

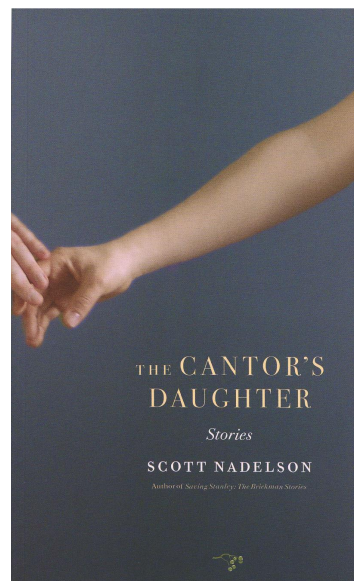
THE WINNER IS INTRODUCING SCOTT NADELSON

Congratulations to Scott Nadelson, whose book of short stories, *The Cantor's Daughter: Stories* (2006), has been awarded the Reform Judaism Prize for Jewish Fiction. The \$5,000 award, conceived by its principal benefactor, Dr. Alexander Mauskop, a New York neurologist and member of Larchmont Temple in New York, assists promising Jewish fiction writers.

The Cantor's Daughter is a collection of eight stories depicting the lives of “ordinary” suburban Jews struggling to live lives not so different from

our own. The characters tend to have one foot inside American culture and another inside Jewish culture—a tension many of us experience.

In addition to *The Cantor's Daughter*, Nadelson has written the short story collection *Saving Stanley: The Brickman Stories*, which won the Oregon Book Award for short fiction and the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writers Award. He also serves as visiting assistant professor of creative writing at Willamette University.



A SAMPLING THE CANTOR'S DAUGHTER

The apartment had been cramped from the start and had only gotten worse as Noa grew, as her father filled the living room with plastic crates crammed with records, all opera. Books on opera, too, from which he sometimes read aloud to her, recounting in an amazed voice some detail in the life of Jussi Bjorling or Franco Corelli. His obsession was absurd, she thought—he hadn't trained as an opera singer, had never even listened to the music until they'd come to the States and he'd watched a production of *Norma* on PBS. In truth, Noa didn't hate the music so much as the way it affected her father, bringing that mournful look to his one exposed eye, a slouch to his shoulders, a silence that would drag on hours after the final note had faded away. He was indulging himself in the doleful tunes, the tragic stories—it was one more way, she thought, for him to

avoid imagining any other possibilities for his life, or for hers.

At the synagogue he was a different person. As his voice filled the sanctuary, his body seemed to stiffen and reach out across the bimah, and when

of punch in both hands, shunning the trays of brownies and freshly baked rugalah, smiling too brightly and talking too fast—divorcées, single mothers, old women with unmarried daughters in tow, all crowding around him,

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he was silent his eye scanned the pews and rested on anyone who met his gaze. Noa understood why congregants were in such awe of him. There was power in his voice and his bearing, mystery in the eyepatch and the woolly hair that had gone gray prematurely, the boyishly smooth skin that needed shaving only once a week, the reluctant smile that showed itself infrequently—whoever brought it out felt the swell of accomplishment, and this, too, gave him power. She understood why women flocked to him during kiddushes, holding their cups

not seeming to notice how he leaned away, one foot creeping behind the other. None of them knew how he shrank into himself in the apartment, at the same time getting in Noa's way wherever she turned, his stool too close to hers when they ate dinner at the kitchen counter, his smell—meaty, she thought, like overcooked brisket—lingering in the bathroom an hour after he'd been in.

Some days the desire to punish him nearly overwhelmed her. Exactly what she wanted to punish him for she couldn't have said. □

The Cantor's Daughter: Stories was published by Hawthorne Books (www.hawthornebooks.com) in 2006. Hawthorne Books also published Nadelson's first story collection, *Saving Stanley: The Brickman Stories*, in 2004.

Q+A



CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

RJ Editor: When did you start thinking you wanted to be a writer?

Scott Nadelson: Towards the end of high school. Up to that time I wasn't a reader at all; actually it drove my father crazy because he was such a big reader. The turning point came when I discovered his collection of Bob Dylan records. Suddenly I heard language a different way, a way that really meant something to me. Not long after that we read two poems in class, T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" and Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," and it was as if light bulbs turned on in my head. I began to write poetry, then in college I started writing fiction, and it took over from there.

RJ: You've said, "I'm really interested in ordinary people." What makes the ordinary compelling to you?

SN: We take things for granted when we look at them from far away, but anything you look at closely enough suddenly becomes very, very interesting. And that's what excites me about writing. Ordinary lives are never so ordinary; they're full of conflict and mystery. As a writer, just observing human beings going through daily life is a bottomless well for me. I imagine it's the same reason why the lives of ordinary people interest readers. We don't really think about our lives, but when we sit down and read a story, a wonderful thing happens—it slows life down. And as we examine the lives of characters that have some connection to our own, we get to see our own life differently.

RJ: Most of your characters are not particularly likable. And yet, I found myself caring about them.

SN: The more flawed my characters are, the more they interest me. I want to understand what makes them the multifaceted way they are.

When I do that, they become more human, and more sympathetic. It's a great challenge for me, trying to make myself as well as the reader care about a character despite his difficult personality. A contemporary writer I admire, Edward P. Jones, once said of his choice to follow a villainous character in his novel, *The Known World*: It would be much easier to stick with a good character, but a difficult character brings out the full complexity of being



THESE STORIES LOOK AT HOW WHAT WE FEAR AND WHAT WE WANT GET IN EACH OTHER'S WAY—THE POINT OF INTERSECTION THAT PREVENTS PEOPLE FROM LIVING THE LIVES THEY MIGHT OTHERWISE HAVE LIVED.

human, calling attention to our universal virtues and universal flaws.

RJ: Your characters are also unable to let go of mistakes, resentments, self-blame—all of which get in the way of harmonious relationships, happiness, and self-fulfillment. Do you believe carrying around emotional baggage is inherently human?

SN: I think fear is inherently human and present in all of us. My stories look at the juncture of where what we fear and what we want get in each other's way. This point of intersection seems very real to me—it is what prevents people from living the lives they want to live, the lives they might otherwise have lived.

RJ: In many stories the characters lie a lot. The cantor's daughter, for example, tells everyone at school that her mother was killed in a terrorist attack in Israel, when, in fact, she died in a car crash.

SN: I think people lie as a result of

fear. If you admit who you are, you're making yourself vulnerable. So for the cantor's daughter to admit who she is to herself, to her father, to other people, would mean opening her up to her fear of taking responsibility for her own life. She would have to accept that her own choices aren't dictated by her father's grief and inertia; that her mistakes are all her own.

RJ: You've said, "I tend to write about Jewish characters because that cultural stance is very much a part of who I am." What is that cultural stance and what interests you about Jewish characters?

SN: Growing up in a Jewish household in suburban New Jersey has colored my way of seeing the world. That's my cultural stance. Still, I used to think that making my characters Jewish was accidental, because it

was most familiar. Now I realize that it is more intentional. What makes American Jewish characters interesting to me is the way in which they have one foot inside the dominant culture—assimilated and more accepted than at any other time in history—and at the same time they try to maintain their otherness. The tension that's created in that in-between place really fascinates me.

RJ: Organized religion seems to play only a peripheral role in the book. Even in the title story, the cantor isn't really part of the Reform synagogue community he serves.

SN: I have yet to write about a character who is deeply religious or observant, probably because I don't understand that experience so well. I've had moments of it, but as a secular Jew, I guess I understand more about being in that in-between space, a state of perpetual doubt and wonder.

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Q+A

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RJ: Many of the characters seem obsessed with materialism. Is that true of your life experience as well?

SN: Yes. At the synagogue where I became a bar mitzvah and at the Jewish day school where my mother was principal, people who thought themselves pious or religious would throw around the weight of their money, pushing themselves to the forefront. That always bothered me, so it comes into the stories.

RJ: How do you intend to use the \$5,000 RJ Prize for Jewish Fiction?

SN: It's a wonderful honor. My publisher is a small, independent press, so the book hasn't had the kind of splash you sometimes see from major publishers. The most important thing to me is the possibility that the prize will help get the book into more people's hands. The prize money itself will buy me time, allowing me to take some months off from teaching and spend next summer working on a new collection of stories. □