

SAMPLE PROPOSAL
FOR CREATIVE WRITING THESIS PROJECTS
(CREATIVE NONFICTION)

Directed Writing Project Proposal: “Reclaiming Jewish Memory”

As a leftist, gay, yet earnestly committed Jew, I am constantly forced to look at the world through vast webs of contradiction. In my forthcoming Directed Writing Project, I intend to prostitute these contradictions in a pair of segmented, personal essays exploring my complicated love-affair with Judaism. “Circumcision and Its Discontents” examines the nature of Jewish identity by tracking moments in my life from a hospital circumcision that could not satisfy Jewish Law, to the “symbolic” circumcision a rabbi demanded before my Bar Mitzvah, to my current partner’s eventual conversion to Judaism. The essay understands Jewish culture as something that is both rewarding and, unfortunately, all too likely to get in its own way. Similarly, “Holocaust Exhibit” examines the complicated and often contradictory ways the legacy of the Holocaust plays on the Jewish imagination. Describing instances in which I confronted the Holocaust and found it resonated with unlikely symbolism, the essay suggests there are many destructive consequences of overplaying tragedy.

For generic purists, these essays are works of Jewish Memoir. This, however, oversimplifies their relationship with a far broader canon of Jewish writing, both fiction and nonfiction. Since the years following the end of World War II, the Jewish memoir par excellence has remained the Holocaust narrative; and while many of these works are of unfathomable value to both the Jewish people and the broader world, they have nonetheless left little room in the category of personal nonfiction for works of lighter tone or varying subject matter. A notable

exception is Alan Kaufman's 2000 memoir, *Jew Boy*, which simultaneously confronts such serious issues as growing up the child of Holocaust survivors and drug addiction—and is very, very funny. *Jew Boy* both pays tribute to the traditional subject matter and suggests a formula for those memoirists wishing to transcend it: the voices of those who have not survived the Holocaust deserve to be heard, provided those voices do not take themselves too seriously. Ironically, this genre which once resisted humor now demands it of Post-Holocaust writers. As a result, contemporary Jewish memoirists have to look largely outside the genre for guidance.

In his essay, "Why Jews Laugh at Themselves," Hillel Halken traces Jewish humor from the dialectical nature of the *Talmud* to medieval imitations of Arabic literary forms, the social structure of the *shtetl*, and its eventual emergence as an important component of status quo American comedy. Emerging Jewish memoirists, finding comedy an integral part of their work, are arguably participating as much in the tradition of writers and performers such as Neil Simon, Woody Allen, Jack Benny, Jerry Seinfeld, and Sid Caesar as writers of their own genre. Though many find "Jewish" and "American" comedy virtually indistinguishable, Halken claims, true Jewish humor acknowledges membership in, and identification with, a broader Jewish community. Similarly, I will argue in my Context Essay, a distinction must be made between Jewish texts and texts written by Jews. A Jewish text, for my purposes, is one that entertains Judaism's quintessential narrative of return. Therefore, a Jewish memoir, distinguished from a memoir written by a Jew, is one in which the author is forced to reconcile the demands of tradition with contemporary reality. The narrative itself, then, stands as an emblem of group solidarity—however tentatively. In Jewish memoir, a return to Jewish tradition may not necessarily occur, but the author nonetheless acknowledges tradition's pull.

“Circumcision and Its Discontents” and “Holocaust Exhibit,” therefore, are far more indebted to the tradition of Jewish fiction, particularly the short story, with its successful marriage of serious subject matter and humor, than that of memoir. Rather than explicitly identifying themselves as characters, many Jewish authors have constructed fictitious alter egos to represent them on the page and transmit their creators’ realities. In the short story collections *The Little Disturbances of Man*, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, and *Later the Same Day*, Grace Paley constructs the semi-autobiographical Faith Darwin to explore the complexities that arise when a Jewish upbringing meets an evolving political consciousness. In *Natasha*, a collection of short stories by David Bezmozgis, the character Mark Berman reenacts many of the author’s experiences as Russian-Jewish immigrant in Toronto, and explores the intricacies of Jewish existence with both true reverence and a keen eye for irony. Works such as these, characterized by a sense of unrepentant individuality and a willingness to diffuse the tension surrounding sometimes sensitive subjects with humor, are arguably greater indicators of the future of Jewish memoir than Jewish memoir itself.

Another reason Jewish writers of memoir have been forced to find inspiration outside of the genre is that it has largely failed to remain at the cutting edge of “secular progress.” An issue such as homosexuality, which plays prominently in “Circumcision and Its Discontents,” has suffered from gay Jews’ insistence on contextualizing their experiences within the stratum of Jewish Law. In *Wrestling with God & Men*, orthodox rabbi Steven Greenberg writes of attempting to navigate the contradictions of being gay and wishing to live observantly, but his experiences emerge as highly qualified; his memoirs are ultimately only permitted resonance because he is able to interpret Jewish Law in a way that condones their telling. Similarly, *Twice Blessed*, an anthology of narratives detailing the experiences of lesbian and gay Jews, repeatedly

mixes memoir with religious conundrums, answering questions such as, “How should a gay Jew feel when confronted with a certain uncomfortable passage from Leviticus?” Neither work, though admirable for its taboo-breaking, understands gay Jews as given; rather, they see gay Jews as people who require explanation. Consequently, much contemporary Jewish writing confronting homosexuality reads more like self-help than literature. This is a trend “Circumcision and Its Discontents” seeks to resist, gesturing instead toward such playwrights as Harvey Fierstein, Tony Kushner, and William Finn, whose characters’ realities are not interrupted by misplaced discussions about their legitimacy.

Aside from having to confront particular problems posed by Judaism, “Circumcision and Its Discontents” and “Holocaust Exhibit” are subject to the same challenges as all memoir. In *Your Life as Story*, Tristine Rainer discusses memoir’s potential as literature and confronts such issues facing writers as the ethics of nonfiction, the relationship between memory and truth, and choice-making when attempting to construct a successful narrative. Vivian Gornick’s *The Situation and the Story* augments discussion of similar issues with many examples from classical essayists and importantly asserts the autobiographical nature of all essay writing, whether consciously constructed as memoir or not. In my Context Essay, I will use both works, as well as essays by Brett Lott, Mimi Schwartz, and Scott Russell Sanders, as theoretical frameworks for analyzing creative choices made in my own writing, particularly regarding voice, choice of scenes, constructing climax, and making ethical decisions when it comes to reconstructing often fuzzy details. The line between fiction and nonfiction is particularly relevant given the fact that many of the prototypes for contemporary Jewish Memoir are, in fact, works of fiction. Because my chosen form is the segmented essay, I am also confronted with an additional set of challenges and opportunities related to the construction of time and the organization of seemingly disparate

narratives. Essays by Robert L. Root, Jr., Mary Elizabeth Pope, and Emily D. Chase further illuminate the peculiarities of the segmented essay and offer insights into its composition which, I will ultimately argue, suggest my essays could not have been structured in other way.

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