
From the Writer

My decision to write this essay began with a self-exploratory question: what was it about Marcus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, Etgar Keret's "Cocked and Locked," and the film *School Ties* that I found so gripping? The answer, it turns out, came to me only days before my first draft was due; all three narratives deal rather explicitly with Jewish understandings of what constitutes victory and defeat for men. As a Jewish man, these are concepts that affect me deeply, so engaging with them on a more intense intellectual level has been quite enjoyable. Though "Cocked and Locked" didn't make the final cut, it remains one of the most fascinating pieces of literature I've ever read and its influence on my thought in this paper is immeasurable.

— Levi Mastrangelo

OSCILLATING NARRATIVES OF 20TH-CENTURY JEWISH MASCULINITY

The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?¹

—Mark Twain

The answer to Twain's question may lie in an article called "The Stories that Bind Us," recently published in *The New York Times*, in which Bruce Feiler reports on sociological research into the role that family narratives play in child development.² Feiler's article focuses on a study conducted by Dr. Marshall Duke of Emory University that points to strong family narrative as a key factor in a child's ability to confront adversity. According to Feiler, Duke's research shows that children who know more about their family's history are more likely to be emotionally healthy.³ Moreover, Feiler reported that, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks—a trauma common to all of the research subjects—children in Duke's study

“who knew more about their families proved to be more resilient, meaning they could moderate the effects of stress.”⁴ The most durable narratives, according to Duke, are what he calls “oscillating narratives,” which feature both ascending and descending themes, vignettes about both acquisition of accolades and endurance of hardship. According to Rabbi Ben Greenberg, this article made its way around the rabbi-listserves in the weeks following its publication because it confirms through sociology something that Jews have understood for a long time: that oscillating narratives preserve the core of identity while stimulating its development.⁵

The oscillating narrative, it seems, is the answer to Twain’s question. The Jew appears perdurable because Jewish identity stems from just such an oscillating narrative, one that is concretely rooted simultaneously in the endurance of hardship and in an infinitely effervescent triumph over it. In 1898—when Twain published the essay from which the epigraph is taken—the Jewish narrative had indeed already transcended a great deal. However, even as he wrote words of such reverence for Jewish survival, that very survival was beginning to face a threat of the highest magnitude. The Jewish narrative was entering a chapter of suspense, climax, and change, the likes of which it had previously endured only twice before. The first of those major threats is described in the tale of the exodus from Egypt. It is an oscillating narrative: on the one hand, its primary characteristic is an ascending shift from slavery and wandering to freedom and stability; on the other, it is marred by hardship and countless blemishes—e.g., the golden calf, the rebellion of Korach, the twelve spies. The second major threat to Jewish existence came with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. This narrative also oscillates, counterbalancing the descent into the depression of exile with the shift to a resilient Judaism governed by the Rabbis. This shift roughly coincided with a turn in Western civilization, from the paganism of the Greeks and Romans to the monotheism of Christians and Muslims. In 1898, at the time of Twain’s writing, the third threat was already brewing. It too was accompanied by a shift in Western civilization, as Europe discarded Christianity in favor of secular values stemming from the Enlightenment. This change bolstered existing theological justifications of European anti-Semitism with racial ones, creating a powerful and distinctly modern anti-Semitism that, in the years shortly to come, would manifest in the Holocaust. This historical period of change

will also most likely be narrated in oscillation, as the splendor of the Jewish ascension from second-class citizenship in exile to emancipated prosperity and a return to Israel is attenuated by the sobering recognition that violence has pervaded this history.

Judaism survived in the wake of all three pivotal eras, it can be argued, because Jews recomposed their collective identity into oscillating narratives. Gender constructs, because they heavily inform individual identity, are amongst the more important of those narratives. In Western civilization's shift from Christianity to secularism, constructs of masculinity became particularly important because Jewish man had been the chief target of Christian othering—that is, the process by which mainstream discourse attempts to create minority identity on a minority's behalf, without their choice or willing participation—but was newly expected to adhere to Western civilization's more standard expectations. In this paper, I will explore two narratives about the Jewish man's emancipation from otherness, paying particular attention to how that otherness complicated Jewish man's understanding of victory and defeat. The first portrayal of Jewish manhood that I will treat is the Jewish character, Max Vandenburg, in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*.⁶ Zusak's work illustrates how utilizing classic understandings of victory and defeat can be detrimental to the Jewish man. Next, I will analyze the 1992 film *School Ties*⁷ in its rendering of the Jewish man's predicament as he went through the process of manumission from otherness. *School Ties* forms the complement to *The Book Thief*, demonstrating how—by acquiescing to subjugations of their pride and dignity—Jewish men enabled themselves to attain success.

Before moving forward with my analysis of *The Book Thief* and *School Ties*, however, I will provide a brief preface, describing and distinguishing between the respective anti-Semitism of the historical periods that these pieces portray. Up until the Enlightenment, Christian doctrine had been the primary source of European anti-Semitism; one might even have expected that when the Enlightenment shifted European intellectual culture away from Christianity, anti-Semitism would have withered. However, anti-Semitism was so ingrained in European culture that it persisted and was actually bolstered by new justifications; theological othering was replaced by racial othering.⁸ *The Book Thief* is set in Nazi Germany, where this “new anti-Semitism” of modern Europe reached its pinnacle, where

the government victimized Jews in order to mitigate the threat that they posed to German racial purity. *School Ties*, by contrast, is set in the U.S. during the 1950s, where anti-Semitism was slowly being phased out of the social structure.⁹ It is important to note that, as a result of this difference between the anti-Semitism portrayed in these two works, the kinds of success that David (the protagonist of *School Ties*) achieves would not have been possible for Max. I therefore qualify that my argument speaks only to the general effect that these various kinds of othering have on contemporary understandings of Jewish masculinity.

The Book Thief is a novel that follows the developmental years of Liesel Meminger—a foster child living in Nazi Germany. Though Zusak's work focuses primarily on Liesel's enthrallment with literature, it also incidentally addresses issues of Jewish masculinity through Max, a Jew who also gets taken in by Liesel's foster parents, the Hubermanns. Our first introduction to Max comes in a chapter aptly named "Enter the Struggler."¹⁰ In this chapter we get only the slightest glimpse of Max, hiding in a dark, cramped storage room, struggling to maintain his wits despite being confined. His concealer enters, delivering minimal sustenance and, hidden in a book, Max's means for reaching his next destination: a forged identity card, a map, instructions, and a key. Zusak goes to great lengths to give us no hint of this person's identity, offering only, "The door was opened and shut, and a figure was crouched over him."¹¹ This description shows us how completely downtrodden Max is. Even this nameless, faceless, crouching figure is in a position of power over him, coming across as some sort of reluctant captor: "There was no apology. 'It's the best I could do.' Door open, door shut. Alone again."¹² Moreover, Zusak's unwillingness to give the concealer an identity points apophatically to the depth of Max's dehumanization: by leaving the concealer completely anonymous, Zusak draws our attention to Max as singularly human in his suffering. Forcing the reader to focus on Max's humanity is Zusak's only avenue for depicting Max with even the slightest modicum of dignity: "To your left, perhaps your right, perhaps even straight ahead, you find a small black room. In it sits a Jew. He is scum. He is starving. He is afraid. Please—try not to look away."¹³ Already, we begin to see the formation of a complex victory-defeat dynamic in which the Jew's humanity rests upon his suffering.

The next time we encounter Max, he is traveling from his old hiding place in Stuttgart to suburban Munich, where the Hubermanns live.¹⁴ In order to make the journey safely, Max has taken to traveling in the open, assuming the guise of a typical German. To succeed in masking himself, however, Max must shave his beard because it clearly identifies him as Jewish. The emotional impact of this adjustment is hefty, prompting Max to bid his beard a verbal “goodbye.”¹⁵ Max completes his disguise with reading material for the train ride, the book containing the means for travel—*Mein Kampf*. The irony is supreme: in order to survive Max must read the very book that, by labeling his otherness as a racial phenomenon, inspired people to put his life in danger. The tense discomfort of this contrast is so palpable that Zusak must acknowledge it directly: “Strangely, as [Max] turned the pages and progressed through the chapters, it was only two words he ever tasted. *Mein Kampf*. My struggle. [...] *Mein Kampf*. Of all the things to save him.”¹⁶ In both of these cases, we find that Max has once again taken on lesser defeats in order to ensure the greater “victory” of survival.

Later in the book we find out more about Max’s childhood, discovering that he has a fighter’s spirit.¹⁷ At first, this character trait is about physical fighting; it is simple, testosterone-driven, masculine bloodlust: “A trickle of blood was dripping from Max’s mouth. He tasted it, and it tasted good.”¹⁸ The dual aspect of this fighting spirit is then revealed when financial hardships force him and his mother to move in with his uncle.¹⁹ A foil for Max, his uncle is the stereotypical Jew, “the type of person who worked quietly away for very little reward. He kept to himself and sacrificed everything for his family.”²⁰ His death has a profound impact on Max: “As he watched his uncle sink slowly into the bed, he decided that he would never allow himself to die like that. [...] Where’s the fight? he wondered. Where’s the will to hold on?”²¹ Despite Max’s harsh condemnation of his uncle’s character, his death is portrayed as ideal: “The Man’s face was so accepting. [...] (He) appeared relieved when his breathing disappeared completely.”²²

Max’s bravado and willingness to fight is contrasted with his uncle’s timidity, not only in action but also in result. While his uncle is rewarded with a tranquil death, Max’s warrior mentality leaves him in a state of futility. This is perhaps most apparent when, while hiding in the Huber-

manns' basement, Max envisions himself boxing with Hitler.²³ Max's fantasy begins with introductions. Hitler is built-up externally: robed in a swastika and attended by an entourage, Hitler is touted by the ringmaster as an undefeated fighter.²⁴ Max, by contrast, is the embodiment of fragility, "a lonely young Jew with dirty breath, a naked chest, and tired hands and feet."²⁵ Notice how in Max's own fantasy Hitler's might and bravado are idealized. Max has come as a challenger to attain this powerful glory for himself; he seeks victory by Hitler's standards. As the fight begins, Max imagines how Hitler would establish his superiority: "There was only one round, and it lasted hours, and for the most part, nothing changed. The *Fuhrer* pounded away at the punching-bag Jew. Jewish blood was everywhere."²⁶ After being beaten to the floor, Max draws upon his fist-fighter mentality; rallying, he refuses to go quietly like his uncle:

Slowly, Max Vandenburg, the Jew, rose to his feet and made himself upright. His voice wobbled. An invitation. "Come on *Fuhrer*," he said, and this time, when Adolf Hitler set upon his Jewish counterpart, Max stepped aside and plunged him into the corner. He punched him seven times, aiming on each occasion for only one thing. The mustache.

[...] All at once Hitler hit the ropes and creased forward, landing on his knees. This time there was no count. The referee flinched in the corner. The audience sank down, back to their beer.²⁷

At this point, Max loses control of his own fantasy; his minor victory results in a major defeat:

On his knees, the *Fuhrer* tested himself for blood and straightened his hair, right to left. When he returned to his feet, much to the approval of the thousand-strong crowd, he edged forward and did something quite strange. He turned his back on the Jew and took the gloves from his fists. [...] within moments, Adolf Hitler was standing on the ropes, and he was addressing the arena.

“My fellow Germans,” he called, “you can see something here tonight, can’t you?” Bare-chested, victory-eyed, he pointed over at Max. “You see that what we face is something far more sinister and powerful than we ever imagined. Can you see that? [. . .] As we speak, he is plotting his way into your neighborhood. He’s moving in next door. He’s infesting you with his family and he’s about to take you over [...] He will soon own you, until it is he who stands not at the counter of your grocery shop, but sits in the back, smoking his pipe. Before you know it, you’ll be working for him at minimum wage while he can hardly walk from the weight in his pockets. Will you simply stand by as your leaders did in the past, when they gave your land to everybody else, when they sold your country for the price of a few signatures? Will you stand out there, powerless? Or”—and now he stepped one rung higher—“will you climb into this ring with me? [...]”²⁸

The juxtaposition of Max’s hopeless struggle and his uncle’s peaceful death illustrates the difficulty that the diaspora Jewish man had in composing his identity. He was faced with two options. The first option—represented by Max’s uncle—was to succumb to the expectations of hegemony. This option resulted in both the serenity and the repression that accompany acceptance. The second option—represented by Max—was to rebel, to enter a struggle in which each step forward meant two steps back, a struggle in which every minute victory, every cathartic, well-aimed punch, caused the Hitlers of the world to climb one rung higher. “In the basement of 33 Himmel Street, Max Vandenburg could feel the fists of an entire nation. One by one they climbed into the ring and beat him down. They made him bleed. They let him suffer.”²⁹

As difficult as it was for Jewish men to construct identity while explicitly being othered, the process of being unbound from that otherness was equally complex. Once theological and bureaucratic barriers had been cleared, the remaining set of slowly eroding social obstructions meant that society’s expectations of Jewish men were often unclear. Set in the 1950s, *School Ties* is a film about David, a working-class Jewish teen from Scranton who must navigate this shifting landscape of expectations when

he is offered a scholarship to play football at a prestigious prep school in Massachusetts. Over the course of the movie, David must live up to a wide range of expectations and, in each of these situations, his success is predicated upon accepting some sort of defeat.

The film begins in Scranton on the day David is set to leave. In the opening scene, David is in a diner with some friends when a group of thugs come by to harass them. The conversation between the main thug and one of David's non-Jewish teammates turns quickly to David's heritage: the thug asks, "So it don't bother you they killed Jesus or nothin'?" For David's friend this is no problem; it has no relevance to his life. For the thug, however it's still an issue. The juxtaposition of these two figures sets up a tension that runs throughout the film, between those who are ready and willing to embrace Jews and those who hold fast to their anti-Semitism. The argument then deteriorates into a fistfight between David and the thug. The thug lands the first punch, signifying his role as aggressor, but then David counters and quickly subdues him; this is a world in which a Jew can actually win a fight. However, as David drives his father home from work in the following scene, we see that David's victory might not be so complete. When they come to a stop at a railroad track, his father notices first the blood on his knuckles and then his black eye and admonishes him for fighting: "This is a school two presidents went to, a pipeline to Harvard University. They're gonna see you and think you're some kind of hoodlum." Only when David accepts the criticism does the train pass, allowing him to cross the tracks. The film's message is clear: David will be able to make the ascending journey across the metaphorical tracks into the upper echelon but will it require him to weather the hardship of submission.

That expectation of submissiveness is echoed in a conversation that David has with the headmaster of the school later in the movie. The conversation in question comes soon after David's arrival at the boarding school when one of his football games coincides with Rosh Hashanah, causing him to miss Temple. That night, the headmaster catches him out after curfew, praying in the chapel. When he confronts David, he makes an observation that marks David as the Jewish other: "You people are very determined, aren't you?" Alluding to the difficulty of existing as other, David replies, "Sometimes we have to be, sir." The headmaster counters by

quoting from Matthew 5:5, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth,” insinuating that the Jews’ imposed humility is admirable. In response, David passive-aggressively speculates, “I wonder how meek they’ll be when they do, sir.”

The greatest indicator of David’s predicament is the disparity between the expectations people have for him before and after he is exposed as a Jew. Before the other students find out that he’s Jewish, David is the big man on campus; he is the star quarterback of the football team, in with the “in-crowd,” dating the beautiful blonde. Even Charlie Dillon, the prototypical ‘old money’ character, is envious of David. He explains one night in a private conversation, “Cause if you get what you want, you’ll deserve it and if you don’t, you’ll manage. You don’t have to live up to anybody else’s expectations; you are who you are. That’s really what draws people to you.” Ironically, Charlie praises David for a sense of self that is rooted in the oscillating narratives of his Jewish heritage. Later in the film, when David is exposed as Jewish, he is suddenly burdened with otherness, barred from victory in any situation. His roommate explains, “Jews are different: it’s not like the difference between Methodists and Lutherans; I mean Jews, everything about them’s different.” Even David’s Western manliness can’t subsume his otherness. When one of the other students hangs a swastika over David’s bed, he responds by posting a written challenge: “Whoever made the sign, meet me at 10:30 behind Iselin Hall.” The next shot shows David waiting alone in the rain for an opponent who doesn’t emerge. Unlike David, the coward doesn’t have to fight to earn his manhood; he is entitled to it by birth.

The film’s climax is set in motion when David sees Charlie cheating on a history test. When the teacher finds the cheat-sheet on the floor of his classroom, he issues an ultimatum: “If the cheater does not come forward or is not identified,” the whole class will fail. Mistakenly thinking he can resolve the situation without making himself a target, David confronts Charlie in private, threatening to denounce him if he does not confess. When the boys reconvene, Charlie accuses David of being the cheater and David reciprocates. Charlie and David then agree to let the other boys determine who is guilty—Charlie because of a shared history with the other boys in the class and David because “I’ve got no choice, do I? This is the way it’s always been done.” David submits, allowing things to proceed

the way they always have. The class deliberates and finds David guilty; once again, David capitulates: “Alright, I’ll honor your traditions. I’ll go to the headmaster and I’ll lie.” When David goes to confess, however, Charlie’s roommate is already in the headmaster’s office reporting that he, too, saw Charlie cheat; via docile perseverance, David prevails.

Both the grittiness and the finality of David’s victory are confirmed in the film’s denouement when David gets the last word, first with the headmaster and then with Charlie. First, when the headmaster comments, “I would like to forget this ever happened,” David retorts, “No, Sir. You’re never going to forget it happened because I’m going to stay here and every time you see me you’re going to remember that it happened. You used me for football; I’ll use you to get into Harvard.” Then, when Charlie tries to salvage his dignity by taking the long view—“you know something,” he says, “I’m still gonna get into Harvard and in ten years nobody’s going to remember any of this. But you’ll still be a goddamn Jew”—David grins and replies, “And you’ll still be a prick.”

Historically, Jews have been deprived of recognition as fully human in many ways. For Jewish men, this failure of recognition has often taken the form of demands to meet unclear, if not impossible, social expectations. What we see in both *The Book Thief* and *School Ties* is that Jewish men have redefined victory so that they can claim success even while yielding to expectations that they be defeated. By reformulating their understanding of victory thusly, they enable themselves to oscillate their narratives of defeat and therefore to maintain core elements of their identity.

NOTES

1. Mark Twain, “Concerning the Jews,” *Harpers Magazine*, (September 1898). Reprinted in the Internet Modern History Sourcebook, Fordham University. Web. 3 July 2013. <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1898twain-jews.asp>>

2. Bruce Feiler, “THIS LIFE; The Stories That Bind Us,” *The New York Times*. 17 Mar. 2013. Web. 07 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html?pagewanted=all>>.

3. Ibid., par. 18.
4. Ibid., par. 21.
5. Rabbi Ben Greenberg, Passover D'var Torah, BMH-BJ The Denver Synagogue, Denver, CO, 26 March, 2013.
6. Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief* (New York: Random House, 2005).
7. *School Ties*. Directed by Robert Mandel. Paramount Pictures, 1992.
8. Sarah Schmidt, University Course, "Continuity and Change in Modern Jewish History," Hebrew University Rothberg International School, Jerusalem, IL. October-December 2010.
9. Ibid.
10. Zusak, 138-41.
11. Zusak, 139. Max is the antecedent of "him" in this passage.
12. Zusak, 140.
13. Zusak, 138.
14. Zusak, 157-60.
15. Zusak, 159.
16. Zusak, 160.
17. Zusak, 187-94.
18. Zusak, 187.
19. Zusak, 188-9.
20. Zusak, 188.
21. Zusak, 188-9.
22. Ibid.
23. Zusak, 250-4.
24. Zusak, 251.
25. Zusak, 252.
26. Zusak, 253.
27. Ibid.
28. Zusak, 253-4.
29. Zusak, 254.

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