

The International Writers Festival, Jerusalem

Israeli writers welcome their colleagues from around the world to the festival

By **A.B. Yehoshua**

The title of the first course I gave in 1972, when I started teaching in the comparative and Hebrew department at Haifa University, was "Literature in the Shadow of World War II." In it I tried to examine among other things, the aesthetic obstacles the author must overcome when writing about or refer to the traumatic events of World War II, especially the Holocaust.

The problem engaged me because of the large gap revealed at that time between the profound and suggestive power of documents and documentary books about those traumatic events, and the literary weakness of works of fiction in creating identification with those subjects among readers. In the course which I taught several times, I chose literary works by authors like Aharon Appelfeld, Jorge Semprun, Camus and others who succeeded in intelligently and sensitively circumventing the significant aesthetic obstacles posed by this particular subject and creating for the reader the ability to identify and to achieve catharsis. Nonetheless, a great gap still remained between the special power of documentary literature and various sorts of testimony, on the one hand, and on the other, those books that tried to transmit the Holocaust as a fictional aesthetic experience.

When I read "**The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million**," by Daniel Mendelsohn, a professor of comparative literature from New York, suddenly the two categories that had previously been distinct for me -- writing from a clearly documentary perspective and literary writing, which organizes the reality in accordance with literary principles aiming to produce identification and not only knowledge.

Sometimes you read a novel or a story and feel the character depicted in the work erupting into the life of your personality, seeping in and becoming imprinted inside you. This is what happened on the course journey taken by the Americans Daniel Mendelsohn and his brother, in order both to reconstruct the events and the place of the murders of six members of their family -- his grandfather's brother Shmiel, Shmiel's wife, and the couple's four daughters -- in what is truly a detective's journey that spans several countries and continents, and a kind of obsession intoxicating in its unrelenting power and its emotional practical stratagems.

Through countless meetings and interviews with Jewish and non-Jewish eyewitnesses, Mendelsohn succeeded in arriving physically at the place where each of these six relatives perished in the Holocaust, in reconstructing precisely the terrible and anonymous death of each of them, in order to give it a human and unique face, value and significance, like the deaths of protagonists from the best of the literature. And thus, in this special combination of the documentary and the aesthetic, Mendelsohn's six lost relatives have become members of my own family and the families of millions of readers around the world: in his wake and thanks to him, have wept for them.

A.B. Yehoshua's most recent novels appearing in English include "Friendly Fire: A Duet" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009) and "A Woman in Jerusalem" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006)

2. Michael Rips: 'His father was also my father'

By **Yoel Hoffmann**

I have been asked why I requested that writer Michael Rips be invited to the International Writers

borrowed his book **"The Face of a Naked Lady"** from the public library in Ma'alot. From the opening pages (in which he describes his grandfather Aaron and his grandmother Esther, who ran a brothel in the city of Omaha), I understood that Michael Rips belongs to my people.

When I reached page 37, I began to suspect that his father was also my father: "Father always had a car so it was father who would be driving back and forth to the dunes. If he had been drinking and was worried about falling asleep, he would pull into a diner and order a cup of coffee. Norman Lincoln, a classmate and early friend of Father's, recounted that while others would drink from a mug, Father would dip his tie into the coffee, wait until it was saturated and then hang it above his head, drain it into his mouth. On the road his coffee dangled beneath his chin. If he needed a sip he could suck on his tie, his eyes never leaving the road."

By page 101, when Rips writes about a counselor with a reddish beard who spent most of the day at a summer camp sleeping on an easy chair in the dirt outside and agreed to answer questions only if they could convince him the summer camp actually existed, I was already certain that he (that is, Michael Rips) is me.

Therefore I asked that he be invited to the International Writers Festival.

Yoel Hoffmann is author of 10 books of fiction, and professor emeritus of Far Eastern philosophy at the University of Haifa. His works translated into English include "Curriculum Vitae" (New Directions, 2009) and "The Shunra and the Schmetterling" (New Directions, 2006).

3. Sofi Oksanen: Thin ice threatening to crack

By Judith Katzir

Sofi Oksanen was born in Finland in 1977 to a Finnish father, an electrician by trade, and an engineer mother who was born and grew up in Estonia during the Soviet period and immigrated to Finland in the 1970s. Oksanen studied literature at the University of Helsinki and dramaturgy at that city's Theater Academy. To date, she has published three novels -- "Stalin's Cows" (2003), about a young girl's eating disorder and the image of Estonian women who immigrated to Finland; "Baby Jane" (2005), about anxiety disorder as well as violence among lesbian couples; and "Purge," a 2008 novel based on her play of the same title, which was performed with great success at the National Theater of Finland.

The latter novel also won that country's two most important literary awards -- the Finlandia Prize and the Runeberg Prize -- and translation rights for it were acquired in some 25 languages, including English and Hebrew. The novel tells the story of three generations of women in an Estonian family. It begins before World War II and continues through the period of the Soviet occupation and then in free Estonia after the liberation, a poor country whose inhabitants try to gather and put back together the remnants of their national identity.

Two sisters, Aliide and Ingel, grow up in a small remote village. Both of them fall in love with Hans Pekk, a farmer who resisted the Communists and is persecuted by them. The pretty and talented Ingel marries him, while the disappointed Aliide, consumed by jealousy, enters a marriage of convenience with Martin, a high official in the Communist party. After Ingel and her daughter are deported to Siberia, Aliide hides Hans in the loft above the cow barn, hoping to win his love. Pages of the diary Hans writes while in hiding frame the novel and afford it an additional, "masculine" perspective.

The novel begins, in fact, at the end: One morning an elderly Aliide, who is trying to preserve what remains of the family farm, discovers a young, battered woman in her yard, Zara, who is freezing in the cold. She takes her into her home and in her tough and sour way gives the young woman shelter, heals her wounds and at the end of the novel saves her from her pursuers. The 20-year-old Zara had grown up in the Soviet Union and was lured into moving to Germany by an offer of work as a chambermaid. Instead she finds herself working as a prostitute, subjected to the cruel whims of her two employers, who humiliate and abuse her. Her escape to the Estonian village can be seen as a paraphrase of the literary archetype of "the return of the prodigal son."

Here it is the return of the daughter -- or granddaughter.

History, which has always been written from the male perspective, is recounted here from a double, in fact triple, female perspective. In addition to the perspectives of Aliide and Zara, whose thoughts are presented to the reader, there are also the silent perspectives of Ingel and of her daughter Linda, and it is left to the reader to construct both what happened to them and what they were thinking.

Oksanen skips back and forth in time: the present -- in the relationship that develops between the elderly Aliide and her protegee, who knows about the family relationship between them, something that is kept from Aliide; the recent past -- Zara's life in Germany and her escape from her captors; and the distant past -- the early years of Aliide and Ingel, their love for Hans, and Aliide's terrible act of betrayal of her sister, the motivating factor propelling the plot.

Despite her young age, Oksanen is a skilled writer. The fascinated reader follows behind her as though on thin ice that threatens to crack. By means of almost laconic description of everyday actions, like canning, and of objects and tools laden with meaning, she creates the present and makes the past come alive. She describes the petty and sometimes dark thoughts of her characters without judging them and leaves the reader to draw lines between past and present and between captives and their captors, and to ponder the various ideologies as camouflage and justification for controlling and enslaving the other.

The women in a society -- be it totalitarian or one pretending to be open and free -- are inferior economically and at the mercy of bullying men. "Purge" in its ideological sense is ironical -- referring to the purge of opponents to the regime; in its emotional-spiritual sense, it refers to the cleansing of the soul of guilt for its sins.

I am looking forward to meeting Oksanen in Jerusalem and talking to her about the issues the novel raises and of course to reading her other books, in the hope they will soon be translated into Hebrew.

Judith Katzir is a writer, and also an editor at Hasifriya Hahadasha Books. She has published novels, short-story collections, children's books and a play. Her books have been translated into 12 languages, including, in English "Closing the Sea" (Toby Press, 2006), and "Dearest Anne" (Feminist Press, 2008).

4. Judith Hermann: Moving in someone else's dream

By Shimon Adaf

The first image that comes to mind to describe Judith Hermann's writing appears in the short story "Red Corals," from her first collection, "**Summerhouse, Later.**" A woman sinks into the depths and the world comes to her through the water, masks of water. Her story -- a drama of love, death and betrayal -- is perceived vaguely in the deep where she lies. And her granddaughter, who narrates the story and inherits her coral bracelet, experiences her own life in images borrowed from the drowned existence, from the bottom of the sea.

The same is true for the other characters in the story. They leave, return, fall in love, separate, and a barrier of water is drawn between them and the reality of their actions. Hermann dramatizes this mode of conduct in shockingly precise prose, but her degree of precision isn't aimed at submerging the characters' situation in the reader's consciousness but rather at dragging him down to the depths where they lie, into a constant duality -- moments which no one, even in retrospect, can identify as trivial or substantial, whether they will slide by and slip away or culminate into something huge. Why were these slices of life selected, is it the magnifying glass of the story that affords them their power? Are they there because someone has paused over them? Are they worth capturing?

The second image I associate with Judith Hermann's writing appears in the story "Pimp," from her

second collection, "Nothing but Ghosts." The narrator feels as though she has closed a box containing valuable and wonderful treasures, and now she is recalling some object, without remembering exactly what it is, lying at the bottom of the box. She is, however, unable to locate it, and is left only with the feeling of the object.

This doubleness of writing and depicting inner and outer experience appears even more powerfully in this collection, the more mature and sophisticated of the two. This time, the vagueness of being underwater has been replaced by the confusion of the language of dream scenes and what that language transmits so well -- an unclear sense of loss, hints, signals that cannot be translated into actions.

At first glance, the logic of the change in the central images in Hermann's writing would seem to derive from the change in the lives of her characters. From young people living in the bursting present, they have become adults for whom the implications of their choices and of what they have refrained from are evident. For them, the loss of the palpable is not just a metaphysical principle but rather the face of everyday experience. However, this logic is just the very tip of a deeper process.

Since she began writing, Hermann has been conducting a dialogue with American literature and culture and turning her back on European traditions. The major American storytellers of the previous generation, of the 1970s and the 1980s, from Hunter Thompson to Bret Easton Ellis and Dennis Cooper, who mapped out the crumbling of the self and the structures of consciousness entailed in it -- the blunting of Eros, the alienation from the symbolic levels of society, with the swell of capitalism and its becoming a sole framework of meaning -- can be seen in the background and contents of Hermann's first collection as interlocutors, spokesmen of an alternative, sub-mythological culture.

In her second collection, the results of an entire generation's devotion to this worldview are felt as a mythic possibility, the outcome of the inability to understand it is a sketch of emptying, of a barren space, of absent passion, which is a warning sign and not a new outcry for real existence.

Thus the wanderings among relationships in the first collection are replaced in the second by movement in an imagined space, getting lost in it -- a journey in a world populated by people who try to see it as a frontier, a land waiting to be discovered. The only discovery possible, however, is that it does not exist, it is someone else's dream, from which only a vague sense is passed on as an inheritance.

Shimon Adaf is a writer and poet. His most recent books are "Aviva -- No" (poetry, Dvir, 2009) and the novel "Nuntia" (Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, 2010), both in Hebrew.

5. Liliana Heker: We're from the same city

By Gabriela Avigur-Rotem

When I heard I was to be paired with Liliana Heker at the International Writers Festival, I was happy but not surprised: We both, after all, were born in the same city, Buenos Aires, to Jewish families, in the 1940s -- the years of Juan and Evita Peron. But when little Liliana was sent to first grade in the big city, my parents took me for a three-week voyage to Haifa on a ship called Conte Grande, and from there on a bumpy ride to the border with the Gaza Strip, to a cluster of tents called Nekuda Yeshana, which after relocating a bit became Kibbutz Mefalsim. And thus, I grew up here into Hebrew with a heavy Argentinean accent, and Liliana grew up in Buenos Aires into an Argentinean Spanish heavily influenced by Italian.

I went back to visit the city of my birth only 50 years later for the international book fair there. My hosts presented me as "an Argentinean writer who lives in Israel." I giggled and protested, but they kept explaining to me that having been born in Argentina I would remain an Argentinean until my dying day. They also suggested I renew my passport. There was something

heartwarming yet irritating in this both embracing and patronizing attitude. This seeped into my visit to a city that was both foreign and familiar, expressing itself in a swift, melodious and strange language from which now and then some comprehensible words leapt out.

I asked Liliana how she felt about her double identity but she, who still lives in the city where she was born -- for better or for worse, she says -- does not feel any duality. She is of course Jewish -- but not in the religious sense (she is devoutly secular), not in her nationality (because she is Argentinean) and not in her race. For her, anything involving race is racism, which she strenuously opposes, as she does any manifestation of discrimination and intolerance.

Argentina itself is a country of immigration -- "Argentineans are born on ships," she says, quoting a popular saying in her country -- and her grandfathers (like my own) immigrated there. For her, Judaism is the world of her grandparents, which is dear to her heart; her mother's temperament and way of life; and a few holidays on the calendar. This is the essence that seeps into her life, her language, her writing and her personal caprices.

A selection of Liliana's stories called "**The Stolen Party**" has been published as "Mesiba shel Aherim" by Hasifria Hahadasha, in a fluent translation by Tal Nitzan. The stories bear the imprint of the culture I am familiar with, in which we don't talk about the unpleasant, we always maintain a smiling appearance, we hide and deny and walk tall so as not to give anyone reason to feel sorry for us. Heker, however, who says of herself that she is imbued with controversial fervor, plants in each of the stories materials that will make the characters and the readers confront what has so charmingly been swept under the carpet.

She has always been a leftist in her worldview, though she has never been an activist in any political party or a member of any organization. She says her views, combined with the contents of her writing -- as amply demonstrated by "The Stolen Party," which has been adapted into a play that will be performed as part of the festival -- can be summed up as "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

During the period of the military dictatorship, Heker clashed with the writer in exile Julio Cortazar about the role incumbent on a writer living under an oppressive dictatorship, whether within his country or in exile. The advantage of debate -- however vivid it may be, she told Cortazar -- is that no one kills and no one gets killed and the listeners and readers decide what to adopt and what to transform from an idea into action.

Heker has written a long essay entitled "Shakespeare's Sisters," in which she says she sees no reason to compartmentalize women's literature, or to relate to it as such. In her opinion, every book of value will find its place in the literary pantheon, be the writer a woman or a man. As a writer, she does not aspire to produce bestsellers but rather she works hard on every story and novel, correcting and polishing them, and hopes the high quality will preserve her books for many years to come.

And I, who welcome her here, am certain this will happen.

Gabriela Avigur-Rotem is the author of three novels and two books of poetry. Her most recent novel "Adom Atik" ("Ancient Red," Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan) was included in a list compiled by New York Magazine of the best fiction of 2007 not yet translated into English.