

MaKenna Beck is an undergraduate sophomore at the University of Memphis from a rural town in Tennessee that most people have never heard of. She is pursuing a degree in both English and Psychology with a concentration in Creative Writing and takes great pride in being a part of the Helen Hardin Honors College and the English Honors Program. Her hobbies include writing creative fiction, rigorously studying to maintain her academics, and lovingly annoying her family day after day with new bits of acquired knowledge. Everything she has accomplished has been the result of the grace of God and the support of her amazing family.

MaKenna Beck

Judaism forgotten: Steve Stern and the importance of the
Jewish to the idea of Memphis

Faculty Sponsor

Dr. Courtney Santo

Abstract

Memphis is known for its foundations in blues and rock music, Ida B. Wells' efforts against racism and in creating the NAACP, and for being the city where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. It has been predominantly characterized by its African American influences on its culture and history. Many, however, are unaware of the rich history of Jewish communities in Memphis. Steve Stern brings this hidden influence into the light. An author who combines details of Jewish and southern culture and identity in stories such as *Isaac and the Undertaker's Daughter*, Stern draws his influences from the Pinch, a forgotten neighborhood that served as Memphis' first business district and the center of a bustling Jewish community. Through his prose, Stern brings the overlooked community into the spotlight, expanding upon the idea of Memphis as he revels in the city's uncelebrated cultural influences. Thus, he should be added to the Memphis canon for works such as *The Pinch* and *The Frozen Rabbi* to create an inclusive list that considers the whole of Memphis' history, not just its prevailing themes.

Introduction

Resting on the edge of the southwest portion of Tennessee and situated along the Mississippi River lies the famous city of Memphis, known for being the home of the blues and the birthplace of rock 'n' roll, creating delicious barbecue, and containing a bustling shipping industry. The city is also known for being "one of the poorest" and most dangerous cities in the United States, an area entrenched in a bloody history of injustice and inequality when it comes to race and class. Noteworthy examples include the Memphis Race Riot of 1866 (in which the white majority attacked the newly freed Black residents), the National Housing Act of 1934 (where Black and low-income neighborhoods were refused mortgages based on racial and ethnic composition), and the brutal deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker that sparked the 1968 Sanitation Workers' Strike (World Population Review).

When one thinks of Memphis, one may think of a culturally rich city largely imbued with heavy African American influences. These reflect a war between celebrating Memphis' history of being a birthplace for music and social change and destroying its colorful heritage through ignoring its most blatant issues. However, there is also a Jewish element in Memphis' lively culture. While influences of the religion of Christianity are more prevalent with southern culture and the idea of Memphis, there are neighborhoods, schools, businesses, and places of worship that reflect the presence and history of Jewish communities. Steve Stern and his works provide just one example of how the Jewish southern community has contributed to Memphis culture, art, and literature.

To explain the importance of Steve Stern to the idea of "Memphis as a text", I will delve into the important aspects of Stern's writing that make him stand out from the crowd of typical Memphis authors, as well as his connections to Memphis that ground him in the narrative of the city. One such aspect is his usage of Yiddish folklore (also known as the mythos), which strays from the more dominating narrative of Christian doctrine in southern writing. Other defining aspects are his inspirations gathered from the Pinch neighborhood of Memphis, a once thriving Jewish community centered in the history of the city itself. These two forces combined with Stern's writing prowess, subject matter, and themes will be explored in more detail throughout this paper.

BIOGRAPHY

Steve Stern was born December 21st, 1947, in Memphis Tennessee. Encyclopedia.com states that Stern was born into "an assimilated household as the son of a grocer and a homemaker, where Stern had "little exposure to any aspects of Jewish culture" during his youth ("Stern, Steve 1947-"; Royal, 139). In the 1960s, he pursued education from multiple institutions, receiving his bachelor's degree from Rhodes College in 1970 and his Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing program from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville in 1977 (Royal, 139). Between the years of 1979 and 1986 within Memphis, Stern worked in almost every institution of higher learning as an adjunct instructor until the mid-1980s where he struggled to find steady work and took a job at the Center for Southern Folklore as a transcriber of oral histories (Royal, 139). It was at this job that Stern discovered a location within Memphis known as the Pinch.

The Pinch was an old neighborhood that consisted of "all Memphis land north of Adams Street, playing the role of "Memphis' first business district" (Nickas, "Pinch District"). Nickas states that the Pinch was an area that consisted of numerous immigrants such as the Irish, Italians, Russians, Greeks, and Jewish whose emaciated appearances gave the area a derisive term: Pinch-Gut. Furthermore, Nickas notes that from the 1890s to the 1930s the Pinch was a flourishing and bustling center of activity for Memphis' Jewish community. This changed after World War II when many young families relocated to the eastern parts of the city and their business and commerce followed after them, leaving the Pinch in a deteriorated state until the late 1980s when urban renewal projects set to work in revitalizing the area.

When explaining his muse for his stories, Stern describes his discovery of the Pinch "as strange as discovering the lost city of Atlantis" (Royal, 139). He also states that "much of the Pinch originates in my imagination", a fact that is morphed by historical and cultural significance. He also says that he has "been mining the old North Memphis neighborhood of the Pinch for about three decades now" (Royal 141; Kissileff, "Interview: Steve Stern"). Stern also comments on the connection between the Jewish presence within Memphis and the city's overarching African American cultural background, stating that "there was an interesting symbiosis between African Americans and Jews... where Blacks were barred from shopping at white-owned businesses, they were welcomed by the Jews" (Kissileff). Stern adds that "the Black heritage of Memphis, the city's richest cultural heritage, had from its early inception a lively Jewish element; further accentuating the unknown and

largely unspoken of elements of Memphis' history and culture" (Kissileff).

Overview

Stern is an author of speculative fiction. His works are set in a world that is different from our own in which imagined elements of grand proportions exist and occur. Stern combines supernatural aspects that stem from Judaism and the worldly basis of the south as the setting for most of his stories. Regarding the influences of his writings, Stern states that

there was very little Jewish content in my growing up. I'm just drawn to Jewish sources and Jewish folklore the same way I seem to be drawn to the damn South. If there's anything that made my being Southern and Jewish necessary and important to my fiction, it's that the combination of the two serves to provide a sense of community" (Dickstein, "Dybbuks in Dixie").

One such story that encompasses these aspects is *The Pinch*, which is set within the very Pinch community that inspires Stern's stories. Its main character, Lenny Sklarew, discovers he is a character in a book titled "*The Pinch*" that tells the history of the area in a work of metafiction.

Stern has won numerous awards over the years. He has won five Pushcart Prizes, an O'Henry Prize and a Pushcart Writers' Choice Award for *Isaac and the Undertaker's Daughter*, a National Jewish Book Award for *The Wedding Jester*, and an Edward Lewis Wallant Award for *Lazar Malkin Enters Heaven* (PenguinRandomHouse, "Steve Stern"). As such, I have chosen three of his works that I believe best demonstrate the influence of Memphis, the Pinch, and Stern's own prowess as a talented writer with a mix of texts that have received awards and recognitions alongside those that have not been celebrated or acknowledged as significant literary explorations of Memphis. These three works are: *Isaac and the Undertaker's Daughter*, *The Frozen Rabbi*, and *The Pinch*.

Isaac and the Undertaker's Daughter is Stern's first well known book, a collection of short stories published in 1983. The book consists of seven short stories that follow differing eccentric and eclectic Jewish characters as they live out their lives while dealing with happenings stemming from the mythos of Judaism and strange occurrences. In the book's first story, "Aaron Makes A Match," the main character, Aaron, chooses to use mystical means to summon a husband for his beloved Aunt Esther so that she does not die, but ends up summoning the angel of death, Azrael, to wed her. The belief that she will die comes from the harrowing warnings of the neighborhood's evil genius, W. Cecil Blankenship who states that "unless your Aunt Esther gets penetrated by a male of the species, she will dry up inside and out" (Stern, 8). Another story, "Bruno's Metamorphosis", follows the life of Bruno Katz after his girlfriend dumps him and he finds that his stalled writings upon his typewriter are

being typed for him by a mysterious force in the night. It turns out that his mysterious writer is a little rabbi man who, in another plot twist, turns out to be his future self who breaks into his past self's apartment to write said stories. All the stories approach these bizarre happenings as if they are completely normal, adding to the charm of Stern's stories.

The Frozen Rabbi is one of Stern's more recent works, published in 2010. It is a story that follows Bernie Karp, a lazy teenager from an assimilated Jewish family living in Memphis, Tennessee with no discernable motives in life. However, when in search of a slab of meat to recreate a sexual act portrayed in a scandalous novel from the sixties, he discovers a frozen rabbi tucked away within the freezer. When prompting his family about the discovery, his father says that the rabbi is a lucky keepsake, handed down from generation to generation in the family. Life remains relatively normal with the revelation, but all changes when Memphis is hit with a power outage that allows the rabbi to thaw back to life.

Now alive and amazed by the modern world around him with its culture of shame and sexuality, Karp is thrust into the role of caretaker as the rabbi begins his descent into corruption. This descent is juxtaposed by Karp's ascension into piety and becoming a noble man rather than an uninspired nobody. The story states that

...finding an old Jew in the deep freeze did not at first alter Bernie Karp's routine in any measurable way. Overweight and unadventurous, he had no special friends to tell the story to even if he'd wanted, which he didn't... (The Frozen Rabbi).

As stated by Ben Marcus in his article "The Rebbe of Graceland,"

The Frozen Rabbi is a story that follows the Karp family across generations as they seek safety in assimilation, portraying what is sacrificed for safety while promising that the passions of our ancestors are not fully lost, only just needing to be rediscovered.

The Pinch is a much more recent work by Stern, published in 2015. It is a story that contains a mythologized Memphis in which the once thriving community of the Pinch has been reduced to one tenant: Lenny Sklarew. Lenny works in a bookstore and peddles drugs on the side, living a wholly uninteresting life until he finds a book called "The Pinch: A History" and finds himself a character in the book.

The book then bounces back and forth between the life of Lenny and the life of the book's author, Muni Pinsker, as he writes the book within an

enchanted day that lasts years. The book also coincides with harrowing events true to real life at the time as Stern delves into the real occurrences of Memphis history like visits from the Ku Klux Klan and the assassination in Martin Luther King, Jr. In his interview with Kissileff, Stern states:

I wanted to address the city's pivotal (even terminal?) historic moment, the garbage strike that preceded the assassination of Martin Luther King. There seemed to me a kind of inevitability in the fact that the so-called urban renewal that destroyed North Main Street coincided with the murder of Dr. King. My dream district evaporated forever with the death of the century's greatest dreamer. (Kissileff)

While Stern bases his stories in a realm of fantastical elements, his works also focus on the real effects of events and people. Drawing on the history of Memphis, Stern employs mystical tools to explore the Pinch and its tangible origins in the same way a ghost story describes a bustling town before a great terror arrives to destroy it. As mythical as Stern may be, inspiration is drawn from real life sources from Memphis, based in the undeniable truth of a bloody history. To tell a story about the Pinch is to tell a story about Memphis itself, and hardly any story about Memphis can ignore the ramifications of the garbage strike and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on the city's history and development.

CONTEXT

These reviews of Stern's works highlight many of the strengths of his prose and his capabilities in delving into the more universal themes of literature. Much like Memphis' exuberant culture, Stern possesses a similar flavor as stated in one review that uses the phrase "dynamic inventiveness" to describe Stern's work (Forbes "Review: '*The Pinch*'"). However, these reviews also suggest reasons for Stern's lack of renown within Memphis itself, as when another review states that Stern "doesn't know when to stop" (Fishman, "*The Pinch*"; by Steve Stern"). The excessiveness that Fishman notes can be similarly found from critics of other great Memphis creators, such as Elvis Presley. With such differing commentary on Stern, there is plenty to be said about his works and what they contribute to both literature and the world.

With regard to professional reviews of *The Pinch*, one reviewer calls it "weird and wonderful. [*The Pinch* is] a backdrop to Stern's poignant and antic drama, a playground on which his exuberant, larger-than-life characters can run wild... *The Pinch* is composed of... perfectly calibrated moments, all of which pulse with a dynamic inventiveness" (Forbes). Opposite this praise sits

a review from the *New York Times* that states that "... unfortunately, Stern doesn't know when to stop. There is no era he can't over-research, no scene he can't overimagine, no digression he can resist and no sentence he can't sag with too many words "(Fishman). Kirkus' reviews calls *The Pinch* an "audacious, hilarious, unabashed fiction" and *The Frozen Rabbi* "an ethnic novel with universal implications" ("The Pinch"; "The Frozen Rabbi"). For *Isaac and the Undertaker's Daughter*, Gordish Lish portrays the infatuation felt by many from reading Stern's prose.

Can't recall where it was I first came across "Isaac and the Undertaker's Daughter" and the alliterative no-nonsense monosyllables that gave me the name of its author. Recall only that I straightway made for a typewriter to whip off a love letter. Steve Stern is smart. Steve Stern is eloquent. Steve Stern is knowing. But the best of Steve Stern is the goodly heart whose imprint he impresses onto the page. Here is a mensch-and an artist. (Qtd. in *Isaac and the Undertaker's Daughter* 114)

Similarly, Shoshanna Olidort sings praises for Stern's portrayal of Jewish people in a more contemporary light.

Steve Stern's fiction draws on Jewish folklore in the tradition of great Yiddish writers such as Isaac Bashevis Singer to evoke a magical world populated by flying rabbis and disembodied souls, voyeuristic prophets, and lascivious angels... he presents a closely studied portrait of his subject-the immigrant Jew and his East European predecessor. .. This is what sets Stern's work apart from-and, I would argue, a notch above-much of the literature being churned out by contemporary Jewish writers, many of whom wallow in what Stern has called a "sepia sentimentality" about their ancestral background. ("Steve Stern: Memory Man of the American Jewish South")

In Academic Scholarly Reviews, Derek Parker Royal of Texas A&M University reported that Stern is of a "reserved manner" and that he "is often uncomfortable about discussing his own work, but when he does he brings a healthy dose of self-deprecating-and highly insightful-wit" (140). Derek Parker Royal also conveys the opinion that the "subversion of the possible" is a defining characteristic of Stern's works, an aspect that is similarly found within the works of Hawthorne and Melville (148-149). Michael Shapiro of the University of Illinois at Urbana states that Stern is "less concerned with documenting the immigrant experience and its aftermath than he is with the interplay of the Jewish imagination with Jewish history and Jewish texts"

(131). In relation to the thoughts of Jewish survival, Shapiro muses that, for Stern, "Jewish survival involves remembering and recreating ancient texts, and drawing upon them in the creation of new texts" (133). In another layer of praise, Jay Rogoff proclaims that "Steve Stern has done as much as anyone to further the art of Jewish southern writing" and that his characters "often confront, by choice or chance, their obsession with the forbidden" (xxx-xxxi).

With regard to authors that Stern is in conversation with, while Stern is seemingly focused upon exploring the human condition through works influenced by Judaism and the Southern lifestyle, he is also in conversation with the history of Memphis itself, the way that Judaism is portrayed in literature, and that of the Southern culture. These conversations also turn into conversations with authors such as William Faulkner, Mark Twain, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Franz Kafka.

Stern draws upon inspiration from the Pinch within Memphis for his works. By using this inspiration and reanimating the otherwise overlooked ghostly memories of the Pinch, Stern takes a bold step out of the dominant caricature of Memphis' history to shine a light on the forgotten yet important aspects that helped to shape the city, insisting that Jewish people have added to the signature flavor of Memphis' culture.

When speaking upon works involving the Jewish culture, Stern has always noted himself to be bothered by authors (such as Nicole Krauss and Michael Chabon) who use their knowledge of Judaism to "defang a ferocious experience until it's safe for nostalgia," referring to the fact that these authors only use the Jewish culture to infuse their works with an unconventional perspective that serves to further enhance the flavor of their stories than to fully delve into the mysticism of Judaism and its effects on the Jewish person (Royal, 158). He is an author who values honoring the traditions from the past, stating that "if you tug at a Jewish weed in a Jewish story, it shouldn't come out of the ground like an artificial plant... instead, you pull the weed... and up comes an immensely elaborate root system with the culture, history, and myths of the Jews attached" (159).

Such examples can be seen on page five of *The Frozen Rabbi*, in which the Rabbi Elizer's meditations are described with conventional Jewish terms in great detail. Through pages nine and ten, the mentions of giants and fallen angels of Yiddish folklore mingle with reference to the "Babylonian Exile" (referring to when the Israelites were captives in Babylon as punishment for disobedience to Yahweh). Then there are the following vivid descriptions of Jewish oppression in which the inhabitants of Boibicz (the town where Rabbi Elizer resides) suffer the brutal destruction of its buildings and the murder of its citizens by its government: a prevalent theme to the history of the

Jewish. He is of the opinion that, in references to the categories in Kabbalah and Criticism by Harold Bloom regarding Jewish literature, "there's more to a story than meets the eye, or the ear, or the brain, heart... and if the story fails to evoke a felt response in each of these categories, then.. it just doesn't matter enough" (Royal, 159-160).

Stern's representations of southern culture and specifically Memphis Mid South culture resist stereotypes and insist on presenting the "South" as complex and full of possibilities for fantasy, as can be seen in *The Pinch* with its descriptions of its "simple" characters (Lenny, a drug peddler trying to win a girl's affections, joins the march for civil rights and focuses on something greater than himself) and its fantastical plot point in which an earthquake creates a flood in the Pinch and strands its denizens in a supernatural time freeze. However, the South is steeped in a folklore of its own that can be expanded upon much in the same way as, according to Millgate, William Faulkner did with his creation of Yoknapatawpha County and its inhabitants (based upon Lafayette and Oxford County, Mississippi, where Faulkner spent a great portion of his life ("William Faulkner"). Much like Faulkner, Stern sees the South as a rich source for storytelling and uses his upbringing to influence his works from character portrayals to settings of prominent themes. As *I Lay Dying*, by William Faulkner, for example, takes place within the fictional Yoknapatawpha County and focuses on the Bundren family undertaking a journey to bury Addie Bundren in Jefferson, Mississippi. In the story, each family member's thoughts and motives (including the dead Addie) are explored in a thrilling psychological narrative of a poor and destitute southern family.

In a similar fashion, in *The Frozen Rabbi*, Stern uses the setting of Memphis as a means of exploring the present-day city and its vices, and its colorful past and population in the Pinch. However, unlike Faulkner, who created a fictional county based on a real place, Stern does not employ fictional placeholders in his works. Instead, he uses the stories he gained from Pinch residents, so much so that Royal reports from his interview with Stern that the surviving tenants of the Pinch sued Stern for a quarter of a million dollars for slander (Royal, 142).

Mark Twain is another southern author similar to Stern. Both authors live in the South, both are talented in their prose, and both heavily deal with creations of a bildungsroman. Stern and Twain often focus heavily upon the seemingly mythical issues the southern adolescent must face in order to grow as people. Both Bernie Karp in *The Frozen Rabbi* and Huckleberry Finn in

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn are presented with herculean challenges that force them to reconsider their current lives and make decisions that fundamentally change them for the better. For Bernie, he must shed his adolescent youth and turn toward his history and faith to grow as a person in order to care for the newly unfrozen rabbi in his care. Huckleberry Finn must escape from his abusive and drunken father and wrestle with the conventions of what is "legally" right and "morally" right as he travels with Jim, an escaped slave.

While not Southern, Isaac Bashevis Singer depicts his own Jewish stories with the same intensity and zest that can be seen in Stern's works. Singer was no stranger to immigration and its effects on the family, which can be seen in his work "Enemies, A Love Story". This work follows Herman Broder, an immigrant from Poland who survived the Holocaust, as he struggles to survive the effects of the traumatic experience and his new life in New York City as he tries to keep his three wives from knowing about each other ("Isaac Bashevis Singer - Facts"). The story reflects human feelings of survival while connecting the Jewish lifestyle with the concerns of mankind. Together, they provide a fascinating narrative of Judaism and its culture. However, Stern is a foreigner to the immigrant experience and writes only from researched accounts and imagination (such as the story of Muni Pinsker in *The Pinch*).

Stern also states he "was weaned on Kafka and Beckett, crown princes of hopelessness", and he is in conversation with them regarding their similar story telling methods (Royal, 150). Both Kafka and Stern are well known for their blending of realism and the fantastical. Kafka is more focused on portraying the struggle against the seemingly futile workings of a world teetering between the edges of nihilism and existentialism. However, Stern focuses upon a world in which the afterlife is a real place. For example, *The Trial*, written by Kafka, follows a man named Josef who is accused of a crime that is never named or told to Josef as he searches for what he could have done wrong, which ends sadly as he is murdered. It is a tragic and absurdist situation that focuses on the desperate attempts of Josef to do right even in a world that fails to help him and constantly confuses what it means to do "right" causing existential doubt.

Stern follows a similar narrative of questioning what it means to do "right" like Kafka does in *The Trial* in his story "Aaron Makes A Match" but where Josef fails to receive an answer from a higher power, a higher power literally shows up to fulfill Aaron's wishes to wed his beloved aunt. Instead, Aaron is left to question the Angel of Death's appearance and affection for his aunt, who is happy, as she is taken from Earth. Thus, it is not a question of whether or not a higher power is watching, but whether or not the characters

will learn from the mythical encounters they face and do something with their predicaments.

Steve Stern is heavily undervalued in the literary marketplace. While he is praised and compared to great writers, his presence is practically nonexistent. Fishman pronounces Stern as "a fellow chronicler of Jewish experience via deeply schooled stories that can't seem to get reviewed without reference to the author being not 'as well-known as he should be.'" This may come from the inability of Stern's works to find a solid foothold in contemporary society due to the nature of his writings and their grounding in Judaism within the predominantly Christian South. Stern himself states that, after having issues with the libel suit previously mentioned, his career was "consigned thereafter to the outer dark, where it has largely remained ever since" (Royal, 143). In total, Stern is widely overlooked despite the awards he has won and the talent that he possesses- an issue that should be rectified.

MEMPHIS AS A TEXT

Across the world there is a great list of literature deemed vital to being considered "well read". This is known as the literary canon, which serves as the list of essential readings such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Odyssey*, and many more.

There are debates on what literature is considered "essential" on a grand scale, but smaller literary canons can conceptualize the ideas of smaller geographic regions through texts. For the idea of Memphis as a text, this literary canon consists of works by Memphis born authors or texts based in Memphis. With the canon's more prevalent themes of social inequality on the basis of race and class as well as its focus on music, Steve Stern contributes to the idea of Memphis as a text.

Stern has stated that he has drawn his inspiration from the stories he collected as an oral transcriber of history for a "vanished Beale Street". These led him to find the Jewish element of Memphis "history" and thus discover the buried history of the Pinch (141). Stern reported that the Pinch became a place where his stories, "which had been searching for somewhere to belong; could occur (142). Thus, by being inspired by the Pinch and placing so many of his stories in the fantastical realm of history and myth, he lifts the forgotten ghetto into the peripherals of modern society and has shown that there is more to Memphis than was ever represented.

Stern has a novel called *The Pinch*, which is directly related to the Pinch neighborhood in Memphis. It would seem almost impossible to write a story concerning Memphis and not delve into the racial issues that are so

well known in the city's history. Stern makes no exception with this novel. He uses the history of Memphis and the mythological occurrences in the story to explore racial issues from a perspective unheard of when it comes to the color lines of Memphis: the Jewish perspective. Stern notes that he has "always conceived parallels between the black and the Jewish experience", a perspective that he has often revisited in his works (Kissileff).

The Pinch thus serves as a new form of racial narrative for Memphis. It contributes to the racial history of the city and how its most dark days send ripples across all circles of life. This can be seen as Lenny reflects on what he had learned from reading "The Pinch" and his lack of action in the present as he is too preoccupied with the past. He states, "... who cowers in a shop nursing his nebbish ego when history is calling just outside the door? Stop already... and join the struggle for justice and inequality..." (*The Pinch*). Lenny, whose past relates him to the Jewish denizens of the Pinch, co-existed with the African American populace of Memphis. He eventually musters the courage to speak up and defend individuals who look different from him against the same power that aims to eradicate anything that is not white or Christian.

The Frozen Rabbi also takes place in Memphis. Set within the average assimilated Jewish family whose only quirks are those that are used to initiate the plot, the novel brings yet another rare perspective to the idea of Memphis that is not entrenched in race. Rather, Stern focuses on the issues of faith, secularism, and redemption that are universal and that intertwine Memphis issues of faith and becoming something from nothing ("The Frozen Rabbi").

Stern's story *Isaac and the Undertaker's Daughter* was heavily influenced by Stern's research and memories of the area. While the stories are not all set in the Pinch like the stories from his book, *Lazar Malkin Enters Heaven*, this novel is undoubtedly the bizarre culmination of the stories Stern encountered since it was published in 1983 while the latter was published in 1986. Along with this, *Isaac and the Undertaker's Daughter* has such wacky elements that the surrounding mythology of Memphis can be warped into even further grandeur. Memphis is a city with its own mythology, ranging from tales of ghosts inhabiting Overton Park and the Memphis Fairgrounds to beliefs that Elvis is still living in Graceland. There is the almost tangible ghost of Martin Luther King, Jr. still hanging around the city (who may not be an actual ghost but still haunts Memphis, and the country for that matter, with his death). It is no stretch of the imagination that Memphis is a city contrived in a rich history of specters and hoodoo practices ("Urban Legends of Memphis"). With Stern's disregard for the possible in *Isaac and the Undertaker's Daughter*, the book creates a new realm for Memphis mythology to expand and tell new ghostly stories with a unique medium that include the Angel of Death whisking away

eligible bachelorettes in "Aaron Makes A Match", fathers returning from the dead to wrestle with their sons in "Rudolph Finkl's Apprenticeship", and versions of 'self' coming from the future to aid in troubling times in "Bruno's Metamorphosis" to name a few examples.

In a broader sense, Stern's contributions can be simply summarized to that of choosing to write about an undervalued part of Memphis. While writers are often urged to write from what they know, to create something considered original means branching away from what is known into the realm of imagination, and create a work in the real world rather than the fictitious one. Many writers are keener to choose the fictitious so that facts pertaining to a location's history cannot be challenged and the laws of the fictional world are of their own making. Stern had been "writing fiction for nearly a decade" before discovering the Pinch, in which he had all the time in the world to write about the blatant themes of Memphis (Royal, 141). However, Stern finds the Pinch and chooses to write about the stories he finds there. Stern could have focused on creating historical texts that unearthed the forgotten neighborhood, but instead chooses to create a new world for Memphians and outsiders alike, bringing everyone back to the place where the stories all began. As Stern has said "it's only natural that some of the narratives dovetail, causing characters who appear in one story to reappear in another." It is then only natural that outsiders who explore the Pinch eventually begin to explore the entirety of Memphis (Kissileff).

And in perhaps the most perplexing method of all, Stern adds to the idea of Memphis as a text by not focusing on Memphis. As paradoxical as it sounds, one of Stern's greatest contributions to the idea of Memphis (past bringing the Pinch back to life) is not focusing his works upon the expected themes that Memphis provides. His works from the Pinch are a "self-enclosed world that has only the barest contact with any larger town", a new perspective that revitalizes what exactly it means to tell a story within Memphis (Dickstein). His stories are unfamiliar and do not scream Memphis in the slightest, but this is how the works aid to reformat the image of Memphis itself and paint a new backdrop for the city to add to its rolling screen of settings. These can be seen in the lack of depictions of blues music, barbeque, or social struggles of Bernie Karp in *The Frozen Rabbi* as he focuses upon a wholly uninteresting teenager rather than a struggling youth who must fight to survive like many other bildungsroman Memphis narratives. His subjects are of a different variety than that of most texts about Memphis,. Stern does not dive into the tried-and-true issues of Memphis and how the city's culture affects his characters, but rather into fantastical situations that force his characters to act in order to reach universal applications regarding the human condition.

The delineation from fact to fiction allows Memphis to be seen in a new way. It also shows other Memphis writers that stories pertaining to Memphis do not have to follow the standard formula so present in Memphian literature.

PROFESSIONAL REVIEW

Memphis is a city known for its music, its food, and its colorful history. As such, when considering the Memphis canon, it would only be natural to include works that concerned Beale Street, Hurt Village, Elvis, Three 6 Mafia, B.B King, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement. However, the task is to create the whole picture, and while these topics take up a large portion of the canvas that is the Memphis canon, Stern's works colorfully and imaginatively fill in patches to create a fuller picture. Thus, Steve Stern and his works should be included in the Memphis canon due to not only filling in these blank spots, but also for enhancing the Memphis canon with his enamoring writing style.

Stern's writing style is as enthralling as it is humorous, and thus further enhances what can be expected when studying predominant writing styles of Memphis. Verbose and lavish with his descriptions, it is said that "there's nothing Stern can't imagine...the prose can be breathtaking...and above all, Stern is so funny". Stern considers himself "a comic writer" whose intention is to entertain with his stories (Fishman; Kissileff). One such comedic moment can be seen in *The Pinch* when Lenny exclaims that he is a character within a book, to which his boss replies, "this is news?" to antagonize him. Such comedic moments can be found in *The Frozen Rabbi* when Bernie, while searching for a piece of meat to pleasure himself, stumbles upon the frozen rabbi in a bizarrely humorous discovery. This results in a comedic discussion between the family at dinner in which Bernie's father must explain the frozen rabbi as a "keepsake." Stern possesses an "arresting style, which veers between the poetic compression of a Malamud and the vulgar exuberance of a Stanley Elkin," belonging more to the literature of fantasy and horror as he sweeps readers away to his crafted land of fantasy (Dickstein). Adding Stern to the Memphis canon could attest to the influences of Memphis in creating mesmerizing works like *Isaac and the Undertaker's Daughter*, which allow Memphis literature to be known as funny as well as serious.

Secondly, adding Stern's works to the Memphis canon would expand upon the dominating perspectives of Memphis and introduce a new element of fiction while adding new methods in which the human condition can be explored. In the ethical sense, Stern "punishes his characters for their gratuitous cruelty and moral weaknesses," which should satisfy any qualms worrisome readers may have regarding the moral implications of Stern's

work since evil is punished (Dickstein). In *The Frozen Rabbi*, Stern explores “how tragically easy it is, after one generation, to forget the struggles of your forebears, if you ever know about them at all” and the power of faith to transform lowly nobodies into noble somebodies. This is not a new and groundbreaking narrative for literature, but the backdrop where “the Torah trumps the King James Bible” creates a new lens to view the maturation of adolescence through the Jewish lens (Marcus, “The Rebbe of Graceland”; NPR, “A ‘Pinch’ of Magic”).

In the exploration of sociopolitical issues in *The Pinch*, Stern primarily focuses on the (sometimes immigrant) experiences of survival, growth, and the effects of the Jewish culture—things that people do not speak of in the South. Stern does not focus upon the civil war and enslavement but instead focuses upon escapes from Siberian gulags and surviving a supernaturally rendered earthquake and flood that halt the passage of time and death. He focuses on the tangible culture of poverty that surrounds Lenny Sklarew as he lives in Memphis, and how his current reality is shadowed by Muni Pinsker's immigration from Siberia to his accounts of the supernatural events of the Pinch after the neighborhood is stuck in time. But this is a clever method of illusion, tricking readers "into thinking we can relax now and then and leave behind a world of garbage strikes, the Tet Offensive, and the impending assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.," which comes to slap readers back into reality with the undeniable implications that history has on us all and that no amount of whimsy can escape (NPR). Stern's work serves to remind us that, even in the face of impending change, the most important thing we can do is to live our lives as we choose and to not expect our lives to be written out before us. We must write the narrative ourselves; a powerful message for any reader when reading about Memphis.

Finally, Stern's works should be added to the Memphis canon because he is directly influenced by the real location and history of the Pinch and brings that neglected part of Memphis' history to life, thus expanding upon the idea of Memphis. Not every text about Memphis should be added to its canon, but to refute the Pinch's significance to Memphis would be inaccurate and unjust. The Pinch "served as Memphis' first commercial area", a home to Memphis' earliest immigrant communities, and was "the thriving center of Memphis' Jewish community" that contained real people who interacted and helped shape the culture of Memphis (Nickas). To not include this vital part of Memphis' history would be to give in to the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant narratives that limit our society to exposure of any culture they deem beneath them. Memphis, a city bathed in a bloody history of fighting for change and for the right to be heard and respected, should reject the erasure of its Jewish

narratives from the public sphere and work to actively include them in literary histories and anthologies focused on Memphis writers and writing.

CONCLUSION

The Memphis canon is in dire need of reexamining what texts it considers to be important to the idea of Memphis as a text. In total, the canon should include works that tell the full story of Memphis, not just its most well known parts. Steve Stern and his works are perfect for beginning to fill in overlooked aspects of Memphis and should be added to the canon. Stern's writing is just one example of important literature that adds a more complete picture and presents the history of the Jewish contributions to Memphis as significant and ongoing.

Stern combines the mythology of Judaism with the familiar aspects of the Southern culture to create his works, revitalizing the existence of the Pinch and the history of Memphis as he brings attention to its hidden past. With his works, which focus on absurdity, morality, and the human condition rather than the well-known idea of Memphis itself, Stern contributes to the idea of Memphis as a text by bringing the ghost stories of the Pinch back to life, enhancing the mythical nature of the city to include a new perspective of the fantastic, giving the city a more complete picture for its history. In the thousand-piece puzzle that is Memphis' history and culture, Stern's works are one overlooked yet vital piece that helps to tie the puzzle together.

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