

## Book Review:

BUTTERFLY WORDS, by Daniel Rosen, translations from French and Hebrew by the author, Introduction and Afterword by William S. Cohen, IP Books, New York, 2019.

Daniel Rosen has written a unique, engrossing, original book, a celebration of life in poetry, in story, an exploration of the past that encompasses trauma and survival, a word-fest that offers understanding, insight, knowledge, and more. We are invited to wonder and to empathize, to think and feel, to enter into the depths of human experience, the depths of the mind, and to remember.

The necessity of remembering permeates the book, bringing to mind the Judaic injunction, *Zakhor!*, which means remember in Hebrew. In the Bible, the people of Israel are commanded to remember, and Rosen's writings are a commitment to memory. We honor the experience of others when we remember their lives, their stories, and we honor our own lives when we commit ourselves to remember what we care about and what we've been through. There is a sense of interconnectedness, a sense of being embedded in ongoing history, in Rosen's poetic storytelling.

The book consists of nine sections, and is written in three languages, English, French, and Hebrew. The seventh section, pages 149 to 186, are original French and Hebrew writings that were translated by the author into English, and the English versions are interspersed with other sections that were written in English. What we encounter in this trilingual offering is the author's experience that we can assume was conceptualized in the language used to render the experience in words.

The first five sections are dedicated to evoking experience in, and of, three specific geographical locations, Paris, Jerusalem, and New York.

The sixth section is titled “Relationships: A psychiatrist’s narrative”, pp. 141-147, and begins, “This essay analyzes the relationships and interactions between the observing narrator and the people he observed, as described in two stories of this collection, *In a cloud of smoke*, and *The melody*” (p. 141). Rosen invites us to consider the relationships described in the two stories, with emphasis on understanding the model of observer and observed. Why? So that we can understand the application of the model to the practice of psychotherapy and psychiatry, using narrative as a therapeutic tool.

Thus we learn that Daniel Rosen is a psychiatrist. Yet, when we come to the end of the book, and read the “About the author” statement, we find out that he does not want to tell us anything overtly about himself. He begins, “If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth” (p. 271). Oh yes, after reading the book, I felt that I had heard truth after truth after truth, and yes, I want to know more, I want to know the truth about what Rosen is refusing to tell us! The next sentence tells us a great deal, though. “All I can tell you is about that book I loved as a child. I must have read it a thousand times, no kidding. I did not know English then, so I read it in French: ‘L’Attrape Coeurs”, it was called” (p. 271).

Yes, of course I wanted to know the translation of the title of the book, as I assume that anyone else who does not know French would like as well. The literal translation is “the trapped heart”. But the English-language book that Rosen said he must have read a

thousand times is a book of which I could say the same thing, as when I was a teenager I read my paperback copy to shreds, is *Catcher in the Rye*. And thus, Rosen the seemingly reticent author artfully told his readers a great deal about himself, as he does throughout his book, as his book in so many ways is about memory.

And yes, since Rosen is a psychiatrist, recognizing the power of narrative in fiction and in psychiatric clinical encounters, he deeply knows and acknowledges the power of history, the intensity of experience, the tendency to avoid, to repress, to deny, to defend against trauma, against the unthought known, the need to remember, the many ways in which truth is lived and expressed no matter what else is at play.

So, although we are given no “biographical data” in the “About the author” statement we learn that Rosen spoke French before he learned English. This brings us back to the trilingual structure of the book. The first five sections are confessions of love for three cities, section 1, “Paris”; section 2, “New in America”; section 3, “Jerusalem”; section 4, “Longing for Jerusalem”; section 5, “New York”.

The stories are a mixture of simplicity and complexity, reassuringly familiar, and startling. The very first story, “The melody”, is about a Jewish man named Ron, who had come from Paris to Budapest hoping to attend a Hasidic Sabbath and hear authentic Hasidic singing, the rapturous religious experience of shared Hasidic song. He is invited to sing the first stanza alone. The Hasidim are delighted, because the melody he is singing is new to them, and sounds authentically Hasidic to them. The story ends, “Ron had come from Paris in search of an ancient melody and he found himself in the position of messenger, delivering a piece of life to music without soul” (p.17). The irony is profound. The history, the memory, the meaning, the soul he sought, he

already had, and he gave it to those whom he imagined possessed what he longed to have.

Thus Rosen takes us on his journey, the first pages of a journey through his book, a book that celebrates memory, with its joys and its sorrows and its pains. Yes, this story was written in French, translated into English by the author, and the original French version can be read on pages 151-153.

The first story in part 2, “New in America”, is “New in town”, translated from the Hebrew, taking place in 1990, and the narrator speaks of discovering “bizarre” professions he’d never heard of before, dog-walker and baby proofer, *and*, ultimately, when his doorbell rings and he answers the door, exterminator. His associations to the word “exterminator” begin with the Holocaust, the extermination of the Jews, and then with Arnold Schwarzenegger and the movie *The Terminator*, and then with the Luis Buñuel movie *The Exterminating Angel*. He can’t bring himself to let the exterminator in, and then, as he adjusts to living in New York, he welcomes the exterminator, happy to have his cockroaches exterminated. In two pages, we travel with the narrator, with his personal range of cultural associations, and his assimilation to a new culture. With Rosen, we are engaged with the narrative, and as the observer we empathize with the observed.

Rosen has scrupulously researched, and paid deeply loving attention to, his family history. Most movingly, he pays attention to the wishes and desires of the women of his family to remain connected to, and continue the legacy of, the women of the family who passed on family heirlooms. The heirlooms become symbolic of the longings to remember, and to be remembered.

Here is an excerpt from the opening paragraph of the story “The bracelet”: “...so that the bracelet goes to its intended destiny, to

its intended owner, perpetuating the chain of relationships between generations, between the living and the dead, between the ancestors and their descendants, between the mothers and the daughters, and the daughters who became themselves mothers” (p. 233). Note the craft of his sentence structure, the craftiness of his phrasing, “and the daughters who became themselves mothers”. Yes, it may simply mean that the daughters eventually took on the role of mothers, as so happens, generation after generations. Yet four words, “who became themselves mothers”, can be interpreted as meaning that the daughters who eventually became mothers became truly themselves, fulfilled an inevitable destiny. They became themselves!

Spoiler alert: the last two sentences of the story exquisitely express the delicate theme of ancestral legacy. “Even if Élise’s gold bracelet had disappeared after or maybe before this story was written, the women ancestors’ chain would not be interrupted. It would still be possible to pass on their memory to both her granddaughters, along with another oldnew bracelet” (p. 238).

In the account of “The bracelet”, Rosen contemplates the many lineages in a family that are acknowledged and unacknowledged historical lineages, a family that could be Spanish, or Moroccan Jewish, or Berber Jewish, or Algerian Jewish. In “The sacrifice of Tamás” and in “The list”, Rosen contemplates the genealogy of his family after reading an advertisement about Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, discovering testimonies about those who died, archived memories. In honoring the dead, he mentions, in a parenthetical comment, “(We have named our 1 year old son David Avraham!)” (p. 202).

Shall we weep? When, and where, shall we weep?

Rosen offers us a poem, "Forever ephemeral", written O so very recently, in New York, October 23, 2018, ending, "We will catch the time/ My love/ Even after the time" (p. 257).

As we discover throughout life, and within this book, from Ecclesiastes 3 and as sung by Pete Seeger, "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven".

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