

Tales from Tel Aviv

Etgar Keret

Tal Raviv & Amy Withmory

Etgar Keret, an Israeli author and Tel Aviv native, has been writing since the age of 25. As his collection of published works grew larger, so did the popularity of his short stories. Today, he is known not only for his stories but also for writing and directing a number of films and receiving many awards, including the Prime Minister's Award for Literature, the Ministry of Culture's Cinema Prize, and several of the Book Publishers Association's Platinum Prizes. Keret's stories are not your typical fairytales or fables: their brevity, humor, melancholic tone, and realistic nature have captivated the attention of people far beyond the Middle East.

Kedma: Do you write with an audience in mind?

Keret: Not when I write the story. It's only after I finish writing the story that I can start thinking of the people who'll read it. But when I write the story, I don't think about anything. When I finish the story, I would say, "Ahh, it would be difficult to translate the name of the story to another language," and stuff like that, but during the process of writing, I don't think about anything.

Kedma: Do you think non-Hebrew speakers can understand your stories in the way you want them to be understood?

Keret: Generally speaking, I'm not sure that Hebrew speakers understand the stories the way I mean them. I think the way you write stuff, and the way people read it, is never the same, and that's completely okay. I think that the problem with translation is that sometimes languages don't match completely,

and you don't have the words that have the same meanings, subtleties, and ambiguities that another language might have. It's really difficult, sometimes, when you write a certain sentence or a paragraph. You do some sort of aesthetic construction and you can either keep it and lose the meaning, or keep the meaning and lose that construction that you made. So it's always about compromises when it comes to translation.

Kedma: Do a lot of people ask you where the ideas for your stories come from?

Keret: There are some stories where it's easier to say where it got started, where there was a sort of incident, or an image I saw, a sentence I heard. Characters I write about are mostly people that I know. It could be exaggerated versions of them, but it could be my friend, my family, guys who were with me in the army. I never invent a character out of nothing. The stories have to do with something that I saw, but they always pass [through] a very strong transformation. Like I've read "Fatso" [at Steinhardt Hall] and it's about my wife. It's not that I see an incident and write it as it is. I see an incident and it transforms into something else.

Kedma: When you read your stories aloud, are you ever surprised by the reactions you receive?

Keret: I have a story, "Missing Kissinger" [a story about a husband trying to prove his love to his doubting wife], and after one reading this guy came to me and said that [the title] should [have] really been "Missing Kissing Her." It sounds interesting, but I was completely unaware of it. Sometimes I'm surprised when people laugh. Sometimes people laugh at points that are embarrassing and uncomfortable, so I guess it's a way to deal with that. In the beginning I would even get a little offended. I wouldn't show it, but when people would laugh, I would think, "What are you doing! Something bad is happening to the character, what are you so happy about?"

Kedma: Have you noticed any trends over time in your work? Things you've

included now that you didn't before?

Keret: I think in my early work, there was kind of a big protest within my stories against the way that people live and about life; it was like going to war with the world. And I think that in my new stories, I'm trying to accept the world and reconcile with it. I think this attempt many times fails. Many times my characters try to make peace with the world but it's still in the way. I think it has to do with my life. When I was young, I was kind of rebellious, and now I have a family.

Kedma: Your short story "Shoes" depicts a boy who visits a Holocaust Museum and is unsure as to how best to respect the memory of his grandfather who had been a victim of the Holocaust. In your opinion, what can our generation do to deal with the memory of the Holocaust?

I know for me, the things that move me the most when it comes to remembering the Holocaust are simple, personal stories. It could be Anne Frank's diary, or Primo Levi's book *If This Is A Man*.

Keret: I think there are two forms of memory. There is this mausoleum, national memory, and the more intimate memory, which is kind of a memory we can develop with certain details. It [the intimate memory] could be a diary of somebody, it could be a scene we saw in a movie, it could be anything. I really think we should look for those places too, because I am really afraid that this kind of need to completely respect and completely deal properly with that memory can turn this Holocaust experience into something that is completely ahistorical and outside our lives, and I think it's a great challenge to bring it into our lives.

Learning history in a different way, really understanding how this process happened, stage by stage, and not just demonizing the Nazis but trying to understand the process that moved them. Because it's not this kind of pure evil force like you see in science fiction films. It's a bureaucracy and technocracy and hidden interests and romantic roots and economic situations. The thing about it is it's important to remember that all those elements that [gave rise to

Nazism] are elements that are out there all the time.

Kedma: You worked with Samir el-Youssef, a Palestinian author, to create the book *Gaza Blues*. What were your expectations when beginning this project?

Keret: The project was Samir's idea during the height of the Intifadah. He really wanted us to do something. So for me, when I went and worked with him on this book, I saw it more as a statement than as a book. I really didn't think many people were going to read it. I just wanted it to be out there, as some sort of proof that Israelis and Palestinians are not that different. A proof of coexistence, something to show, at a certain point when there was so much hatred and suspicion, that things can be different. I don't look at it as a book the same way I look at other books; I just look at it always as kind of a statement made through fiction.

Kedma: How do you feel about your stories being studied and analyzed in literature classes and high schools?

Keret: If I were a teacher, I would teach people how to love reading. If we're analyzing stories, it means that people kind of take place in a personal, creative process of stating their thoughts and ideas. That's great, but if it's something that takes the soul out of a story and makes it into a list of effects or metaphors, then I don't like it.

I once had a professor in university who said that in Hebrew the word for analyzing is *nituach*, which is also the word for [medical] "operation." He said that you can cut the patient into as many pieces as you want. You'll still never find its soul.

Tal Raviv is a junior studying chemical engineering. Amy Withmory is a sophomore studying Philosophy, Politics, and Economics.