



MODERN
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disseminating widening circles of meaning. Thus we have a mysterious, apocalyptic vision of millions of people guiding each other in lofty directions at crossroads (pg. 129); and, in an altogether different mode, an elderly couple at a poetry reading evening in Florida (pg. 136) "man and woman draped in soft white hair and green clothing / she in a green dress and he in a green suit" approach him, he stands slightly behind her, and she says: "We are both poets. I write / light verse, but my husband writes very deep poetry." They then turn and disappear at the end of the hall, into the dusk, "like a green sunset." Yes, the word "like" appears, but it is both minimal and completely justified, an integral part of a human moment of fine, resonant observation. This is something new, humble yet free, rich in empathy without the nervous tic of wittiness.

The new Amichai, new in terms of his strength which only occasionally finds expression, will be the one to part with what has turned him into the favorite of poetry readers, as well as English translators. I still believe in the poet in him. Sometimes I still marvel at his Midas touch that turns the trivial into gold. My only wish for Amichai, and ourselves, is that he give the silent, bitter and tight-lipped more opportunity to speak out from among the clumps of gold. ■

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The Riddle of the Mirrors

AMIR ESHEL

Haim Lapid

The Crime of Writing

Hakibbutz Hameuchad/Siman
Kriah, 1998. 124 pp.



Haim Lapid was born in Tel Aviv in 1948. He is a social psychologist and teaches Social and Behavioral Psychology. He is also a film critic and writes film scripts. Haim Lapid has published five books. The detective novel *Breznitz* has been translated into English, German and Italian.

SELDOM DOES a reader feel that the book he is reading is not only unique in literary value, but directly pertinent to his own life as well, that it is a book that he'll want to pick up again as soon as he finishes reading it. The rereading is not necessarily aimed at retracing certain details, but rather because the reader understands that as many times as he reads the work, the book will present itself differently and offer him the opportunity to view himself and his life in a different light. Haim Lapid's *The*

Crime of Writing is just such a unique book.

The narrator has this same feeling, that reading a literary work can change the natural order of things. *The Crime of Writing* begins with an apparently innocent frame story about a modern Israeli man. The narrator tells of his wife's recent trip to London, and of a mysterious meeting that took place there. While dining in a Chinese restaurant, a stranger, an older man, George Brown, approached her and attempted to strike up a conversation. After what seemed to the woman to be a short, meaningless conversation, they went their separate ways. The woman had no idea that a few months later the man would die. She was even less capable of anticipating that the man had requested that his fascinating life story be forwarded to her. The woman's husband finds the large brown envelope that is sent to her. An inexplicable urge leads him to begin reading its contents voraciously. This same urge leads him to conceal the envelope from his wife. Once he has completed reading the manuscript, he hands his wife the envelope without revealing the secret. From this point on the husband is aware of, yet conceals, the truth. It is he who approaches the reader wanting to share the compelling story of this far yet near stranger, George Brown.

The story that unravels in *The Crime of Writing* can be paralleled to a remarkable effect known to any child. When two mirrors are placed facing each other, the infinite can be viewed from a certain angle. An endless number of mirrors, reflections, a depth the eye cannot comprehend. This experiment is surprisingly simple, yet it always impresses us. Haim Lapid evokes two such literary mirrors, endowing them with a literary expression of endless

reflections of the written word: Who is the narrator and who is the story about? What is the story? These riddles are answered, apparently, in the course of the plot. Apparently, because the writing and reading themselves stem from that place where the reader connects between the "apparent" in the writing and the "apparent" in his or her life. The most intriguing riddles are those that will never be solved. They have no solution from the onset.

Haim Lapid's mirror riddle is reflected in the story of the Israeli narrator who has yearned to write his entire life. He is the one who tells the story of George Brown, an English gentleman who addresses a letter to a strange woman, thereby addressing the readers. George has also struggled with the passion to write. When finally realizing his dream, telling his story, all of the gloominess of his life is reflected: When he was four his mother disappeared and from that time he lived alone with his father, who adamantly refused to tell (to "reflect" in words) the story of his love from beginning to end. George's entire life depended on his desperate attempt to unveil his father's secret. The readers, together with George, embark on a hopeless journey in search of the lost mother who disappeared from the young boy's life leaving no more than a dim memory of love. This journey, like all good mysteries, is fascinating because the search itself creates suspense. The lack of knowledge, the doubt and the despair in searching maintain their hold on readers until the mystery is solved. And when it is finally solved, we repeatedly want to return to the beginning to reread this book.

In his search for his mother, we will reveal to George that evidently she was a Jewish refugee who spent her life running from persecutors. The distant friend who agrees to

share these bits of information will note that the name of his mother's birthplace cannot be known. "What difference does it make exactly who and what she is? In my experience," the man says, "wherever there are problems with the identity of someone, it always turns out that he is a damned Jew." George refuses to give up. He continues to search for every morsel of information, repeatedly torturing the father with questions, following him through the London streets on dark evenings. While feverish with pneumonia, the son shouts at his uncooperative father in rage, "Where is my mother ... where are you hiding her?!" The father, despite his son's impending death, refuses to unleash his secret, "Forget her, she is gone, she is dead ... she is a ghost, a murky hallucination." When the son recovers, the two, unable to find partners and live a normal life, live together, despite the growing distance between father and son. The mother, both present and absent, continues to wedge between the two, tying them together in madness.

George Brown spends his time at work. In addition to his work at the bank, he also helps the needy. As a member in a reading group which strictly forbids writing, his lecture on the basic failure in writing and reading reflects the fact that the world as seen through writing will never be "real." George claims that this is similar to our failure to understand the Rabbi in Heine's story, "The Rabbi from Bachrach," an inability that reflects Heine's failure to write a novel. What remains is the need to tell, the uncontrollable urge to commit the crime of writing. To create the world anew each time with words that are no more than that - words, empty, wonderful reflections of "what is real." The reflection reveals a moment of grief, pain and compassion for the

lonely child who has spent his entire life looking for his lost mother, a search that reflects the loneliness and compassion that the reader feels for himself.

The father continues to go to his store, day after day, every day of his life. He passionately guards his privacy, his separate bathroom, where no one is allowed to enter. Day after day the two progress towards old age, frightened, lonely, living in the shadow of their secret. The son refuses to give up. As his father lies on his death bed, he continues to badger his father with annoying questions, "Where is she, just tell me if she is alive or dead?" Only on the last page of the book, in the final sentence addressed to the narrator, do the readers together with the narrator, discover that the very father who has refused to solve the mystery of his son's life, is none other than the lost mother who has lived all these years with a borrowed identity to protect her son from some unexplained danger. Danger? A danger which is no more than the reflection of the reality in her mind. The mother's death, which is also that of the father, is the result of the son's dreadful treatment during her final days. More than anything else, this unnecessary death reflects their mutual failure. The son was unwilling to forgive and understand, and the mother was never able to empower the being she gave life to with the life force. Her being buried while she is still alive placed a mirror in front of her son buried in her home throughout his life. Even after her death, he is incapable of claiming his own life.

"Have I made myself clear?" asks George, and replies, "To describe a steady world of twilight is to describe two opposing aspects of one entity." To describe two opposing aspects of one entity: *The Crime of Writing* is a riveting, well

written story as well as a wonderful, breathtaking allegory about writing, reading and the most intimate of triangles – father, mother and child. The novel can be read through the Oedipal perspective, as a story about a boy who kills his father to be alone with his mother. The lingual aspect, as represented by Jacques Lacan, can be added to the Freudian interpretation, as indeed this murder involves language. During “the father’s” final days, the child “does not hear” that his mother asks for water, just as he did not hear the things his mother told him when he was young, (page 35) “I am your mother.” Only after the verbal murder does he hear the sentence that both does and does not solve the riddle of his life, (page 124) “I am your mother, my son.”

The Crime of Writing is one of the most impressive books to come out of Hebrew Literature recently. The multi-faceted narration, Haim Lapid’s fascinating use of the Hebrew language while avoiding any unnecessary stylistic or fancy affectations, is reminiscent of the finest of Albert Camus’ writings, as well as Franz Kafka. This is not an exaggeration. Kafka himself is mentioned in the book as a literary figure significant to the narrator, George Brown the Jew, who is the Israeli man, the reader who asks himself, who is the narrator and who is the hero. Haim Lapid’s impressive ability to integrate all levels of the story into a complete work with great depth places the author among the interesting and innovative writers on our literary stage. ■

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Yearning for Love

ROCHELLE
FURSTENBERG

Etgar Keret

Kneller's Happy Campers

Keter and Zmora Bitan, 1998.

107 pp.



Etgar Keret was born in Tel Aviv in 1967. He is undoubtedly the most popular author among Israeli youth and young adults and his books have become cult books. His two story collections and *Kneller's Happy Campers*, his latest book, have together sold more than 100,000 copies and over 40 films have been produced based on his stories. His books have been translated into English, German, and Italian.

ETGAR KERET'S newest book of fiction, *Kneller's Happy Campers*, consisting of four short stories and a novella, engages in literary “black humor.” But in spite of his morbid obsession with madness, suicide and hell, it is not only funny, but also good-natured. The first-person protagonist in the stories of this collection has a warm, humanistic side to him, even when discussing, for example, the grotesque scars and telltale disabilities that reveal how

people ended their lives. There is not the cold, abstract amorality of much postmodernist fiction, even though, at times, horrible facts are matter-of-factly presented. Also the influence of American writer Raymond Carver, evident in Keret’s earlier collections of stories, *Pipelines* and *Missing Kissinger*, where the banality of everyday situations ends in sudden violence, is less prevalent.

Keret belongs to the literary generation which is still distancing itself from the collective ideology of its Zionist forefathers. In “The Story About the Bus Driver Who Wanted to Be God,” the Egged bus driver is basically “a good guy,” but he will not wait a half-second to pull out of the bus stop. He must be exactly on time, even if old people with shopping bags are waving with trembling hands for the bus to wait for them. Out of concern for ideology, he mustn’t steal a half minute from each person on the bus even if an individual has to then wait fifteen minutes for the next bus. In this story, Keret points up the unbending harshness which Israel’s collective philosophy engendered, and the power it gave the bureaucrats and bus drivers who had it in their hands to deny people simple wishes in the name of the collective good. It is only because the bus driver remembers that he is almost next to God, and God has a merciful side, that he allows Adi to board the bus a second late. But it is to no avail. The girl that Adi is supposed to meet never shows up.

Anti-heroic figures, in tandem with an indifferent, churlish God, appear throughout Keret’s stories. His down-and-out heroes smoke pot, swear, take turns going crazy, and eventually commit suicide. They are the flip side of successful yuppie Tel Aviv society. In the story, “The Ginge of Nimrod,” Keret appears to be creating a