

The escapist: Fantasy, folklore, and the pleasures of the comic book in recent Jewish American holocaust fiction.

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The Escapist: Fantasy, Folklore, and the Pleasures of the Comic Book in Recent Jewish American Holocaust Fiction

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Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies

Purdue University Press

Volume 22, Number 3, Spring 2004

pp. 56-71

10.1353/sho.2004.0048

ARTICLE

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Abstract

In three recent books by young Jewish American writers, Nathan Englander's *For the Release of Unbearable Urges* (1999), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), and Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), each author uses fantasy to represent the Holocaust or to thematize the problem of its representation. In these writers' hands, fantasy can point to the difficulty of directly accessing historical experience, it can be a medium for representing Jewish folk culture before the Holocaust, and it can even provide pleasure and escape through its diversions. In Englander's story "The Tumblers," the famous Fools of Chelm are transplanted into a Nazi environment and miraculously survive. In

Everything Is Illuminated, Foer uses magical realist devices to give shape to his imaginary shtetl, Trachimbrod. Chabon's Kavalier & Clay is exceptional in presenting fantasy as a means of therapeutic escape from history. Chabon most directly confronts the problem of representation through non-realist techniques, and strikingly, he sets up a defense of popular escapism as a quintessentially American artistic response to the Holocaust.



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