelling bees, were you thinking about the rhetoric of bees as a process of Americanization and assimilation? In other words, were the bees a kind of a metaphor for that?

MYLA GOLDBERG: Certainly from a sociological perspective they are. If you just look at the kind of ethnographic makeup of who tends to enter bees and take them seriously, it often tends to be whichever immigrant group is newest to the country. It's a really interesting thing.

What I was actually more interested in using — and that's certainly in there — but I think what I was more conscious of when I was talking about bees is the very particular and peculiar American kind of imperative that if you are going to be successful, you have to be the best at something. Certainly in many solid middle-class Jewish households there is this kind of ethic of over-achievement — you know, you've just got to get A's in everything all the time and to be the best this and be the best that. It can get tiring at times and it can be a bit difficult. So the spelling bee for me encapsulated that idea that we all feel we have to be the best at something to be anyone at all.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Yes. And that's certainly there in the characters who are competing alongside of Eliza from other immigrant groups. Sure. That's so interesting.

Here's another part of that question: "Can Eliza maintain her Jewish difference while still being a spelling champion?"

MYLA GOLDBERG: Yes, sure.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Okay. Here's a different facet of ethnicity for Josh. A member of the audience would like to know: "What Wisconsin? Does it symbolize the ultimate Goyishe place?" Wisconsin is where that woman comes from.

JOSHUA HALBERSTAM: I had a girlfriend from Wisconsin when I was in graduate school. I called her Katrina. This is a risky name after the hurricane.

She was — yeah, here we go with the stereotyping — but she was this blonde *shiksa* from Wisconsin, and I was this yeshiva boy at NYU, and she was very wacky. She learned a lot about Judaism. Talk about wacky, she had discovered that, according to Jewish law, when a woman is menstruating you are not supposed to touch men. So she made a point of going to 47th Street to the Diamond Center where Hasidim were and going to elevators and rubbing up against guys and saying, "I have my period, by the way," just to stick it to them. How can you not be endeared by a woman like that?

There is a scene, however, I've got to tell you. So this is this exotic Wisconsin. And thanks to the Web, I could actually do all this research of Racine, which is in Wisconsin. I have no idea where it is. It's somewhere on the other side of the Hudson. But I could tell you every street, thanks to the Web. I went on Google Earth and I got all the blocks. You can do that when you're writing fiction.

There is a scene in the movie, however — not yet — there is a scene in the book where she comes to my house on Passover. This actually happened. This is one of the difficult things.

When you write, it's always the scariest places where you do your best writing, I think, because you don't want to go there.

I remember this time when she came to my house on Shabbat. My family was all sitting around. We had always about seventy people around the table.

The bell rings. This is already a problem. So I'm really thinking *Oh, it's Jehovah's Witnesses. Who else would be coming to the house on a Saturday?* But this was weird because they wouldn't come in the morning. What would a Jehovah's Witness be doing? This is a bad business if you're a Jehovah's Witness.

It's her, it's this sort of girlfriend of mine. I'm freaking out because all my family is looking, and what is going on here? I've got to invite her in. There was very difficult explaining to do. That became the scene about Passover, which was kind of pivotal in the story. So Wisconsin, go ahead. Although it's very cold, I understand.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Here's a Montreal question for David: "Did you have egg creams in Montreal?"

DAVID ROSKIES: I don't remember having egg creams in Montreal. But we did have the best smoked meat in the world.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Okay. There are two questions that maybe will pull together some closing thoughts from each of our panelists. These are kind of related. I'll read each. A member of the audience writes: "It seemed to me growing up Jewish that the Jewish family was a substitute for the world. At the same time I was taught to look inward, not at the world. Is this not just as Jewish?" That's one question for you to think about. Here's another: "If Jewish novels are filled with *angst* or introspection, how come so much of comedy is created by Jews, not necessarily about the Jewish experience?"

I want to invite each of you. I think there are a lot of places where you can come into those questions and you can choose your point of intersection.

MYLA GOLDBERG: I want to address the looking-inward thing. While I've been thinking a lot about what it means to be a Jewish writer and what it means to create Jewish literature, that's something I've thought about a lot, because I think in my generation of Jews there has been a change.

I think by necessity we as a culture in a community had to look inward for a long time because no one else would have us. We were a community that was excluded. We were not allowed other places. So, of course, as a community we looked inward, we drew from our inward resources, and it's a very rich thing to draw from, so there's a lot there.

But when I was growing up I didn't face very much prejudice. I did not face very much anti-Semitism. I grew up in a largely secular neighborhood and felt very comfortable. So I was sort of granted permission to look outward without even realizing that that was permission that was being granted. It was just normal. I took for granted that of course I'm going to be reading and seeing all sorts of different things in terms of movies and books. Some of them would maybe be Jewish, but that wasn't even a focus. It was just like something would happen to come along and I wouldn't pay attention to that one way or the other.

That is why, I think, why when you look at perhaps my generation of Jewish artists and writers, you are going to see work that is Jewish but in a different way, because it is born of people who have spent large portions of their lives just looking outward in addition to looking inward.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Thank you. David, do you want to add anything or comment?

DAVID ROSKIES: Well again, my perspective was different because my parents were first-generation rebels against tradition. They were the first generation of modern Polish Jews, who went skiing and they were part of a Jewish Scouting movement. That's how my parents met, as members of a student Scouting organization. They were always creating organizations and part of a community.

I grew up at the center of three concentric circles. Only the center was the family. Outside the family was the second circle, which was the Yiddish-speaking street. And outside that was the Jewish world for which you were somehow responsible.

So there was a profound sense of agency, that we were the first generation that was actually going to take history into our own hands, which is why I guess it was obvious to me that when you turned sixteen and you couldn't find a youth movement to belong to, you started your own youth movement.

As for inwardness, I have to say that I didn't actually discover that until Havurat, the culture of meditation and silent meditation. I could never master that. For me silence is not a Jewish form of self-expression.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Thank you. Josh?

JOSHUA HALBERSTAM: I actually want to perhaps — I don't want to sound like this old-fashioned guy who's complaining about the younger generation of Jews and their writing, but I will.

I actually worry about this. That relates to the question about Jewish humor. These old Jewish comics grew up in very Jewish lives and it was part of the rhythm of their lives. As Jews now become increasingly secular, I don't think they're going to be as funny. And I worry about the Jewishness of them because I actually think that there's a barrier of entry. You've got to learn this tradition to really absorb it.

Let me just give you some demographics here. I have some issues obviously with the Hasidic world, but we are going to have to deal with it. Some demographers now argue that by the year 2050 the majority of Jews in the United States will be ultra-Orthodox.

If you look at the numbers, Jews have the lowest population growth of any ethnic group in the United States. They are the oldest ethnic group on average in the United States. They used to be 3.6 percent of the American population. They are now 1–2 percent and dwindling — except for my family, who singlehandedly it seems are making up for the rest of it.

There are 250,000 people who speak Yiddish badly — I'm sure David would agree — but they speak it every day. Their Jewishness, I don't know what's going to happen with them. The old Jewish writers came from that world.

I'm concerned that as Jewish learning atrophies and dwindles to the point where it's almost nonexistent, in what sense will people be Jewish in any real way that will influence and contour their writing?

There are larger philosophical issues about Jewish ethics, which is a word I don't understand — to me that's like Jewish physics. I don't know what it means, "Jewish ethics." I think there is a rich culture here that I think is getting lost. So I do worry about that.

ANNE HOFFMAN: Well that certainly leaves us with some good questions to think about. I think now Jim McCartin, the Co-Director of the Center on Religion and Culture, will close the evening for us.

JAMES McCARTIN: Thank you, Anne. Thanks to all of you. That was terrific. It was

really a delightful, engaging conversation.

I want to remind the audience that our authors have generously made themselves available outside to sign the books that you can purchase outside. If you go outside, you can purchase and then take a right and you can get your book signed.

We also hope that you will all join us on February 1st, when we will hold a three-way debate. Three distinguished panelists will come together around the question of "What Rules America — Money, Myth, or Morals?"

Arguing that the power of wealth and corporate influence rules America will be Robert Kuttner, a longtime *Business Week* columnist who authored two books, among others, one called *The Squandering of America*, and *Everything for Sale*. With Paul Starr he also founded *The American Prospect* magazine.

Taking the position that values, such as equality, opportunity, and liberty, rule America will be the *New York Post* editorial writer Robert A. George. Mr. George is also a one-time staffer for both the Republican National Committee and for former congressman now presidential candidate Newt Gingrich.

Finally, Susan Jacoby will argue that certain overarching and shared myths are the decisive shapers of our politics and national life. Ms. Jacoby is author of *The Age of American Unreason*, *Never Say Die: The Myth and Marketing of the New Old Age*, and *Free Thinkers: A History of American Secularism*.

Our moderator that evening will be E.J. Dionne, a columnist for *The Washington Post* and *Commonweal*, the author of several books on American politics and religion, a weekly commentator on National Public Radio, a Fellow at the Brookings Institution, and Professor of Public Policy at Georgetown, and many other things.

This is going to be a lively conversation, just as our conversation was tonight, and hopefully as entertaining and informative. So please mark February 1st on your calendars.

If you are not signed up to receive information about our events, please do sign up as you leave. Before we leave I want to thank our Program Manager, Patricia Bellucci, and our student assistants. And finally, I want to thank once again our panelists and our moderator. Have a wonderful evening. Thank you.