

A drive for justice

Gail Hareven discusses her latest novel 'Lies, First Person' and the emotional cost of confronting evil
By David Stromberg

GAIL HAREVEN is one of Israel's leading literary voices and has published 15 works including novels, story collections, plays, and children's books.

Her novel "The Confessions of Noa Weber" won the Sapir Prize for Literature in Israel and the Best Translated Book Award in the United States. She has also received the Prime Minister's Prize for Literature and is a member of the Academy of the Hebrew Language. Her second translated novel, "Lies, First Person," will be published in February 2015.

"Lies, First Person" tells the story of two sisters, Elisheva and Elinor, who grew up in a Jerusalem bed and breakfast run by a pair of flighty parents. The family lives in a moderately dysfunctional manner until the girls' intellectual uncle Aaron Gotthilf comes from Europe to write a book called "Hitler, First Person," telling the Nazi leader's life story from "his own" perspective.

During his stay, Aaron repeatedly rapes Elisheva, but this only comes to light years after he left. The family falls apart – the mother commits suicide and the father moves to Italy. Elisheva is left to the care of her younger sister Elinor. Elisheva is eventually

committed to a psychiatric hospital and only regains a measure of normalcy after converting to Christianity and moving to live in an Evangelical community in America.

Elinor, the book's narrator and more talented of the two sisters meets her dream husband – a young law student named Oded who comes from a solid family and is unfazed by her wildness. Elinor enters the sanctuary he offers and, forgetting her family trauma, builds what she considers her own personal Garden of Eden in Jerusalem taking on a naïve alter ego and writing fluffy newspaper columns titled "Alice in Jerusalem."

The novel begins when Elinor's Eden is reinvented by the presence of Gotthilf – who is coming to Jerusalem to give a lecture in which he plans to apologize for having written "Hitler, First Person." He contacts Elinor and says he wants to meet her. Elinor sets off on a journey into the depths of her self and her family's past, finally deciding that there is only one thing she can do when faced with the existence of evil incarnate: kill Gotthilf.

Hareven's moral vision looks beyond cultural trends, examining social tendencies in Israel, specifically, and in the West, more generally. While a thoroughly Hebrew writ-

er, with equal fluency in the language's ancient and modern registers, her novels and stories often portray how foreign landscapes and cultures influence or rub against Israeli reality and consciousness.

Her latest novel extends this exploration by locating one of its major sections in the US, where the characters interact with a foreign environment while dealing with personal family trauma that spans across Israel, Europe, and America. The novel's geographical scope reflects the breadth of its thematic concerns, which extend beyond a single language, culture, or society.

These broader concerns have to do with the eternal struggle between good and evil





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Gail Hareven at her Jerusalem home: 'Stories allow me a kind of understanding that other kinds of thinking don't allow'

– in this case, the different ways that people understand the meaning of “good” when faced with unquestionable evil. Hareven is less interested in what drives evil than in how the drive for good can be expressed. The questions Hareven’s book explores offer neither simple nor clear-cut answers. The characters respond differently to the presence of evil – and the reactions of some influence the reactions of others. It would be difficult to say that Hareven stands behind the actions of her characters. This would mean over-identifying the narrator’s first-person voice with that of the author – a

problem at the heart of the novel.

I recently had a chance to sit with Hareven and get her viewpoint on this and other issues the book raises.

The Jerusalem Report: *Can you tell me how this book came about?*

Hareven: Sometime in 2006, I chaired a panel with some prominent Israeli writers. We talked about the question of whether there exist stories that one shouldn’t write, and whether there are stories that shouldn’t be written in the first person. Alon Hilu [author of “Death of a Monk” and “The House

of Rajani”] said, “There’s no first person that I wouldn’t write about.” I asked him, “Hitler too?” And he said, “Yes.” Since then, he took back what he said and told me he wouldn’t write anything like this. But back then, in the taxi on the way back to Jerusalem, I started thinking about Hitler in the first person. It was a disgraceful, nonsensical, pornographic idea. But I thought that it was interesting to think about the person who decides to write such a story. What kind of person is he?

You’ve said before that your novels have to do with exploring questions. Is this the main

Books

question that preoccupied you during this writing?

In my opinion, writing is a way of conducting research, an attempt to understand things deeply. Stories allow me a kind of understanding that other kinds of thinking don't allow. I start with a certain type of question, but on the way the questions change, the story overcomes the question and raises different kinds of questions altogether. The first question had to do with the kind of person who would write such a story – with the pretension of understanding evil, of going deeply into it. I'll add a side note and say that, in my opinion, our culture invests too much effort in understanding evil and too little in understanding good.

WE WRITE BOOKS SO THAT THEY TEACH US SOMETHING. WHEN I FINISH WRITING A BOOK, I ASK MYSELF WHAT IT TAUGHT ME

In the book, we have two characters who write in the first person that's not theirs – while Gotthilf chooses Hitler, Elinor chooses Alice. She does this in order to escape the personal tragedy of her life and to escape the tragic conception of life altogether. Alice might be good and joyful, but she's also stupid and shallow. When the story developed – and I wrote in Elinor's first person – the focus moved to the conception of justice. And as Elinor became increasingly obsessive in relation to the fact that Gotthilf walks on this earth and that there's no retribution for evil, this question continued to occupy me.

We write books so that they teach us something. When I finish writing a book, I ask myself what it taught me, whether I learned anything. During the writing, I understood that punishment is important as part of the healing of victims. I understood a little better how insufferable it is to know that someone who committed a crime against you walks around without being punished. That punishment is necessary for one to believe that there is order in the world. From this, I started to look a little differently at prisoner

deals in which terrorists are freed. For the first time, I tried to understand in a serious way what this does to the victims and their families.

Some readers and critics talk about the book as being about evil. Would you agree?

The book deals with taking a position in relation to evil. For Elinor, evil is a tangible being incarnated in the form of Gotthilf and his book. I don't share all of the viewpoints of my characters, but I completely share this feeling of Elinor's. Among American writers, I very much like Flannery O'Connor, and one of the reasons is the very serious way she related to evil. A way of relating that is not very fashionable in our day. Evil is an ancient drive. I don't think that Cain murdered Abel because his mother wasn't loving enough, or because he didn't have a good upbringing, or because he suffered from inequality or poverty. He did it because he was evil.

How does the use of first person narrative play into the complexity of evil?

The use of first person creates identification with the narrator. When we read a book in the first person, the reader becomes this first person "I". But this is only one reason why "Hitler, First Person" is a disgrace. Beyond identification, there's a pretension of being able to understand evil. And not just to understand, but to understand it from inside and give it a voice. Actually, there's no lack of writing by historical figures who wrote about themselves. There are entire archives full of testimony from evildoers. So it's not clear to me why fiction should deal with this. The only sad explanation that I can seem to find is a kind of fetishistic fascination with evil.

A literary work written in the first person also requires a degree of identification on the author's part. When Jonathan Littell's "The Kindly Ones" was released, I was still under the influence of Elinor's obsession and, like her, felt I was going crazy – so much so that when I met acquaintances on the street I felt the compulsive need to tell them why this book was so terrible. One very hot day, on my way from the [Mahane Yehuda] *shuk*, I met a friend, a radio broadcaster, and made him stand for 10 minutes in the blazing sun listening to my furious speech. I later heard that he spoke about this episode on his show, mentioning how nice life in Jerusalem is when on the way from the *shuk* you can meet a writer and hear interesting thoughts from her about "The Kindly Ones."

In "Lies," after the publication of "Hitler, First Person," there are strong reactions and critiques written in Europe and Israel. Gotthilf is an intellectual in the worst sense of the word. He builds the first part of his career by writing the Hitler book and the second part on a dramatic "mea culpa." He profits equally from both. It was interesting that reactions to "The Kindly Ones" were very similar, if not identical, to those dealing with "Hitler, First Person" in the novel. When a book like "The Kindly Ones" comes out, "Hitler, First Person" isn't very far away.

"Lies, First Person" has been previously written about in terms of revenge – what do you make of this?

I don't think it's a book about revenge. The more accurate concept is justice or retribution, the attempt to bring order to the world. It's a sensation that's very primal. An ancient, primitive feeling that perhaps sits in the soul of every person. I don't think, God forbid, that we should arrange our lives according to our primal drives. But I think that very bad things happen to people and to society when they repress the existence of those drives.

Life in a society that follows the rule of law is based on the agreement that we all transfer the right to retribution to the authorities. People don't do justice on their own; they give it over to the authorities when a terrible crime is committed. One of the things I perhaps understood during the writing is that, in a situation where the authorities are incapable or uninterested in making sure that justice is done and supply the need for retribution, you have the appearance of vigilantes. This returns us to the first scene of "The Godfather," one of my favorite movies. In a place where authorities fail in doing justice, fantasies like "The Godfather" are born. It's completely clear to me, by the way, that vigilantes do not generally add justice to the world.

Elinor also preserves a very clear feeling that there are things in the world that are impure. When she holds Gotthilf's book in her hands, she feels that she's touching an impure object. A rational modern person is supposed to look down upon such feelings. Science hasn't discovered any material that's called "impure." And, nevertheless, I think that it's a mistake to deny the existence, the authenticity and the power of feelings and consciousness of impurity. Sometimes, such feelings come to teach us something important and denying them can cause deformations in society.

“The Confessions of Noa Weber,” your first novel translated into English, dealt with Russia and the influence of its culture and literature on Israel. In this book, America plays a central role—how did this come about?

The book incorporates experiences, landscapes and feelings that I had while teaching for a semester at the University of Chicago in Champagne-Urbana. The book started to develop there. I’d decided before leaving Israel not to try and write anything while I was away. Life around me was in English and I felt this wouldn’t allow me to write correctly in Hebrew. What happened is that part of the book was written in my head during my months there. And the first actual pages I allowed myself to write in the days just before I came back to Israel.

ELINOR SETS OFF ON A JOURNEY INTO THE DEPTHS OF HER SELF AND HER FAMILY’S PAST

The geographical environment of Urbana certainly entered the novel. And so did part of the society. During my stay there, I was lucky to get to know some special people from the Evangelical community. I was also lucky to have a few interesting conversations with them on theological questions. And part of all this made it into the book.

In the book, Elisheva converts to Christianity and forgives her uncle for everything he’s done to her. But Elinor doesn’t forgive. What drives her refusal to forgive?

Elinor and Elisheva, who are sisters, are basically two parts of a single emotional system. Elinor obsesses on justice precisely because Elisheva forgives. If it weren’t for Elisheva’s Christian forgiveness, Elinor would not have been pushed to violence.

Elinor lives in Jerusalem. In one of the chapters, her good husband convinces her to go to a psychologist together, but the visit fails. She doesn’t think the problem is psychological, that it’s inside her. She thinks it’s outside and that its name is Gotthilf. When she runs out, she stands in front of a Jerusalem landscape and feels that the city and its history are on her side, that the voices of the prophets and their fury are on her side. Elinor undoubtedly belongs to the world of the Old Testament and not that of the New Testament. Her fury

is no different from the fury of the prophets. It’s obvious that such emotions don’t belong to the flat landscape of Urbana, Illinois.

By the way, there is one landscape element that was transferred directly from the reality of Urbana to the fictional world of the book. One day, as I took a walk, I came across a cemetery that was called Mount Hope. I wondered what kind of frame of mind calls flatlands “Mount” and death “Hope.”

Can you talk about Elinor’s conception of “good”?

Elinor enjoys something that in today’s world is somewhat avant-garde: a happy marriage. She loves her husband, she loves her sons very much, she sees herself as someone who lives in the Garden of Eden. The only problem with her Garden of Eden is that it’s based on denial and forgetting – an attempt to erase from her consciousness the terrible things that were done to her sister.

It’s not accidental that Elinor builds for herself a literary persona using the pseudonym Alice. This literary persona lacks depth and allows her to only write short and upbeat articles for the newspaper. Elinor herself knows that Alice does not make her an author. But Alice is the false self that’s created out of denial of the past, out of the incapacity to deal with the trauma. When the snake, in the shape of Gotthilf, penetrates the Garden of Eden, he finds Elinor especially vulnerable.

Elinor tries for many years to build a Garden of Eden based on avoiding the existence of evil – on the basis of being unable to deal with it. By nature, such an attempt is doomed to fail. But even when Elinor does fail and her drive for justice drives her to madness, she remains a considerate family member. And when it seems to her that her revenge plan might land her in jail, she buys a microwave for her husband so he can warm up his food in her absence.

Elinor’s language increasingly breaks down as the story progresses. What happens to her narrative ability?

As Elinor increasingly

falls into madness, her language changes. She begins using quotes and broken phrases from the Bible. Her reason continues to function, but it guides her to strange conclusions. From a certain point, it looks as if a demon has possessed her. But she accepts this possession. She thinks she’s right.

This madness isn’t limited to her alone – it has an effect on her husband.

A few of my girlfriends said that the character of Oded is the dream husband. As Elinor gets increasingly crazy, he finally joins her, comes over to her view of things. The feeling that evil is a material being that should be fought, the feeling that it’s impossible that the evildoer will continue to celebrate, infects him too.

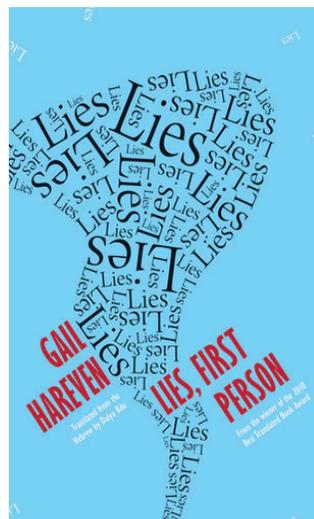
Can you talk about the question of translation as it relates to this book?

The literal translation of the book’s Hebrew title is something like “The Last Lies of the Body” but the title can’t really be translated. The “body” in the title refers both to a physical body and to a “person” in the grammatical sense. This relates both to the lies of the physical body and to the lies of using the first person. And the word for “last” in Hebrew also means “latest.”

The translation by Dalya Bilu is great and she also translated my previous English-language novel. But as the work progressed

there were a few sections in which even a translator of her skill had to give up some things. Elinor’s language is full of allusions, some of them to Hebrew classics, and in at least two instances certain sections had to be left go because it would have been impossible for non-Hebrew readers to understand them.

I never write with the thought of how things will sound in translation or what a person who doesn’t understand Hebrew might understand. I think inside Hebrew all the way to the end. And I’m very happy when I find, each time, that despite everything the stories or books are translatable and can move into other cultures. ■



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