

# Dara Horn – A New Voice in Contemporary Jewish American Fiction

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## Abstract

*This essay introduces the contemporary Jewish American novelist Dara Horn. It concentrates on her second novel The World to Come, published in 2006. In this novel, in which Horn mixes various genres, we follow the mysterious story of the Ziskind family from Russia to America. The family history is seen through the history of a Marc Chagall painting that once accompanied the life of the protagonist Benjamin Ziskind. This essay attempts to present Dara Horn as an author with a deep knowledge of the history, culture, and religion of the Jewish people.*

Most readers usually associate modern Jewish American fiction with a few names – Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and perhaps some of them may add Cynthia Ozick. However, the work of the first three writers mentioned above is already complete, and the nature of contemporary Jewish American fiction has been shaped by representatives of the younger generation of writers, such as Melvin Jules Bukiet, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Rebecca Goldstein, Lynne Sharon Schwartz, Nicole Krauss and others. One of the most talented writers among them is Dara Horn (born 1977).

If we consider the religious factor as the main constituent of Jewish ethnicity, then we can say that this new generation of writers is more Jewish than their predecessors. From their writing it is obvious that their fiction is gradually turning inward. In this respect it is quite useful to know that Horn studied Hebrew and Yiddish at Harvard University, and that at the same university (as well as at Sarah Lawrence College) she teaches courses in Jewish literature and Israeli history. Her first novel, *In the Image* (2002), received the prestigious National Jewish Book Award and among other prizes also the Edward Lewis Wallant Award. Her novel *The World to Come* (2006) has confirmed her status as one of the best young American writers and it – like the author's first novel – received the National Jewish Book Award for Fiction ("World" online).

Horn's novel was inspired by a real event. During a cocktail party at the Jewish Museum in New York City on June 7<sup>th</sup> 2001, a valuable painting "Over Vitebsk" by Marc Chagall was stolen. This oil painting dating from 1914 was on loan from a Russian museum in St. Petersburg. A few days later the museum received a letter from an unknown organization, demanding a peaceful settlement of the disputes between Israel and Palestine in exchange for the return of the Chagall painting. The canvas was found in February 2002 at a post office in Topeka, Kansas, and returned to the Jewish Museum and subsequently transported to Russia ("Over" online).

It is precisely the character of the Jewish painter Chagall that unites the otherwise multilayered, fragmented structure of Horn's novel. The main narrative line is interrupted by flashbacks into various historical periods ranging from the early 1920s to recent times; Horn's spatial take is equally wide, including New Jersey, the Soviet Union in diverse stages of its history, and even Vietnam. Throughout the novel, the author traces the history of the Chagall painting, which enables her to follow three generations of the Ziskind family and at the same time to touch on many significant ethical, political, religious and artistic issues.

At the novel's beginning, the reader meets Benjamin Ziskind, a former child prodigy who works for television, writing questions for a quiz show. Depressed by the death of his mother Rosalie, a writer and illustrator, and his recent divorce, this postmodern *shlemiel* visits the Museum of Hebraic Art in Manhattan on the occasion of an exhibition of Marc Chagall's work. Aware of his dark family history scarred by loss, in an unguarded moment he steals the Chagall painting "Over Vitebsk" because he is convinced that this picture used to hang in his parents' living room in the past and thus he has a moral right to own it. His twin sister Sara is shocked by his deed, but Ben explains his motives to her convincingly: "I am sick, sick of having things taken from me. Don't you get it? Our family is finished, Sara. This is the one thing we have left" (48). In a story full of surprising, unexpected twists, the protagonist is revealed as the thief by a young museum employee, Erica Frank. Because of their mutual attraction to each other, she tries to persuade Ben to send the canvas back in a way which would prevent him from being punished. Though Ben has fallen in love with Erica, he is unable to give up the Chagall work and he returns to Erica a forged painting made by his sister - who herself is a very gifted painter.

Side by side with the main plot, Horn develops parallel stories of Ben and Sara's parents and their grandfather Boris Kulbak. Despite their differences, they are linked by the history of the Chagall painting and by

the presence of Chagall himself. The life of this noted postimpressionistic painter crosses paths with that of Boris Kulbak in the Jewish Boys' Colony at Malakhovka, a retreat for orphaned boys who became the victims of the pogroms in the Soviet Union in 1919. Chagall works there as an art teacher and, as he soon uncovers Boris's artistic talent, he allows the boy to choose one of his own studies in exchange for one of the boy's paintings which he likes. Boris chooses a picture in which a man with a walking stick and a beggar's sack - who reminds him of his murdered father - is flying over a gloomy, depressing street. This oil painting on canvas has the name "Over Vitebsk."

In the course of her novel, Horn simultaneously confronts Chagall with another Jewish artist, the half-forgotten Yiddish writer Pinkhas Kahanovitch, better known as Der Nister, which in English translation means "The Hidden One". The fate of this author - who in his short stories and novels reflected the persecution of the Jews in the Soviet Union before and after World War II and the destruction of the Jewish people under the Nazi regime, and who himself became a victim of the Stalinist purge of Jewish intellectuals - intersects with Chagall's life in the orphanage in the early 1920s, however later on their destinies diverge. Whereas Marc Chagall in his French exile becomes a renowned painter, befriending Picasso and Matisse and enjoying worldwide fame, Der Nister lives in poverty in Russia, unable to support his family. As his symbolist short stories do not conform to the official government stream - socialist realism - he is not allowed to publish, and consequently his talent is suppressed.

The chasm between Chagall and Der Nister deepens even further during World War II; while the celebrated painter achieves great success in Europe and America, the divorced Der Nister hides from the Nazis in a claustrophobic room in Tashkent and lives an ascetic life completely devoted to writing his trilogy, which is called *The Family Crisis*. His misfortune reaches its climax with the loss of his beloved daughter Hodele, who dies of starvation during the blockade of Leningrad. Der Nister's misery is completed after the war. Whereas Chagall, as an internationally respected artist, is welcome all over the world, Der Nister ekes out a living in a tiny apartment, secretes his manuscripts in various hiding places, and is spied on by the secret police. In 1949 he is arrested and disappears in one of the Soviet prison camps.

Horn's approach to Chagall seems to be ambiguous. On the one hand it is clear that she admires the artist's work, on the other hand she pictures him as a man who forgets his former friends and who is in essence indifferent to the plight of Jewish artists in Russia. It is difficult not to notice that he hardly registers their strange disappearances and deaths. The

fact that no chapter in the book is narrated from the perspective of Chagall – and that by contrast, some chapters are presented from the viewpoint of Der Nister and Boris Kulbak, who also vanishes in a gulag, a victim of the Stalinist totalitarian regime – testifies to Horn's emotional attachment to the victims of the oppressive political system and to her critical view of the rather apathetic role of Jews in the West in their attitude to the suffering of their Jewish brothers and sisters in Eastern Europe. Through the characters of Der Nister and Boris Kulbak she pays tribute to those who "decided to commit themselves to Soviet Jewish life by remaining in the Soviet Union and pursuing their art in Yiddish. And they paid an enormous price for that choice. By 1952, nearly all of them had been murdered by Stalin, and today almost no one has heard of any of these major talents" ("Conversation" online). According to Sorin, the contrast between Chagall and Der Nister allows Horn "to show us some of the brutal realities of twentieth-century Russia and the communism that devoured its founding parents as well as its dissenting children" (1).

Horn remarkably manages to transpose the world of the Chagall paintings into her book – his colorfulness and imaginativeness. Those who are familiar with his work know that in his paintings the real world merges with fantastical elements in accordance with the tradition of old Yiddish culture. His world is filled with flying people, animals, and objects that symbolically convey the human desire for freedom, for a life unbound by everyday earthly troubles. They float over an East-European *shtetl*, peopled with fiddlers, *shnorrers* (beggars), water carriers, lovers, wedding guests and other peculiar figures. Horn's novel too is imbued with the motif of flying. At its beginning, the depressed Ben desires to fly like the figures and animals in the Chagall paintings: "Ben became more interested when things started to fly: first clouds, then words, then angels, then goats, and finally men and women, soaring through the air" (14). After the loss of both parents, flight elevates him from his dejection, and thus "he imagined himself flying, gazing at the ground far below and seeing, from his aerial view, two paths out of the necropolis that might not be dead ends" (50). It enables him to escape from his dismal reality and the whole dark family history.

The same motif is associated with Ben's sister Sara, although it fulfills a different function – that of describing her commonplace everyday activities. Therefore we can read that "Sara was floating freely around the room" (47) and "leaned her head back against the door and stuck out her lower lip, blowing air up toward the loose hairs on her forehead to make them fly" (48). For Boris Kulbak, flying becomes a symbol of a spiritual height which he wishes to reach. Already as a small boy in the Malakhovka

orphanage, he makes an impression on his teacher Chagall by his painting of his vision of a mother's womb, in which an angel with six wings is hovering next to yet-to-be-born baby. In his early years, he experiences rare moments when he feels as if he were "swimming in air, flying, weightless, over the town" (18). In the hard times of the postwar Soviet Union, Boris Kulbak projects his only hope into his daughter Raisya (in America renamed Rosalie, Ben's mother) and in his fantasy "he dream[s] of walking with Raisya, running hand in hand with her, taking off with her like airplanes into the air, and then flying with her, for miles, over the town" (265). Her hair, floating on the air, reminds him of a Chagall painting.

Der Nister, in the moments of his greatest despair after the loss of his daughter, turns to a heavenly being and writes a letter addressed to the Angel of Dreams. He complains that wrongs and adversity have deprived him of dreams, and recalls his dreams from childhood in which he "was always flying on air over the town" (198). Having been arrested by the agents of the Soviet secret police, his dead daughter Hodele reveals herself in front of him. In his imagination, "she took her father by the hand and flew with him, crossing the paper bridge she had built from the earth to the sky" (233). The motif of flying frequently appears in his short stories and also in the children's stories by Ben's mother Rosalie which are inserted into the plot. The symbolic connection of flying with freedom is expressed in the scene in which Ben frees himself from fraudulent behavior and decides to tell Erica the truth about the forged Chagall painting. One of the most touching passages, which captures Chagall's dreamfulness and color, is the surreal description of Sara's dreams approaching the atmosphere of the artist's paintings:

Once Sara discovered how to see time, she rarely closed her eyes. As she grew older, everything, not merely time, but everything, turned into color, or light and shadow. Sounds were colors, flavors were colors, even the touch of her mother and Ben... were colors, shimmering colors, her brother a sturdy gray-green of a growing tree, the segue between gray and green from a fluttering leaf to a branch, her mother a deep, resonating blue, like a square of sky caught in a windowpane just after sundown, and Leonid [her husband] was the gleam of light on water, a glimmering orange reflection of a brightening sun. (246-247)

One of the problems that Horn addresses in her novel is historical antisemitism. In her concept, antisemitism does not know borders and is

present at any time in modern history regardless of political or ideological systems. "The longest hatred," if we want to use Wistrich's label (Kushner 64), is materialized here in the pogroms of the early phase of the Soviet Union, when the reader is introduced to the victimized boys in the orphanage, and is also expressed in the anti-Jewish state power politics of the postwar Soviet Union – which liquidated thousands of Jews including the Jewish intellectual elite. Horn convincingly depicts the totalitarian practices of the Stalinist regime, with networks of informers who on the basis of false accusations destroyed the lives of numerous innocent people. The persistence of the persecution of Jews in the USSR is reflected in the episode covering the final phase of Soviet history; since Soviet Jewish children are not allowed to have a *bar mitzvah* initiation ritual, one of them - Leonid, Sara's future husband - is "assigned" to Ben, who becomes his *bar mitzvah* "twin" at a distance, and during the ceremony confirming his religious and ethical obligations he reads a section from the *Torah* not only for himself but also for Leonid.

However, antisemitism also affects the fates of Jews in other parts of the world. Due to his Jewish origin, Ben's father Daniel is treated as an outsider in his unit in the Vietnam War. Even the USA is not free of anti-Jewish sentiments, as Horn indicates in the final part of her novel, in which Ben and Sara witness the explosion of a bomb at the main entrance of the Museum of Hebraic Art. The tragic consequences of this terrorist attack and the immeasurable material damage caused to the museum also have a personal aspect for Ben, as he searches in vain for Erica in the museum's basement, where his new love had an office. After all, antisemitism is indirectly responsible for the theft of the Chagall painting, because almost the entire museum budget goes on the security of people at the expense of the protection of art; this is a result of the experience of terrorist attacks against various Jewish institutions in various parts of the world. As a matter of fact, the Chagall painting "Over Vitebsk" itself symbolically expresses the gradual extermination of Jews, as the figure of a beggar without facial features, soaring over the town, gives the impression that his existence is vanishing. It looks as if the beggar's identity is absolutely unimportant and marginal.

One of the significant themes of Horn's novel is the question of faith confronted with deception. It is lack of faith and betrayal of trust that destroy the blossoming relationship between Ben and the museum curator Erica at its very beginning. Deception intrudes into the lives of Horn's characters constantly and marks their fates. This theme revolves not only around the authenticity or forgery of the Chagall painting (actually the reader is not sure whether or not Sara is actually forging a fake, or whether

the Chagall study is an original) but also the plagiarism of Rosalie's short stories in her children's books. Fraud deeply affects interpersonal relations among the individual characters. In her reminiscence of her childhood, Sara remembers how her trust in her father Daniel was shaken when she revealed that he had lied her about the cause of the loss of a part of his leg. Daniel himself was crippled as a result of his trust in a cunning interpreter, Cuong Thien Minh, in the Vietnam War. This con man pretends to be loyal to the American army while secretly working for the Viet Cong. Moreover Daniel's blind faith costs the lives of his comrades-in-arms from his unit. False, inauthentic behavior also has tragic consequences for Boris Kulbak, who believes in his friendship with his neighbor Sergei Popov without knowing that this brutal man is an informer who works for the Soviet secret police and gets rid of politically inconvenient people by running over them with a truck. In the novel's last chapter, Horn's theme of faith acquires religious dimensions.

Horn enriches her novel with the universal theme of the purpose of art. In philosophical disputations between Der Nister and Chagall, and Der Nister and the Yiddish writer Peretz, they pose various questions: should literature necessarily convey any message? Does a painting or a book have to have meaning? Does a story have to have ending? Which art is closer to real life? What is the relation between imagination and reality? Whereas Chagall claims that a painting does not have to mean anything and that it is just color, light and a little happiness stemming from a creative work, Der Nister is convinced that stories should carry a meaningful message, which his mentor Peretz confirms in his advice to the writer that gave Horn's novel the title: "Your purpose as a writer is to achieve one task, and one task only: to build a paper bridge to the world to come" (84). However, their discussion transcends the realm of art when Chagall asks an existential question - whether Boris Kulbak means something - and many years later, after the loss of his daughter, Kulbak asks what was the meaning of Hodele. Rosalie's plagiarism and Sara's forgery of the Chagall painting raise moral questions connected with authorship and authenticity. When Erica accuses Ben's mother of fraud, Ben defends her, arguing that in this way she has rescued all forgotten stories "that were buried in library vaults and that no one would ever read again" (206).

The title of the novel *The World to Come* recurs many times in Horn's text and has multiple meanings. It alludes to Rosalie's last children's book of the same title - and, more importantly, it refers to the afterlife. However, throughout the novel the title suggests mankind's continuity or, better to say, our connection with future generations (thus the author employs the frequent motif of a bridge). Ron Charles claims that "the world to come is

nothing more than the world we make, day by day, with our choices and actions" (BW06). It concerns the future of those who will follow us and whose lives are shaped by our deeds, by our entire existence already before their birth. As Horn says, "the world to come that his parents had always talked about was not an afterlife at all, but simply this world, to come—the future world, your own future, that you were creating for yourself with every choice you made in it" (193). The meaning of the continuity is reinforced by Sara's pregnancy. In this context we understand Ben's rumination about his sister when he concludes that "[e]very pregnant woman was carrying the dead" (178). He realizes that the fetus in Sara's body carries the imprint of his dead parents.

Horn's motif of the world to come draws on a legend in the Jewish tradition that an unborn baby in a mother's womb knows everything substantial from this world but at the moment of birth a child forgets everything that has learnt. In the womb before their birth, the natal children meet with their ancestors who pass on their life experience to them. This legend forms the basis of the last fantastical chapter, in which not-yets who "have only nine months to wonder" and who "have been sentenced to birth" (283) meet already-weres. Therefore it is possible that in a world which resembles paradise, the natal Daniel (Sara's future baby) meets the mortal Daniel (Ben and Sara's father), Rosalie and Boris Kulbak. The world to come is an imitation of the real one, a kind of forgery, like Sara's fake of the Chagall painting.

In Horn's novel, the world to come, and hence the future, can also be the past or the present depending from which temporal stage and from whose perspective the narrative is presented. For Kulbak the world to come is that of Rosalie and Daniel, and for them it is the world of Ben and Sara. From the perspective of the main narrative plot, the world to come is the future of Sara's not-yet-born baby – her son Daniel. Horn's concept of continuity is underscored by eponymous names; the natal Daniel has the same name as Ben's late father, and even Ben's name is identical with that of his maternal grandfather Boris Kulbak, since the latter's original name was Benjamin.

If Singer, Malamud or even Bellow narrated their stories in a more or less traditional way, Horn's novel displays modernist and postmodern features. It does not offer a traditional linear narrative; on the contrary the central plot is interrupted by many digressions that enable the author not only to trace three generations of the Ziskind family but also to confront the situation of Jews in the United States and the Soviet Union. The novel has a variable focalization; the narrators are alternated, so the individual chapters are narrated from the viewpoint of the protagonist Ben, Sara,



Daniel Ziskind, Erica Frank, Der Nister, Boris Kulbak and even, as the last chapter indicates, from the perspective of the child to come. Horn fractures her novel, giving it a fragmentary character. She intertwines her main story with texts taken from classical Yiddish literature. Mostly through Rosalie Ziskind, she adapts the tales of Yiddish writers such as I. L. Peretz (for example his well-known stories "Eternal Life" and "The Dead Town"), Sholem Aleichem, Der Nister, Moyshe Nadir, Nachman Bratslav, Itzik Manger and others. In so doing, hand in hand with the use of Yiddish folklore, she demonstrates the greatness of the Yiddish cultural heritage, which should not be forgotten. The inclusion of stories within stories is not autotelic, and it serves its purpose because they are used as a parable of the fate of Ben and Der Nister. Postmodern intertextuality is a distinctive feature of Horn's novel; for example in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter, Der Nister quotes the end of Sholem Aleichem's short story "The Haunted Tailor", and Aleichem is to be staged in the State Jewish Theater for which Chagall is asked to design theater sets.

In her novel, Horn mixes various genres ranging from the family saga through romance to the fantasy novel. The novel's beginning can remind us of a crime novel, however the range of literary forms is much wider and includes letters, texts inspired by the Bible (for example stories of creation), poems, songs, folk tales and so on. The composition of the novel can be compared to a puzzle; the reader has to gather various pieces together in order to have "everything illuminated" if we paraphrase the title of Jonathan Safran Foer's successful novel. In fact Horn uses a similar technique to Foer's when she gradually interconnects seemingly totally different chapters and episodes so that they make sense in the end.

It would be more appropriate to say that *almost* everything is illuminated in Horn's novel, because it has no ending. We will never get to know how Ben's story developed after the terrorist attack on the museum and what happened to Erica. A lack of conclusion was the most common objection of literary critics to the novel. However, it seems that Dara Horn sides with Der Nister, who also advocates stories without endings, as his conversation with Chagall reveals: "But it [Aleichem's story] doesn't have a real ending," the teacher protested. "People like real endings. Redemption, that sort of thing." "How is that not a 'real ending'?" Der Nister snorted. "There are no real endings in life, either. Since when do things end?" (38).

At any rate, Dara Horn represents a new distinct voice which challenges us to revise our traditional view of Jewish American literature. Her thought-provoking work testifies to her talent – a talent that should by no means be overlooked.

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