

Etgar Keret on Writing as Anger Management

The author discusses "Mitzvah," his story from the latest issue of the magazine.

By [Deborah Treisman](#) June 20, 2022

You told me that the idea for your story "[Mitzvah](#)" came from a taxi ride. Can you explain?

I took a taxi ride in Tel Aviv with a young driver who seemed to be nice. The driver was telling me about a date he'd had, and the way that he was speaking about the girl he'd dated and about women in general was so disrespectful that I found myself yelling at him. When I got out of the cab, the driver, who seemed genuinely offended, told me that I was aggressive and that, because of people like me, he wanted to leave Israel. At that moment, I realized that we were seeing the world in radically different ways, and that, in our different versions, we each saw ourselves as the good guy. When I sat down to write this story, I tried to tell it through that taxi driver's eyes, a story of somebody who is offensive and rude to some of the people around him but is totally unaware of it. I must admit that this is a recurring scenario with me: I fight with people, can be really nasty to them, feel bad afterward, and then later try to write a story from what I

imagine to be their point of view. It's strange, but this always helps me calm down and feel slightly less self-righteous.

How hard was it for you to inhabit the voice of this character and find ways to empathize with him?

Somehow, when it comes to writing, it is easy for me. When I argue with people in real life, I find it very hard to see the world through their eyes. They annoy me, and I feel little empathy toward them. But, the moment I try to step into their shoes in fiction, the situation is different: the protagonist stops being the other and becomes some meeting point between me and the person I resented; my own vices and hopes mix with the character's, and, though the character's arguments still feel "wrong," once I've mixed something of myself into them it becomes impossible for me to feel completely alienated. I guess that this is some kind of improvised anger-management therapy.

Did it help that Yogev and his brother have slightly worse characters than the narrator, so that you had gradations of likability?

I wanted the protagonist to be with crasser characters who would trigger his vague yearning for another kind of relationship. He may tell us that he wants sex, but it looks as if first he'd like to be in a dialogue with someone sensitive, or at least not offensive. In that sense, the people in the

synagogue are a good alternative to Yogev and his brother.

Why do you think the narrator decides to stay at the synagogue and pray with the men there?

I feel that, like most people, the narrator wants to be a good person and do the right thing. The synagogue man's request puts him in a position in which he can be helpful, and he really wants that. He wants to be a considerate and likable person. The praying part, I feel, is less important to him than the chance to be seen by himself and by others as a nice guy.

How did you and your translator, Jessica Cohen, work on turning the Hebrew slang in the story into comparable American slang?

This was all in Jessica's hands. In general, I think that the Hebrew slang is more extreme and explicit. In modern Hebrew society, being outspokenly honest is an important value, and blunt or rude speech can be seen as an excusable attempt to be truthful.

Who do you think are the best writers on the subject of misogyny (without themselves being misogynistic, of course)?

It is difficult for me to distinguish misogyny as its own theme. For me, it's just one indicator of indifference and a lack of empathy. In my eyes, a misogynistic character, a fundamentalist religious character, and a racist one are

essentially the same—in the sense that they are unable to see themselves as that “other,” be it a woman or someone of a different ethnicity or religion. When it comes to racist characters, I really like the way that Mark Twain portrays Huckleberry Finn, a kind and empathetic boy, who had a predominantly racist upbringing. As a character, he has a world view that is totally different than that of most modern readers, and yet, as critical as we are of Huck’s views, we keep liking and identifying with him.

I think that literary characters who hold views opposed to our own but still evoke empathy in us are a great gift, reminding us that other people whom we see as wrong actually believe that they’re right, and that, in their narrative, they’re struggling to do the right thing. This is very difficult to remember in real life, especially in a reality that is more and more divided and less and less tolerant.

Fiction, historically, was always a sphere in which we could confront emotions and ideas that we wouldn’t accept in real life. “[Lolita](#)” and “[Crime and Punishment](#)” are good examples of that: they don’t justify pedophilia or murder, but at the same time they acknowledge that these things exist in human behavior and in the human psyche. I feel that this has become less true in fiction lately. Increasingly, literary writing avoids taboos and bad behavior, or comes with trigger warnings. It’s strange how we try to police artists’ thoughts and imaginations while the real world does as it pleases. Whenever I watch Netflix, I can’t help noticing the huge gap between what is allowed to occur in fiction

series, like, for example, "[The Chair](#)," and what happens in documentary series, where the "heroes" are people like Joe Exotic, the Tinder Swindler, or that woman who allegedly fed her husband to her tiger and is now dancing with stars. How helpful can it be to doctor the fictional content to P.C. perfection when the world doesn't act the same way? It feels a bit like being a controlling parent to your Tamagotchi babies while totally neglecting your real-life ones. ♦