

BOOK CLUB To Go!

The Centaur in the Garden

By Moacyr Scliar

Introduction

This novel by the Brazilian writer Moacyr Scliar is reminiscent of the Chagall paintings in which the scenes of everyday Jewish life are tenderly and oddly transmuted into fantasy. "The Centaur in the Garden" is set, however, not in a Russian shtetl but on a farm in southern Brazil, in one of the colonies of Jewish immigrants established there at the beginning of this century by the German-Jewish philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch (1831-1896). One Jewish family's struggle to make a living in these unfamiliar and lonely surroundings is thwarted by the birth of the youngest child, Guedali, who is a centaur.

The family has a hard time hiding its little monster from curious neighbors and an even harder time getting him through the rituals of circumcision and bar mitzvah, so they immigrate to the city. Their quandary, however, is as nothing compared to that of Guedali himself, who enjoys his uniqueness but wants to find companions like himself. He gallops south in search of other centaurs but finds acceptance only among the freaks of a traveling circus. When he finally meets and falls in love with a she-centaur, Tita, his difficulties are not over. Not only is Tita a goy, she wants to go to supermarkets and cannot resign herself to a life spent hiding from mere human beings.

The couple makes a trip to Morocco, where a surgeon removes their front legs. Since they are able to disguise the vestiges of fetlocks and hoofs, they become indistinguishable from other members of Brazil's upwardly mobile middle class. They have normal children, buy a condominium and commit adultery like everybody else. After a while, even their hoofs disappear and they are left with only the faintest memory of their centaur freedom. Guedali, however, has regrets; only after a determined but failed attempt to return to the pastoral life and his centaur body does he settle down for good.

(www.nytimes.com)

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About the Author

Like his centaur protagonist Guedali Tartakovsky, Moacyr Scliar was born and raised in Porto Alegre, the capital city of Rio Grande Do Sul which Scliar locates in “the deep south” of Brazil. Porto Alegre is still home to the sixty-six-year-old Scliar, who also works as a public health physician.

Scliar was inspired to write fiction as a young man after hearing his parents’ stories about life in Bessarabia, a region of Eastern Europe that is currently contained within Moldavia and Ukraine. In a recent e-mail exchange, Scliar noted that although he is not traditionally religious, he is “very connected to Jewish tradition – to the stories, mainly. We are a people of story-tellers, and I got that from my parents.” Scliar’s mother was his first mentor. A teacher in a Yiddish school, she introduced her son to literature and “applauded my first attempts to write”.

Scliar recently came back to international attention after Yann Martel won this year’s Booker Prize for his novel *The Life of Pi*. In Martel’s introduction to the book, he thanks Scliar for providing “the spark of life” that generated his own novel. The spark comes from Scliar’s short symbolic novel *Max and the Cats*. Some critics questioned whether Martel had actually plagiarized Scliar’s book, but Scliar is reticent on the subject and notes that Martel “told the press that he read a review of my book by John Updike (but Updike never wrote such a review). He liked the plot and decided to write a story about the subject. But my story refers to Nazism and also, in a metaphorical way, to the military dictatorship we had in Brazil at the time. Martel’s book is about religious faith.”

Moacyr Scliar is eloquent about his dual existence as a writer and physician, a venerable combination in Jewish tradition that goes back to Maimonides. He sees profound connections between both his vocations and notes that “medicine has inspired my work. It is a way to know the human condition and, in the case of public health, the social reality as well.”

(The Jewish Reader)

Reviews

“Yet if one criticism can be made of *The Centaur in the Garden*, it is that it is too genial. Except in his sexual encounters, Guedali is not at all monstrous, which leads one to suspect that underpinning the centaur fantasy is some quite ordinary association of animality with sexuality and of civilization with repression. (...) Dr. Scliar's Guedali, who at end of the novel is ‘like a centaur in the garden, ready to jump the wall in search of freedom,’ resembles nothing so much as a man with the seven-year itch. Nevertheless, it is interesting to contrast this genial version of the Jewish immigrant experience in Brazil with the mordant irony Jewish writers from other Latin American countries have applied to their estrangement.”—*New York Times Book Review*

“Clearly, that combination of emotions is present in the novel as Guedali goes through the metaphoric experiences of being Jewish in Brazil. That is, of being Jewish, of not being Jewish, of marrying a non-Jewish centauress, making love to a non-Jewish sphinx, and, eventually, of discovering what his identity actually is. Stylistically, the novel exhibits a kind of restrained inventiveness in that the reader never questions the validity of Scliar's imaginary world, and the dialogue, even in English, shows a consistency of voice that is exceptional.” —*Review of Contemporary Fiction*

Further Reading

Life of Pi by Yann Martel

A Pigeon and a Boy by Meir Shelev

The Rabbi's Cat by Joann Sfar

The Yiddish Policemen's Union by Michael Chabon

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. How does Midrash play out in Moacyr Scliar's narrative?
2. At various points in the novel Guedali attempts to pray. He says, "It wasn't exactly religion I was practicing, it was more a form of nostalgia. I was echoing my own childhood." How does this comment reflect Scliar's attitude toward Judaism?
3. The Tartakovskys' wealthy sponsor, Baron Hirsch, thought about buying the Wailing Wall from the Turks in order to dismantle it and reassemble it in Brazil. What is the meaning of such a scheme?
4. Once Guedali becomes a functioning human, how is he affected by fully assimilating into Brazilian society?
5. Are Guedali and Tita's operations really a success? If so, what are the implications of its success?
6. Despite Tita's reservations, why is Guedali so insistent that his sons be circumcised?
7. Contrast the pioneering spirit of Guedali's parents with that of the friends with whom he moves to the "horizontal condominium".
8. How would you characterize Moacyr Scliar's concept of Jewish identity?
9. Is the image of a centaur a successful metaphor for Diaspora Jewry? For something else?
10. At the end of the book Guedali still retains the wisdom that was in the marrow of his hooves. Scliar comments that such wisdom was culled from answers to "the unknowable things of the universe." What might some of those "things" be?

(The Jewish Reader)