H-WPL READERS
BOOK DISCUSSION GROUP

FEBRUARY 2015

Monday, February 23, 2015, at 1:00 P.M.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank: Stories” (2012), by Nathan Englander

Discussion Leader: Candace Plotsker-Herman

England’s latest collection of short stories includes the title story about two marriages in which the Holocaust is played out as a devastating parlor game, and a dark story of vigilante justice undertaken by a troop of elderly campers. (NovelistPlus)

“These eight masterful stories…continue the work of Philip Roth, Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud—authors who mined the Jewish-American experience with tremendous humor, humanity and healthy amounts of guilt.” (USA Today)

Monday, March 23, 2015, at 1:00 P.M.

Wide Sargasso Sea (1966), by Jean Rhys

Discussion Leader: Ellen Getreu

Jean Rhys’s reputation was made upon the publication of this passionate and heartbreaking novel, in which she brings into the light one of fiction’s most mysterious characters: the madwoman in the attic from Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre. Set in the Caribbean, its heroine is Antoinette Cosway, a sensual and protected young woman who is sold into marriage to the prideful Rochester. (W.W. Norton)

**************************

Camp Stories

A man walks into a peep show. He has an excellent reason: he has just scuffed his shoe, which was costly, on the sidewalk. A flight of stairs and $5 later he is in a booth, facing a circular stage. The partition lifts. Before him sit four nearly naked women. The first is sheer perfection, the creature of his dreams. He barely has time to come to terms with his torrent of desire — “a feeling so pure that he wants to cry” — when his time is up. Briefly he ponders his situation. In a few rush-hour minutes he has transformed himself from the loyal suburban husband of a pregnant wife to a man befouled by lust on 42nd Street. He inserts a second token. The partition lifts. Before him sit the rabbis of his youth. Their leader is fat, naked and demanding. What precisely does Allen Fein — born Ari Feinberg, hotshot lawyer in his $500 wingtips — think he’s doing? Before he can properly answer, an inner chamber opens to reveal Fein’s therapist.

At what point does it become clear that we’re in a Nathan Englander story rather than a Woody Allen movie? Surely not when the next token reveals Fein’s half-clad wife and his (“Why ruin a good marriage even if it’s to her?”) mother. Possibly when Fein stubbornly reasons with his jury: “You want truth and justice and for everything to fit in its place. But some things are in between, Rabbi.” Certainly when this haunted peep show ends on a note of startling grace.

Englander burst on the scene in 1999 with “For the Relief of Unbearable Urges,” another collection poised at the trapdoor between spiritual thirst and physical hunger. (The title refers to a visit to a prostitute, prescribed by a Jerusalem rabbi for a long-suffering congregant.) My favorite was the indelible tale of the Protestant financial analyst on whom Orthodox Judaism abruptly descends from the clear blue sky. He will wind up in his chintz-filled Park Avenue apartment with a mystified wife, his longtime shrink and a rabbi plucked from the Yellow Pages; in a way, his story is a bookend to “Peep Show.”

The aroma of Judaism permeates Englander’s work as the smell of tzimmes does a house. Echoes of the two Isaacs, Bashevis Singer and Babel, can be heard throughout his pages, though Gogol is somewhere in the neighborhood too. It is not so great a leap from a man at odds with his runaway nose to a rabbinical conference in the freezer aisle or, for that matter, the sudden acquisition of a Jewish soul in the back seat of a yellow cab.

Absurdities abounded in Englander’s earlier work, rich in pilfered mezuzas and yarmulke-wearing Santas. A yahrzeit candle may still serve as an instrument of revenge, but with “What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank” Englander has sharpened his focus. His subjects are mercy, vengeance and their moody, intractable stepchild, righteousness. He is never deaf to the past or willing to grant us that luxury. As Allen Fein of Parsippany was once Ari Feinberg, Pvt. Shimmy Gezer of the Israeli Army had been — will always be — Shimon Bibberblat of Warsaw. To fail to understand as much is to fail to understand his singular sense of right and wrong. Englander plants us in a world where “God no longer raised His own fist in the fight,” leaving us to write the rules ourselves. Whether it’s blacks or “kids with horns,” the young anti-Semite’s mother instructs him after he has delivered a schoolyard pummeling, “I don’t want you beating on those that are small.”
That message is delivered with a slap across the face. Its author speaks more obliquely. Two lumbering Florida retirees — “a pair of big beige manatees” in the eyes of the world — are seated on a locker room bench. It is pointed out to them that the numbers tattooed on the insides of their wrists are practically consecutive. Only two people had stood between them in line. They could not be less interested.

Generally Englander works with a light touch, a nearly whimsical sobriety. He has pared down his style as well. He is more of a minimalist here, even when exploring the thickets of cognitive dissonance that flourish between faith and falsehood. He delivers something else too, the opposite of Google’s type-ahead, I-already-know-what-you’re-thinking feature. When was the last time the ultra-Orthodox couple you met on Page 3 were smoking dope borrowed from their host’s son 12 pages later?

A short story is by definition an odder, more eccentric creature than a novel: a trailer, a fling, a warm-up act, a bouillon cube, a championship game in one inning. Irresolution and ambiguity become it; it’s a first date rather than a marriage. When is it mightier than the novel? When its elisions speak as loudly as its lines. Englander knows where to hold back, a particular gift when writing about and around the martyr of his title, the locked up and locked in. A kind of hard-won wisdom spills out on every page.

Nowhere is that more true than in the collection’s two finest stories, both delivered with Englander’s trademark blend of the breezy and the biblical, both meditations on what “2,000 years of being chased” can do to a people. He knows that much of the psychic damage is self-inflicted. As the narrator of “How We Avenged the Blums” notes, Masada remains a rallying point in Jewish history, an object lesson in military readiness. It was also a battle fought “without the enemy present.” We have seen the Cossacks, and they are us.

In “Camp Sundown,” the idealistic Josh finds himself reckoning with more than he had counted on when he assumes the job of Elderhostel camp director. What to do when his wards turn into geriatric vigilantes? Decades earlier, they had been in a very different kind of camp. They now believe that a veritable Eichmann has taken his place among their lakeside ranks, “an old Nazi hiding in the Berkshires under the guise of a blue-toed low-sodium bridge-playing Jew.” Justice must be served, an act that necessarily involves Josh. “Don’t you understand?” tiny, sharp-tongued, 76-year-old Agnes explains. “If he’s guilty, then he’s your Nazi, too.”

The title story is a cordial, stoned salute to Raymond Carver, transposing New Mexico to South Florida, gin to vodka. The conversation still takes the form of a quiet competition between two couples. Some of us still claim to speak with greater authority. The light still drains from the room. And the burning question remains, as Carver phrased it, “What do any of us really know about love?” Here Englander may just surpass the master. Some vodka shots, a few joints, a wild dance in the rain, a raid of the well-fortified pantry and it’s time for the two couples — little acquainted with each other, for one of which Judaism is a life, the other only a legacy — to play “the Righteous Gentile game.” In the event of a second Holocaust, would the across-the-street neighbor hide you? Would your
own spouse? In a different universe, would the ultra-Orthodox father of 10, with his black suit and the beard up to his eyebrows, now high and ravenous and shut in a Florida pantry with a bad case of the munchies? It’s a toxic thought experiment. Probably it should not escape the confined space. Surely it will.

“Are there stubborn people here?” a real estate agent asks rhetorically in another story, touring a young couple through a settlement property on the Israeli side of a security wall. The answer is a resounding yes, though the agent is oblivious to the full extent of his observation. Like so many of Englander’s characters, he is dealing in whole-scale betrayals and half-truths, trying to make sense of a world where we don’t know what we’re talking about, where the not-so-numinous choice is to bend or to break. Stubborn people. Stubborn history. Terrific collection.

Stacy Schiff is a frequent contributor to the Book Review. The author, most recently, of “Cleopatra: A Life,” she is at work on a book about the Salem witch trials.

**Nude Rabbis and Tales of Revenge**


“What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank,” the title story of Nathan Englander’s new collection, deliberately alludes to Raymond Carver’s classic tale “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.” But while Mr. Englander’s narrative borrows Carver’s style and mise-en-scène (two couples sitting around a kitchen table), its conclusion and this volume as a whole underscore the authors’ very different views of the world and their very different approaches to fiction.

Whereas Carver’s stories focus on the difficulties of emotional connection and tend to feature isolated characters living in a present quite divorced from conventional social and political concerns, Mr. Englander’s people define themselves largely through their embrace — or rejection — of Jewish orthodoxy and tradition. Whereas Carver’s slender stories are grounded in the banalities and oddities of ordinary life, Mr. Englander’s tales use allegory and folkloric techniques (reminiscent of Isaac Bashevis Singer) to tackle the largest questions of morality and history.

Like his acclaimed 1999 debut collection, “For the Relief of Unbearable Urges,” this volume showcases Mr. Englander’s extraordinary gifts as a writer — and his liabilities. The story “Everything I Know About My Family on My Mother’s Side” demonstrates his new mastery of contemporary realism, recounting, in sharp, staccato takes, the efforts of a writer (named Nathan, no less) to piece together the secret stories of his own family’s past. In contrast, another tale about a writer, titled “The Reader,” devolves into a sort of hokey ghost story about the relationship between an author and his audience.

“Sister Hills” gives the reader an intimate understanding of the hopes and fears of Israeli settlers, walking the tightrope between fable and realism with unwavering authority and
felt emotion, while “Free Fruit for Young Widows” begins as an exceptionally moving account of the sufferings endured by a young survivor of the Holocaust, only to tumble into fairy tale artifice.

There is a dark undertow to many of these stories, reminding us of the human capacity for evil and appetite for revenge. The Holocaust casts a shadow over the lives of many of Mr. Englander’s characters — in the title story, the two couples play “the Anne Frank game,” wondering which of their friends would hide them in the event of another Holocaust — and in some cases its emotional fallout propels people to terrible acts.

“Camp Sundown” begins as a laugh-out-loud funny portrait of a summer camp for elderly retirees, but takes a more sinister turn when rumors begin to circulate that one of the campers was in fact a Nazi camp guard, and they lead to an out-and-out witch hunt.

As for “Free Fruit for Young Widows,” it recounts how a teenage survivor of the death camps, who’s seen his mother, his father, his sisters and grandparents all killed, returns home to find his childhood nurse, Fanushka, and her family occupying his parents’ house. After overhearing Fanushka’s plot to kill him (so as to keep custody of the house), he waits until everyone is asleep, then executes her entire family, including a 1 ½-year-old child (“because he did not know from mercy, and did not need to leave another of that family to grow to kill him at some future time”).

Even in cases where the main characters are friends or allies, grief or bad luck can lead to heartless behavior. “Sister Hills,” which traces the growth of a small Israeli settlement from a couple of shacks into a thriving Jerusalem suburb, depicts the emotionally fraught relationship between two neighbors: one, named Rena, loses her husband and her three sons to the war and unhappy accident; the other, named Yehudit, has nine children and lives a vibrant, satisfying life.

When Yehudit’s daughter Aheret was a baby, on the verge of death from a high fever, Yehudit was so desperate she indulged an old superstition: to outsmart the Angel of Death, she “sold” Aheret to Rena for a pittance. Aheret survived, grew up to be a young woman, and now Rena, alone and bitter, decides to reclaim her, insisting that the girl forfeit her freedom and come to live with her as a caregiver.

At his best, Mr. Englander manages to delineate such extreme behavior with a combination of psychological insight, allegorical gravity and sometimes uproarious comedy. He can be as funny and outrageous as Philip Roth in describing the incongruities of modern life. The two couples in the title story, one secular and one Hasidic, sit around a kitchen table in Florida, smoking pot (filched from one woman’s son) rolled up in a paper tampon wrapper.

In another tale Mr. Englander captures the obsessive fear of wooden houses that consumes an elderly couple who live in an adobe house in Santa Fe and who, during a stay at a summer camp, take to wearing smoke alarms around their necks (on lanyards “woven specifically for this purpose in crafts”).
In several instances, however, the delicate narrative balance slips from Mr. Englander’s grasp. Either from an over-kneading of themes or from a willful melodramatic impulse, moral insight gives way to moralism, irony to O. Henry contrivance. “Peep Show” — in which a suburban husband’s visit to a Times Square nudie show turns into an encounter with a group of naked or scantily clad rabbis — is a heavy-handed portrait of a guilty conscience. And “How We Avenged the Blums” unravels into a predictable tale about Long Island kids getting revenge on a local anti-Semite.

It’s the title story and “Everything I Know About My Family” that point to Mr. Englander’s evolution as a writer, his ability to fuse humor and moral seriousness into a seamless narrative, to incorporate elliptical — yes, Carver-esque — techniques into his arsenal of talents to explore how faith and family (and the stories characters tell about faith and family) ineluctably shape an individual’s identity.

What We Talk about When We Talk about Anne Frank, *Magill’s Literary Annual 2013*

**About the Author:** Nathan Englander is the author of the novel *The Ministry of Special Cases* (2007). His first collection of short stories, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, was published in 1999 when he was twenty-nine years old. Englander, who was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family, was the recipient of the PEN/Malamud Award in 2000.

The opening story in Nathan Englander’s short-story collection takes its title and certain characteristics from the famously edited and retitled Raymond Carver short story, “What We Talk about When We Talk about Love.” Carver’s story, originally titled “Beginners,” features an afternoon conversation between two couples over two bottles of gin. They tell each other stories — in more ways than one — about the nature of love. In Englander’s version of the tale, two couples come together over vodka to discuss the nature of Judaism. One couple has returned to Florida for a visit after moving to Jerusalem and becoming Hassidic. The second couple is secular.

In his review of the book for the *Boston Globe*, Michael Lowenthal is puzzled by the comparison to Carver’s work that Englander’s title invites, saying “Aside from superficial similarities — two couples drinking alcohol and talking, a few echoed phrases — the link is inapt, and the title seems a silly Catskills gag.” Lowenthal’s criticism is indicative of Englander’s earnest yet fairly flat collection. *What We Talk about When We Talk about Anne Frank* is Englander’s second collection of short stories. His first, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, was published in 1999 when Englander was only twenty-nine years old. The following year, he won the PEN/Malamud Award. Englander, who was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family, often writes about Jewish identity though with varying degrees of success, according to his critics. When he adapted his historically inclined story “The Twenty-Seventh Man” (from *Urges*) for the stage, theater critic Charles Isherwood gave the show a lukewarm review for its static structure but praised the original published story as Chekhovian. Much like Englander’s play, *Anne Frank* does not want for a good story; the challenge for Englander is in the telling.
Too often, Englander’s stories seem to arrive at an unearned crescendo. It is as though, rather than taking a journey to the final moment, the reader has been picked up and placed there, expected to feel the emotion that the journey might have brought about. This happens for several reasons. For one, his characters tend to be passive victims of circumstance; some readers might find it difficult to care about a character that never faces a tough choice. In the case of Englander’s characters, few face any choices at all. In “Peep Show,” a man visits a sex show, only to imagine his mother, pregnant wife, and childhood rabbi, inside the booth shaming him. From the moment he purchases his tokens, the man never makes a single choice about anything. In other words, the imaginary world has no bearing on the actual world — the most basic requirement of introducing imaginary characters or situations. Disappointingly, the specters in his imagination speak in clichés and never offer an unexpected word. The story risks being a sixteen-page joke with a single repeated punch line.

In the Carver story to which Englander makes reference one learns how characters feel based on their behavior. In the titular “What We Talk about When We Talk about Anne Frank” story, Englander does the work for the reader, explaining how the characters feel and also explaining how the reader should feel at its conclusion. In Carver’s story, a character chooses to share things in confidence at the end, and readers can assume certain things about her relationship with her absent husband based on this choice. Englander leaves little room for interpretation or the satisfying work of deduction. He makes a habit of cutting corners and narrating the subtext. In the story, the characters talk about who might “hide” whom in the event of an American holocaust. Englander caps the discussion like this: “She does not say it. And he does not say it. And from the four of us, no one will say what cannot be said — that this wife believes her husband would not hide her. . . . And so we stand like that, the four of us trapped in the pantry. Afraid to open the door and let out what we’ve locked inside.” If “it” cannot be said, some readers may wonder Englander says it at all? Perhaps it should be shown instead. Englander does not provide strong evidence for the idea that this man would not hide his wife; he tries to merely wish this loaded bit of the story into existence.

For the *London Review of Books*, Christian Lorentzen noted that Englander’s “stories are all too often choreographed towards a schematic finish.” “Camp Sundown” perhaps demonstrates this point. The story is about a thirty-eight-year-old camp director who struggles to maintain authority when two elderly Holocaust survivors believe a former Nazi guard has infiltrated their ranks, posing as a Jewish retiree. Beyond their hazy memories and the suspect’s grumpy demeanor, the story offers little reliable evidence for this as a plausible scenario. While nothing particularly changes in the mind of the reader, however, manufactured circumstances intensify on the page as the two survivors gather more aging campers in their corner. A camp director in such a situation has a number of options from which to choose, many of which readers could measure against their own ideas for action. In other words, there is room for the reader to engage: the conflict is an interesting one. The stakes are high for the world of the camp and the characters are vivid. In short time, the camp director does take action — burning books and videos. He says, “I’m only burning the ones that incite.” This story, it should also be noted, has been praised by critics for raising questions of memory, fear, forgiveness, and injustice.
Similarly, in the case of “What We Talk about When We Talk about Anne Frank,” the two couples suddenly put all differences aside after a few puffs from a joint one character has confiscated from her teenage son. After an entire story of tense confrontation, they all suddenly find themselves in the backyard dancing in the rain: “We do not talk. We are too busy frolicking and laughing and jumping around. And that’s how it happens, that I’m holding Mark’s hand and sort of dancing. . . . It is the most glorious, and silliest, and freest I can remember feeling in years. . . . And then Deb, my love, once again she is thinking what I’m thinking.”

It could be argued that Englander relies on charged descriptions to fill in for character development and that, too often, cathartic moments happen on the page instead of in the mind of the reader. In a story called “The Reader,” a character known only as Author travels on a lonely book tour, while an old man follows him between bookstores from empty reading to empty reading in order to let him know that his work is still relevant. As Author begins to see that the world has no more want for writers, the old man assures him that he is special. Little changes in between, but somehow the journey they take leads them to overwhelming emotion: “The two men stand there facing each other, Author now openly weeping. They are caught in a moment so large and so raw that they do not notice that the cell-phone ringers have gone silent and the coffee machine has lost its terrible hiss.” The moment is akin to a first date blown by a blubbery confession of eternal love.

Reviews of What We Talk about When We Talk about Anne Frank are strongly opinionated and have been sharply divided. But despite the underlining, as it were, of his text, Englander’s stories have been praised as fresh and unexpected. “When was the last time the ultra-Orthodox couple you met on Page 3 were smoking dope borrowed from their host’s son 12 pages later?” Stacy Schiff of the New York Times asked in her positive review. In regard to the title story, Schiff wrote of a particular twist: “Here Englander may just surpass the master [Carver].” Other critics have noted that, while many of the same themes are revisited throughout the stories, the author takes new approaches to them, most notably the ways in which history can and should affect the present. Englander has good intentions; he wrestles with big subjects and beguiling narratives that risk overpowering him, but he certainly does not want for creative spark.

_Essay by:_ Molly Hagan,

_Review Sources_


Rev. of What We Talk about When We Talk about Anne Frank, by Nathan Englander. Kirkus Reviews 1 Sept. 2013: 2373. Print.

“Enough Already,” by Robert Alter, (newrepublic.com)

What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank

The great mystery about the fiction of Nathan Englander is the rapturous response that it has elicited. The enigma deepens with the accolades for this new volume of stories, which, for reasons I will try to explain, is a great falling-off from For the Relief of Unbearable Urges, his debut collection, which appeared in 1999. The jacket of What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank comes with a full minyan of blurbs by highly visible, mostly younger, American novelists, printed in double columns like the King James Bible. Among the blurbers are the three Jonathans—Franzen, Lethem, and Safran Foer; Dave Eggers; Richard Russo; and Michael Chabon. Superlatives such as “masterpiece” and “genius” are bandied about. Englander is variously praised for his wisdom, his courage, and the beauty of his writing. Stacy Schiff, on the front page of The New York Times Book Review, joined the chorus, inviting us to see Englander as a legitimate heir to Gogol, Babel, and Bashevis Singer. It should be said at once that any link with Babel’s exquisitely crafted fiction or Gogol’s brilliant comic fantasies is preposterous, while the three or four stories in which Englander consciously imitates Singer misfire badly.

Critics should be more careful with their words. I do not mean to say that there is nothing at all to make a fuss about, but this volume offers precious little cause for celebration. For the Relief of Unbearable Urges created a minor sensation, in part for intrinsic reasons and in part for its author’s unusual background. Englander came out of an intensely Orthodox milieu in Brooklyn. Though he broke with that world, he chose to make its black-hatted, bearded men and its bewigged women the protagonists of many of his stories. Thus, to some readers he seemed to be a piquant successor to Bellow, Malamud, and Roth who, instead of writing about Jews in various stages of Americanization, was able to represent “authentic” Jews, who—lo and behold!—exhibit the same sexual compulsions and existential confusions as the protagonists of his predecessors. (In Israel there are several novelists who have emerged from the haredi world and write about it, but they are not especially acclaimed for doing so.)

Englander’s recurrent subject is Jewish victimhood. Sometimes this condition is imagined in historical terms, as in “The Twenty-Seventh Man,” the strong opening story of For the Relief of Unbearable Urges, which is a fictionalized version of the night of
August 12, 1952, when Stalin had most of the leading Soviet Yiddish writers murdered. More often, the stories are about self-victimizers, people who have a gift for turning their personal lives into a desperate shambles. Englander’s novel, The Ministry of Special Cases, from 2007, is not able to sustain itself as a long work of fiction, despite some arresting moments, precisely because it mires itself in victimhood at great length and in repetitious detail. Set in Buenos Aires at the time of the military coup in 1976, it tells the story of a Jewish couple whose son is abducted by government agents for purportedly revolutionary involvements. Any conceivable effort to placate or circumvent this murderous state bureaucracy is bound to be futile, but the couple, like the protagonists of Englander’s short stories, end up merely compounding their own suffering as they attempt to rescue their disappeared child. The book has the uneasy feel of a version of Kafka’s The Trial oppressively recast by a lumbering avatar of Zola.

By contrast, For the Relief of Unbearable Urges, though uneven, included at least three compelling stories. There are two different ways in which Englander’s fiction is Jewish. The first is simply the use of Jewish characters—often very Jewish characters, who strictly observe the laws of family purity, pray three times a day, consult their rabbi when faced with dilemmas, and so on. But the predicaments in which they are represented are not distinctively Jewish, only the social framework in which they are enacted. Thus, Ruchama, the protagonist of “The Wig,” one of the two most affecting stories in the book, is an ultra-Orthodox woman who earns her living making wigs for other ultra-Orthodox women, but the story is really about a marriage that has turned sexless, and the woman’s bitter frustration, and her desperate effort to recall and perhaps even revive the beauty she lost long ago. Her Orthodoxy may (or may not, for this reader) give all this a special edge, but the human quandary is a universal one.

Another quite touching story here, “The Gilgul of Park Avenue,” which is distinctly reminiscent of Malamud, is the peculiar tale of a WASP stockbroker who during a Manhattan taxi ride has the sudden revelation that he is a Jew. Through the yellow pages, he locates a dubious rebbe to give him guidance, and then he strains to embrace Jewish observance, a course of action that gravely threatens his loving relationship with his elegant wife. You might say that the subject could scarcely be more Jewish, but the story would work just as well in the hands of a writer from a different background, if the sweeping conversion experience had been to Catholicism or Hare Krishna. The title story of this collection, about a man who is advised by his rabbi to go to a prostitute for the relief of his unbearable urge when his wife persists in refusing to sleep with him, is, like “The Wig,” about thwarted desire and marital dysfunction. In this case, unfortunately, the story is spoiled by Englander’s impulse to submit his characters to cruel and unusual punishment: the wife is at last moved to passion, but the husband cannot have sex with her because he has contracted a venereal disease through his illicit encounter. (The forced ironic twist at the end is more O. Henry than Malamud.)

THE OTHER WAY in which Englander’s fiction is Jewish is in its themes, and this is the prevalent mode of his new collection, much to its detriment. Of the eight stories, three
center on a preoccupation with the Holocaust, one on the related subject of anti-Semitism, and another on the also related subject of the loss of dear ones in the Israeli-Arab conflict. The problem with this explicit addressing of Jewish themes—all, of course, involving victimhood—is its didactic insistence, which leads to contrivance or to sensationalism.

The title story is a case in point. Two middle-aged Jewish couples, who grew up together in a modern Orthodox setting, meet in the Miami home of one of them. That couple has become secular, whereas the other couple, settled in Israel, is now ultra-Orthodox. The four get drunk, then uncover a stash of pot belonging to the teenage son of the Miami couple, and they proceed to get very high. This scene has been admired by critics for its startling incongruity, but there is nothing either profound or funny about it: it is merely bizarre. Englander has too often gotten artistic credit simply for bizarre and improbable inventions. The couples, in their extreme inebriation, begin to talk about Anne Frank, and the Miami wife announces that “in the event of an American Holocaust, we sometimes talk about which of our Christian friends would hide us.” This twisted fantasy is then translated into a role-playing game in which one spouse is supposed to play the hunted Jew and the other the Gentile neighbor. The story ends when the Orthodox wife comes to suspect that her husband would not hide her.

The murder of six million Jews was an unfathomable catastrophe, and none of us, Jews or Gentiles, can avoid pondering what it may suggest about human nature, history, and much else. What one sees, however, in Englander’s new stories is a sick (and mechanical) obsession with the Holocaust, as in the Anne Frank game of the two couples. He reminds me in this regard of Woody Allen at his cheapest. The moral unseemliness of this obsession becomes evident even in a simple plot summary of some of his other stories.

In “Camp Sundown,” a camp for Jewish elders (hence the heavy irony of the name), the aged campers decide for reasons that remain unclear that one of their number was actually a concentration-camp guard, and they gather together and murder him. Their spokesman justifies this act to the camp director by declaring, “To stand by for a murder is to murder. To hide the history of murder is to murder.” In their eyes their victim was as guilty as Eichmann. When further challenged by the director for what they have done, the same person explains, “That is what happens when you fence people in.... A camp is a camp, Herr Direktor. Inside, different kinds of justice will form.” Perhaps this merging of an Elderhostel with Auschwitz is what Englander’s admirers regard as brave and beautiful (I take those terms from Jonathan Safran Foer), but to me it seems merely creepy, not courageous at all, and also a facile and violent distortion of moral and historical distinctions.

This story is surpassed in sensationalism by “Free Fruit for Young Widows.” Englander’s battering ram is here deployed from the opening sentences. A platoon of Israeli soldiers in 1956 are having lunch at a remote site in the Sinai when one of them raises his gun and shoots four of the others in the head. To his horrified mates, he explains that these were actually Egyptian commandos wearing French-supplied uniforms like those of the
Israelis. (We are not told how he detected their true identity.) As the narrative moves forward in time well beyond 1956, we learn that there are still greater horrors lying behind this one. The shooter, a man named Tendler, is a survivor of a concentration camp, and he saw his father, mother, three sisters, and grandparents killed in front of him. When he returns to his home after the war, he is warmly greeted by the Christian family that has moved into the house, but then he overhears them plotting to kill him in his sleep before he can reclaim his property. His response is to anticipate them early in the night by shooting every single member of the family. His final victim is an infant: “That last bullet Tendler left in the fat baby girl because he did not know from mercy, and did not need to leave another of that family to grow to kill him at some future time.”

One might reasonably infer that Tendler’s grief has transformed him into a homicidal maniac, but the problem is that Englander’s treatment of the Holocaust, here and in other stories, like his treatment of anti-Semitism and even of sex, does not leave any firm ground for a moral or even a psychological perspective. A man who witnessed Tendler’s killing of the Egyptians tells Tendler’s whole story to his son, trying to explain why he has a kind of reverence for the Holocaust survivor. Of the son it is said that “it was on that day that Etgar Gezer became a philosopher” and decided that “Professor Tendler was both a murderer and, at the same time, a misken [poor guy].” Two assumptions here are equally objectionable, exemplifying Englander’s weakness of moral imagination. The first is the notion that the exposure to barbaric extremes puts one in touch with the dark profundity of existence, and so in itself makes one “a philosopher,” like Tendler, who holds a chair of philosophy at a university. (In this way Englander’s readers are invited to flatter themselves for reading his fiction.) The second assumption is that having it both ways is not an evasion but the expression of an encompassing view of grim realities. Tendler in the story underwent unspeakable suffering, but then he murdered a whole family, finishing with a baby girl. Does he really retain his status as a poor guy? Is it this combination of victim and killer that makes him a philosopher?

What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank betrays a writer who has lost control of his materials. Even on a technical level, the writing is disheartening: the prose, undistinguished throughout, is no more than a vehicle for moving the characters from one point to the next. The characters themselves are for the most part schematically sketched, and riddled with ethnic tics (like Englander’s style, as in that “did not know from mercy”); they are just instruments to convey the author’s uninteresting insistences. And several of the plots are manifestly contrived for little but sensationalistic ends. Englander showed flashes of real talent at the beginning of his career, but he has lost his way. These stories are neither courageous nor outrageous. They are merely bad.

Robert Alter’s most recent book is The Wisdom Books: A Translation with Commentary (Norton). This article appeared in the April 5, 2012 issue of the magazine.
1. The narrator of the title story suggests that his wife’s preoccupation with Holocaust survivors is excessive. “And Deb has what can only be called an unhealthy obsession with the idea of that generation being gone. Don’t get me wrong. It’s important to me, too. I care, too. All I’m saying is, there’s healthy and unhealthy, and my wife, she gives this subject a lot, a lot, of time.” How do you feel about this? Later, the narrator suggests that Deb was disappointed by the story about the two survivors meeting years later in the locker room in Florida because she was expecting something that would “reconfirm her belief in the humanity that, from inhumanity, forms.” What does it mean to have an unhealthy obsession with the Holocaust? How do you feel about Deb as a character?

2. Yerucham and Shoshana used to be called Mark and Lauren, before they became ultra-Orthodox. Early in the title story, though, Shoshana confides, “We still get high. . . . I mean, all the time,” and that, in relation to traveling with drugs, “it’s pretty rare that anyone at customs peeks under the wig.” What do you think Nathan Englander’s point of view is about religious Orthodoxy? What point is he trying to make?

3. Appearance and reality, secrets and hidden truths, are themes in the title story. These are approached comically, at first, when Deb and her husband discuss Trevor, and the discovery Deb had made and kept a secret. “But he’s the son. . . . I’m the father. Even if it’s a secret with him, it should be a double secret between me and you. I should always get to know—but pretend not to know—any secret with him. . . . That’s how it goes. . . . That’s how it’s always been. . . . Hasn’t it?” What is at stake here? Why does the narrator suddenly feel “desperate and unsure”? What fears are gathering force in this moment?

4. The idea above—the possibility that we don’t know our spouses, or even ourselves, and that perhaps our lives are something quite other than what we believe them to be—is echoed with powerful, indeed tragic, implications at the story’s conclusion. Discuss the terrible parlor game the couples play in the story’s final pages. What do the couples learn about one another? About themselves? How does this change your understanding of each character and the portraits the author had painted of them in the story’s opening pages?

5. The story “Sister Hills” is divided into four discrete sections. Why? Discuss how the story’s structure relates to its themes.

6. “Sister Hills” can be read as a political allegory based on the story of a bargain struck in order to save the life of a critically ill child. In this reading, who or what does the child represent, and what meaning can be inferred from the exchange of money? What is the relevance of the two mothers?

7. Rena changes dramatically over the course of “Sister Hills.” Describe her journey and discuss the difference between her true relationship with Aheret and the way the young couple perceive the nature of their relationship at the story’s end. What point is the author
trying to make through his use of irony here, and how does this irony relate to the story as a whole?

8. What statement, in “Sister Hills,” is the author trying to make about the history of the Israeli settlements? What do you think the author believes about their cost? About their fate? Look in particular at pages 64 to 66, where Rena discusses with the rabbis the nature of a contract, both symbolic and real, and the nature of justice.

9. How does the story of Masada relate to the story of Zvi Blum and the bully known as the Anti-Semite in “How We Avenged the Blums”?

10. On page 88 of the story above, Englander writes, “We weren’t cohesive. We knew how to move as a group but not as a gang. We needed practice. After two thousand years of being chased, we didn’t have any hunt left in us.” What does he mean? How is he suggesting Jewish history relates to the fate of these neighborhood boys and their plight?

11. “How We Avenged the Blums” concludes with a powerful image of a circle of boys clustered around the Anti-Semite, and the narrator’s unexpected insight about the nature of helplessness and power, dignity and victimhood: “As I watched him, I knew I’d always feel that to be broken was better than to break—my failing.” What does he mean? And why does he consider this his failing?

12. At the start of “Peep Show,” Allen Fein reflects on his transformation. “He had only wanted a peep. He’d gone up the stairs a loyal husband and lover, a working man on his way home to the burbs. And now, minutes later, a different man emerges: a violator of girls and wives and matrimonial bonds.” Then, when the partition rises and unexpectedly reveals a rabbi, Allen muses: “Where the rabbis are involved, there is always a path to be followed. Either you stay on it or you stray into darkness: This is the choice they offer. And, much as Allen feels bitter and lied to for all these years, he half wishes he could live in their realm, where a man is religious or he is not, a good husband or bad.” How are these two moments related? What is the author saying about the nature of identity, morality, and truth?

13. How is “Everything I Know About My Family on My Mother’s Side” different from the other seven stories in this collection, thematically and tonally? Did you feel it was more personal, intimate? Why do you think the author chose to narrate this story in the first person?

14. “Camp Sundown” is a story about vigilante justice undertaken by a group of geriatric campers at a bucolic summer retreat. Discuss the author’s views on guilt and innocence. Look in particular at the passage on page 166, where one of the campers confronts the director and implores, “It’s your choice, Director. You take one crime to bed with you every evening; take a second one tonight.” What is happening in this scene?

15. What do you think the director should have done in “Camp Sundown”? What should the campers have done? Why?
16. “The Reader” is an exploration of the relationship between authors and readers. Is there a social contract between writers and readers? What is an author’s responsibility to his or her reader?

17. Discuss the contrast between the narrative form of “Free Fruit for Young Widows,” in which a father is lovingly recounting a story to his son, and the story’s actual substance. How does this dissonance contribute to the story’s power? What is the significance of the comment Etgar’s father makes when Etgar is twelve: “Do you want to know why I can care for a man who once beat me? Because to a story, there is context. There is always context in life.”

18. In “Free Fruit for Young Widows” Englander distinguishes between two kinds of survival, saying that Professor Tendler “made it through the camps. He walks, he breathes, and he was very close to making it out of Europe alive. But they killed him. After the war, we still lost people. They killed what was left of him in the end.” What does he mean?

19. At the heart of several of these stories is the relationship between religious orthodoxy and contemporary American culture. How do you think the author views religion and issues of faith and belief?

20. The title story, “Sister Hills,” and “Free Fruit for Young Widows” all pivot around incidents within Jewish history, and the question of how essential stories—stories that define us, that shape both our understanding of the past and our vision of the future—are told and retold over the course of many years. What do you think Englander is suggesting about history, tradition, and storytelling itself?

21. Many of the stories in this collection are comic in tone, despite the tragic nature of Englander’s dramatic predicaments. How does humor serve the author’s intentions? How does it express his view of life?

Nathan Englander: Assimilating Thoughts Into Stories

February 15, 2012 (npr.org)

The stories in Nathan Englander's new collection are based largely on his experiences growing up as a modern Orthodox Jew with an overprotective mother.

In What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank, Englander writes about his own faith — and what it means to be Jewish — in stories that explore religious tension, Israeli-American relations and the Holocaust.

In the title story — a riff on Raymond Carver's classic What We Talk About When We Talk about Love — a Hasidic couple and a secular Jewish couple play a morbid game
called "Righteous Gentile," in which they debate who would hide them during an imaginary second Holocaust. Englander says that though he calls it a game in the story, it's not really a game — and that's the point.

"I call it a game," he says, "because it makes it easier to talk about as a game — but it's something we play with dead seriousness in my family — we would wonder who would hide us in the Holocaust."

Englander, a fourth- or fifth-generation American, says despite his family's longstanding roots in the United States, they frequently played the mind exercise when he was little.

"We really were raised with the idea of a looming second Holocaust, and we would play this game wondering who would hide us," he says. "I remember my sister saying about a couple we knew, 'He would hide us, and she would turn us in.' And it struck me so deeply, and I just couldn't shake that thought for all these years, because it's true."

Englander grew up on Long Island in the mid-1970s, where he and his sister both attended a religious day school. The rabbis at the school would tell them graphic stories about the Holocaust and the Inquisition. At home, his mom wasn't much better.

"My mother raised me very clearly that if you cross the street, you will die," he says. "If you go outside, you will die. If you play sports, you will likely die. That's what I was getting at home."

Meanwhile, anti-Semitic graffiti popping up around his town was reinforcing all of his fears. Looking back, Englander says his paranoia and fears of nonexistent threats made him want to explore his roots further.

"I think that's why I had to live in Jerusalem all those years," he says. "There's a reason ... I spend my childhood in America feeling Jewish and not American. And it's only in Israel — it was those years there — where I got to be an American because everyone's a Jew."

**Personal Discoveries In Jerusalem**

Englander's time in Jerusalem overlapped with a period of brutal violence in the city. He says the constant real threat of violence actually made him more comfortable living his daily life.

"That was a huge discovery," he says. "If you're paranoid and you put yourself in a place of real existential threat, then you're not paranoid anymore. It was a huge relief for me on that front. It was like living in Catch-22. ... The state of panic — I didn't stick out in a crowd anymore — the cold sweat was just general."

While living in Jerusalem, Englander also examined his own religious beliefs.
"It was the first time I saw ... deeply secular atheistic Jews who I could identify with," he says. "The first week there was when I gave up organized religion. My first Shabbat in Israel was when I broke [being Orthodox] after 19 years."

Englander remembers thinking that week that God would smite a bus he was riding on the Sabbath. When that didn't happen, he says, "it felt like I wanted a cheeseburger."

Eating a cheeseburger would have broken the Jewish law forbidding the mixture of milk and meat products. Still, Englander wanted one, he says.

"It was pretty hard to break that rule," he says. "I had to wait months to find one. My buddy and I had flown to London. I literally got out at Victoria Station and went up the stairs into Burger King and had me a Whopper."

He calls the process he went through an "active irreligiousity."

"I was trying to think of every rule that I could possibly break till I checked them all off," he says. "Because that's what a young person is going to do when they swing in the other direction. I'm 42 now; if I was complaining about something in high school, it would be time to let it go. But then, it was large and electric and active."

---

**Interview Highlights**

**On his fiction**

"Every book better be fully intimate, it better be all you have. I'm obviously not shy because I'm going to talk your ear off today, but I'm private, which is different. But the idea for me to be truly intimate — for me to be naked and raw — the fiction allows me to do what I need to do emotionally. And with this book, certain stories were looking at things — it was a change for me to look at things that were right there. And in a sense, this was normality — this game — and I just took a step back and said, 'My god, we're pathological.'"

**On going to a religious day school**

"This education that I fought so wildly against was a huge effort for my parents to give me that education. We had these old-school rabbis. And I think that's the reason I write the way I do. ... [At the University of Iowa, one professor told me] that I was writing all of my sentences in transliterated Yiddish. My mom's from Boston and my dad's from Brooklyn but I hear everything [in a Yiddish] rhythm."

**On living in Israel**
"As someone who spent a lot of years living in Jerusalem, one of the great perks is that when you come back, and you get into these Israel arguments in your American-Jewish clan, you can really just silence them by saying, 'I lived there.' So we used it like a bludgeon."

On becoming more secularized from his Orthodox upbringing

"I've been comparing it to friends' coming-out stories. When you're in a world and your parents are one way and you're told, 'This is how the whole world is, and this is how you're supposed to be,' and you're terribly unhappy in that world, it's a very scary thing. The whole time I was so religious and so sincere and so interested in the texts, but thinking this is not the world for me. And it grew and it grew."