

Between two worlds: the stories of Serge Liberman

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Abstract. Serge Liberman, who died in December 2017, was an important and highly distinctive Australian ethnic writer. His short stories, including the posthumously published *The Storyteller*, conduct what is in effect a conversation between two worlds: that of post-Enlightenment rationality, on the one hand, and that of the magical, the folkloric, the Hassidic, imagination of the shtetl, on the other. Liberman's profound tragic sense does not preclude the possibility of human redemption through empathy, compassion and imaginative inspiration.

Key Words: Australian Jewish short fiction, Post-Enlightenment rationality, Jewish mysticism, existentialism, redemption

Serge Liberman as both man and writer had a marvellous sense of life's ironies and incongruities. Indeed one could imagine a story of his in which a man, a sort of Australian Chekhov, whilst ministering compassionately to thousands of patients during a long medical career, spent his spare time writing short stories and dreaming of the day when he would produce a *magnum opus* that would be launched before a large and admiring gathering late in his life...but in which death takes him just months before the great work debuts.

Just such a Liberman plot played itself out at a packed launch of his posthumously published *The Storyteller: Selected Stories* on April 3, 2018, less than four months after he died on December 22, 2017 after a remarkably gracious and uncomplaining journey through Motor Neuron Disease. Though he did not live to attend the launch Liberman knew precisely what was brewing in this volume. He had consulted closely with Alex Skovron (who did the bulk of the work on this project) and myself on the selection of the stories; with Alex on detailed editorial issues; had signed off on the title, the Foreword and the cover image after discussions that included his wife Anna Mow and his publishers Anna Blay and Louis de Vries of Hybrid Publishers.

Serge Liberman came to prominence as a writer during the 1980s and 90s, principally as what we would now think of as an ethnic writer. And certainly he was that. But he was also much more than that. Like all deeply reflective and accomplished writers Liberman

creates a world, indeed as is quite often the case, overlapping, even colliding worlds. Thus the specifics of any particular Liberman story are deeply rooted in and unfold against a complex metaphysical background. His characters, those 'vagabond souls' in search of an author, as they are described in the story "Voices from the Corner", are a voluble lot and if you listen to their various musings and expostulations you can start to piece together what you might call the modern metaphysical worldview of many of these stories. In the story "The Promise", Hana speculates that "maybe chance itself is God". In "Fame: or the Rise and Fall of Benny Liner" (like all stories not included in *The Storyteller*, this one is available on Liberman's website: <https://www.sergeliberman.com/>), Liner speaks of "the gaping contrast between the heedless flow of time and the flitting evanescence of existence which both [make] meaningless and pathetic all our fretting, our ambitions, our very lives, yet...[charge] every man and woman alive ever to create meaning, even to invent it if need be..." In "Messiah in Acland Street", Gotteswill, the would-be Messiah, commends the atheistic writer-narrator, Elias Federman, in the following terms:

what is constant in your work...is how a man stands always at the centre of your world, how it is in man that you place your highest trust, and how it is his sanctity that you prize, and his genius, his innate goodness, his diversity and great potential... in this, you see, you show more religion than a host of others who pray and beat their breasts before God but have no feeling for others...

In the tale "The Fortress" (see website), Stillman, confronting Widowski with the brute fact of mortality, tells him: "What is yours is not yours. You have it merely on loan. What you say is yours belongs not to you but to time."

If you put these various ideas together – that the world is a realm of chance, contingency, and does not operate according to a divine Masterplan; that we are not presented with meaning but must rather seek, indeed make, meaning for ourselves; that death is absolute; that a compassionate ethical humanist outlook offers greater hope than dogmatic religious tradition – you have several of the elements of the world view often designated Existentialism, or, more generally, the metaphysics of secular modernity. It is with this general understanding of life in mind, I suggest, that many of Liberman's major fictional themes should be read: the struggle to find meaning and dignity after Holocaust trauma and loss; the hard facts of mortality with which his doctor-narrators must help their patients to deal; the disorientation and pain of migrant experience (but also its new vistas); tensions between first and second generation Australian Jews, and more.

Liberman's writing also constantly echoes the existential dictum that one must take ethical responsibility for one's own actions, and the ethical entitlements of the Other. A fine example of this is the story mentioned earlier, "The Promise", promising being a fundamental feature of ethical life. In all of this we see powerful ethical elements of Jewish tradition in Liberman's work, but his ethical outlook is perhaps best described as a form of ethical universalism with deep Jewish roots. In the story "Africa" (see the website), the young Jewish doctor, Raphael Bloom, says:

our history, our writers – Peretz, Sholom Aleichem, Bergner... have all taught me... that before we are white, black, yellow or brown, before we are African, Jewish, Australian, European, Russian or whatever, we are all human beings first and... The more a Jew cares about others too, the more Jewish he is.

The mention of these great Yiddish writers is important for another reason. I said earlier that a serious writer might seem to articulate more than one world, and Serge's writing, like that of Peretz and Sholom Aleichem, contains what is in effect a conversation between two worlds: that of post-Enlightenment rationality, on the one hand, and that of the magical, the folkloric, the Hassidic, imagination of the shtetl, on the other. Thus you will find in *The Storyteller* stories that read like parables and fantasy – more like Magic Realism than Realism; stories which seem to live outside the 'heedless flow' of chronological time, as Liner puts it, and to lift us into a realm of archetypal imaginings, preternatural happenings and stunning metamorphoses. A fine example of this latter kind is the aforementioned "Messiah in Acland Street" where Gotteswill, despite commending the sceptical young Federman for his humanism, takes himself to be, and may indeed be, the or a Messiah, and anoints Elias as a sort of Elijah who must take over the prophetic task. I use the qualifier 'may' here because some of the stories are pitched in a sort of liminal zone, familiar in Magic Realism, where it is finally hard, often impossible, to know where reality lies. Maybe, as the story seems sometimes to hint, Gotteswill is one of those 'vagabond souls' who needs a writer like Elias to bring him into being? Maybe the whole scene is a creation of Elias's imagination? And how interesting that Federman early says of Gotteswill that 'he could have been a character right out of Peretz.'

Two constants wend their way through both the realist and the Magical Realist Liberman stories. The first is a tremendous sense of human intensity, urgency, and striving among many of his characters. This brings to mind a wonderful phrase in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*: 'the terrible stringency of human need'. His stories reflect and often minister to this need with compassion but also with uncompromising honesty.

The second is Liberman's prose style, unique in Australian writing, which reflects this stringent, questing and complex quality of need, drive and emotional complication. The style is often elaborate, always charged with feeling, and is equally good at gritty sociological detail, fantasy, and the great profundities of human life. Thus it is that in "The Promise" Hana, rejecting the possible resumption of a life wrecked by the Holocaust, tells the fiancé she has not seen for fifty years, in delicate Yiddish cadences: "I have what I have, and what I have I have." History has shifted the ground of her promising, but she continues to see the keeping of promises as a sacred ethical duty.

Liberman's first volume of stories was entitled *On Firmer Shores*. Those 'shores' were Australia's, a place where harassed and traumatised post-Holocaust Jews had a chance to live in relative security. But for Liberman the world was forever and everywhere a shifting and hazardous place which only the empathic, principled and imaginative heart could redeem.

Bio Note Richard Freadman is Emeritus Professor of English at La Trobe University and is the author of a study of *This Crazy Thing a Life: Australian Jewish Autobiography*, and two volumes of memoir, *Shadow of Doubt: My Father and Myself*, and *Stepladder to Hindsight: An Almost Autobiography*.