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CLOSE-UP Stories Found In A Lost Religion

Nathan Englander's Break-Out Collection

By Paul Zakrzewski

When I ask Nathan Englander's publicist how I'll recognize the 29-year-old writer, she laughs and tells me he's a dead ringer for his dust jacket photo. Sure enough, as I enter the East Village cafe where we've arranged to meet, I spot Englander's face immediately. His dark, masculine features are framed by what's likely to become his trademark: a thick mane of corkscrew curls.

There's good reason for my sudden shock of celebrity recognition. It seems everywhere I turn these days I come across the same brooding, sensuous publicity shot — more Roger Daltrey than Bernard Malamud. I've seen the photo in Newsweek, Time Out New York and the Village Voice. I jog down to the mailbox between breaks from writing this profile and there it is again, this time emblazoned across a postcard advertising an upcoming reading.

It's not Englander's good looks that have the press all hot and bothered. Rather, it's his funny, wrenching stories of Orthodox Jewish life, not to mention the Orthodox upbringing he's since abandoned, which make for such great copy. Last summer, when the Village Voice numbered him among a few select "writers on the verge," he'd already won a prestigious Pushcart Prize for what's become the title story of his new collection.

In the past month, he's appeared in two leading venues for fiction writing, The New Yorker and the Atlantic Monthly. Meanwhile, Knopf released his debut collection, "For the Relief of Unbearable Urges," which earned Englander a reputed \$350,000 and prompted Newsweek to dub him "fiction's hot new talent." Even Ann Beattie has blessed Englander's "precise, funny, heart-breaking" stories. "It's the best story collection I've read in ages," Beattie crows on the dust jacket.

That kind of buzz will likely make him this season's David Foster Wallace or Donna Tartt. Lois Rosenthal, who edits the influential journal, Story, says Englander's



Nathan Englander back in the States

strong craftsmanship and his ability to handle powerful subjects with a light touch is rare among writers. In fact, it was her magazine that originally published the Pushcart Prize-winning "For the Relief of Unbearable Urges."

"Nathan's a very intelligent writer who deals with very strong issues, but in a very magical, mystical, humorous way," says Rosenthal.

Some of the stories in the collection are set among the Orthodox and Hasidic communities of Jerusalem and Brooklyn. Their protagonists are caught between their strict, circumscribed communities and their own unfettered desires. In "For the Relief of Unbearable Urges," a Hasidic man whose wife has grown estranged from him receives a heter, a special dispensation, to visit a prostitute. "The Last One Way," depicts the brutal lengths to which one wife finds herself driven when her husband refuses to grant her a divorce. And the aging wigmaker in "The Wig" fashions herself a beautiful shietel to restore her looks, risking immodesty in the process.

Other stories in the collection don't rely on

the present day for inspiration. For example, Englander uses the legends about the Wise Men of Chelm to great effect in his Holocaust-era story, "The Tumblers." Though usually the object of derisive laughter, here the loony logic of the people in Chelm suddenly makes more sense than what's happening outside the ghetto walls. In "The 27th Man," a minor bureaucratic mistake seals the fate of an unpublished scribbler, who's sent to his death along with the greatest Yiddish writers in Stalinist Russia.

In fact, the last two stories are among the collection's best. Not only because they display Englander's talent at getting to large, dark moments through humor, but also because they reveal his debt to tradition, his use of both his personal and literary past. Englander freely admits to "tipping my hat" to writers such as Isaac Bashevis Singer and Leslie Epstein for example. And unlike many contemporaries, Englander's stories are not trying to make sense of modern rootlessness or concerned with a search for identity. Like Yiddish and Jewish writers past, his stories feel like they've evolved from a culture which their author understands profoundly.

"There are a few people who can write about their background extremely well," explains Lois Rosenthal. "There are others who try to do it and end up writing in a heavy-handed way. Nathan uses humor — really dark humor — but in a very appealing way."

Nonetheless, Englander's both concerned and resentful that his stories might be interpreted as attacks on the Orthodox community, rather than as the deeply human portraits he's worked so hard to evoke. "If I wasn't trying to enrage people, why would I expect people to be enraged?" he wonders. "However, there's the idea of dirty laundry, that you're not supposed to expose the community. As if revealing very specific humanity, or flaws for specific characters, will somehow reflect on the community on the whole."

Englander's background provided its own set of creative problems when he began to write seriously. For one thing, he was hyper-conscious of not stereotyping his characters or allowing his own mixed feelings about Orthodox life get in the way. "One of the things I tried to avoid was letting any of my own prejudice seep in," Englander said. "If they're going to be characters they've got to be three-dimensional."

And there's never been any question in his mind that his stories were not meant only for

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a big lesson. I was so exhausted from writing my thesis and taking five classes. I had worked so hard facing the possibility of maybe not making it to graduation because I was so sick.

In the end, I made it, but it was a turning point for me. I realized I had pushed myself too hard. All through college you think you are able to stay out all night and still manage to be productive the next day, but there is a point when your body is going to give out. It was a funny lesson to learn right when college was ending.

Q: Is there a particular person whom you admire greatly and whom you pattern your life on?

A: There are so many people that I admire. I admire Russell Banks for his amazing writing ability. He wrote "Affliction," the modern-day "Crime and Punishment." To be able to write like that would be amazing.

Q: When do you have time for reflection?

A: As an actor, your life is always somewhat free form. You have maybe an appointment at 1 p.m. and then maybe not until 5, and it is up to you to make the most of that time. Writing is an amazing outlet and it helps you to better understand yourself.

Q: What is the most influential story that has impacted your life?

A: I would say "Death in Venice" because in specific there is the universal. There is a

very specific infatuation that this man has with a young boy and yet the story was universal.

Everybody knows what it is like to desire the unattainable. Whether it is unrequited love, or the need to succeed, the theme is universal. George Bernard Shaw once said that there are two tragedies in life: One is never to get your hearts desire, and the other is to get it, "Death in Venice" and this statement are connected, I relate to both of them.

Q: Was there a defining moment in your life where you made a decision that changed your life forever?

A: After I graduated I decided to return to New York and start acting again. All of my friends were following the safer path: law school, medical school or investment banking.

For a year, I did anything I could get my hands on. I was working for free, reading screenplays, doing anything just to meet people. I think about that every single day.

I have not taken the safe path. It can be scary, but it's what I had to do. It was a decision that has defined my life.

Q: What is your motivation: fame or money?

A: It is definitely not fame, and money is a necessity. I love living, and art is something through which you experience life in its fullest. I feel really lucky. I am grateful for the life and education that I have had. Feeling lucky every day and not taking anything for granted — that's what keeps me going.

Research and editorial assistance: Jillian Rowley

"Breaking the Pattern" appears regularly in Our Town. For comments e-mail cplotkin@mind-spring.com

Nathan Englander

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Jewish readers. From his first drafts, Englander worked hard to make Jewish terms and rituals easily understood to outsiders. "That was one of the early things that I most struggled with," he says. "Finding that line between what can be gotten from context and what needs a little push."

Speaking with Englander about his craft it's soon clear that the young writer is private, intense, obsessive and a hard worker. In fact, he sounds almost gleeful explaining the benefits of work. "What matters is hard work, that's it," he said. "Parties don't help any. Being seen isn't going to do much for your work."

Such talk isn't just good writerly form, however. It's partly a vestige of the ritual-bound, highly circumscribed training he received as a boy in a Long Island yeshiva. In fact, throughout our conversation it seems as if Englander is unusually conscious of divisions and separations — whether he's talking about enjoying the distance between writing in Jerusalem and publishing in America, his polite but firm refusal to discuss reviews, or else describing his rigorous six-day work schedule and one day of rest.

It took Englander a long time to leave religion completely. Though he can joke about what he calls the "losing my religion" question, he's clear it wasn't an easy choice. "I was raised to never give it up. That you should keep doing it even if you don't believe 'cause that's what you're supposed to do."

After his graduation from Binghamton

University, he got a job managing a commercial photography studio. "It was great. It was creative. It was a way to make rent, and you don't have to be alone all day," he said. "That's when I learned to work hard. And I saw the passion that goes into any of those things where you're doing art for art's sake."

Englander says he only does one thing at a time, "and sort of obsessively I'd say." When it became apparent that photography wasn't going to be his life's work, he began to write. "I guess I looked into the future and asked, do I want to be scrambling for jobs or setting lights when I'm 60 or 70?"

He answers his own rhetorical question. "I love photography, but not in the way you need to do things the way I prefer to do them. I was scared to write, but that's what I wanted to do."

Englander enrolled at the prestigious Iowa Writer's Workshop after a friend's mother saw an early draft of his story "The 27th Man" and urged him to apply. Though he's wary again of indulging in what he calls "workshop nostalgia" He says the experience was crucial for him. It gave him a close-knit group of serious readers — on whom he still relies — and it gave him two years to perfect his craft.

For the past 2.5 years, Englander has lived in Jerusalem, drawn by the opportunity to live in a culturally Jewish environment while working on a draft of a novel about Jews in Argentina. After our interview, I'm not surprised to learn that Englander spent a couple of months in Buenos Aires himself. As Rosenthal pointed out, "If you have these rich experiences and you're a very fine writer you can make an incredible literary mark." ■

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