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## Third-Generation Holocaust Representation

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## CHAPTER 4

# Trauma and Tradition

## *Changing Classical Paradigms in Third- Generation Novelists*

One job of history is to “work through a past that has not passed away.”

—DOMINICK LaCAPRA, *HISTORY AND MEMORY AFTER AUSCHWITZ*

If you don't tell that story, it disappears, and even if you do tell it, it might just disappear anyway.

—JOSEPH SKIBELL, “TEN FACES”

The Jewish tradition assigns great theological weight to historical events. The covenant between God and the Jewish people invests history with a transcendent meaning and holds the people to account for any deviation from the covenantal path. From the biblically based assertion, “we are punished for our sins” (*mipenei hataeinu*), to the rabbinic contention that suffering is a “reproof of love” (*yessurin shel ahavah*), Jewish thought instantiates the linking of human action and divine judgment. Consequently, there are no historical accidents in Jewish history. Moreover, Jewish tradition has a highly evolved historical consciousness that responds to the eternal validity of archetypes of redemption, as in the Talmudic saying, “On the day the Temple was destroyed, the Messiah was born” (*Berakhot* 2:4). The post-Holocaust question is: Does this archetype still resonate in terms of confronting the Holocaust's traumatic legacy?

This chapter analyzes how selected third-generation novelists revisit, engage, and revise classical archetypes for understanding evil and suffering in the wake of the Shoah. Rituals such as the blessing of the moon and figures such as the golem and the *lamed voy zaddik* (the hidden righteous for whose sake the world exists), and fictive shtetlach are frequently incorporated as elements of third-generation literary responses. Simultaneously, these novelists rely upon tropes of magical realism, Jewish myth, mysticism, and folktales in seeking to confront the effects of Holocaust-induced trauma. Collectively, works by Joseph Skibell, Michael Chabon, and Jonathan Safran Foer, to name but a few, reveal the third generation's testing of traditional assertions in relation to their burden of Shoah inheritance. Their novels problematize these assertions. Nevertheless, like the title of Julie Orringer's novel *The Invisible Bridge* implies, these writers attest that this "bridge," after Auschwitz, leads both away from and toward the classical Jewish tradition.

### *A Blessing on the Moon*

Joseph Skibell, a professor of creative writing at Emory University, published his debut novel *A Blessing on the Moon* in 1997.<sup>1</sup> The book was dedicated to Skibell's great-grandparents and to their children. The dedication also includes the Hebrew expression preceding the recitation of the Sh'ma Yisrael prayer: "Gather us in peace from the four corners of the earth." One scholar, Marita Grimwood, somewhat misleadingly considers the book "a particularly original addition to the Holocaust canon."<sup>2</sup> Skibell's novel received both the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Turner Prize for First Fiction from the Texas Institute of Letters. Additionally, Skibell's novel was a Book of the Month Club selection and was named one of the year's best by *Publishers Weekly*, *Le Monde*, and Amazon.com. *A Blessing on the Moon* has been translated into half a dozen languages including Dutch, French, and German. It has also been produced as an opera, *A Blessing on the Moon: The Color of Poison Berries*. Skibell is the coauthor of the libretto.

Skibell's novel is his "attempt . . . to recover from the silence a family history that, except for a clutch of photos and whatever is encoded genetically, has all but disappeared."<sup>3</sup> Eighteen members of his great-

grandfather's immediate family were murdered in the Shoah. In a later nonfiction piece, Skibell speaks to the imperative to give imaginary voice to those who perished: "Though these people were my grandfather's parents and his siblings, I never knew much about them when I was growing up. Nobody ever spoke about them or mentioned their names, and I felt that by making them characters in this novel, I was somehow *re-membering* them back into the family, remembering them in the normal sense of the word, of course, but also *re-membering* them: making them members of our family again" ("Ten Faces," 208). In reflecting on the absence of stories that might have included them in the family narrative, Skibell writes that in his childhood he sometimes "mistook the silence for shame [while] at other times I heard in it an accusation and a threat: You are next" ("Notes from Adolf the Plumber," 6–7). Elsewhere Skibell discusses this problem of shame and silence surrounding the deaths of those who perished, reflecting on a childhood in which "That silence was very palpable for me. As a child, I assumed that there was some sort of shame in it. Instead, I realized later that it was just horrible, horrible grief."<sup>4</sup> Skibell asks a question directly related to the intergenerational transmission of trauma: "Who knows how long the spooks of the Holocaust will haunt us?" ("Notes from Adolf the Plumber," 7).

The novel, which Grimwood helpfully suggests should be read allegorically and as an example of *merveilleux* (the supernatural), contains eighty chapters and is divided into three sections of unequal length (Grimwood, 91). The novel's conceit centers on the protagonist, Chaim Skibelski, a pious Jew living in a small Polish village, who, on the novel's opening page, is murdered by a Nazi. He and the other Jewish villagers are "rounded . . . up" and taken into the forest, where they "stood . . . shivering, like trees in uneven rows, and one by one we fell" (Skibell, 3). Here the all too real gives way to the surreal, for the dead Chaim "climbed out of the grave" and, in a kind of wishful reinvention on the part of the writer, is reanimated (Skibell, 4). His ghostly self undertakes a postmortem pilgrimage in which he juxtaposes the orientation of traditional Judaism with its emphasis on the World to Come and the world-shattering event of the Holocaust. His traumatic experience leaves him feeling disoriented and abandoned. In an equally fantastical moment in the novel, the town's rabbi transforms into a wisdom-dispensing crow who guides Chaim. With understated simplicity, Chaim acknowledges, "The Rebbe

is not his usual self, that much is clear” (8). The moon is pulled from the sky, thereby making the reckoning of time impossible. Here the natural world as well as the customary measurement of time’s passage is ruptured by the cataclysmic events of the Shoah. Restoring the moon to its proper place only occurs after the Shoah. Chaim at the novel’s end appears to regress to a point just after his physical birth.

A *Blessing on the Moon*’s three sections move gradually from theological despair to the possibility of at least a partial *tikkun* (repair) of the world. Significantly and directly related to the book’s title, there are two epigraphs fronting the novel: one from the Book of Job (37:21)—“And now they do not see light, it is brilliant in the skies, when the wind has passed and cleared them”—and the second from Maimonides’s “Sanctification of the New Moon” (2:6)—“For there existed suspicion that at first something that looked to them like the moon had appeared in the gathering clouds, but that the clouds subsequently disappeared and that they had seen nothing.” Raising the moon that has fallen to earth is the novel’s central metaphor and theological fulcrum. The fact that the moon has fallen from the sky is repeatedly referenced, with different versions accounting for the fall, and serves as a parable for the physical, psychological, and theological havoc wreaked by the Holocaust.

Emphasizing the collapse of the ethical, Skibell opens his novel with a section titled the Mayseh Book or Maaseh Books, referencing “collections of folklore, in Yiddish, which are concerned exclusively with ethics.” These collections emerged in the fifteenth century. Their teachings are based on Talmudic and Midrashic Aggadoth combining “Jewish and non-Jewish sources [with] a religious application.”<sup>5</sup> On the first page of the opening section, the mortally wounded Chaim Skibelski, whose first name in Hebrew means “life,” falls into a pit containing the bodies of his fellow Jews. Although Chaim escapes the pit, his wounds continue to bleed, suggesting thereby the continuing trauma of the Holocaust. As Cathy Caruth writes: “The traumatized . . . carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.”<sup>6</sup> In this context, it is worth noting that both Johanna Adorján’s memoir *An Exclusive Love*<sup>7</sup> and Thane Rosenbaum’s novel *The Golems of Gotham* begin with suicides of Holocaust survivors, thus illustrating the continuing trauma of the Shoah or what Primo Levi termed “the survivor’s disease.” Alvin Rosenfeld succinctly describes what

Levi meant by this phrase: “The psychological and spiritual components of what Levi called ‘the survivor’s disease’—the diminution of energy, a wearing away of vitality, the heavy burdens of guilt and shame, a slow but certain collapse of the will to live.”<sup>8</sup>

In Skibell’s novel, Chaim is a Job-like figure who, unlike his biblical namesake, neither fully repents nor has an auditory experience of the deity. He questions both God’s existence and the deity’s justice. Chaim conducts a *din Torah* (trial of God) in which the deity is found absent from, and evidently indifferent to, the plight of the chosen people. Skibelski’s experience instantiates Caruth’s observation that, “trauma unsettles and forces us to rethink our notions of experience, and of communication” (Caruth, *Trauma*, 4). Chaim’s journey through the Holocaust landscape is a postmortem version of the return to sites of memory, which, as this book demonstrates, many in the third generation undertake. Chaim’s experience, however, is significantly different from many of the return narratives, for he carries “an impossible history *within*” himself (*ibid.*). He bears witness to and interprets his traumatic history.

Skibelski is a figure who experiences both “individual trauma” and “collective trauma.”<sup>9</sup> On the individual level he still mourns Ida, his first wife who died in childbirth along with their newborn baby. He himself is, as noted, in the novel’s opening scene, shot in the head. On the collective level, the Shoah problematizes traditional Jewish theological responses to catastrophe, such as the promise of a World to Come and the belief that God intervenes in history, casting grave doubt on the continued existence of the Jewish people. Seeking to account for Chaim’s post-mortem wandering and suffering, Kirsten Renders notes that such a condition “can be considered a metaphor for the time-consuming process of working through [his] trauma.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, significantly, as the novel progresses, Chaim clings to a form of Jewish mystical-magical—if not a distinctively religious—perspective in his attempt to work through his trauma.

Chaim undertakes a series of postmortem journeys. Visiting his former home, he makes two observations: “workers were lifting all the memories into carts and driving off,” and “In front of every house were piles of vows and promises, all in broken pieces” (Skibell, 4). The town’s rabbi, speaking through his guise as a black crow, suggests to Chaim that perhaps “this [death-world] is the World to Come [*Olam Habaah*]” (Skibell, 5).

The World to Come is a central metaphor in Jewish thought, suggesting one of two possibilities: a spiritual reward for the pious, or the advent of the messianic age. Clearly, the rabbi's statement questions this notion: Is death the Messiah and does the end of the Jewish people signify the coming of the messianic age?

A spectral presence in what once was his home—inhabited now by a Polish family—Chaim is visible only to Ola, the couple's fatally ill thirteen-year-old daughter. The young girl is anguished by Polish complicity in the murder of the Jewish people, and thus it is only she who can see Chaim's ghost. Ola can witness Chaim because she recognizes suffering, which is reflected in "the sorrow in her gray-green eyes" (33). She, unlike her family, is not indifferent to the suffering of others. Among her few possessions are a telescope with a cracked lens and a compass, items that figure in the novel's final section dealing with raising the moon. Upon her death Ola is carried to heaven by Jesus and Mary. Commenting on the appearance of the former, Chaim muses: "That fat mama's boy with the scraggly beard and the blotchy face? This nebbish is their god?" (56). Chaim refers to Jesus as a "failed rabbinical student" (61). He contrasts these "false gods" to the Jewish God, "our God, the One True God, [who] has left me neglected here below, answering my pleas with His stony, implacable silence" (62). God's silence is a characteristic trope of Holocaust narratives in many survivor writings as well as in post-Holocaust literary representation.

While haunting the house Chaim leaves trails of blood on the walls and, in an ironic inversion of the Deuteronomic injunction to remember God's saving acts and the Ten Commandments, he insists: "I mark a slanted vermilion slash across every lintel and on the doorposts of their house, and upon their gates" (19–20). The descendants of the criminals are thereby enjoined to remember the crimes of their forbearers. In addition, blood is one of the ten plagues God visited upon the Egyptians. Moreover, the protagonist wreaks havoc inside the house, breaking glassware, stealing family photos, and seeking to generate dis-ease among the Polish usurpers who speak derisively about the murdered "Yids." Chaim will, in defiance of the Poles' indifference and brutality, leave traces of his blood, proof of his prior existence in the world and evidence of their guilt. In a version of the third generation's return motif, Skibell has his protagonist return to the site of his own death, drawn "to the mound

the soldiers made when they covered our pit” (24). There, he finds his friends and neighbors, those whose bodies at the time of his transcendence “lay twisted in great heaps like so many pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, unassembled, on a parlor table,” now living and talking below the desecrated ground (24). His “ear to the ground,” Chaim can hear “faintly at first, but then more and more distinctly . . . the sounds of Yiddish being spoken” (25). Of course, the living voices of his “Landsmen,” like the animated presence of Chaim himself, are fantastical resurrections of a destroyed life, only reconstructed in the imagination (*ibid.*). For even their “memories” along with their belongings, were piled “into carts and dri[ven] off” (4). The fear, extended from generation to generation, is that even the “ghosts”—the memories—of the dead will “pass among them unnoticed, unfelt, possibly unremembered . . . Gone. Simply. No one cares where” (17).

The opening section of Skibell’s novel has three references to the moon falling from the sky. The first comes as Chaim seeks to decipher a scrawled note that the Rebbe as crow leaves for him. Unable to read the message—later the crow informs him that the note is written in Yiddish—he looks out of an open window and watches in astonishment as the moon “sinks and disappears behind the trees” (15) a rupture of the natural world and its processes. Next, Chaim listens as one of the Poles exclaims: “If the Yids want the moon . . . then what’s it to us? Let them keep it. They’re the only ones who ever used it. It’s not as if they took the sun” (26). This utterance distinguishes Jews from Christians in terms of how time itself is reckoned. For Christians time depends on the solar calendar alone. For Jews time is determined according to the lunar calendar, although certain elements of the solar calendar are also included in this equation. Moreover, theologically, there is also a major distinction between Christian and Jewish calculations of time. The moon waxes and wanes, indicating the fortunes of the Jewish people who periodically face great danger and survive the crisis. Furthermore, Jewish rituals are reckoned according to the moon. The third moon reference to the moon is contained in a tale Chaim relates to Ola prior to her death. Echoing the Dutch fairy tale “Wynken, Blinken, and Nod,” Chaim speaks of two Hasidim who find a boat that takes them to heaven. Arriving at the moon, they discover pots of silver that they load onto the boat that they have tethered to the celestial body. The silver is so heavy it causes the boat to



sink. The sinking vessel pulls the moon out of the sky, plunging the earth into darkness. The fate of the Jewish people is, intimately tied to the fate of the moon. If the fallen moon can be elevated, then Judaism itself may survive the Holocaust and its traumatic inheritance.

“The Color of Poison Berries,” the novel’s second section, references blood-covered snowdrifts that appear “salmon pink, the color of poison berries” (71). This section of the novel pivots on the trope of fairy tales. Skibell acknowledges, “For years I have been a great lover of fairy tales and folk tales. Yiddish folk tales, especially, speak to me” (“Skibell, self-interview,” 2). Moreover, Skibell told an interviewer that “the Holocaust (. . . the invisible backdrop to my childhood) seemed foreshadowed in the tales of the Brothers Grimm: the oven in Hansel and Gretel becomes the ovens of Auschwitz; the Pied Piper leading away first the rats and then the children of Hamelin is, to me, the story of World War II. Hitler as the mesmerizing entrancer seducing the ‘rats’—which is how the Nazis characterized European Jewry—to their doom; the bad faith of the German people; the loss of their children, the next generation, who suffer the consequence of their bad faith: what is that if not the story of the Holocaust?” (ibid.).<sup>11</sup>

This section of the novel is replete with postmortem conversations: between Chaim and his murdered Jewish neighbors, between Chaim and the severed head of the German soldier who killed him, between Chaim and the virulently antisemitic kitchen staff of the mysterious and deadly Hotel Amfortas, and between Chaim and the the Rebbinic crow who serves as his guide on this part of his postmortem journey. The protagonist journeys to the mass grave containing the corpses of his murdered community. One of the victims, a childhood friend, raises the moral question in reproving Chaim for not having pulled him out of the pit. Chaim replies that he has been shot in the head and cannot think clearly. Despite his trauma and feelings of abandonment, Chaim still clings, perhaps instinctively, to a Jewish frame of reference. Seated at the edge of the pit housing his dead friends, Chaim and his transformed Rebbinic mentor muse that the day feels like *Tashlich*, the symbolic casting away of sins during the Jewish New Year (*Rosh Hashanah*). Only here, the Jewish people are sinless in the face of the Holocaust onslaught and the natural order of time eroded: “The day feels like Tashlich, when, at the new year, we’d walk, the entire town, to the river to cast our sins

into its accepting waters. Of course, today, we'd only find it frozen" (Skibell, 80). The protagonist remarks that it is nearing the time of the month of *chesvan*, which is known as *marchesvan*—the bitter month.

Chaim and his fellow victims wander over the Holocaust landscape, "each one trailing his own thin trickle of blood" (81). On route, his colleague Reb Elimelech asks if what they have heard about the moon falling is true. Chaim responds, evoking a version of the "we are punished for our sins" paradigm. He says that while none of the Jews has the moon, "we're all thieves! We're all to blame" (*ibid.*). He is also accompanied by the head of the German soldier who murdered him, the soldier having been beheaded by a Ukrainian peasant. In a surreal moment, the disembodied head tells Chaim a variant of the story he himself had told Ola about two Hasidim who sail to the moon and end by pulling it from the sky. The German head attests that he witnessed the two traditional believers arguing about whether the Laws of Moses permit them to take a boat they had come across. The boat is tied to a tree near a river and is full of holes. Miraculously the boat, lightened by the holes, and carrying the two pious Jews, sank upward into the sky on route to the moon (106–9). Such a paradox—"sank upward"—makes emphatic the rupture of language and the fractured experience of living in a Holocaust world.

After blaming Chaim and, by implication, all Jews for having caused him to interrupt his conservatory studies, the head begs Chaim's forgiveness, thereby raising a moral question for members of the third generation: is there a moral imperative regarding forgiveness? Chaim replies: "Little head when, you killed me you took everything. My home, my wife, my children. Must you now have my forgiveness as well?" (112). This postmortem dialogue is revealing on at least two counts. In the first place, it confirms the accuracy of LaCapra's observation that "The traumatic event . . . affects everyone who comes into contact with it (including) perpetrator and collaborator" (LaCapra, 8–9). It reveals, we would add, that being a murderer is not predicated by one's culture and learning; there is no contradiction between culture and murder. Second, by raising the issue of forgiveness, Skibell points to strategies for working through the Shoah. Chaim does not forgive the head. Nevertheless, he carries it with him in a burlap bag. But Skibell, in asking the question, "Can one forgive on behalf of the dead?"—an impossibility according to normative Jewish teachings—challenges third-generation writers to

articulate a position on the problem of forgiveness and clemency.<sup>12</sup> The novelist differentiates himself from his great-grandfather by postulating the hope that his novel “is a book of blessing” (“Interview,” 3). Writing emerges as a possible way of working through the traumatic legacy of the Shoah, a therapeutic encounter, so to speak, which enables one to live in the present, project into the future, and not forget the past.

Chaim and his dead companions travel to the mysterious Hotel Amfortas that caters to dead Jews, although first they must avoid a pack of dangerous wolves.<sup>13</sup> Sighting the animals through his broken spyglass, Chaim recites the Viddui, a prayer one must say on one’s deathbed. Moreover, as if to underscore the presence of the absent God, Chaim twice wonders, “What can God be thinking?” (Skibell, 10). The dead Jews must forge a raging but somehow healing river to get to the hotel. Once there they change into evening clothes, Skibelski is seated with his family for dinner. Initially he fails to recognize them. Then he realizes the totality of the destruction, uttering: “You are telling me that not one of you survived?” Chaim then muses on a central Holocaust question: “How is it possible for men to make laws against another man’s life, so that by merely living, he [a Jew] is guilty of a crime?” “And,” he continues, “what kind of men enforce such laws?” (149–50).

Chaim listens to his two sons-in-law argue about the existence of Paradise. The cynical one believes it’s been “cooked up” by the rabbis to enslave the Jews. He concludes his diatribe by enquiring, “If there is a Paradise, do you actually think they’d let Jews into it?” (158). Chaim himself has doubts that he is really in the World to Come, musing, “Wouldn’t all the dead be here and not just the recently murdered?” (159). Moreover, biblical figures such as Adam, Abraham, and Elijah are absent from the ghostly gathering, thus reinforcing Chaim’s doubt about the character of the World to Come. In a twist on the return journey conceit of the third generation, here it is the dead wanderer who makes the return as he travels through the World to Come. Ironically, Chaim’s misgivings implicitly ask the unanswered question, “If this is the World to Come, then what is left after the Holocaust for the Jews?”

*A Blessing on the Moon* highlights both the euphemistic language the Nazis employed and their virulent antisemitism. Frantically searching for his wife in the now deserted hotel, Chaim finds himself in the kitchen. The head baker orders his assistants to bring in the next batch of Jewish

corpses. Reverting to the fairy-tale trope, one of the middle bakers calls out amidst much laughter, “Hansel, stick your finger out so I can see if you are fat enough!” (181–82). One of the other bakers reports that Chaim’s family “have taken the steam” (183). Another baker says with pride, “We have baked them” (ibid.). A third baker speaks up with equal enthusiasm, “They have been in our ovens” (ibid.). National Socialism sought to make the world *judenrein*. The head baker addresses this goal in speaking to Chaim: “Herr Jude . . . I must bake. Do you understand? Surely you don’t wish to be the only Jew left in God’s blue world?” (ibid.). The baker continues, “There will again be sweetness in the world” — when all the Jews have been murdered (182). Here the realities of the methods of annihilation become contextualized in the distorted fairy-tale language of legend, both taking the events out of time and making all the more emphatic the extended traumatic time.

“The Smaller to Rule by Night,” the novel’s third section, is a bold attempt at seeking a “repair” or “restoration” of the world (*tikkun ha-olam*) in so far as this is possible after the Shoah. Here, the reference to such repair is both metaphorical and physical. Consequently, while on the one hand, the novel looks unblinkingly at the destruction of the Jewish people during the Holocaust and attests to the fact that traditional piety and belief in the World to Come have come under radical assault by the catastrophe, the blessing of the new moon (*Kiddush Levanah*), on the other hand, evokes significant and potentially restorative symbolic meaning. This concluding section introduces the characters Kalman and Zalman, the two Hasidim who inadvertently pulled the moon from the sky. In terms of time, the action takes place in the post-Shoah world—Kalman and Zalman have waited fifty years for Chaim to arrive. This fifty-year period may also be seen as referring to the length of time Skibell himself believes necessary for a working through of the traumatic inheritance. This section freely evokes the tropes of fairy tales and folklore. Significantly, Skibell skillfully integrates the tragedy of the Shoah with a sense of hope, however improbable this seems, and concludes by suggesting a working through process that enlists both the dead and the living.

“The Smaller to Rule by Night” begins with Chaim adopting a theological posture resembling that of Job, interrogating the deity. The protagonist muses that if he had been informed as a child of what awaited him, he would have preferred death. Chaim also considers the propriety

of saying Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, for himself: “Why can’t a soul recite the prayer for the dead over himself and somehow, on his own, effect his way into the World to Come?” (195). This question evokes a scene described by Elie Wiesel in his classic memoir *Night* where he witnesses a group of Jews in Auschwitz reciting Kaddish for themselves. Wiesel rhetorically queries if the recitation of the prayer for one’s own death has ever before occurred in Jewish history. Chaim, for his part, wonders if, by saying Kaddish, it is possible to pray oneself into the World to Come. Classical rabbinic practice enjoins the saying of the prayer for the dead for eleven months. But, Chaim muses, “Without the moon, who can keep track of the time?” (196).

Leaving the forest in which he wanders, Skibell’s protagonist stumbles across his former town, which is now part of Russia. There are paved roads, television sets, traffic lights, and more cars than ever before. He spies a stone glowing “with a pale green light” (200). Soon additional glowing stones appear. These glowing objects, an updated version of Hansel and Gretel’s bread crumbs, are moon rocks that form a trail leading back into the forest and, eventually, to a small hut in the middle of the woods. There Chaim discovers Zalman and Kalman, the two Hasidim responsible for the moon’s descent to earth. Food and drink have been magically supplied them, suggesting the intervention of either Elijah or perhaps the metamorphized Rebbe. Chaim’s arrival—on Shabbat (Saturday), the day Jews are commanded to rest in honor of God who, after creating the world in six days, rested on the seventh—initiates the process of redeeming the moon, but not before Chaim, plagued by his ongoing traumatic experience, confesses that he hates the two for being alive when “I and my family are not” (210). Zalman and Kalman tell Chaim that the Rebbe had predicted his resistance and, further, had given explicit instruction to the two to wait for the protagonist.

Redeeming the moon requires both mystical calculations and hard physical labor. Zalman confides that he has “perhaps found a way to return the moon to the sky” (209). He retrieves a book from his shelf. It is, possibly, the *Sefer Yetzirah* (*Book of Creation*) composed between the third and sixth centuries C.E. The volume speaks of thirty-two secret paths of wisdom composed of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet plus ten primordial numbers called sefirot, and was influential in

the subsequent development of Jewish mysticism. Zalman, who engages in ascetic and mystical purification rituals, has drawn diagrams in the volume's margins, and has created a secret map—indicating where the moon is buried. Chaim has never seen a map like this before.

Moreover, Zalman has written below the images of horrible demons, “*Beware! Beyond this boundary—madness!*” (213). Such a warning recalls the dangers associated with esoteric and mystical activity as presented in the legend of the “Four who enter PaRDeS” (Paradise or mystical experience) found in the *Mishnah Hagigah*. The acronym represents different interpretive modes. The P (Peshat) stands for literal or plain meaning. The R (Remez) refers to allegoric or symbolic meaning. The D (Derash) indicates Midrashic meaning whereas the S (Sod) refers to secret or mystical interpretations. Of the four, one loses his faith, one loses his mind, and one loses his life. Only one, Rabbi Akiva, “entered in peace and came out in peace.”<sup>14</sup> The two Hasidim have no idea where they themselves are and in what direction the imprisoned moon lies. They need the compass that Ola has given Chaim to guide them.

Prior to setting out to rescue the moon, Zalman and Kalman tell their own version of how the moon fell to earth. After loading pots of silver from the moon onto their boat, the craft sank to earth dragging the moon with it. Cutting the rope tethering the moon to their boat, they are astonished when the silver-laden vessel sank up to the sky leaving the moon earthbound. Zalman admits to his own personal trauma in reporting that his and Kalman's hearts “grew heavy, knowing the trouble we were causing, pulling the moon from the sky” (Skibell, 224). Kalman and Chaim, following Zalman's ethereal map, discover the moon's burial place in a cemetery in the forest. Seeking to free the celestial body, the three labor with shovels, picks, and push brooms. They discover the moon amidst the bones of Jews murdered in the Shoah. Chaim observes: “Skulls stare at me with darkened sockets, grimacing through gnashed or broken teeth. With each of my blind steps, bones rattle and crunch, shifting to make room” (240). It is the sound of death. The trio's eventual success in accomplishing their mission calls to mind Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones and his question of whether the bones can yet live (Ez. 37:1–14). While it is too late for the victims of the Shoah, the Jewish people will be resurrected, as it were, in the State of Israel. Kalman reinforces this notion

when addressing the moon, still earthbound but slowly emerging from its chthonic prison, when he exclaims, “Look who’s risen from the dead, so to speak” (Skibell, 232).

Raising the moon metaphorically carries with it the weight of memory and survival. It brings relief to a vanishing world where even notions of time and nature have been corrupted. The moon is, as previously noted, crucial for the notion of time, in both its sacred and secular dimensions. Moreover, the waning and waxing of the moon is a visible and eternal symbol of the Jewish people: no matter how their enemies seek to destroy them, the people endure. Furthermore, blessing the new moon is a ritual linking the Jewish people with the deity. “To bless the new moon at the proper time is,” attests the Talmud, “like greeting the Divine Presence” (*Sanhedrin* 42a). Therefore, the novel’s title provides cause for hope. The ritual of blessing the moon that occurs on the first Shabbat after each new month (*Rosh Hodesh*) provides an opportunity for the Jewish people both to extol God and remind themselves that, in spite of the vicissitudes of history, their eternal presence is not in doubt. The prayer itself reads:

Blessed art thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who  
didst create the  
Heavens by thy command, and all their host by thy mere word.  
Thou hast  
Subjected them to fixed laws and time, so that they might not  
deviate from their  
Set function. They are glad and happy to do the will of their  
Creator, the true  
Author, whose achievement is truth. He ordered the moon to  
renew itself as a  
Glorious crown over those he sustained from birth, who  
likewise will be  
Regenerated in the future, and will worship their Creator for  
his glorious majesty.  
Blessed art thou, O Lord, who renewest the months.<sup>15</sup>

The waning and waxing of the moon is, thus, allegorically related to the history of the Jewish people, particularly during times of persecution and oppression. As the moon is “restored to its pristine brightness . . .

Israel, too, will achieve its final redemption” (Skibell, 97). Moreover, the moon symbolizes the feminine. Linguistically, the Hebrew word for moon (*levanah*) has a feminine ending. The moon’s monthly rhythm suggests an affinity with a woman’s menstrual cycle. Further, the moon has the characteristic of receptiveness, receiving light from the sun. The Kabbalah, in its sixteenth-century manifestation, attested that the moon represents the Shekinah or feminine aspect of the divine. Chaim, addressing the moon, refers to the celestial body as “her.” The moon, of course, has universal resonance as well. “It is,” writes Pamela Stadden, “a symbol that unites us all.”<sup>16</sup>

There is, however, heavenly competition between the sun and the moon, as is seen in the section Hullin 60b (Babylonian Talmud):

R. Simeon b. Pazzi pointed out a contradiction (between verses). One verse says, And God made the two great lights (Genesis 1:16), and immediately the Verse continues, The greater light . . . and the lesser light. The moon said unto the Holy One, blessed be He, ‘Sovereign of the Universe! Is it possible for two kings To wear one crown?’ He answered, ‘Go then and make thyself smaller.’ ‘Sovereign of the Universe!’ cried the moon, ‘Because I have suggested that Which is proper must I then make myself smaller?’ He replied, ‘Go and thou wilt Rule by day and by night.’ ‘But what is the value of this? Cried the moon; ‘Of What use is a lamp in broad daylight?’ He replied, ‘Go. Israel shall reckon by thee The days and the years.’ ‘But it is impossible,’ said the moon, ‘to do without the Sun for the reckoning of the seasons, as it is written, And let them be for signs, And for seasons, and for days and years (Genesis 1:14. ‘Go. The righteous shall Be named after thee as we find, Jacob the Small (cf. Amos 7:2, Samuel the Small, David the Small (cf. 1 Samuel 17:14).’ On seeing that it would not be consoled The Holy One, blessed be He, said, ‘Bring an atonement for Me for making the Moon smaller.’<sup>17</sup>

Yehuda Liebes writes: “Even at the literal level, the connection between the moon and Israel in this myth is already clear. To compensate the moon for its waning, God rules that Israel shall reckon their days by it



instead of by the sun as do the gentiles, and lunar eclipses are therefore considered a bad omen for Israel in the Talmud.”<sup>18</sup>

Faith still retains a modicum of efficacy even after the Shoah. Although the moon is raised from its earthly imprisonment, it no longer appears as before. It is transformed. Its surface is mottled and uneven, reflecting the hideous wounding of the Jewish people during the Shoah. Chaim observes: “Forever now, the moon will appear this way, no longer the smooth and gleaming pearl I remember from my youth” (Skibell, 244). The natural world, its rhythms and measures, are forever changed. Nevertheless, Chaim himself suggests that he and the two Hasidim recite the sanctification over the moon. The Rebbe, simulating a biblical prophet, intervenes: “In the name of God,” he exclaims, “and with the merit of my righteous ancestors, I command you, O fallen luminary, to return to your place in the Heavens above” (251). The moon complies, but Zalman and Kalman need Ola’s telescope to locate the risen moon. Yet the passage ends on an ominous note. Kalman wonders how we can be sure “that [the moon] won’t wax and wane and disappear again?” (252). No one responds. This *tikkun* is only partial, provisional. The Rebbe, acting as the spokesperson for normative Judaism attests, “We don’t always understand God’s ways . . . But that is our failing, not His” (254). The novel ends with two transformations. The Rebbe reappears as an elderly figure who works one final miracle: disappearing and being replaced by a young woman who is ostensibly Chaim’s mother. Chaim, whom the mysterious woman calls by the affectionate diminutive Chaimka, begins to forget everything including why he died. He is reborn. His “history falls away, like the sacks of grain from a careless farmer’s wagon.” Furthermore, he begins “to forget everything” (256). Chaim sees the light of the moon as he did when a child prior to the cosmic rupture caused by the Holocaust period.

Skibell’s novel suggests two possibilities concerning traumatic inheritance. On the one hand, this inheritance must be worked through, detoxified, in a manner of speaking, so that an individual is able to function in the present and face the future with some degree of hope. Writing this novel is the author’s own attempt at working through his Holocaust legacy, “an act of commemoration” (Beierle). On the other hand, Chaim does not “work through.” He reverts to infancy—the time before the Shoah when Judaism functioned as what Professor Peter Berger terms

a “sacred canopy” under whose protective cover life was lived with a purpose, and death had a transcendent meaning. The pre-Shoah Jewish world into which Chaim was born was inhabited by worshippers of God and believers in the World to Come. Here Skibell makes clear that the Shoah cannot be undone. Reversion to a pre-Holocaust world is impossible. Traumatic inheritance threatens to overwhelm traditional—pre-Holocaust—Jewish thought.

Skibell continues and deepens his pursuit of an acceptable theological response to the Shoah in his 2010 novel *A Curable Romantic*, a richly imagined work, combining history, magical realism, and a complexity of plot all undergirded by immense theological erudition. Divided into three books, the work follows Viennese-born Dr. Jacob Josef Sammelsohn, a secularist, and his relationship with three father-figures: Sigmund Freud; Ludwik Lejer Zamenhof, the founder of Esperanto; and Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Szapira, Grand Rabbi of Piaseczno, Poland. Part three of the novel—the Warsaw ghetto—is an indictment of the failure of rationalism and Esperanto, which envisions a “useless utopia.” In their stead, Sammelsohn teams with Rabbi Szapira in seeking a religious explanation for the persecution of the Jewish people. Rabbi Szapira is best known for his book *Esh Kodesh (Holy Fire)*, a collection of inspirational speeches given to his followers during the Holocaust. The rabbi exemplified faith under tremendous stress and did not shy away from the complexities of belief during the Holocaust. Like Chaim Kaplan and Immanuel Ringelblum—two other martyrs of the Warsaw Ghetto—Rabbi Szapira buried his book in a canister that was discovered after the war.

Skibell combines the teachings of Merkabah mysticism, Jewish gnosticism, and rabbinic thought in portraying a heavenly ascent by Rabbi Szapira and Dr. Sammelsohn. The pair—accompanied by two angels—ascend a symbolic Jacob’s ladder toward the celestial realm. In a version of *Midrash Rabbah*, which portrays the patriarchs ascending to heaven to plead the case for the Jewish people, Szapira and Sammelsohn literally storm the gates of heaven seeking to interrogate the deity about the persecution of His people. But they do not see God. Instead, they discover that the Holy One is a weeping God, who is a *nistar*, a concealed one. As God is infinite, so is His pain infinite. Concerning the suffering of God, Wiesel notes that the Book of Jeremiah portrays God as saying, “I shall weep in secret.” A midrash, suggests Wiesel, “remarks that there is a place

called 'secret' and that when God is sad He takes refuge there to weep" (*All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 105, 1). In Skibell's retelling of the *Midrash* there is a failure to see God; the deity does not hear them and does not respond. The rabbi and the secularist return to earth.

Having exhausted the possibility of a meaningful theological response, and despairing of Jewish life in Europe, Sammelsohn advocates for a Zionist response on the novel's last page: "The farther I got from the ghetto," he asserts, "the harder it was to believe" (*A Curable Romantic*, 593). Finished with myths and dreams, Samuelsohn was "walking into history" (*ibid.*). He was "heading towards Palestine, towards the Promised Land, and it was only there . . . that a man could live as a Jew, and a Jew could live in peace" (*ibid.*). Unlike *A Blessing on the Moon*, resolution of the dilemma of how to respond to the Shoah is less theological than political. Here Skibell is advocating that support for the State of Israel is a characteristic of third-generation response to one's Holocaust inheritance. Yet faith is not banished. It remains an option for believers and those who wish to believe in spite of the Shoah. Here Skibell also suggests the tenuous and precarious condition of memory: What happens when memory is erased?

### *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*

Michael Chabon's Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* is marked by intricacy of plot structure and sophisticated use of language.<sup>19</sup> Critics unanimously praised the work: *Kirkus Review* described the novel as "A stroke of sheer conceptual genius," and the *Denver Post* described the author as a "literary Houdini." (These blurbs appear in the inside cover of the novel.) Chabon's novel tells the story of Prague-born Joseph Kavalier, who escapes from Europe on the eve of the Shoah, and his New York cousin Sammy Clay, né Klayman. Sammy has a crippled leg and is traumatized by being abandoned by his father. Chabon's plot plays out against the background of America's isolationist policy that advocated an escape from moral responsibility. The novel in fact employs the metaphor of escape as a governing principle. Kavalier studies with an escape artist before fleeing his natal city and the Shoah; Sammy overcomes or escapes the limitations of his physical handicap; the Holocaust emerges as a backstory.

*Kavalier and Clay* explores the tension between escape and engagement. Moreover, as Joseph Dewey notes: “in his portrayal of Jewish immigrant life in mid-century New York City [Chabon reveals a] deep investment in his own religious roots, a reclamation, even rediscovery, of the dimensions of Jewish identity and its meaning in a contemporary and often hostile world.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Chabon explores American culture and the history of the comic book industry and its oppression of creative artists between 1939 and 1955. In this layering of narrative landscapes, Chabon treats responses to the Holocaust in a distinctive yet ambivalent manner. However, very few critics have analyzed the novel in terms of Holocaust representation in the third-, non-direct-witnessing, generation of American-born novelists. As Hillary Chute notes, Chabon’s work is an “historical fiction that asks how one responds to or registers history—especially traumatic history—in a popular medium.”<sup>21</sup> In this respect, Chabon’s novel resembles Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* volumes I and II.

### Third-Generation Novelists and the Holocaust

As the most recent bearers of Shoah representation, third-generation novelists reveal a moral responsibility to serve as witnesses. But what does it mean to look back from a distance of three score years and ten? How do third-generation authors inherit traumatic experience when they lack personal memory of the Jewish catastrophe? Daniel Mendelsohn describes this position as revealing the tension between proximity and distance, which we discussed in chapter 3 of the present study. In short, third-generation works represent the Holocaust through indirect means. Jessica Lang notes that the common thread in the Holocaust writing of authors born in the 1960s or after is that their writing, while referring to the Holocaust, also employs other narratives.<sup>22</sup> These authors view the Shoah as one of several important events in their novels. We add that these works tend to be inflected by the use of magical realism and motifs from Jewish myth, folklore, and mysticism, as demonstrated by Skibell, all in an attempt to underscore the rupture instantiated by the catastrophe.

Chabon’s novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, focuses the trauma of the Shoah on European Jewry while distancing the Holocaust from major American concerns. His “survivor,” Joseph Kava-

lier, is a refugee who does not have first-hand experience of the camps. Unlike Julie Orringer's and Nicole Krauss's protagonists, Kavalier does not write a book. Rather, he draws over two thousand pages of the adventures of the Escapist, an action hero based on Superman. Consequently, rather than directly confronting the trauma of the Holocaust, Chabon's protagonist seeks to escape it. Lee Behlman perceptively writes: "Chabon is most surprising [in that] his novel guardedly presents the idea that . . . distraction may be itself a valid response. *Kavalier and Clay* is an extended meditation, with comic books as its central subject, on the value of fantasy as a deflective resource rather than a reflective one."<sup>23</sup> Behlman's critique, while well reasoned, understates the significance of the central and symbolic role of the golem—a crucial symbol in the novel—in dealing with Holocaust trauma. Chabon employs a revised version of the golem in order to work through the psychic pain caused by the Shoah. The novel pivots on Will Eisner's comment that provides the book's epigraph: "We have this history of impossible solutions for insoluble problems."

### Holocaust Representation in Chabon's Novel

Chabon's Holocaust representation is noteworthy for navigating the tension between distance from the catastrophe and the moral obligation to write about its impact. On the one hand, as Chabon told an interviewer, "I think it's obvious from the way I have treated the subject, that I don't think I feel right about approaching it in any but the most indirect way."<sup>24</sup> Such indirection has a long history in Jewish-American letters, beginning with Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker*, and including Saul Bellow's *The Victim* and Philip Roth's most recent novel *Nemesis*. On the other hand, however, Chabon notes that "The Holocaust itself, in its overall scope and its particulars, just defies credulity, which makes it somewhat fertile territory for deniers" (Maliszewski, 5). The novelist provides warrant for his own literary treatment of the Shoah by contending: "But I think we expect the incredible from the Holocaust" (Maliszewski, 5).

*Kavalier and Clay* can be read as a *künstlerroman* and as a Jewish-American immigrant novel that contrasts the naïveté and optimism of America with the ominous events in Europe. Furthermore, Chabon's

novel explores the role of comics as a serious contribution to American culture and as a means of fighting back against the grim reality of the Holocaust. The author steadfastly focuses on the major contribution of Jewish artists to comic books. Kavalier and Clay are loosely based on Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the Jewish creators of Superman. Moreover, as Behlman notes, the novel also is an expression of social realism in describing the unscrupulous ways of corporate culture, in the person of Sheldon Anapol, and his exploitive treatment of Kavalier and Clay.<sup>25</sup> Chabon also intersects his trademark concern about gay life and homophobia in writing about Sammy's coming out of the closet and his abuse by the police department. Chabon also paints a vivid portrayal of Greenwich Village bohemian life in the person of Rosa Sax Luxembourg who falls in love with Joseph. In addition, Chabon includes cameo appearances by Salvador Dali and Orson Welles, as well as pivotal references to Harry Houdini, a master escape artist.

Following a circuitous route, Joseph arrives in America where he joins forces with his cousin Sammy, who fantasizes about writing the great American novel. The cousins produce a series of comic book heroes who vicariously defeat Nazism. Chief among these heroes is The Escapist, a prototype of the Superman comic, who singlehandedly knocks out Hitler and his armies. Joseph also seeks to rescue his young brother Tommy, who is trapped in Europe. Using the money he has made from his art he charts a ship—*Ark of Miriam*—to bring Tommy and several hundred other children to America. The biblical Miriam, Moses's sister who watched over him in the bulrushes, thereby ensured his life and the Jewish people's future. However, Joseph's rescue attempt met with a different fate: the *Ark of Miriam* is sunk by a German torpedo. All aboard perish. The escapist's comic book feats are no match for the brutality of the Holocaust.

Neither is the kind of wishful thinking that attempts to conjure Jewish heroes who defeat the Nazis that we find in another third-generation novel, *The Last Flight of Poxl West*, by Daniel Torday. Characteristic of third-generation narratives, the central character in Torday's novel attempts to reconstruct a revisionist history, an alternative, victorious, and ameliorative version of the events of that history he hopes to confront and rewrite. For this third-generation narrator, the Shoah remains the unflagging reminder of defeat and defenselessness, powerlessness in the

face of imperious forces of evil up against which no hero or superhero can contend:

On Monday and Wednesday afternoons I suffered two hours of Hebrew school, where our aging teachers would ply us with tales of woe, melancholy stories of the survivors of death camps and ghettoization. I remember seeing for the first time, when I was only ten, the black numbers tattooed on a classmate's grandmother's wrist. I can see even now my young brain being tattooed with anxiety and pensive fear. My grandfather had survived that period and reached the States—only to die before I'd gotten to know him. It compounded my sense then that history was some untrammelled force acting upon us. Leveling any hope of heroism like some insuperable glacier flattening mountains to plains.<sup>26</sup>

The overarching text of the Holocaust inevitably brings with it a “leveling” of “any hope of heroism” (4). Such resignation—as Eli, the tale's narrator, fears—is why his surrogate grandfather's tales of heroism in the face of the Nazis are so seductive to him, why he is so ready to believe his Uncle Poxl's stories not only of “survival, but of action” (Torday, 6). And this is why Eli's discovery of the fictitious shape of Poxl's stories, the embellishment of his war years, leaves him unsettled and, inexorably bereaved. “Thinking of it now,” the older narrator admits, “I'd lost a grandfather before I knew what it meant to have one, but in his place I had what every Ashkenazi kid in America needed without knowing he needed it: a Jewish war hero, at my side” (140–41). Poxl's surrogacy and his stories of bravery and valor provided, as Eli admits, “an antidote” to the authorized version of events that suggest to the adolescent Jewish narrator, “*It will happen again*. Beware. Be always aware” (4). Finally, of course, what this third-generation narrator in search of a reconstructed history discovers is that “We can't undo the past” (144).

In addition to *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, the Holocaust plays a role, although ambiguous and even deceptive, in Chabon's *The Final Solution: A Story of Detection* (2005) and in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2008). The title of Chabon's *The Final Solution* is a liter-

ary tease, a misdirection suggesting only one thing—the Holocaust—but treats quite another, a detective story. The work has three protagonists: a mute German boy—who is a survivor of the Holocaust; a talking parrot who repeats a series of numbers that may be a secret Nazi code; and Sherlock Holmes, who comes out of retirement to solve the mystery of who killed the bird. Muteness here, on the one hand, suggests that the reader learns nothing of the Shoah and thus is unable to participate in bearing witness to the event. But, on the other hand, and more significantly, Chabon implies that the youngster's mute state is in fact a response to his traumatization by the Shoah. Muteness also invokes the occasion for a reconsideration of the initial twenty-year period of silence surrounding the subject of the Holocaust, following the end of World War II. Furthermore, such silence calls into question the epistemological problem of knowing and articulating such knowledge that is characteristic of third-generation Holocaust narratives.

The landscape of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is the Alaskan wilderness and its openness to oppressed European Jews. Then, in 1948, the nascent state of Israel was overwhelmed by invading Arab armies. The Jewish remnant settled in Sitka, Alaska, becoming “the frozen chosen.” *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* thus emerges as one of a growing number of counterfactual books about the period of Holocaust and American history written by both novelists and historians, such as Philip Roth's *The Plot against America* and Jeffrey S. Gurock's *The Holocaust Averted: An Alternative History of American Jewry, 1938–1967*. The Jews are once again facing exile as the deadline of “reversion”—a decree announcing that they must leave Alaska—is fast approaching. The novel's protagonist, Meyer Landsman, whose last name conjures the Yiddish “compatriot,” is a down-on-his-luck detective called in to solve a murder. He is separated from his wife Binah, whose name translates as “understanding,” one of the ten *sefirot* or divine emanations in kabbalistic thought. At the novel's end, the couple reunites. The complex and richly imaginative plot deals with a clandestine agreement between the anti-Islamist American government and the Verbovers, a radical right-wing Hasidic group. They plan to blow up the Dome of the Rock, igniting a holy war in which the Jews would claim all of Palestine and rebuild the Temple.

Messianism plays a large role in the *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*.



Mendel Shpilman, the murder victim, was the son of the Verbover rebbe. Followers hailed him as the Messiah. Intellectually and spiritually gifted, he was also a chess master who had become a drug addict. Prior to his murder, Shpilman was playing chess. He had left the pieces in the so-called Zugzwang Dilemma, a strategy that inevitably leads to checkmate. Landsman is the son of a Holocaust survivor who was a chess master. The detective's knowledge of the game enables him to solve the mystery of Mendel's murder. As was the case during the Holocaust, messianic longing both continues and continues to go unfulfilled. Shpilman is a false messiah. Landsman accepts exile—his homeland, so to speak, is anywhere that enables him to interact with Jews. He remains in Sitka to solve the mystery and, on the symbolic level, embody the messianic hope articulated by Maimonides's statement: "I believe in the coming of the Messiah even though he tarries" (chapter 10, commentary on *Mishneh Sanhedrin*). Significantly, a large portion of Sitka's Jews are Holocaust survivors who remain traumatized by their experience. Ex-partisans dig tunnels in case they have to fight again. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, like *The Final Solution*, engages the detective trope of seeking hidden information, which is characteristic of the third generation's search for the missing pieces of their family's pre-Holocaust and Holocaust histories.

## The Golem in Jewish Folklore

Returning to Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, the novelist draws upon Jewish legend in what he refers to as the "thinly fictionalized role [the Golem of Prague] plays" in his novel.<sup>27</sup> Golem legends abound in the Jewish magical and mystical tradition. Gershom Scholem notes, "the special fascination exerted by [the golem], in which so many authors found a symbol of the struggles and conflicts that were nearest their hearts."<sup>28</sup> The best-known golem legend is that attributed to the sixteenth-century scholar, Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, known as the Maharal (*Moreinu ha-Ray Rabbi Liva*). Although nothing in Loew's vast writings concerns or even mentions the golem, his name is indissolubly linked with the creature. Perhaps, speculates Byron Sherwin, it is because of his stature as a "scholar, community leader, and national Bohemian hero."<sup>29</sup> Additionally, Judah Loew had achieved "fame as a wonder-worker" (Sherwin, 19) in Prague, and was invited by

the emperor, Rudolph II, who had a personal interest in the kabbalah, to meet with him in his castle.

According to legend, Rabbi Loew and two disciples went to the banks of the Moldau River at 4:00 in the morning where they fashioned a golem on the river's clay bank. Following a prescribed ritual, the rabbi placed a piece of paper containing the words "Adonai Emet" — "the Lord is Truth" — under the creature's tongue. Thus animated, the creature stood. Loew named the golem Joseph (Yossele) because "he had implanted in him the spirit of Joseph Shida who was half-man and half-demon and had saved the sages of the Talmud from many trials and dangers."<sup>30</sup> Yet, as Hillel Kieval writes, it is important to note that the "golem legend as far back as the seventeenth-century Polish rendition [viewed] the source of danger [as] residing within the confines of the community; in the very process of the creation of artificial life."<sup>31</sup> Kieval further argues that the tale is misremembered in the twentieth century, "as if it had always been concerned with the danger posed by the outside world" (Kieval, 16). That is to say, the golem was believed to protect the Jewish people from Christian mobs who, inflamed by the notorious blood libel, posed a mortal danger to Jewish life. Rabbi Loew's golem embodies three features. First, it is created to serve practical purposes such as drawing water from a well and carrying wood. Second, the golem poses potential dangers by having the capacity to run amok. Third, the golem can turn on its creator and either wound or destroy him. One of the versions of the Prague golem portrays the creature as flooding the Maharal's house. The rabbi is summoned, overpowers the creature — removing the name of God from under its tongue — and carries the body to the attic of the Altneuschul on the eve of Shabbat. He then decrees that only his successors be permitted entrance to the attic.

In Chabon's reworking of the Golem of Rabbi Loew tale, Joseph Kavalier, son of two secular Prague physicians, is a talented artist who studies techniques of escape with his mentor Bernard Kornblum, an eastern European *Ausbrecher* (escape artist). With the German army occupying Prague, the Jewish secret society responsible for the golem's safety enlists the aid of Kornblum in rescuing the slumbering giant by sending it to Vilna before the German army can ship its remains to Berlin. The creature's remains had previously been spirited out of the Altneuschul and hidden in an apartment house.

## Michael Chabon's Golem

Chabon analogously parallels the novelist to the maker of a golem: “the relationship between a golem and its creator is usually viewed as a metaphor for that between the work of art—in my case, a novel—and its creator” (*Maps and Legends*, 183). Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, however, links the themes of physical escape with the escapism found in comic books, magic, and Jewish folklore tinged with mysticism. He refers to the “bitter truth” of golems, writing that “A golem, like a lie, is the expression of a wish: a wish for peace and security; a wish for strength and control; a wish to know, in a tiny human way, a thousandth of a millionth of the joy and power of the Greater Creation” (*Maps and Legends*, 187). Literature, attests Chabon, “like magic, has always been about the handling of secrets, about the pain, the destruction, and the marvelous liberation that can result when they are revealed” (*Maps and Legends*, 155). However, literature representing the Holocaust typically eschews the possibility of truly revealing secrets. Is it possible to experience “marvelous liberation” when writing of the trauma inflicted by the Shoah? Certainly his own creation, Joseph Kavalier, feels no such emotion. Chabon’s advocacy of even the possibility of escaping the Shoah is, of course, conditioned by time and space. He refers to himself as “a lucky man living in a lucky time in the luckiest country in the world” (*Maps and Legends*, 154). Chabon writes as an American whose worldview is not drenched in the blood of Europe.

Kavalier encounters bureaucratic difficulties when he seeks to leave Prague. Therefore, he joins forces with Kornblum to discover in which apartment house the golem is hidden. Disguising themselves as workers, they tell the building superintendent that the Jewish council sent them to survey the building in order to monitor the movement of Jews within Prague. By means of a ruse requiring all the building’s Jewish inhabitants to put a blue Star of David in the window, the pair discovers the golem’s hiding place—it is the window without a star. As an aside, it is worth noting that Kornblum utters the word “contemptible.” But Joseph was unclear whether his mentor referred to the ruse, the Nazis who made their story plausible, Kornblum himself for having perpetrated, it or the Jews who willingly complied. Chabon here implicitly brings to mind

the criticism raised by scholars such as Hannah Arendt, Raul Hilberg, and Richard Rubenstein that alleges the Jews' complicity in their own destruction.

Disguising the golem as a "dead goyishe giant," dressed in an oversize man's suit and secreting Joseph in the casket's concealed compartment, the *Ausbrecher* has the casket loaded on a train headed to Lithuania where the golem and Kavalier subsequently arrive. At this point in the story, Chabon turns his attention from the liberated pair to focus on the subsequent adventures of Joseph. The physical remains of the golem do not reappear until the end of the novel, although symbolically the golem is present both as comic book, inspiration, representative of traumatic history, and therapeutic healer.

The novel's story takes place primarily in America. Joseph meets and falls in love with Rosa Sax Luxemburg who, unbeknownst to him, becomes pregnant with their child. But he left to join the navy, which sends him to a listening post in Alaska. There, he discovers and murders his German counterpart, although this makes him feel miserable. During Joseph's extended disappearance and silence, Sammy lives with Rosa. Together they raise Joseph's son Tommy. Joseph reappears in their lives. Rosa and Joseph reunite while Sammy seeks fulfillment of his gay lifestyle in Los Angeles. The casket of the golem, bearing Lithuanian shipping labels, mysteriously arrives at the end of the novel. Whereas the casket had been nearly weightless in Prague, in New York it is heavy, prompting Joseph to speculate that the dust that once had been the mud of the Moldau contains the souls of the murdered Jews of Europe.

Chabon's use of the golem has given rise to various interpretations. Behlman contends that the figure "represents both the dead hope of Jewish life in Europe and the ever-living promise of Jewish creativity, which can be transferred to the new world" (63). Hillary Chute views the golem in Chabon's literature as "an embodiment of trauma (and yet hope)" (286). Moreover, Chute observes, "*The Golem* registers on a formal level both the urgency of representing trauma, and trauma's seeming unspeakability" (287). Nicola Morris suggests that the golem is a "metaphor for power and powerlessness."<sup>32</sup> The creature was powerless to save the Jews of Europe, but it did save Joseph both physically and later, in America, psychologically. We will return to this idea shortly.

Chabon himself combines the dimension of renewal and power in having Joseph contrast the golem's use in literature and folklore, from Rabbi Loew to Victor von Frankenstein, with his own use of the figure:

The shaping of a golem, to him, was a gesture of hope, offered against hope, in a time of desperation. It was the expression of a yearning that a few magic words and an artful hand might produce something—one poor, dumb, powerful thing—exempt from the crushing strictures, from the ills, cruelties, and inevitable failures of the greater Creation. It was the voicing of a vain wish, when you got down to it, to escape. To slip, like the Escapist, free of the entangling chain of reality and the straightjacket of physical laws. (*Adventures*, 582)

It is instructive at this point to contrast Chabon's golem with traditional understandings of the creature noting several ironic reversals. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century versions of the golem posit the creature as saving the Jewish people. In Chabon's reworking of the myth, the golem is saved by Joseph and Kornblum. Furthermore, in being smuggled out of Prague in a casket, Joseph replicates the act of Yohanan ben Zakkai who, Jewish folklore attests, fled Jerusalem, which was besieged by the Romans in the year 70 C.E. The vital difference is, of course, that whereas Yohanan ben Zakkai founded the first rabbinic academy in Yavneh, thereby birthing a transition from temple religion to rabbinic Judaism enabling Judaism to survive, Chabon's protagonist saves only himself, while Jewish life in Europe was systematically exterminated.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of Chabon's golem is that his creature flees the enemy, whereas traditional assertions contend that the golem's fearsomeness causes the enemy to flee. But in 1945, a Holocaust survivor from Prague, who was not religious, told a story about the golem, which confirms the tale's power even in the face of Nazi evil:

The Golem did not disappear and even in the time of war it went out of its hiding place in order to safeguard the synagogue. When the Germans occupied Prague, they decided to destroy the Altneuschul. They came to do it; suddenly, in the silence of the synagogue, the steps of a giant walking on the roof, began

to be heard. They saw a shadow of a giant hand falling from the window onto the floor . . . The Germans were terrified and they threw away their tools and fled [*sic*] away in panic. I know that there is a rational explanation for everything; the synagogue is ancient and each and every slight knock generates an echo that reverberates many times like steps or thunder. Also the glasses of the windows are old, the window-panes are crooked and they distort the shadows, forming strange shades on the floor. A bird's leg generates a shade of a giant hand on the floor . . . and nevertheless . . . there is something.<sup>33</sup>

The survivor's story, unlike Chabon's novel, affirms the golem's traditional task of scattering the enemies of the Jewish people. The golem is neither powerless nor inert. Moreover, the golem's act concerned not an individual Jew, as is the case with Joseph Kavalier; rather, the creature saves the Jewish house of worship. This version may be a fantasy, but it is not a lie. Nor does it embrace the concept of escape from the Shoah.

The golem as a gesture of hope serves a therapeutic purpose in Chabon's novel via the medium of comic books. Kavalier muses first on the escapist role played by comics:

Having lost his mother, father, brother, and grandfather, the friends and foes of his youth, his beloved teacher Bernard Kornblum, his city, his history—his home—the usual charge leveled against comic books, that they offered *merely an easy escape from reality*, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf. (*Adventures*, 575)

Escape from reality seemed “a worthy challenge, especially right after the war” (*Adventures*, 575). Drawing *The Golem* occupied all of Joseph's time and helped heal him psychologically so that he might bear the burden of his familial and communal losses:

And as he dreamed, night after night at his drawing table, the long and hallucinatory tale of a wayward, unnatural child, Josef Golem, that sacrificed itself to save and redeem the little lamplit

world whose safety had been entrusted to it, Joe came to feel that the work—telling this story—was helping to heal him. (*Adventures*, 577)

The *Golem* thus functions as nothing less than Joseph's "writing therapy," a "secret record of his mourning, of his guilt and retribution" (*ibid.*).

Chabon also reworks the myth of the *lamed vov zaddikim*, which contends that the world exists owing to the presence of thirty-six hidden righteous men. These individuals, hidden because their generation is unworthy, are tasked with fighting evil. The "zaddikim," or "just men," frequently need to descend into evil's depths in order to extricate Jews who have fallen into its clutches. The kabbalah terms this the "descent in behalf of the ascent." Moreover, the Zaddik is one who puts things in their proper place thereby restoring a notion of cosmic order which enables humanity to live in spite of the trauma induced by apparent injustice or disorder.

Chabon's retelling of the myth involves inventing the League of the Golden Key, a secret society whose members "roamed the world acting, always anonymously, to procure the freedom of others, whether physical or metaphysical, emotional or economic" (*Adventures*, 133). The Golden Key's foes were agents of the Iron Chain, whose aim was the enslavement of humanity. Tom Mayflower, the crippled apprentice to his magician uncle Max, is cured of his affliction upon receiving the golden key from the mortally wounded Max. Tom raises the key and swears "a sacred oath to devote himself to secretly fighting the evil forces of the Iron Chain, in Germany or wherever they raise their ugly heads, and to working for the liberation of all who toil in chains—as the Escapist" (134).

So, too, Chabon offers readers "Luna Moth," a feminist tale of the transformation of Miss Judy Dark, the Under-Assistant Cataloguer of Decommissioned Volumes whose office is deep underground in the Empire City Public Library. Interrupting the theft of an important artifact, the Book of Lo, Judy is electrocuted by a live wire, becoming Luna Moth, a creature who receives instructions from the Cimmerian moth goddess Lo. Lo tells her that Cimmeria, once ruled by women, was a peaceful queendom overthrown by men who "have been making a hash of things" (272). Lo tells her new disciple that "she has only to imagine something to make it so" (272). Henceforth, Judy in her guise as Luna will "haunt

the night”—a time when evil often occurs—and defeat the evil ones. The fantasy scene culminates with Luna Moth rescuing the Book of Lo and freeing the kidnapped library guard. In Chabon’s telling, these various myths each offer an angle of vision on the possibility of trauma being combated when the imagination confronts physical death and suffering.

*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* illustrates both the possibilities and challenges of third-generation Holocaust representation. On the one hand, Chabon seeks to acknowledge both the bond and the barrier existing between Jews on the American and European side of the Atlantic. He recognizes that American innocence must yield before the traumatic enormity of the Holocaust. And he skillfully portrays the isolationist sentiment in America and the reluctance to antagonize Germany prior to America’s eventual entry into World War II. Moreover, escaping the nightmare of Auschwitz, at least temporarily, may enable one to continue one’s existence. It is, after all, the case, that apart from a very few survivor memoirs, American novelists did not begin responding to the Holocaust for approximately fifteen years after the War. On the other hand, the novel appears to endorse a typically American embrace of the happy ending. Joe is reunited with Rosa and their son. The protagonist is at peace psychologically and emotionally. He has, with the “help” of the golem, worked through the trauma of having lost his entire family, thereby enabling him to achieve at least a temporary *tikkun* (healing or repair). But this *tikkun* is of the self (*aztmi*). It does not address the broader and classically Jewish notion of *tikkun ha-olam* (repair of the world), a motif which Skibell’s novel embraces.

Chabon’s novel consequently creates an ambiguity on the issue of escaping as opposed to confronting reality. The reader sees this uncertainty in the scene where Joseph visits the grave of Harry Houdini. Chute observes that “instead of instigating an escape from history, [Houdini] instead conjures history for Joe, demanding a reengagement with painful memories . . . It is under the auspices of Houdini that the ghost of Kornblum appears telling Joe to ‘go home’—that is, to engage with history instead of running from it” (282). Nonetheless still at the gravesite, Joseph muses on the distinction between hope and belief: “No; he could be ruined again and again by hope, but he would never be capable of belief” (*Adventures*, 607). This distinction is important but ultimately misleading. While it is certainly true that the Shoah destroyed the pos-



sibility of belief for some survivors, for others it was a reaffirmation of their faith. The faith and doubt of Holocaust survivors is a complex issue and, while Chabon's novel emphasizes the destruction of belief, it, like Skibell's novel, also admits to the complex possibility of continued faith after Auschwitz.

A further word needs to be said about the ambiguity inherited in Chabon's Holocaust representation. On the one hand, he clearly draws upon magic and mysticism as they coalesce in the golem figure. Consequently, the Shoah is transformed into a metaphor, and there is little if any distinction between the mysticism of hope and the Nazi mysticism of death. As John Podhoretz writes:

The Jews of Central Europe, both those who were murdered and those who escaped murder, were ordinary people. In attempting to memorialize them and pay tribute to their suffering, Chabon descends into a false mysticism. It is true that their tradition featured a certain mystical strain, but it is also horrifically true that mysticism was among the forces that led to their extermination—an evil mysticism that promised the world would be purified by their removal.<sup>34</sup>

*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* may, thus, be read as a novel that threatens to generalize the Shoah so that Europe's murdered Jews are a nameless and anonymous group whose memory lacks specificity.

Such a concern raises issues about the moral responsibility of the novelist. Obviously, embedding the Holocaust in a broader narrative is one way to ensure that contemporary readers are reminded of the Jewish catastrophe. In the postmodern and multicultural world, novelists need to determine ways in which to navigate the shape-shifting contours between the particular and the universal in a new and challenging environment. However, we cannot avoid the uneasy feeling that it is one thing for Wiesel to write that "The ghetto was ruled by neither German nor Jew; it was ruled by delusion,"<sup>35</sup> implying that at that time the Jews of Hungary did not understand that they were on the verge of extermination. It is quite another thing for Chabon to imply a type of escapism at a time when everything is known, at least about whom the Holocaust

was designed to eliminate and why. There are two unhappy results of escapism. The first is that one cannot escape the Holocaust any more than one can escape the impact of Rome's destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Second, escapism leads to forgetting. And forgetting is the ultimate threat to enduring Holocaust testimony. There is an equally clear call to engage in the "day to dayness," as it were, of life. In addition to Houdini's admonition not to escape from history, it is crucial psychologically to re-engage painful memories as a precursor to working through one's Holocaust inheritance. Moreover, as Dewey notes, in commenting specifically on *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, two choices are familiar to veteran readers of Chabon—"Surrender or engagement" (107). Joseph Kavalier clearly participates in both types of behavior. He exiles himself for a multi-year period in the Empire State Building while drawing 2000 pages of his Golem comic books. However, his re-engagement with life is portrayed when he rejoins his wife and son at the novel's end.

### *Everything Is Illuminated*

Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything Is Illuminated* originated as the author's senior thesis at Princeton University and was directed by Joyce Carol Oates. The novel achieved both critical and commercial success, being awarded the National Jewish Book Award (2001) and a Guardian First Book Award (2002). It was also listed as a *New York Times* Bestseller, and was co-winner of the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize (2004). A film version appeared in 2005. Foer's debut novel creates both pathos and humor in telling of two third-generation characters and their attempt to come to grips with their traumatic post-Holocaust identity.<sup>36</sup> Foer's novel is part of the return narrative structure characteristic of third-generation Holocaust representation.

Eva Hoffman, the Polish-born daughter of survivors, attests that the era of memory precipitates "the era of return."<sup>37</sup> Hoffman proposes that "'The Return' is accumulating a literature of its own," including, as she suggests, "such brilliant bouts of fictional invention as Jonathan Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*" (203). Foer's novel is based on a 1999 trip that he took to Ukraine in search of his grandfather's past. He insists that he "never intended to write [the book]."<sup>38</sup> What he did intend was to chronicle his trip "in strictly nonfictional terms" (conversation with

Jeffrey Goldberg). His journey began with a photograph of the woman who was presumed to have saved his grandfather from the Nazis.<sup>39</sup> Foer intended to visit Trachimbrod, the shtetl of his family's origins in order to gain knowledge otherwise unavailable to him, as if setting foot on the geography of his grandfather's origins could take him back in time. Referring to his trip as a "comedy of errors," Foer writes, "I found nothing but nothing, and in that nothing—a landscape of completely realized absence—nothing was to be found. Because I didn't tell my grandmother about the trip—she would never had let me go—I didn't know what questions to ask, or whom to ask, or the necessary names of people, places, and things" (ibid). Here the third-generation traveler, once again, sets forth with incomplete information, following as Anne Michaels puts it, a "blind guide," navigating the landscape of the past with only fragments of a history not his own (Michaels, 5).

Foer tells two distinct yet interrelated return tales narrated by the novel's protagonists. One describes the author's fictional doppelganger and his ill fated search for Augustine, the mysterious woman who reputedly saved his grandfather's life during the Shoah. The other relates the story of Alexander Perchov, a Ukrainian tour guide who works for Heritage Touring, a company catering to Jews seeking their Ukrainian ancestral heritage. Alex speaks a fractured and syntactically hilarious English. Both narrators are the same age, each has a silent grandparent, and each is on a quest for identity, although initially it appears that only Jonathan's character is doing so intentionally. The book, divided into chapters, contains or implies letters written by both protagonists; readers only get to see those of Alex.

Alex's own unintended pilgrimage of self-discovery, in fact, eclipses that of the fictional Foer. Alex, his allegedly blind grandfather of the same name, and a flatulent dog named Sammy Davis, Jr., Jr. accompany Foer on his quest for Augustine. Unexpectedly, it is—at least in our reading—Alex's family dynamic, including his grandfather's terrible secret, that illuminates the psychodynamic operating in the third generation of non-Jewish victims of National Socialism and their burden of traumatic inheritance. Furthermore, the novel implicitly raises the question of the relation between Holocaust history and authorial imaginative authority in combining a rich (re)creation of the history of the shtetl Trachimbrod and the real Trochenbrod shtetl. Foer presents a 150-year history

of the imaginary Trachimbrod, beginning in the 1790s and ending with its destruction by the Nazis. Trachimbrod is a Chelm-like shtetl whose inhabitants “gathered to debate that about which they knew nothing” (Foer, 12). The author’s imagined shtetl has two sections: The Jewish quarter and the “Human” three-quarters. All sacred activity occurs in the former, whereas “the humdrum activities of daily existence transpire in the latter” (Foer, 10). Moreover, there are two synagogues: The Upright Synagogue and the Slouching Synagogue. Their adherents are, respectively, known as Uprighters—those who are strict adherents of Jewish law—and Slouchers who are lax in their observance.

Trachimbrod’s history begins with the drowning death of Trachim, a wealthy businessman, whose carriage overturns and sinks in the Brod River. The sole survivor of this tragedy is a baby girl who is the fictional Foer’s great-great-great-great-great-grandmother. Although the shtetl sponsored an annual competition for the purpose of finding Trachim’s body, it remained lost. Foer links Trachimbrod’s pre-Shoah history to a more contemporary moment by identifying it as the place of Augustine’s birth. The real shtetl of Trochenbrod, however, was at one time a completely Jewish enclave. All but thirty-three of its nearly 5000 inhabitants were murdered by the Nazis. The Soviets obliterated the remains of the shtetl. Today there is a memorial at the former site of Trochenbrod, a fact that Foer incorporates by referring to a memorial stone in Trochenbrod, dedicated by the Israeli prime minister.<sup>40</sup>

*Everything Is Illuminated* derives its raison d’être from the presence of an absence. The author underscores this point by having one of his fictional characters observe that stories are always initiated by a sense of absence. Neither Foer nor Alex has an entirely uncomplicated relationship with his grandparent. Jonathan’s grandfather died before Jonathan was born. He tells Alex that as a young child he sat under his grandmother’s skirt and looked at her varicose veins. Moreover, although the two would shout words to each other, he spoke in English, she in Yiddish; the boy never asked his grandmother the meaning of her words. Symbolically, he remains a child in the womb—under his grandmother’s skirt—and, like the simple child in the Passover Seder, he is unable to ask the meaning of his grandmother’s Yiddish. In a similar manner Jonathan, fearing his grandmother would not permit him to go to the Ukraine, does not tell her of his plans. Consequently, he has no details that could aid him in

finding Augustine or in discovering more information about his family history. All he knows is that his grandmother has shown him a photograph of Augustine,<sup>41</sup> but provided no details (“Conversation”). Once in the Ukraine, Foer discovers that his grandfather’s shtetl has been obliterated, “both from the landscape,” writes Erin McGlothlin, “and Ukrainian memory.”<sup>42</sup>

The Holocaust continues to elude comprehension among members of the third generation, although it continues to inflect the identity of this chronologically removed cohort. Foer, responding to an interviewer’s question regarding Holocaust representation, muses whether the Holocaust can or cannot be engaged artistically: “Can historical accuracy be replaced with imaginative accuracy? The eye with the mind’s eye” (“Conversation”). Moreover, he raises the central novelistic questions for writers who treat the Shoah: What are one’s responsibilities to “the truth” of a story, and what is “the truth”? How can the imagination be shaped to enact the rupture of lives and the complexities of memory?

Holocaust-inflected trauma continues long after the historical event has passed. Jonathan shares with Alex that he recalls spending most Friday nights at his grandmother’s house. On the way in to the house she would “lift me from the ground with one of her wonderful terrifying hugs” (Foer, 158). The following afternoon, when leaving her house, his grandmother would again lift him in the air: “I was again taken into the air with her love” (Foer, 158). Only much later did Foer understand that she was weighing him. He explains what he means to the uncomprehending Alex: “When she was our age,” he tells Alex, “she was feeding from waste while walking across Europe barefoot. It was important to her—more important than that I had a good time—that I gained weight whenever I visited” (ibid). This experience greatly impacted Foer the novelist. He told an interviewer that “[My grandmother] has always been [concerned] with measuring the distances between what is felt and said, the lightness of love, the heft of showing love—that I have related with her. My writing, I have begun to understand—I am learning anew with each newly written word—springs from the same need to measure.”<sup>43</sup>

The novel’s great ironic twist concerns three Ukrainian generations: Alex’s grandfather, his father, and himself, each of whom bear the same name. Alex may be at home, but he is very much a stranger in a strange land. Guiding the fictional Jonathan, Alex discovers his own identity.

His grandfather, who may in fact be at least partly Jewish—he is sometimes called Eli—feels overwhelming guilt and trauma resulting from the murder of his friend Herschel during a Nazi action in the town of Kolki, located not too far from Trochenbrod. Under pain of death he had revealed to the Nazis that Herschel is Jewish.

After much fruitless searching, Jonathan, Alex, and the grandfather finally encounter an aged woman whom they believe to be Augustine. She shows them many small boxes, which contain the remnants of possessions once owned by Kolki's murdered Jews, again revealing the third generation's preoccupation with objects of memory. Moreover, Augustine attests—much in the manner of Derrida's notion of "trace"—that the "ground is still filled with rings, and money, and pictures, and Jewish things" (Foer, 152). This trace reveals the presence of the Jewish absence. The meeting with Augustine results in a development of crucial psychological importance: the return of what the grandfather had repressed for so many years and which accounts for his persistent melancholy behavior. That which is repressed, as the work of LaCapra reminds us, returns with a vengeance. Alex, in one of his letters to Jonathan, reports that he has seen his grandfather weeping three nights in one week. The first night his grandfather was looking at an aged leather bag containing many photos. Holocaust photographs, as Hirsch observes, contain "ghostly remenants," an opening for stories (*The Generation of Post Memory, Poetics Today*, 29:1, Spring 2008, 115). The second night he held the photograph of Augustine. The third night he held a photograph of Jonathan. The novel concludes with the grandfather's unfinished suicide note. Trauma has no statute of limitations.

*Everything Is Illuminated* illustrates several key psychological points pertinent to our discussion of third-generation narratives. The legacy of trauma extends to the third, non-Jewish, generation. The maturing of Alex's own identity occurs over time and in stages. He confronts his own alcoholic and abusive father, throwing him out of the house. He accepts the responsibility for raising Iggy, his little brother, and his letters and advice to Jonathan become increasingly sophisticated and insightful as he develops respect both for himself and for the Jewish tradition. The racial insensitivity displayed by the dog's name is matched by Alex's initial ignorance of and hostility towards Jews coming to the Ukraine to search for traces of family murdered in the Shoah. Early in the novel, Alex opines

that before his journey with Foer, he thought that “Jewish people were having shit between their brains” (3).

The illumination in the novel’s title refers to a number of complexities in addition to Alex’s emotional maturation. Discovering the grandfather’s true identity is one form of revelatory illumination. The villagers of Kolki watching the burning of the town’s synagogue are illuminated by the flames of destruction and murder. Lovers coupling in the imaginary shtetl of Trachimbrod, according to Foer’s fictional recreation, emit light that can be seen from outer space. Augustine, in telling stories about the shtetl and Foer’s grandfather, is also a character who illuminates matters. Moreover, the murderous flames of the Shoah itself cast light on the depth of National Socialism’s psychotic fantasy of making the world *judenrein* and on the utter devastation wrought by the Holocaust. Foer told an interviewer that he is fascinated by illuminated manuscripts (*Jewish Life*). Furthermore, writing itself is, as we have noted, a crucial dimension in each of the three authors’ attempts at working through their traumatic inheritance. So, too, the inhabitants of the fictional Trachimbrod are continually writing. The novel contains two pages on which is written simply and repetitively, “We are writing . . .” (Foer, 212–13).

## Conclusion

The novels of the third-generation writers we have discussed in this chapter are engaged with postmodernist concerns. Nevertheless, the shape-shifting shadows of the Holocaust continue to impact the identity of this generation. Their Holocaust-related writings are simultaneously a way of mourning relatives they never knew and an attempt to understand their own Jewish identity. Foer reports that when he went to the Ukraine at age twenty he was “an unobservant Jew . . . skeptical of anything described as ‘Jewish.’” Nevertheless, his writing “began to take on a Jewish sensibility” (“Conversation”). All three writers—Skibell, Chabon, and Foer—although ostensibly secular, have written deeply Jewish books which draw upon folkloric as well as historical materials, and magical realism; they share a picaresque motif, and bear witness to the Shoah’s intergenerational reverberations.

These works, each of which was a critical and commercial success, also bear witness to the impetus for renewal and identity within both a

particular and a universal framework. *A Blessing on the Moon* broadens the impact of traumatic legacy by seeking to respond to catastrophe. The volume represents the inheritance of traumatic legacy in terms of a mission, not despite but because of Auschwitz. Skibell's work attests that Jewish myth and ritual retain their deep hold on the Jewish imagination and continue to provide spiritual succor. *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Clay* also imagines the possibility of a partial repair of individual lives deeply traumatized by the Shoah. *Everything Is Illuminated* represents the universal dimension of intergenerational transmission of trauma. Jews were the killers' obsession, but the lives of others were deeply impacted by Nazism's evil. In this regard, Foer's novel may in fact be read as a warning to humanity.

Reading these works reveals traumatic traces of the Holocaust past. The Shoah continues to be a part of Jewish identity. While treating highly personal and individualized experiences, these authors also transmit a sense of communal trauma, thereby illustrating the complexity and necessity of memory in the postmodern context. Moreover, their emphasis on storytelling itself is a fundamental Jewish motif. Their respective works provide important clues to how literary representation of the Holocaust has a history and a future. Memory for survivors comes unbidden. Second-generation writers speak not of the Shoah directly; rather, they reflect on the impact of the trauma on their parent's child-rearing practices. Holocaust markers and imagery—showers and trains, for example—appear in these works, as they do throughout post-Holocaust writing. Yet the second generation has much more control over Holocaust memory than does the third. The third generation is far less restrained than its predecessors. They search for identity and memory even while giving free rein to artistic imagination that informs a variety of innovative narrative techniques. Collectively, the third generation reveals the truth that trauma, even—or especially—in the face of silence, forms an ineluctable part of the human experience, and that the attempt to transform the legacy of Holocaust trauma into history will, no matter the format, likely continue in an as yet to be determined manner in the future.



