

The First Two Pages

Jewish Noir blog

By Steven Wishnia

“The Sacrifice of Isaac,” my story in *Jewish Noir*, opens with the sound of breaking glass. It’s a sound used in a couple songs I love, just before the noisefest explodes in the Velvet Underground’s “European Son” and to herald the first line—“broken glass everywhere”—in Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s seminal hip-hop record “The Message.”

Here, it’s the traditional breaking of the wineglass at a Hasidic wedding in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, the sound that symbolizes the beginning of the marriage, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and probably also the breaking of the bride’s hymen. I tell the story more from an omniscient-disembodied narrator perspective than from any character’s point of view, but Zak Katz, the bass player in the wedding band, might be the closest thing to a protagonist. Zev Asher, part of the groom’s party, is the son of a politically connected real-estate developer that’s the other major force. The two meet when Zak, exhausted from cramming four gigs into one weekend, slips into a kitchen for a break, overhears Zev snorting cocaine, and a deal is struck. Here are some of the key elements of the story: Judaism, music, a whiff of illicitness, and cold-blooded business.

He needed the stimulant. It was a good-paying gig, but they made you work for it, playing for four hours as the men in black danced. Men in round black hats wrapped in double-breasted coats, the younger ones cigarette-thin inside them, the big-bellied older ones stretching them. Some of them were shikkering the liquor pretty hard.

This is the bridge to the rest of the scene, with Zak back onstage. It evokes the atmosphere, lets me get into describing the music—something I know pretty well, because I’ve played in klezmer bands—and thus fold in some of Zak’s backstory. It also enables a bit of Yinglish wordplay. “Shikker” is Yiddish for “a drunk,” but is not

a verb. On the other hand, it works as a one-word neologism for “drinking to get drunk.” Adapting it into a verb gave a more Yiddish flavor than the goyishe terseness of “drinking hard,” and I wanted to avoid the slob connotations of “guzzling” or “swilling.” And I liked the k-to-k internal rhyme.

Sometimes you go minimal, sometimes you want ornamentation. What works in music is often true in writing too. My life as a musician colors my writing: I want my words to sound good, to have a lyrical flow, a hypnotic mood, and rich overtones.

I do not remember how I came up with this beginning. Sometimes my story ideas come to me like that, in a dreamlike state where I hear a character’s voice in my head, and I roll with it. That’s how a couple of the stories in *Exit 25 Utopia*, my first book, germinated. I conceived my novel *When the Drumming Stops* sitting in the basement of CBGB, on heavy painkillers for a bad migraine, listening to a jazz-improv band a couple of my friends were playing in. I sketched out an opening scene, ideas for characters, general themes, and a plot structure. On the other hand, that concept didn’t come out of nowhere—an agent had suggested that I write another novel drawing on my experiences playing in rock’n’roll bands, but find a way to bring it into the present. The ideas I had at CBGB resolved that conundrum.

Though the origins of “The Sacrifice of Isaac” are shrouded in mystery, I’m not going to belabor you with paeans to the mystical fount of spontaneity, the old Beat “first thought–best thought” nonsense. That moment of inspiration is irreplaceable, but once you have it, you have to work it, take it somewhere, and keep honing it.

Zak’s mood perked up when they did “Yikhes.” The word meant ancestry or family heritage, a selling point for matchmakers back in the shtetl, but the tune’s original lyrics were a Yiddish yo-mama snap, far too crude for a frum wedding—“your mother steals fish in the market... and your sister sleeps with a Cossack.” He rocked into the C section, driving the band with a burbling, galloping groove, and when they punched out the six G notes that heralded the chorus—ahh! ahh! ah-ah-ah-ah!—the men went wild, dancing with a frenzy that bordered on religious moshing.

That's how the first scene ends, with a laugh for the reader (I hope) and a bit of ecstasy for the extras. Now I had to construct a plot to follow that scene, to yoke those impressionistic images and plow a narrative arc. As Charles Baudelaire said of the effects of eating hashish to stimulate poetic inspiration, there is still "that terrible Morning After," when the cold light of reality crashes the sweet blur of reverie. The second scene of "The Sacrifice of Isaac" begins literally on the morning after: in the office of Zev's father's real-estate business, awaiting a visit from a mayoral aide to discuss a planned housing development.

If you stuck your head out the office window and craned your neck to the west, you could see the first big deal they'd made, new buildings on a three-block stretch south of the bridge that had been so abandoned in the '70s that the only occupied structure was the clubhouse of a biker gang called the Chingalings. The deal had been tied up for years while the Hasidim and the Puerto Ricans to the north fought over it, but Shaul Asher, Zev's father, had brokered a compromise...

Here, I'm putting fictional characters in a real-life historical context, to introduce the backstory of the Asher family empire. The story is set in Williamsburg in the 1990s. The neighborhood was really diverse on paper—Jews, Puerto Ricans, Poles, Italians, Dominicans, American blacks—but internally, it was clearly subdivided. (One ethnic borderline was evinced by where an avenue's ceremonial subname changed from Via Vespucci to Avenue of Puerto Rico.) The "Southside Triangle" area, the blocks below the Williamsburg Bridge, was the DMZ between the Hasidic neighborhood to the south and the Latino one to the north. (Yes, there actually was a gang called the Chingalings, the name a rather rude Spanglish portmanteau of "dingaling" and the verb often followed by "tu madre.")

Here enter the themes and actions that put the plot in motion: the collaboration of real estate and politics, the relentless drive to capture every spot of space in the

city and capitalize on it, fueled by greed and greased by corruption, set against the crime and racial tension of New York in the late 20th century.

Those are the forces that rule my city, both the one I live in and the one I depict. Between my work as a journalist and my experiences and observations as a most-of-my-life New Yorker, I believe nothing happens in a vacuum devoid of social context. Today, the once-vacant Southside Triangle is dominated by extremely expensive luxury apartments. The Latinos are being pushed out and priced out of Southside Williamsburg. The Hasidic enclave remains and is expanding into the black neighborhoods to the south, across the ethnic borderline that figures later on in the story. The era I set “The Sacrifice of Isaac” in was the turning point where those changes began.

The sad fate of New Yorkers trying to make an honest living is to be trapped between lawyer-wielding landlords forcing you to give up \$2,800 a month and knife-wielding dopefiends demanding that you give up \$10. As one wanes, the other waxes. In the time when this story is set, only the most optimistic would have accurately predicted how much street crime would drop. Only the most apocalyptic would have accurately predicted how pervasive corporate crime would become.

Color it one of the twenty-three shades of noir.



Steven Wishnia's books comprise the novel *When the Drumming Stops* (Manic D Press), in which four aging rockers face the impending Great Recession; the short-story collection *Exit 25 Utopia*; and *The Cannabis Companion*, which has been translated into six languages. His short stories have appeared in *Long Island Noir* and various magazines, and his memoir/essay “Wie Bist Die Gewesen Vor Punk-Rock?” in *Jews: A People's History of the Lower East Side*. Bassist in the '80s punk band the False Prophets, he currently plays in Blowdryer

Punk Soul, a yet-unnamed klezmer band, and the multimedia shows of artist Mac McGill. In his day job as a journalist, he's won two awards for reporting on New York City housing issues; covered urban politics, labor, drugs, and civil-liberties issues; and written and edited for publications from *High Times* to *Junior Scholastic*.

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