

Jon Papernick's High-Wire Act ***A Canadian's Tales of Israel Are Published to Acclaim***

By Erica Brody

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"I think the stories are good," Jon Papernick said about his first book, "The Ascent of Eli Israel and Other Stories" (Arcade). But, he added, "I think it's the subject matter that's interesting to people.... It fits in with what's happening in the news every day."

And he appears to be right — on both counts.

Publisher's Weekly called the stories "powerful" and praised the author's "sense of the surreal" and "dark humor." Noah Richler, writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, described his "penetrating, clear-sighted stories" that "bring utterly no consolation."

And the subject matter: All seven of the stories are set in Israel, ranging from the birth of the state in 1948 to the eve of the new millennium. The stories variously touch upon Yitzhak Rabin's assassination, the idealism of American immigrants, Palestinian and Israeli extremists, the Law of Return, broken hearts, drunken debauchery, the Oslo accords, battling falafel stands, the legacy of the Holocaust and the late poet laureate Yehuda Amichai.

The 31-year-old Papernick, however, is not an emerging Israeli writer. He is an emerging Canadian writer who lives on a tree-lined street in Brooklyn, far from the violence-plagued region about which he has written — although not far from what he called a hotbed of Jewish extremism of the sort that may very well crop up in the novel he's currently writing.

Why he would write about Israel, and why he feels he has the license to write about a country he knows only as a tourist and journalist, was the topic of conversation on a recent hot August morning. The writer welcomed a reporter into the apartment he shares with his fiancée on the outskirts of Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood. A framed poster of Theodor Herzl and another vintage poster promoting "Hebrew Watermelon" hint at the topic with which Papernick is preoccupied; a Vladimir Jabotinsky poster is tucked away in a closet behind his clothes.

The notion that only an Israeli can write authentically about the Jewish state is absurd to him. "Writers are always appropriating voices, unless they're writing memoir or biography," Papernick said. To "take someone's voice and to make that person human" is the writer's job.

Besides, he's done his research. In November 1995 he arrived in Israel on an \$8,500 grant from the Canadian Arts Council. It was the day Rabin was gunned down by a Jewish extremist.

Papernick stayed 18 months, landing internships at The Jerusalem Post and later United Press International. "It was a really great experience," he said. "We covered everything: the Palestinian elections, suicide bombings."

On his own time, Papernick "went around the country with a tape recorder," interviewing just about anyone who would talk to him. His subjects included former Jerusalem Mayor Teddy Kolleck, Israeli settlers, black Hebrews, writer David Grossman, a Haifa sex therapist, a Christian missionary and an Arab woman "who had been in Israeli prisons for half her life." These interviews, he said, later helped him capture the "cadences" of the way many different kinds of people in Israel speak.

Papernick grew up in a home in the Toronto suburbs where Passover Seders, synagogue on the High Holy Days and his own bar mitzvah were the only outward acts of observance and his only encounters with Hebrew.

He first went to Israel at age 22, taking a break from the political science-turned-creative writing degree he had begun at York University in Toronto and following a stint as editor of a literary magazine called *Existere*. "I went because something had happened in Toronto," he said. "I wanted to get away from it.... I was open to anything." He spent almost seven months that first time: three weeks on an army base refitting rusty bombs, six weeks at Hebrew University and four months on a kibbutz in the Jezreel Valley, milking cows. "It was awesome," he said of his experiences in Israel. "I was discovering so much.... I also spent a month at a yeshiva in Jerusalem, Aish HaTorah."

Papernick returned to Toronto and finished up his bachelor's degree. After his second, longer, stay in Israel, Papernick returned to North America and enrolled in a master of fine arts program at Sarah Lawrence College in upstate New York, where he won prizes in fiction and poetry. "Going to Israel was the best thing I ever did, but I think going to Sarah Lawrence helped me put my thoughts together. Putting these stories together made me able to move on." After countless revisions and two years at Sarah Lawrence, Papernick completed his master's thesis, which ultimately, minus a couple paragraphs, became "The Ascent of Eli Israel," which he called "a historical document" of sorts.

"That world I wrote about is not a world that exists anymore. It's a much more violent and scary world," he said, soon after discussing the bombing at a Hebrew University cafeteria that left seven dead, including five Americans.

"Americans and Canadians may not realize how important Israel is. Jews have always been killed and massacred no matter where they were in the world — whether it was in Spain or in Russia or Poland or Germany or Arab countries or anywhere. So in Israel I think it's very important that they have control over their own destiny."

"Right now," he said, "in many ways America is actually the promised land. America is safer for Jews than Israel — but then again I don't take that for granted either. Things can turn in 10 or 20 years. Already you're seeing an antisemitic shift in Europe, not really in America yet, but... it could definitely happen. If one or two well-spoken extremists come up, it could happen. I think the world is basically an antisemitic place. I think the Jews need to have their own strong country."

The ongoing violence has also brought about a change in Papernick's political views. "I think that one's views are changed by the situation. As I said, I think my views lie naturally with a peaceful, liberal view. But how long can you continue to act in such a way? I don't know what the answer is."

Whatever his political views, however, "I'm a fiction writer first."

That job has become more difficult, but not for want of imagination: Papernick is no longer able to type: Years at the keyboard have caused what appears to be carpal tunnel syndrome. He writes in longhand, using computer dictation and typists when necessary.

The disability has inspired one of his stories. "The Art of Correcting" is about an aging rebbe who awakes one morning to a backache so severe that he can't make it out of bed, let alone to the Western Wall to lead the nine other members of his minimal minyan. A proselytizing Christian chiropractor enters the picture, re-aligning his patient's back while blaming the discomfort on the rebbe's hunched-over style of studying the Torah, the tightness with which he wraps his tefillin and the up-and-down motions of davening. It is the rebbe's prayer that has prevented him from praying, just as Papernick's writing prevents his typing.

When not working on his novel, Papernick has been preparing for the fall semester, when he will teach 11th-grade English at the Brooklyn Friends School and freshman composition at the Pratt Institute, as he's been doing for the past two years. He is also planning his upcoming marriage to Eve Rubinstein, the daughter of a Reform rabbi and the niece of the rabbi at Manhattan's Central Synagogue, where the two will be married September 1.

Papernick said he loves living in New York — it's been four years now, two in the suburb of Mount Vernon and two in Brooklyn. Although he has strong familial ties to Toronto — his father's grandfather came from Lithuania to Toronto when he was 3 — he doesn't think he'll move back there. His mother lives nearby now, in New Jersey.

"I don't think there's the same kind of opportunities" in Canada, he said. "I really believe that in America you can become something and excel."

As Papernick led a reporter out, he passed under a *hamsa* hanging above the door. The good luck charm seems to be working.