Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge
A Perennial Paperback Original
Edited by Paul Zakrzewski

Editor's Introduction (excerpt)

I trace the idea for this anthology to a reading series called "Bad Jews." One cold February night a few years ago, I found myself at the first of these readings wondering what to expect from anything with such a name. "Bad Jews" sounded playful, even funny, but would the writing be half as clever as the name? Would I hear some poorly imagined account of life in a nineteenth-century *shtetl*? Or a half-baked memoir about sexual escapades masquerading as fiction? That the series was held at the KGB Bar I took to be a good sign. Tucked away on the second floor of a rambling, nearly anonymous tenement building in New York's East Village—its owners installed a small, street-level neon sign only a couple of years ago—KGB exudes the sort of well-worn authenticity you might associate with left-bank Parisian cafes or nineteenth-century taverns. For a long time the meeting hall (and watering hole) of the Ukrainian Labor Home, a gathering place for Ukrainian socialists, the bar retains a quirky communist

décor with Soviet-era photographs and posters covering its red and black walls, busts of Lenin and Stalin brooding over the bar, and a large blood-red hammer-and sickle flag pinned, like some strange giant bird, to the old tin ceiling.

That night the place was packed. Twenty-somethings squeezed into tables or on the floor near the podium, their short tidy hair and stylish oval-framed glasses half-illuminated by tea lights. Regulars crowded at the old wooden bar. Off to one side, looking somewhat out of place in their sports jackets, wool skirts and yarmulkes, sat a flock of middle-aged newcomers. A sense of anticipation animated the bar—all the more obvious when the curator, a young journalist named Jeff Sharlet, stepped up to the podium and the conversational buzz quickly died off.

The series was the brainchild of both Sharlet and novelist Melvin Jules Bukiet. Not long before, Bukiet had approached the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan with the provocative idea of creating an altogether different breed of Jewish literary experience. “Bad Jews” would combine unconventional writing in an unexpected setting, aimed at a crowd that hungered for new Jewish events. In one sense, the series was part of a wave of edgier Jewish programs sprouting up in cities like New York and San Francisco, and intended to reach unaffiliated or disaffected Jews in their 20s and 30s. One literary series which began around the same time featured spoken word poetry slams at the time, while another—held in the basement of a former kosher winery on the Lower East Side—opened its stage to emerging Jewish writers. However, “Bad Jews” soon set itself apart by creating a place for established literary talents to revel in more controversial, even subversive, material glossed over elsewhere. For example, the first reading featured a writer, Ellen Miller, who had never been introduced into a Jewish

context before. Yet Miller's first book, *Like Being Killed*, which recounted the story of a young Jewish heroin addict living amid the faint traces of the old Lower East Side, was clearly a Jewish novel. The book also featured other topics not commonly associated with Jewish fiction, including sado-masochism and AIDS.

I had stumbled across the reading at a time when I was searching for my own Jewish roots. I had been raised, perhaps not atypically, in a wealthy but overwhelming Christian setting—this on the outskirts of Toronto, Canada. Being one of only a handful of Jewish kids in my high school, I had always associated being Jewish with a sense of life on the margins—despite bar mitzvah and years of Reform Temple Hebrew classes. By the time I had graduated college, I'd severed nearly every religious or cultural tie. But not for long, as it turned out. A sense of identification with Judaism had remained, however buried, and this began to reassert itself during my mid- and late-twenties—a time in my life when I had experienced a dizzying sense of dislocation and loss engendered by my parent's divorce, among other events.

By then, I'd moved to New York, a city with the biggest concentration of Jews outside of Israel. I discovered a contemporary urban culture that excited me: progressive, ironic, queer-friendly, Yiddish-inflected. I was introduced to the music of the Klezmatics, a group of world-class musicians whose protests about the AIDS epidemic and paeans to marijuana are cloaked in a jagged, gorgeous fusion of klezmer and jazz. I saw the plays of Tony Kushner, who had recently adapted Ansky's classic *A Dybbuk* with such electrifying stage props and performances that it brought home the terrible loss of Eastern European Jewry in a way no TV special or Hollywood blockbuster had been able to do.

And I discovered a number of literary events, such as "Bad Jews," at which young writers grappled on stage with questions of identity, history, and authenticity.

The name "Bad Jews" might put some *alter kacker*'s nose out of joint, but like most Jews my age I grinned at its playful humor, its intimations of sexual, even religious, promiscuity. Beneath the flippant joke, however, I discovered a deeper meaning. Jews have risked the label of "bad" throughout our history, no more so than when we've elevated the quest for truth and justice above other considerations. A century ago, socialist Jews from Eastern Europe earned the label as they agitated for worker rights, marching on Union Square to help end unjust child labor practices. A half-century later, college students risked this identification—and far worse—when they joined the Freedom Riders in the South to protest the inhumanity of segregation. More recently, the label has clung to women who've argued for a more egalitarian liturgy, or who've exposed the sexism that still plagues our institutions. At different times throughout our history, we've been "bad Jews" when we've helped to expand and redefine Jewish identity: when we've cheered for Abraham Joshua Heschel in Selma, Lenny Bruce on the comedy stage, or an orange on the seder plate.

In the realm of Jewish-American writing, Philip Roth may be the most famous "bad Jew" of all. Throughout a forty-year career, Roth has enraged his critics and endeared his fans with novels that offer brilliant, explicit and outrageous dissections of Jewish identity. Long before the neurotic antics of *Seinfeld,* Roth had lampooned the values of the Jewish middle-class in nervy, ambitious stories such as "Goodbye, Columbus," and "The Conversion of the Jews." But it was with *Portnoy's Complaint* that he captured the contradictions of Jewish identity with a ferocity and abandon heretofore

unseen. Henry Roth, Delmore Schwartz, and Saul Bellow might present the lives of the immigrant generations as a tough but potentially redemptive struggle—but Roth and his narrator, Alexander Portnoy, don't find much in the experience to *kvell* about. When he's not busy recounting raw but funny encounters with teenage masturbation and shiksa goddesses, Portnoy ruthlessly catalogs the humiliation visited upon children of immigrants like himself, indignations inflicted by his suffocating mother, his feckless father, his clueless rabbi. Roth once remarked he was completely surprised by the public outrage that greeted the book, yet the reaction was a measure of how accurately he'd hit his mark. Critics might pounce on the book's untrammeled misogyny, or the tiresome nature of Portnoy's seemingly endless malaise, but one thing is certain. *Portnoy's Complaint* may still be the best yardstick by which "bad" Jewish writing can be measured—and Roth himself a good prism through which to view a new breed of Jewish American writer….

- Paul Zakrzewski
December 2002