For the Relief of Unbearable Urges Short Guide

For the Relief of Unbearable Urges by Nathan Englander

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Characters

Pinchas, the protagonist of "The Twentyseventh Man," is the vehicle for two of Englander's most important themes, the compulsion to write and the calming force of tradition. Pinchas is condemned to death for his eccentricity. Though he never publishes a word, he spends all his days isolated in a room, writing. The authorities suspect that he intends to dismantle the Communist regime with these writings. In fact, his motive is purely self-serving: he loves to write. In fact, he has a compulsion to write that, in his last days, becomes his only solace. For Pinchas, writing is a tradition, like the rites of prayer. Rather than reverting to prayers, however, Pinchas begins composing a final story at the outset of his internment. In part, he does this out of habit, but on a deeper level it works as his sole psychological ballast. While the guards tortured him to coerce a confession of disloyalty, "Pinchas had focused on his story, his screams sounding as if they were coming from afar. With every stripe he received, he added a phrase, the impact reaching his mind like the dull rap of a windowpane settling in its sash." His own writing becomes a mantra, giving Pinchas peace in the face of his unreasonable execution.

The protagonist of "The Wig" may be Englander's most dynamic female character. Through Ruchama, a maker of wigs, Englander expounds on a universal theme: the desire for acceptance. Ruchama lives in a strict, somewhat isolated Orthodox community. Nevertheless, she has strong urges to make forays into the outside world; she spends afternoons, for instance, surreptitiously reading the forbidden fashion magazines at a magazine stand. She wishes, not at all unreasonably, to be more than a Jewish mother. These twin identities are, she feels, stifling and reductive. Sometimes, "to take off her makeup slowly, to look in the mirror and be sad, that's all she wants." The demands placed on her because of her identity often deny her these simple wishes.

Englander thus makes an important point about the essential nature of categories such as Jew and mother: they reduce the possibilities of personal expression available to an individual. Ruchama finally breaks free of the constraints placed on her, but this only happens through a hilarious and Herculean effort on her part.

In "The Reunion" Englander considers the tricky, sometimes shifting boundary between sanity and insanity through Marty, an institutionalized man who believes he is, in fact, quite sane. Unorthodox behavior in Synagogue and at home prompt his wife to send him to an asylum. Every transgression, though, is accompanied by a rational explanation on Marty's part. The outrage he enacts in the temple is, to his mind, justified by the word of the Torah. He believes it was not he but the Rabbi who erred. The reasonableness with which Marty excuses his past actions raises interesting questions about both insanity and religious practice. Who really has the power to say that Marty suffers from a mental illness?

More interesting, however, is the question Marty raises about religious practice: If a worshiper breaks religious practice but adheres to the word of God, who is to say he

has transgressed? Is Marty in fact more right than the Rabbi who supports his wife's desire to keep him institutionalized?

Social Concerns

The stories in Nathan Englander's collection For the Relief of Unbearable Urges all address issues of Jewish identity. In general, the stories tell tales of individual people and families who do not fit into society because of their religious background. Englander's Jewish characters are, for the most part, orthodox in their beliefs, so they stand out from the crowd even more than secular or less strict Jews might. Because Englander's stories span a large period of time, the social concerns addressed are not particular to a single era; instead, they address the persecution of Jewish people that has occurred since ancient times. Thus, Englander's stories strive to capture the totality of Jewish experience.

The first two stories consider the social concern which has, historically, most directly affected Jewish people: persecution.

Set in World War II Poland and Stalinist Russia respectively, "The Tumblers" and "The Twenty-seventh Man" tell the stories of Jewish groups subject to the worst kind of persecution, mass slaughter. The Jewish men and women in these stories are condemned to death for no reason other than their Jewish faith. In both cases, though, Englander does more than relate the horror of genocide.

In "The Tumblers" Englander shows off his skill at black comedy and asserts that absurd situations call for absurd responses.

The story tells of how the Nazi regime came to Chelm, a tiny, isolated village. Its Jewish residents removed themselves so thoroughly from the outside world that even as they are relegated to the ghetto and herded onto trains, they do not fully understand what is happening. A small band of Chelm residents manage to slip past the Nazi herders and onto a train filled with circus performers. Finally comprehending their fate, the group decides to "pass as acrobats and tumble across the earth until they found a place where they were welcome." This wandering desire for a homeland persists today as Jewish and other native peoples continue to fight over the land which makes up Israel. Though World War II denotes a high water mark of Jewish persecution, Englander's concern for the homelessness of the people is not peculiar to the era in which he lives or in which his stories are set.

"The Tumblers" ends with the first performance. Obviously, an underfed band of Jews with no experience at gymnastics could not pass as professional tumblers. But an act of providence sees them through; an audience member (presumably Hitler himself) laughs at what he believes is the act's intentional humor. Then, one of the tumblers moves to center stage and stretches out his hands toward the audience, finally occupying a space where "there were no snipers, as there are for hands that reach out of the ghettos ... no angels, waiting, as they always do, for hands that reach out from chimneys into ash-clouded skies."

Though ending with an infectious optimism and a sense of hope in the power of divine providence, the story remains a disturbing account of the violence perpetrated by the Nazi regime. Only through cosmic good fortune is a small band able to escape the camps and furnaces into which the Jewish people were systematically herded by the Nazis.

In "The Twenty-seventh Man," Englander underscores the arbitrariness of ethnic persecution, thus teasing out some of its motives rather than simply relating its horrors. The fate of Pinchas, the character that gives the story its title, demonstrates the anonymous, almost random nature of Stalin's campaign against Jewish people. The story's opening shows that, though he knew his motive for rounding up dissidents, Stalin was not particular about who fell into the hands of his police: It was not an issue of hatred, only one of allegiance. For Stalin knew there could be loyalty to only one nation. What he did not know so well were the authors' names on his list. When presented to him the next morning he signed the warrant anyway, though there were now twenty-seven, and yesterday there had been twenty-six.

This passage points to the motive that people have cited since ancient times in justifying their campaigns against Jewish people: suspicion. Stalin demands that all his countrymen declare allegiance to him alone. The Jews' dedication to God diminishes their commitment to their secular state, so Stalin, as Hitler had, becomes suspicious of their allegiance.

One effect of this suspicion against anyone who shows dedication to a god other than a political leader is the arbitrariness of punishment inflicted. All the names on Stalin's warrant are of authors who either write anti-Communist tracts or continue, after the Communist Party's ban, to write in Yiddish. Pinchas, though he does write Yiddish, never publishes his work. A recluse, Pinchas lives in a backroom of an inn, writing for the joy of the practice and never venturing into the outside world. Such reclusiveness, coupled with his Jewish identity, provokes enough suspicion for one of Stalin's underlings to place his name surreptitiously on a list condemning him to death. Englander's work uncovers the absurdity of such arbitrary sentencing of people simply because of their ethnic difference. Pinchas could not harm the Soviet state. He is a gentle, harmless man. Nevertheless, the force of paranoia is strong enough in Englander's imagined version of communist Russia to doom a gentle, reclusive man.

Obviously, such systematic aggression against Jewish people does not exist in today's world. No governments have committed themselves to the systematic extermination of all Jews. Nevertheless, violent hostility toward Jews does exist in Israel and its environs where a low-level war between Jews and Palestinians has persisted for decades. Englander turns his attention to this social concern in his final story, "In This Way We Are Wise."

The story relates the personal consequences of a terrorist bombing in central Jerusalem. The protagonist, Natan, hears the blast while sitting in a cafe, waiting for his girlfriend. The two experience a kind of near-death experience as both suspect that the other was caught in the blast. While relating the horror of living under the shadow of

terrorist activity, the story, perhaps unwittingly, uncovers at least half of the entrenched ideology that keeps the two sides of the conflict from resolving their differences. While thinking back on the previous day's bombing, the narrator muses, "Today is a day to find religion. To decide that one god is more right than another, to uncover in this sad reality a covenant— some promise of coming good." Unfortunately, the assertion that "one god is more right than another" lies at the heart of the conflict between Israel's official, Jewish residents and its marginal, Palestinian inhabitants. Both sides claim the land as their historic and religious center and both claim that the presence of the other is an abomination in the face of their god. Resolution of the conflict depends not on the conclusion of Englander's narrator that one god is more right but on the recognition that peaceful co-existence requires flexibility on the side of all parties.

Unfortunately, more mundane motives than peace force Jewish people to show flexibility. Englander, in his comic tale "Reb Kringle," betrays his concern about the modern world's potential to insinuate itself into the lives of the most pious Jews. Itzi, a rabbi whose parish has grown too small to support itself, has taken to using his long white beard to make money at the local shopping mall. Though he objects viciously, he dons the red suit every season and portrays Santa Claus for the Christian children.

This foray into the secular world is necessary for Itzi to sustain himself and his parish. Nevertheless, he shows hesitancy about his occupation: He was not one of the provincial Jews who had never crossed the Royal Hills bridge into Manhattan, the naives who'd never dealt with the secular world; it was not the first time that he'd put on the suit, and he very well knew the holiday kept him afloat. But even after all those years, the words "Merry Christmas" remained obscene to him.

Englander concedes that Jews must function in the secular world to survive. The need for a Jewish environment cannot be taken to the extreme of isolation, for such isolation breeds economic disaster. However, there are limits beyond which Englander's rabbi cannot go. So long as he does not himself blaspheme by bidding children a merry Christmas, his flexibility remains contained. One can achieve a compromise between religious and secular identities, but the story's conclusion demonstrates that this compromise remains tenuous.

Englander explores the corollary of this social concern in "The Gilgul of Park Avenue." Instead of focusing on a rabbi dabbling in secular life, this story narrates the conversion of a middle-aged Christian man to Judaism. The conversion comes suddenly: "Charles Morton Luger understood he was the bearer of a Jewish soul. Ping! Like that it came. Like a knife against a glass." The sudden and inexplicable nature of Charles' conversion suggests that Englander is less concerned with the theological dynamics of conversion than with the social impact of a secular man adopting Jewish faith. Shocked and disturbed by the change, Charles' wife wonders "why do people who find religion always have to be so goddamn extreme?"

The problem, it seems, is that most people, even when outwardly accepting of religious difference, remain unwilling to accept the behaviors that they see as deviant in their

loved ones. Charles' wife has no problem with Jewish faith so long as she remains untouched by its more obscure traditions.

But with her husband's conversion, she must experience these traditions firsthand.

Though she takes the changes her husband makes as an affront, an intentional effort to make her life more inconvenient, Charles wants only simple acceptance: "He struggled to stand without judgement, to be only for Sue, to be wholly seen, wanting her to love him changed." "The Gilgul of Park Avenue," is, then, a modern day fable about the difficulty of acceptance. Charles' wife, like most non-Jews, never knew what Jewishness truly meant until she was forced to make room for it in her life. Truly accepting ethnic or religious difference does not entail an absence of discrimination but actual, personal sacrifice.

Techniques

Though concerned with a rather dark topic, Englander's stories consistently retain a light, often funny tone. He employs several techniques to maintain this tone.

For example, he carefully orders his stories to avoid drawing the reader down a slope to despair. The pointless tragedy of "The Twenty-seventh Man," for instance, is balanced by the divine redemption of the Jews in "The Tumblers." This balance is important because it give the reader a sense of the strength in Jewish identity. Even while ruminating on the oppression suffered by his people, Englander does not give in to selfpity but strikes back in a clear, comic voice.

The clarity of the voice with which Englander endows his characters underscores the force of personality that For the Relief of Unbearable Urges exudes. None of the characters is flat or stereotypical. Though they often repeat Yiddish phrases common to the shtick of a farce like Seinfeld, the Jews of Englander's stories are not parodies or stick figures. They are, for the most part, complex characters that all have individual quirks. Thus, Englander is able to tear down stereotypes by resisting the urge to make his characters fit the reader's expectations of Jewish behavior. Itzi's reluctant acceptance of a job as Santa Glaus is almost unbelievable to the reader who suspects that all Orthodox Jews are rabid in their conviction. The story reveals, however, that people of all religious faiths and ethnic origins must pay homage to the world outside their community in order to survive. Englander's careful rendering of character reminds the reader that Orthodox Jews are not naive, isolationist, or, most reductively, weird.

Another technique Englander employs to give voice to Jews is the detailed description of obscure Jewish traditions. Non-Jewish readers will find For the Relief of Unbearable Urges fascinating simply because of the insight it gives into religious practices unknown to them. In all the collection's stories the non-Jewish reader occupies the position of Charles' wife in "The Gilgul of Park Avenue." The traditions described and names used by Englander might at first seem strange to those not familiar with Jewish tradition. Englander's sympathetic rendering of character, however, easily tempers the foreignness of the practices. By the end of the collection, the quirks of Jewish Orthodox worship appear less like curiosities than ancient and majestic traditions.

Themes

In his first story, "The Twenty-seventh Man," Englander takes on his most selfreflexive theme. The character of Pinchas demonstrates more than the randomness of religious persecution; he embodies the driving passion of writing as well as its power and importance independent of publication. Pinchas is different from his fellow inmates in two ways. First, his voluminous writings are unpublished. The other Jewish authors rounded up by Stalin's cronies published scathing attacks against the Communist regime. They represent half of writing's purpose: to change minds through mass readership.

Pinchas, on the other hand, represents the often unrecognized second half. Unlike the other prisoners who argue bitterly about their respective techniques in an effort to assert their superiority, Pinchas has no interest in either fame or esteem. Though the other authors write for political purposes as well as glory, Pinchas writes only because he loves to: "he had written because it was all that interested him, aside from his walks, and the pictures at which he had peeked.

Not since childhood had he skipped a day of writing." The posturing of his fellow prisoners seems shallow in comparison to Pinchas' deep passion for literary production. The value of language, it seems, is not in the reading but in the composition.

Pinchas is one of many characters who give Englander an opportunity to turn his attention to the persistence and strength of Jews. This theme appears most clearly in "The Twenty-seventh Man" where "an eminent selection of Europe's surviving Yiddish literary community was being held within the confines of an oversized closet."

Though clearly destined for the firing squad, these members of the literati remain defiant of their Soviet captors. They continue to debate the best strategy for uncovering Stalin's hypocrisy. The foundation for their strength, of course, lies in their religious faith. The characters in the story remain confident that they lie on the right side and that their persecutors will suffer after their deaths. When arrested, one of the writers says to his guards, "I did not say you were without orders. I said that you have to bear responsibility." Only by relying on God's power to punish can Jews remain sane in the face of the religious persecution suffered throughout their history. At every turn this faith proves invaluable for Englander's characters as they are denied the usual comforts awarded members of secular society.

Key Questions

Englander's stories all focus on Orthodox Jewish characters who struggle to either isolate themselves from or fit into secular society. The stories in For the Relief of Unbearable Urges cover the entire gamut of Jewish experience from the horror of Nazi camps to the terror of bombs which still explode in downtown Jerusalem. In between these extremes, Englander situates the small struggles to survive in a world that views Jews with suspicion.

Because Jews have endured the struggles described by Englander for thousands of years, the social concerns he addresses are somewhat timeless. Though his first two stories relate events set in two particular eras of genocide, one can imaginatively recreate the violence against Jews in almost any era. Stories such as "Reb Kringle," however, reveal that Jewish people do not only suffer during times of ethnic cleansing. Though funny, many of Englander's stories endeavor to make a rather serious point: that Jews remain a minority, subject to the same sort of prejudice and discrimination as African-Americans. If the prejudice is different in degree, it is not in kind.

1. Do you think Englander's depiction of Orthodox Jewish life is somewhat exclusionary? In other words, do you think that one should strive to represent the broadest possible cross-section of an ethnic group when lending that group a voice through fiction?

2. What effect does the juxtaposition of comic and tragic elements in a story such as "The Tumblers" have? Does the comedy make the tragedy more disturbing, or does it relieve the tension created by the story?

3. How does divine providence operate in Englander's stories? Is fate, luck, or the work of a higher power always beneficent?

4. If you are not Jewish, what aspects of Jewish religious tradition did you learn about by reading For The Relief of Unbearable Urges? If you are Jewish, how do your traditions differ from those of Englander's characters?

5. Which of Englander's stories might one make into a film? Why? How might such a film be cast?

6. What do you make of Englander's construction of female characters? Does he create strong, dynamic women, or are they all either naggers or schemers?

7. Do you think Marty, the protagonist of "The Reunion," is crazy? Clearly, he has only good intentions and jus tifies all of his actions with reasonable argument and the support of the Torah's words.

Literary Precedents

Englander's attention to the problems of contemporary Jewish-American identity places him in the company of several contemporary authors with similar concerns.

Published, like Englander's collection, in 1999, Ehud Havazelet's book of short stories, Like Never Before, focuses on the conflict between the twin Jewish needs of assimilation and traditional practice. The stories all center on one family and the generational differences it experiences. The patriarch, Max, is angered and hurt by his son David's desire to fit in with the people of his new home. Max worked hard to bring the Old World with him, and he cannot comprehend his son's desire to live fully in the New World. Such tension is explored in many of Englander's stories. Most notably, "Reb Kringle" and "The Gilgul of Park Avenue" consider the difficulty of balancing secular life and religious needs.

For the Relief of Unbearable Urges also has precedents in older, more prestigious quarters of the American literary tradition. Nobel Prize winning novelist Saul Bellow has written several works with similar concerns of Jewish-American identity. The Victim (1947), for example, deals with the often problematic relationships between Jews and Gentiles. Englander also takes on this theme in "The Gilgul of Park Avenue" and the title story. In both tales an individual member of one community makes a foray into the other with consequences that are both funny and indicative of incompatibility of Jewish and Christian lifestyles.

Englander's interest in the treatment of Russian Jews has a precedent in Bernard Malamud's best known work, The Fixer (1967). This novel tells the story of a Jewish jack-of-all-trades who lives in Russia shortly before WWI. His community's rabid antiSemitism comes to the fore when he is falsely accused of murder. Malamud's character, like Pinchas of "The Twenty-seventh Man," is the victim of an arbitrary system of oppression and violence.

Thomas Keaneally's Schindler's List (1982) is a well-known precedent for Englander's depiction of Jews subject to the violent hatred of the Nazi regime. Though Keaneally's book focuses on the heroic efforts of a German businessman to save hundreds of Jewish workers, it gives a vivid picture of what life in the Jewish ghettoes was like. Also, the characters in Keaneally's novel who are saved are the benefactors of the same sort of divine providence which keeps "The Tumblers" from the camps and ovens.

Students should also read works which do not take sympathetic views of Jewish people in an effort to gain a fuller understanding of the struggles they endure. Casual readers often cite William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice (1600) as a play which ennobles its Jewish character through the famous "hath not a Jew eyes" speech. The drama actually expresses rather anti-Semitic sentiments. Shylock, the Jew, is not a sympathetic character but a money-grubbing usurer who demands a pound of flesh for an unpaid debt. The drama concludes with the forfeiture of half his wealth and his conversion to Christianity. In addition to this antiquated, fictional source, Adolf Hitler's

Mein Kampf (1926) gives a useful but disturbing view of a madman's motivations for killing millions of Jews. In the two volumes of this book, Hitler outlines his "final solution," the plan for exterminating all of Europe's Jews. Though painful to hear, the voice of the oppressor often provides a more profound understanding of the plight of the oppressed.

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