Perhaps no contemporary writer has done more to mark the ongoing legacy of the Holocaust than Thane Rosenbaum. Over a series of three books now known as the post-Holocaust trilogy—Elijah Visible (St. Martin’s, 1996), Second Hand Smoke (St. Martin’s, 1999), and The Golems of Gotham (HarperCollins, 2002)—Rosenbaum has explored the ways in which the Shoah continues to define our collective consciousness. His fiction is filled with what Alan L. Berger has called “second-generation witnesses,” children of Holocaust survivors who have given voice to their horrendous inheritance. Rosenbaum emphatically rejects the label “Holocaust writer”; for him, the Holocaust can only be represented by those who witnessed it, and even then its representation is fraught with problems. Rosenbaum’s narrative territory is the post-Holocaust world, a region populated largely by American-born children of survivors and usually set against the backdrop of New York or Miami. Although he refuses to capture the horrors of the concentration camps, the pages of his books reverberate with their consequences.

Born in 1960, Thane Rosenbaum grew up in Washington Heights, New York, and Miami Beach, Florida, where his parents moved when he was nine years old. Both of his parents were Holocaust survivors—his mother had been in Majdanek, his father in various concentration camps, including Auschwitz—but the subject of the Nazi death camps was unmentionable within the household. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, these conspicuous silences, the aftereffects of the Shoah found their way into his adult work. He studied
law because he felt that the security of a law degree would help to mitigate his inherited sense of vulnerability. Although successful as an attorney, Rosenbaum quit practicing law full-time in the 1990s, and from then on his career has been largely literary. His first book, *Elijah Visible*, a cycle of nine tales he calls “a novel in stories,” was published in 1996, and between 1996 and 2002 he served as the literary editor of the progressive Jewish American magazine *Tikkun*. Nonetheless, his legal background continues to inform his writing. Rosenbaum’s most recent book, *The Myth of Moral Justice: Why Our Legal System Fails to Do What’s Right* (HarperCollins, 2004), is an attempt to redefine the American legal system by arguing that moral responsibility (expressed through storytelling and the public acknowledgment of harms and grievances, apologetic discourse, and restorative remedies) supersedes legal duty. He is a frequent contributor to *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he is currently the John Whelan Distinguished Lecturer in Law at Fordham Law School, where he teaches courses in human rights, legal humanities, and law and literature and also directs the Forum on Law, Culture, and Society.

I first met Rosenbaum in October 2004 at the American Literature Association’s Jewish American and Holocaust Literature Symposium in Boca Raton, Florida. He was our guest speaker, and during his talk he entertained the audience by reading from *The Golems of Gotham*, a post-Holocaust “romance” where the ghosts of notable concentration camp survivors (all artists who committed suicide) haunt the streets of Manhattan, imploring its populace never to forget. I say “entertained” because that is what Rosenbaum does, in the fullest sense of the word. During his address, filled with deadly seriousness, I could not help but notice the affability and even humor he brought to his delivery. Afterward I approached Rosenbaum, telling him how much I enjoyed his talk and mentioning that I was teaching *Elijah Visible* to a class of undergraduates in three weeks’ time. He was sincerely interested in my teaching of his book and agreed to talk with my students. The result was a conference call with my class sitting around a speakerphone and Rosenbaum fielding a wide variety of questions. This classroom exercise was such a success that I asked him if he would be interested in doing a more formal interview with me, to which he kindly agreed. Between January and July 2005, we carried out
an e-mail–based correspondence that covered the topics that Rosenbaum, as a novelist, finds most pressing. What follows is an edited version of our dialogue.

Q. I want to start with one of the most obvious—and most significant—aspects of your writing: the Holocaust. Your first three books—Elijah Visible, Second Hand Smoke, and The Golems of Gotham—all revolve around the legacy of the Holocaust and the ways in which it continues to shape our lives. But I understand that you do not consider yourself a “Holocaust writer,” even in the very broadest sense of the term.

A. I generally recoil at the idea of being thought of as a Holocaust writer, and when people refer to me in this way, I feel very awkward and embarrassed. First, I don’t write about the Holocaust. My novels deal with the post-Holocaust universe, so if anything I am a post-Holocaust novelist. This distinction is not trivial. I don’t write about the years 1933–45, nor would I ever. My characters all live in the aftermath of Auschwitz and deal with the surreal circumstance of having to live in a genocidal age with full knowledge of having genocide in one’s genes—the absurdity of starting anew in a world of madness and indifference. True Holocaust writers—mostly memoirists—write about the event itself and have had the moral authority to do so, since they were actually there, as witnesses. In that sense, their work serves the purposes of both testimony and aesthetics. I have no claims to the Holocaust as an event, only its generational consequences. Nor do I welcome any suggestion that I am a witness to anything other than my own experience as a child of survivors. Moreover, I like to think of myself as a novelist who just happens to incorporate the post-Holocaust universe into his fiction, rather than as a pure Holocaust writer who is an authentic artifact of the event itself. When it comes to the Holocaust, personal history must, necessarily, transcend the art.

Q. Melvin Jules Bukiet wrote in his afterword to the 2002 reprint of Stories of an Imaginary Childhood that the years spanning the Second World War are completely off-limits to him, at least as a writer. Do you feel the same?
A. In this regard, I very much agree with Mel, but in virtually every other way, we are completely different kinds of novelists, particularly with respect to the Holocaust.

Q. I’ve noticed that many reviewers seem to link the two of you, to mention you in the same breath. How would you distinguish your fiction from his, especially on the topic of the Holocaust?

A. Bukiet doesn’t write from the perspective of the second generation, nor does he really write about the aftermath. I think he is much better at, and focused on, the before part, and perhaps the immediate aftermath. I have focused almost entirely on the generational consequences, and the huge shadow of darkness and forgetfulness that the Holocaust has cast on humanity in the post-Holocaust era. I also think that our fictional characters who are survivors are different, to some extent. So, too, are our theological observations. But most importantly, I have a curious strain of redemptiveness running through my novels—an impulse that I detest personally in connection with the Holocaust but that somehow makes sense to me in my fiction—which doesn’t really exist at all in Melvin’s work.

Q. Would you please explain what you mean by “a curious strain of redemptiveness”?

A. The novelist in me seemingly rebels against the pessimism of my personal philosophy on the nature of atrocity. The fiction writer, the storyteller, wants to leave a lesson, something to savor and preserve, a gift to his or her reader—some essential goodness or hope, even if it is something considerably less than a happy ending. The aesthetics of the trilogy called for a redemptive closure, given that it began with paralysis and mourning, turned to rage, and then ended up with resurrection and rescue. The Holocaust is nothing but a black hole to me. But the post-Holocaust, while not an overlay of the original, nonetheless offers the possibility for something else, something that is alive and lasting, something that can endure, precisely because Holocaust memory requires survivors, and the post-Holocaust demands that the memory of the Holocaust not prevent the forward march into the future. As the golems teach in The Golems of Gotham, it is essential to somehow mediate the moral imperative to
remember and never forget with the equally moral duty to reconcile with the past and aspire to a life filled with meaning and possibility.

Q. Ruth Franklin, a senior editor at The New Republic, in a 2004 review of several post-Holocaust writers said that your work and that of other second-generation writers could be called “neo-Wilkomirskism,” referring to Benjamin Wilkomirski, a.k.a. Bruno Grosjean, who fraudulently passed himself off as a Holocaust survivor a number of years ago. I was wondering if this kind of reaction is something you frequently get when critics link your name to any aspect of the Holocaust.

A. If you recall, I actually answered Ruth in a letter that Leon Wieseltier asked me to write, which appeared several weeks after her article ran. No other critic has ever accused me of what she is suggesting. She read “Cattle Car Complex” and, based on that one story, decided that all of my fiction somehow privileges and misappropriates the suffering of the children of survivors to an even greater extent than the suffering of the survivors themselves. If you have read my fiction, and surely my essays, you know that I have taken the exact opposite position. My response in The New Republic points this out. I didn’t grow up in a home of alcoholics or where there was spousal abuse or violence or incest, but I would assume that those who wish to write fiction from that perspective, and who have lived in such homes, had a privileged view of those circumstances. Surely they can write authentically from that perspective, and who would begrudge them that? It’s their emotional experience, and their fiction should probably benefit from it. Given the enormity of the Holocaust, why wouldn’t it be the case that the children of survivors simply have seen something unique, lived with people who are unique, so that their experience is singular, privileged (in the worst sort of way), and, yes, exclusive?

Q. In your first three books, you deal specifically with the post-Holocaust world and the ways that the Shoah influences, and even determines, the lives of many Americans, Jewish or otherwise, born after 1945. Elsewhere you have called these books a post-Holocaust trilogy. When did you first get the idea of sustaining this narrative
focus over more than one book? At what point did the idea for a single book become a trilogy?

A. Soon into the writing of Elijah Visible, I realized I was working on a book of post-Holocaust fiction. I didn’t set out to do it. I just wanted to write a novel. I didn’t have any grand prophetic visions or crusading aspirations. I simply didn’t want to be a lawyer anymore, and I did want to write fiction. Yet the stories seemed to come out this way. But then I realized that a true fictional reimagining of the post-Holocaust world couldn’t be accomplished in just one book. Elijah Visible seemed to be a book about loss, mourning, and spiritual paralysis in a postgenocidal age. But those psychological dynamics and occurrences don’t end the Holocaust conversation. After loss comes rage, and after rage there is the hope for rescue, repair, and even redemption. So I started taking notes for what would be three novels—the first about loss, the second about rage, and the last about repair and resurrection (in the true spirit of a ghost story). That’s how the trilogy came about, almost by necessity, because given the enormity of the Holocaust, I didn’t want to leave any of the emotional story out.

Q. You refer to Elijah Visible as a novel: St. Martin’s Press, however, has marketed it as a collection of stories, with the subtitle “Stories” on the book’s title page. I’m curious about your thoughts on this generic “fit” and the issues involved in defining the book as novel or story collection.

A. I wrote the chapters as a fragmented novel—a metaphor for Adam Posner (who in one guise or another appears in each chapter, a broken man living in a broken world). And, as you know, the chapters are not arranged in a linear order, furthering the complexity of what message is being imparted about this post-Holocaust protagonist. But my editor, Robert Weil, a good friend, and frankly the man who discovered me, believed that we could not market the book as a novel, because we would be open to criticism that we were trying to elevate a collection of stories into something larger, grander—an unconventional novel. He was concerned that critics would see this as a deception and lose sight of the originality of the stories themselves. At the time, the use of discrete stories, with one
central character, which has novelistic aspirations and is marketed as a novel, was quite rare. Since *Elijah Visible*’s publication, however, we have repeatedly referred to it as a novel in stories. The only problem, to my mind, is that story collections are usually taken less seriously than a novel and reviewed far less frequently. I’m not sure why— they are certainly no easier to write; in fact, I think they are harder to write successfully. Perhaps the book might have received more attention had it been marketed, from the outset, as a novel.

Q. I’ve always read the fragmented nature of that book—the disjointed linearity, the multifaceted representation of Posner, the constant shift between first- and third-person narrators—as a function of its subject matter: the aftereffects of the Holocaust and the kind of world it has wrought, or at least its effects on the way in which we conceive of, or construct, our world. Thus the effectiveness of one narrative is in many ways linked to the others surrounding it. Do you see *Elijah Visible* in this way?

A. I think that reading any of the Adam Posner tales without reading them all is a risky enterprise. None of the stories, to my mind, makes any sense unless you’ve read at least a few, even though I am told that individually they stand alone quite well. “Cattle Car Complex” has been performed as part of *Selected Shorts*, in which celebrated actors read short stories at Symphony Space, a New York theater, with a later broadcast on National Public Radio. I thought the actor who read “Cattle Car Complex” did a fabulous job, but I remembered thinking that the story only begins the Posner cycle and by itself sounds more like a work of science fiction, with *Twilight Zone* pretensions, than it would be if one were to read the entire book. If you read that story as an example of the entire post-Holocaust trilogy, then you are left with a distorted, terribly incomplete landscape of what this post-Holocaust vision actually looks like.

Q. When I’ve taught *Elijah Visible*, students are always baffled by what happens to Adam Posner in the elevator, and their questions usually lead to a useful discussion on why you might have chosen to bend reality—or, perhaps a better way of putting it, why you bend the perception of reality in that story. Is it Adam who changes, or is it
the perception of him that changes? In many ways, the last image we get of him in that story is from the perspective of the four men who have been trying to get him out of the stuck elevator.

A. Actually, I think the story is a misdirection in all directions. You are right, the point of view, at the end of the story, is from the four men anxiously awaiting the arrival of the elevator car, but the story is not really about perception, but rather transformation—whether it be Jekyll and Hyde, Clark Kent to Superman, or Dracula at night. The extent of the transformation is not revealed until the end of the story, which is quite different from these other transformations, where the readers or viewers are aware of it immediately. But I think that the story is more internal than external: what’s happening is really all inside Adam’s head. The transformation that is alluded to throughout the story, with his cries for help, his warped time frame, his complete incomprehension of reality, finally takes on a physical, material, literal dimension as the elevator door opens. I like to think of the elevator door as a curtain, which gets pulled at the end of “Cattle Car Complex” and essentially announces to the reader of the novel (you see, I always imagined it as part of the whole): “Welcome to Adam Posner’s World. From now on, think of these chapters as if you just entered this transformative portal. Without the elevator, the following stories won’t make sense. You will naturally associate them with the world you know. But that would be a mistake. Adam’s world is one that is informed by cattle cars and their lethal destinations, so try, if you can, to read these chapters from that perspective, the perspective of a damaged man, and the many reasons that he became damaged.”

Q. So you had originally intended “Cattle Car Complex” as the opening of this short-story cycle? And the reader is to enter the elevator as a way of being transported—perhaps up and down, perhaps sideways, but nonetheless through a series of narrative misdirections, as you put it—through the many experiences and permutations of Adam Posner?

A. I wouldn’t say permutations. I would say the unlived nightmare and inherited memory of Adam Posner. That’s his world, one that he didn’t choose, but one that he was destined to inhabit, all
because of the enormity of Auschwitz and his lineal proximity to those who were there.

Q. By permutations I meant the different contexts in which we see Adam Posner: sometimes older, sometimes younger; at one point orphaned, at others the young adult son of aging parents; at times almost indifferent to Holocaust memory, at other times passionate in his need to inherit the unimaginable experiences of his family. He’s fragmented in many senses of the word, and as you mentioned previously, his life isn’t linear by any means. This multiplicity of expression is apparent even in the book’s point of view. In most stories you write from a third-person point of view, but in three—“An Act of Defiance,” “The Rabbi Double-Faults,” and “Lost, in a Sense”—you shift to the first person. I was wondering if there was a particular reason you chose to write those narratives in that way.

A. I like that in “Romancing the Yahrzeit Light” Adam rides a motorcycle around Manhattan, but in “An Act of Defiance,” he doesn’t even know how to ride a bicycle. Can’t get more fragmented and nonlinear than that—two permutations that make no sense unless the reader is willing to surrender to the will and madness of the elevator car. As for your insight about the sleight of hand with respect to the book’s point of view, I would say the following. First, in “The Rabbi Double-Faults,” the first half of the story is actually narrated in the third person, and the second half is narrated by Adam in the first person as a newly minted bar mitzvah–boy tennis prodigy. In that story, I doubled the fracturing, largely because Adam wouldn’t have had the perspective or maturity to comprehend how Rabbi Vered got to Miami Beach in the first place, and why he was acting like a Jewish Captain Kurtz from Heart of Darkness. But the main reason why those three stories are largely narrated by Adam is that they don’t really concern him, even though his narration is intended to bring about, at least for him, some renewed self-awareness. I liken this technique to the Nathan Zuckerman of Philip Roth’s later novels who is narrating the books; unlike The Ghost Writer and beyond, the later novels do not find Zuckerman as the protagonist but rather as a keen observer of some
breakdown in American culture and society. In each of these particular Elijah Visible tales, the true hero is someone else. Adam is merely the witness, and a witless one at that. As an observer, he finds the main character(s) to be inscrutable—his uncle Haskell, Rabbi Vered, the Isaacson family, and, of course, his parents. Remember, his perspective is warped by a twisted, gloomy childhood, so we can’t really trust his interpretation, yet at the same time, he is faithfully telling us what happened, so we hope and assume that he is listening to his own tales, because in each tale, there is a truth about his legacy, and his reaction to it. In addition to the mixed up points of view, and fueling even greater fragmentation, was the idea that Adam, at times, should narrate some of these tales, precisely because he is damaged. It’s like allowing a nervous person to drive a car and seeing how he does. Damaged people have an interesting way of telling us what they see, because their observations are colored by fears and injuries and repressed traumas and the general mistrust that the endings cannot be entirely happy.

Q. The significance of Adam as narrator seems to underscore an important aspect of narrative: since our identities are in many ways wrapped up in the stories we tell, how we tell our stories reveals who we are or who we see ourselves to be.

A. And since the Holocaust is often discussed in terms of “witnessing” and “testimony,” Adam’s post-Holocaust perspective, as the observer of others, adds yet another layer of complexity. Since his vision is already warped by the “cattle car complex,” is he capable of being a reliable narrator, given the surreal diversions of the elevator car?

Q. In what ways does the word “trauma” apply to Elijah Visible, and what functions do you see it playing in the various narratives of Adam Posner?

A. Well, trauma, in a large, philosophical, if not psychological sense, is brought about by a shattering episode, an event that breaks the spirit and alters one’s comprehension of reality—it, in essence, creates a different human being from the pretraumatized self. Jean Améry once said, “One who has been tortured remains tortured,”
and the same is true, I think—I fear—of traumatized people. Aside from those who are burdened by repressed memories, for most people, it is easy to recall the episode that left one permanently scarred. In Adam Posner’s case, he is traumatized not only by his proximity to traumatized parents who cannot parent, but also by the burdens of history, and the fragmented self that comes from so much consolidated fear, loss, abandonment, and the general paralysis traceable to unfulfilled mourning. Clearly “Cattle Car Complex,” the opening chapter, is an homage to trauma. Indeed, the entire conceit is a paradigm of what happens to traumatized people: they are mesmerized, almost hypnotized, by certain sounds, images, and associations that bring them back to the scene of the crime, in essence retraumatizing them. The problem is, in Adam’s case, he never actually witnessed any crime other than the murdered spirits of his parents—the aftermath of genocide. The child abuse scene in “Bingo by the Bungalow” is similarly loaded with strange traumatic material, as is “The Little Blue Snowman of Washington Heights.”

Q. In the book you deal with the ways in which cultural memory—the “inherited” memory that comes with the legacy of the Holocaust—determines the life stories of Adam Posner. What links do you see between the trauma that Adam’s family experienced and the memories that end up shaping his interpretation of the world?

A. The whole book provides an answer to this question. Every chapter, in fact, can be analyzed in this way: from the cattle cars to the carnival where Adam’s father fired a gun not just in the hopes of bagging a stuffed bear, but to fire away at his memories of when guns and targets were real and lethal; from the yahrzeit candle and what that represents to Jews, and how Adam eventually breaks the glass and incorporates it into his art, to the Passover seder and the imperative to tell the story of the Holocaust (not unlike the Exodus), but yet who will want to know this story, as history recedes into amnesia; from the way in which numbered arms figure so prominently in “An Act of Defiance” and “The Rabbi Double-Faults,” to the immediacy of conventional death from cancer in “Lost, in a Sense” and how it is perceived by those who know unconventional, concentration-camp death; from “The Pants in the Family,” which
only reinforces the vulnerability that children of survivors already fear—that they must parent their parents—to the creepy lessons that little Adam operates and labors under in “The Little Blue Snowman of Washington Heights.”

Q. You’re right, there is something creepy going on in “The Little Blue Snowman of Washington Heights.” I’ve certainly noticed elements of the fantastic in your books. You’ve already mentioned the “magical” quality of “Cattle Car Complex.” But I see little bits of the fantastic subtly sprinkled throughout Elijah Visible, and it’s much more noticeable in your other novels. In Second Hand Smoke, there are the ghostly swings in the former Jewish playground, as well as the lights of Tavern on the Green that mysteriously came on when Duncan’s Uncle Breitbart shows up. And obviously there are the eight golems in your third book, The Golems of Gotham. I’m wondering how the magical, the mysterious, and the chimerical figure into your larger project, how they may be reactions to—or even palliative for—the kind of trauma characters undergo.

A. It all comes back to the grand narrative of the Holocaust: mass murder. You can’t kill that many people, under such unspeakable circumstances, and expect their spirits to vanish so easily. For me, the post-Holocaust universe is a perpetual way station of interrupted life, and for this reason, the post-Holocaust, by definition, must offer some elements of a ghost story. The Final Solution was, in many ways, without finality. Not only were there survivors but, at least in my fiction, the aftermath gave us ghosts. My books are not only about survivors and their children; we must give equal billing to the dead. They are granted a fictional afterlife in my novels. There is also the deep desire, given all that was lost, to think in terms of repair and resurrection, at least in art, and so therefore, as you know, The Golems of Gotham, in particular, deals precisely with the concept of repair and resurrection, even if inadequate, even if the idea of communing with ghosts or observing the lessons they have to teach us is, in so many ways, futile.

Q. So in your fiction—and perhaps for fiction in general—you believe that a more fantastical mode of narrative is more effective
than realism when it comes to expressing traumatic events and our reaction to them, especially trauma such as the Holocaust that goes beyond human comprehension?

A. I would say that traumatized people are better equipped to comprehend and speak the language of the spiritual, mystical world, precisely because they were so formidably and forbiddingly spooked by the real, physical world. It is easy to understand their desire or willingness to retreat into some other, perhaps safer haven, even one that is marked by the vastness of a void, even if it is wholly imaginary. Isn’t that one of the reasons why children have imaginary friends, to help them make sense of a world that is otherwise threatening and overgrown? Trauma is the result of a great failure of normal, prescribed expectations. We end up shocked and numb. The world has let us down, and so we retreat from it and seek solace in some other world, one that will rescue us or at least keep us safe until it is time to return to our world. The Holocaust, of course, given the extremity of its inflicted trauma, elevates this impulse for rescue, resurrection, and repair to an extreme degree, and this is why ghosts from the other world, and the walking dead from this world, are such familiar characters in my fiction.

Q. What you’ve just said reminds me of a passage toward the end of Second Hand Smoke. As Duncan and his long-lost brother, Isaac, are flying into New York, they momentarily try to imagine their mother’s journey from Poland to New York about forty years earlier. But they’re not able to, because their mother “gave neither of her sons a chance to carry her actual memories into the next generation. Imagination and fantasy—poor substitutes for the lived experience—were all that they ever had.”

A. Yes, imagination is all that the brothers have. They don’t know anything, really. The relevant secrets and truths of their lives were neither lived by them nor communicated to them in any conventional way by their survivor mother. They have to do all the work, knowing from the outset that their efforts might be entertainingly imaginative and emotionally true, but perhaps never literally true. They know that if you weren’t at Auschwitz at the time when the gassings and the ovens were active, then you will never know Auschwitz.
Q. In that novel, Duncan, the American sibling, must go to Poland not only to meet the brother that he never knew but to confront his family’s past. Of the three books in your post-Holocaust trilogy, only *Second Hand Smoke* takes place in part in Eastern Europe. Why did you decide to take the American protagonist into the heart of the Holocaust? What advantages, or even problems, did you perceive in carrying your action to foreign soil?

A. Well, the point is that Duncan is spiritually dying from second-hand smoke—and the gaseous nature of that smoke is American-made. It comes from his mother, the survivor, but it is inhaled in America. He’s been a goner from the very beginning. With the discovery of his brother, there is perhaps the chance of some repair, some unity that can possibly reverse some of the brokenness. But in order to achieve that, Duncan must not only visit his brother, but he must also visit, for the first time, the scene of the crime: Poland, Polish soil, the Polish graveyard uninhabited by Jews but nonetheless haunted by Jewish ghosts. Until he begins the painful process of breathing Polish air into lungs infected by secondhand smoke, there is no chance of any repair, much less redemption. The risk, of course, is the very risk that Duncan ultimately encounters. The experience proves to be too much. He unravels repeatedly and breaks down in Birkenau. In order to heal, he must sink even lower—and the proximity to all that mass death, even for a Jewish avenging warrior, is overwhelming. In this case, geography is a character. Poland is not just a place but a forbidding state of mind. Locating some of the novel in Poland takes the story away from the perceived comfort of Miami Beach, Washington, D.C., and New York and returns it to the very place where no Jew was safe, even one as formidable and gigantic as Duncan.

Q. Was there a risk for you as a novelist in making much of the action take place on Holocaust-laden ground? I’m not asking on an autobiographical level; I mean, did you think that your narrative might get out of control when you shifted your setting to Poland?

A. On some level, I wanted the narrative to get out of control. I was taking the reader to Poland, after all. All those ghosts. All that death. If Duncan was returning to the land of the lost, the reader should
experience some of those same trembling sensations—the feeling that we are now traveling on unsafe ground. I think in the novel I refer to it as “terra infirma.” A very unfamiliar yet haunted territory. This is why, while I have personally been to Poland, I didn’t care so much whether I got the street names or the geography right. What I wanted was the feeling of a traumatizing return, yet an ambivalent and essential one. For many readers, Poland is not a central destination for their European vacations—it is, and certainly was in 1999 when the novel was published, a mysterious country, caught on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain. That’s what I was after—not just the foreign country as setting for the novel, but something even more foreign, like another planet, or an underworld. For this reason, you see more of the supernatural in Poland, because I wanted to create a true psychic distance between the place itself and the state of mind in which Duncan holds Poland in his invented memory.

Q. I know you have a European readership. What has been those readers’ response to your novels?

A. There is no great love affair, I’m afraid. Particularly with respect to my essays, few Europeans embrace the idea that future generations bear moral responsibility for atrocities committed by an earlier generation. And even fewer people believe that ritualized memorializations are moral imperatives that must be respected and practiced by everyone. The question becomes, Can a society maintain any claim to being moral if it refuses to acknowledge and remember atrocities committed by its people, on its land, in its presence, and amid its indifference? Those who believe that future generations have no moral responsibility to remember, ritualize, and continue to undertake meaningful gestures of repair will not find my essays to be pleasant reading. There is a difference between legal guilt and moral responsibility. The former is reserved for actual perpetrators, but the latter is more long-lasting and harder for many people to accept, since the impulse toward absolute innocence is always so great and compelling.

Q. I find these comments fascinating in light of your chosen occupations. You’re a lawyer as well as a novelist, you’ve written works
of legal philosophy as well as fiction. In what ways has your background as a lawyer informed your novelistic writings?

A. I would ask the question slightly differently, although I realize it is a strange way to frame it: the fact is, my novels have had a larger influence in shaping my legal philosophy than the other way around. What I have tried to do is insert the moral themes of my novels—the moral imperative to acknowledge and remember great loss, to undertake gestures of repair, and to understand that humanity requires the protection of spiritual dignity as well as physical integrity, that victims must be granted a voice to speak to their grievances in a public setting—into the law courses I teach and essays I write. In fact, The Myth of Moral Justice, which is an attempt to offer a coherent legal philosophy that is grounded in moral language, reads to me as if it was written and conceived by a novelist who just happens to also be a law professor. Its entire focus on moral and spiritual concerns, emotional complexity, backstory, and the way in which novelists and playwrights have historically interpreted the legal system has far more in common with a novelist’s mind-set than with a unified, coherent theory of justice offered by a law professor.

Q. Is this why in The Myth of Moral Justice you advocate for more emphasis being placed on victim testimony, that is, giving the victimized an opportunity to express their stories of grief? Does (and should) storytelling—which seems to play a central role in this book—function in the courtroom in the same way that it functions in general, as a way of making sense of our lives, as a means of healing, or at least ameliorating, our situations?

A. Yes. The most important thing for those who have been harmed or betrayed or violated is to know that the event itself will not be forgotten, that it will be acknowledged, proclaimed for the entire world, and recorded for history. There is no worse spiritual crime than forgetfulness and amnesia, as if forgetting even works. The truth always wins out in the end. So, yes, storytelling is important not just for the novelist, but for everyone. The only way I know to keep a story alive is by telling it, and repeating it, and making it available for others to learn from it.
Q. Would you say that the act of remembering, and of repeating the memory through narrative, is part of your alternative legal approach, what you call in your book a “moral-soul-acknowledgment/restoration” paradigm, as opposed to the “legal-body-punishment/money” paradigm?

A. There is no moral justice without memory, acknowledgment, storytelling, and narrative. Legal justice puts people in jail and provides monetary compensation. Moral justice allows victims and injured parties to go home and rest easier, knowing that they have been heard and respected.

Q. So you are a novelist who practices law, rather than the other way around, but in what ways do you translate your alternative legal approaches through your fiction? For instance, how do you see your legal philosophies playing themselves out in Second Hand Smoke or The Golems of Gotham?

A. The novels are clearly inspired by the conceit that fiction can actually speak to the most grave of injustices, that it can provide a moral voice to explain madness. Somehow the fictional narrative voice can leave testimony, pronounce judgment, speak to historical truth, and find some sense of resolution or reconciliation for those who suffered unspeakable injury. Most importantly, the novel can serve as a memorial, a monument so that what happened is not forgotten and the future does not march on without memory. I think there is a deep element of longing for moral justice in these novels, because conventional legal justice cannot, and did not, produce a satisfying outcome, given the enormity of the underlying crime.

Q. One of the most notable aspects of The Golems of Gotham is your giving voice to six famous authors—Primo Levi, Jerzy Kosinski, Jean Améry, Paul Celan, Piotr Rawicz, and Tadeusz Borowski—who survived the Holocaust but ultimately committed suicide. Tell me, what reservations might you have had in using these figures as characters in your novel? Does using them allow for a sort of “fictional testimony”?

A. As a lawyer, I knew that there was no legal impediment to returning these writers to an afterlife that they never actually lived.
They populate my novel as ghosts. Obviously none of these post-death events ever took place, and the novel begins with a disclaimer that, of course, it is all fiction. But just because I could do it legally doesn’t mean that it was right morally—and the author of The Myth of Moral Justice would know that. There was a kind of aesthetic audacity in bringing back to an afterlife six Holocaust survivor-writers who had killed themselves. On the other hand, who better to resurrect? These were men who had said so much about the world’s greatest atrocity while they were alive, and yet ultimately they took their own lives without leaving any word of explanation. For years I felt that this was the world’s greatest post-Holocaust mystery, and yet no one had written about it: virtually all the major Holocaust writers who had been survivors had killed themselves. (I mentioned this in an article I wrote for The New York Times on the film The Truce, as well as in an op-ed piece, also in the Times, when Imre Kertesz won the Nobel Prize for literature.) But just because it was a great mystery, and a great story that I could reimagine, didn’t mean I didn’t feel any ambivalence about doing it. I even asked Elie Wiesel what he thought about it, and he gave me his blessing. Of course, he makes several cameo appearances in the novel, as if he became a fictional character as well. There is a conflict in me between the novelist as sorcerer, as magician, as provocateur of real events, and the guardian of Holocaust memory. In this case, I felt that giving these men a post-Holocaust, postdeath voice was not trivializing but perhaps necessary given the mystery of their final acts, and the failure of mankind to live up to the moral imperative of Holocaust memory. Who better to speak to the harsh truths of human failing than the very men who, through their art, sought to leave evidence of what they had witnessed, only to discover that the world didn’t really care?

Q. Did any other “guardians” of memory take issue with the ghosts?

A. Kiki Kosinski, Jerzy’s wife, called me soon after the novel was published, without having yet read it, and was pretty upset. Six months later, after having read the book and hearing from some Kosinski scholar that the novel was important, artful, and apparently
respectful, she conceded that she was pleased that I had written it. I received a letter from a Holocaust survivor who loved the novel but detested my postdeath portrait of Rawicz, who in the novel is the sweet, avuncular, grieving golem, but in real life, in Auschwitz, she said, was anything but charitable or kind. Who knows about such things. I know that he was one of Elie Wiesel’s best friends, and he was a terrific writer, the author of *Blood from the Sky*.

Q. Your “golems” aren’t the traditional sort that you see in literature, the kind inspired by the legend of Rabbi Loew. What gave you the idea to incorporate golems into your third novel, and why did you choose to write them more as ghostly figures?

A. The third novel of the trilogy was supposed to be redemptive, the one where I try to pull it all together, to make my final post-Holocaust statement. For this reason, it was, to my mind, a novel of rescue and repair. I thought about the six dead writers, and Oliver’s parents, and I realized, How do you resurrect them as ghosts without resorting to extreme measures? How does this happen, even in a fictional setting? Along the way I thought about Jewish mysticism, and how that might be deployed as Jewish black magic or sorcery, since this was, after all, a gothic Jewish ghost story with a post-Holocaust backdrop. Of course, then the idea of the golem emerged, since it was a creature of rescue. But I thought, given everything else about my post-Holocaust imagination, I couldn’t possibly rely on a strict adherence to the golem-making recipe. Indeed, I thought, consistent with my fiction, and even *The Myth of Moral Justice*, I wanted to focus on the Holocaust as a crime of mass murder that also had a spiritual component. Apart from the dead bodies, there were dead spirits and souls, and what needed to be re-created here was more than the mere making of a Jewish monster; it also had to include a spiritual resurrection. The original golem was all body and no soul; my golems were all spirit with no body. A complete inversion of the paradigm, which makes sense to me, given that in a post-Holocaust world, nothing can be as it once was—even the operating manual for making a golem.

Q. Quite a number of works lately have used the golem in one way or another. In addition to your novel, I’m thinking of Cynthia
Ozick’s *The Puttermesser Papers* (although parts of that novel appeared in the 1982 collection *Levitation: Five Fictions*), Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, and even James Sturm’s graphic novel *The Golem’s Mighty Swing* (about a 1920s Jewish baseball team). What does the golem represent that makes it such a relatively popular narrative device?

A. I spoke at a conference several years ago at UCLA on the golem. I was asked to provide the artist’s perspective on what the golem means to artists, why artists are often inspired to re-create and reimagine the story of the golem and adapt it to modern times. The golem story, in essence, is a story of creation, which is not that much unlike what artists do. The novelist begins with a blank page and, by adding words, gives life to a story. The same is true with a golem; you start with clay, but mud is not enough. You need words and gematria to breathe actual life into the mud. Such an endeavor is a godlike act—the act of giving life—and in Judaism, such powers are rarely displayed by human beings. The Maharal was, indeed, a special rabbi. There is also the idea that the golem is a creature of rescue, and, in Jewish history, such calls for rescue were necessary, even if mostly unanswered. If a novelist is given the power to create a character that can save the world, if not speak to the larger aspirations of *tikkun olam* [repair of the world], he or she will usually take the risk that the golem won’t succeed.

Q. But at the same time, there is always the danger that the golem will get out of control and become a threat to those it is supposed to protect. This happens in *The Golems of Gotham* when the golem spirits become angered over the loss, or weakening, of Holocaust memory. If we look at art or writing as a “golem,” isn’t there a similar risk?

A. Yes, quite right: all fiction-writing is risky, an act of voodoo and black magic. In fact, I would say that fiction is at its best (and surely this is even more true of post-Holocaust fiction) when it shows humanity slightly out of control and off-kilter, as if every novel in some way has its golem moment, where a riot breaks out and we are faced with the flattening of our expectations, and where our comprehension of reality and assumptions about the world are entirely upended. The novel loses its balance, the fictional world tilts away
from our perceived axis of truth, and the imagination of the novelist hijacks whatever rigid orthodoxies once guided us. Yet despite the disruption, we somehow choose to read on and discover some reconciliation, so that we are eventually rewarded for having willingly suspended all that disbelief.

Q. Who are some writers (post-Holocaust or otherwise) you admire, authors who take risks in their fiction?

A. Well, you know Kafka was the rabbi for most Jewish writers, and most modernists, too. Cervantes, to this day, to my mind, is the most daring and inventive novelist of his or any other era. I grew up on Crane, Poe, Dickens, and Dostoyevsky. I continue to think that Herman Melville remains an underrated genius, even though most academics and readers believe that his work is seminal, but whatever the considered opinion is of his contribution to literature, to my mind, it’s not high enough. There was a time when I was addicted to John Irving; at another time it was Milan Kundera; and at yet another it was Jorge Luis Borges. Bruno Schulz and Isaac Babel were masters who cannot really be emulated. I would include Joseph Roth as well; I especially like his essays. Henry Roth was the Jewish American Joyce. Elie Wiesel is another one who is underrated as a fiction writer. I love Philip Roth: *The Ghost Writer* and *The Counterlife* clearly influenced my fiction writing. E. L. Doctorow has done some very interesting things in his fiction over the years. David Grossman’s *See Under: Love* convinced me that continuing on as a lawyer would be a tremendous waste of time if I could come even fractionally close to the extraordinary power of that novel.

Q. You mentioned both Wiesel and Henry Roth as underappreciated writers of fiction. Why do you think this is so?

A. Well, both are thought of as artifacts of something other than the legacy of their novels, as if their novels are incidental to some larger event that dominates and completely obscures the fiction they have created. With Wiesel, it is unquestionably the Holocaust, the granddaddy of all obscuring, epochal events. Because he is identified as a Holocaust survivor, humanist, moral philosopher, and Nobelist in human rights, there is the tendency to undervalue his
fiction, or to tragically ignore that he has even written any fiction. And *Night* doesn’t help him here, because it is a memoir that everyone has read, but it is not fiction, and therefore everyone believes they have read him when all they have read is his first book, which isn’t his best book, is not a work of fiction, and may not be the book that he himself would want to be best remembered for. With Henry Roth, well, he’s totally and completely overshadowed by the other Roths—Philip and Joseph—and his first book, *Call It Sleep*, is deemed a masterpiece, but mainly as an artifact of American modernism and a historical re-creation of the American shtetl that existed on the Lower East Side. If not for the time-and-place significance of his work, he might not have been taken seriously at all. And certainly his later fiction, published sixty years after *Call It Sleep*, was read not necessarily as great fiction but rather as a great comeback story, which again overshadows the novels themselves and by doing so severely undervalues him.

Q. Did you ever have the opportunity to communicate with Henry Roth?

A. No, I wish I had. But he did provide a blurb for *Elijah Visible*, and I learned recently in Steven Kellman’s biography of Roth that it was the only blurb he had ever written, which, I suppose, binds me to him in some way, and I appreciate that connection, particularly since his career was so idiosyncratic and worthy.

Q. What do you think of the current state of fiction, specifically the most recent generation of Jewish American writers?

A. I think what is happening with regard to contemporary Jewish American fiction is interesting and magical. When I was at *Tikkun*, we devoted an entire issue to this renaissance in Jewish American fiction-writing. But as for specific observations, it does seem as if religion, neo-orthodoxy, and the return to once-forsaken Jewish homelands have found a place in Jewish fiction in ways that would not have been imagined if one were reading only Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth. And, of course, the voices of Jewish Americans of Russian heritage have really contributed to the literary culture these past few years.
Q. In your 2004 essay “Art and Atrocity in a Post-9/11 World,” you write about the problems inherent in traumatic representation. You’re a novelist, a child of Holocaust survivors, and a New Yorker: given this curious subject position, what do you see as the writer’s responsibility in narrating the events surrounding 9/11 and its aftermath?

A. I think it is simply way too soon for writers to imagine, conjure, or reinvent the events of 9/11—even its aftermath. I don’t believe it can be processed properly, or fairly, and the impulse to want to, to my mind, is misguided. People really forget how many decades had to pass before the Holocaust was taken on as a subject for the artistic imagination. To the extent to which there is ever going to be a great 9/11 novel, we won’t read it for many years to come. As Primo Levi wrote in an entirely different context—even though both Auschwitz and 9/11 fall into the category of atrocities, 9/11 is a considerably lesser one—“No words can be used to describe this offense: the demolition of a man.” The point is, words will fail to transmit the horror and transport the reader to the scene of the crime, and therefore any attempt to do so will end up trivializing the representation, because the representation will not present the event fairly or accurately. No writer is up to the task.

Q. Then there’s Oliver Stone, no stranger to controversial subject matter, and his film World Trade Center. What are your thoughts on that?

A. Again, if you want to distort and twist the Kennedy assassination, that’s one thing. But once you start messing with the ghosts of 9/11, you’re really trampling all over much more profound sensitivities.

Q. Do you think that mediums other than the novel might lend themselves more easily to representing 9/11? I’m thinking, for example, of Bruce Springsteen’s “The Rising” or Art Spiegelman’s In the Shadow of No Towers.

A. Hard to argue with the Boss; I’d rather take issue with Art. The song really is terrific, and perhaps a pop ballad offers possibilities—due to three minutes of intense creative compression (and the fact
that it is not trying to do too much)—that a novel, or film, or illustrated book, simply cannot. I just don’t understand why the impulse to wait holds so little value, and why modesty and humility in the face of unspeakable, unwritable tragedy carries even less currency in the modern world.

Q. What are your issues with Spiegelman and his representations of 9/11?

A. None, really. It would be the same point that I would make about *Maus*. Any attempts to depict life in the camps are trivializing, regardless of the aesthetic form. Any attempts to address the fall of the twin towers and the horrors within them would be equally desecrating. I don’t know whether Art has done that in his latest book.

Q. One thing that you and Art Spiegelman have in common is being the children of Holocaust survivors. Even though you represent the Holocaust and its aftermath in vastly different ways, both of you are working from historical (and familial) fact. Are you annoyed when readers assume that what you are writing is more memoir than imagination?

A. I’m not sure people realize what they are reading when they pick up a novel. In light of the popularity of daytime confessional talk shows and the shrinking boundaries between public and private lives, most people believe they are entitled to know about someone’s private life, or that people are open to revealing their private affairs, so that a novel is surely a memoir in disguise. This kind of thing never happened with Faulkner, I’m sure; people didn’t raise their hands at readings and ask him whether his father ever burned a barn. The Holocaust makes this blurring between the imagination and reality even more pronounced, since it takes a certain moral authority to write about the Holocaust in any form, so that people readily assume that one must be writing from a literal truth rather than an emotional one. Once you tell someone that you are a child of Holocaust survivors, and your novel deals with the post-Holocaust universe, they can’t seem to read it as if it isn’t a voyeuristic experience. The problem is that these attitudes completely discount the imaginative realm, cheapen the value of a
novel, and ultimately distort truth, because people are reading novels believing that they are reading about history, which is not the novelist’s burden.

Q. But don’t you believe that novel-writing is a form of history or way of capturing historical truths—or inversely, that historical accounts have more in common with fiction than most people believe?

A. I think it is wrong if not dangerous to read fiction as if you are reading history. The only truth that exists in fiction, when it’s good fiction, is emotional truth. Literal truth has nothing to do with fiction, and history is first and foremost an exercise in seeking out literal, factual truths. Let’s not underestimate the value of emotional truth. We would all be better off if we could get introduced to emotional truth more often in our day. The world would be a much better place. And the novel is one of the best places to get your fix. The problem is, is anyone addicted anymore?

Q. What do you see as the responsibility of the novelist in relation to historical truth?

A. Make sure your readers are reminded that they are not reading history, that when the book jacket reads “novel,” it means a work of fiction. The best way to avoid the confusion is to try not to retell an atrocity as if it is happening on the page. It’s one thing to write about its aftermath—and those people living in the shadow of it—from a removed distance. But it’s quite another to set it up as if the reader is entering the world of the atrocity itself, being falsely transported to the scene of the crime, as if there is a live feed or a simultaneous hookup. In an age of CNN and Survivor, people get confused and believe they are reading the equivalent of reality TV.

Q. How do you see the larger role of the novelist in contemporary American society and culture?

A. Unfortunately, America doesn’t have such a role for the novelist (isn’t even aware that the novelist can even play such a role), and that’s one of the reasons why the novelist, and the novel of ideas, is
such an endangered species in this country. There was once a time when ideas mattered, and many ideas came from the minds and imaginations of novelists. In other countries, this is still true. In fact, many countries look to their novelists not just for art, but for art that illuminates and provides for a better comprehension of the world. Writers are often recruited as electoral candidates. Could you imagine that in this country? People around the world look to the novel, and the novelist, for a coherent moral philosophy. In America, most everyone is impressed only by money, and not ideas, which makes material wealth the only currency of value. And so captains of industry remain our role models even as they engage in unethical, fraudulent business practices. And everything seems to revolve around celebrity and entertainment. There is little room for or excitement about ideas.

Q. How do you see your current work, the fiction that you’re writing now, fitting into our contemporary cultural landscape?

A. Actually, the novel I am now completing, in various ways, deals with some of the deracinated, diminished values of contemporary culture. It takes on many broad themes, but I am pretty much resigned to the fact that it won’t change the mind-set or intellectual curiosity of most Americans. A number of years ago I wrote an essay challenging the presumption that Jews are big readers of literature. I believe it once was true, but no longer. Jewish Americans have confused advanced professional degrees and high incomes with broad cultural knowledge. Most MBAs and JDs haven’t been near a novel in years. The joke of that essay is that no one challenged it because, I fear, no one read it, which essentially proved my underlying point.

Q. Philip Roth was quoted in 1993 as saying that we are down to what he called “a gulag archipelago of readers.” He thought that the number of serious readers—the kind of readers who willingly turn off their televisions and phones in the evenings and look forward to reading two to three hours a day, several days a week—could be optimistically estimated at about sixty thousand. Is that how you feel?
I remember when Roth said that. I hadn’t published my first book yet. But even then, nearly fifteen years ago, I assumed his numbers, although frightening, were actually too high. If you ask most people whether they have purchased a serious, literary novel in hardcover, very few, if they are honest, will tell you that they have ever done it, unless it was a book that was written by a friend or relative. They have little interest in reading anything other than their last statement from Merrill Lynch. In Manhattan, it used to be a matter of pride for people to showcase bookshelves in their apartments filled with books. Books were almost quasi furniture, like placing art on the wall. Today, even in Manhattan, books are deemed unnecessary clutter, which interferes with the aesthetics of a pristine white wall. The culture has very much changed, and any presumption about what it means to be an educated, well-read person has been replaced by the allure of money and material things.

Q. So why do you continue to write fiction? Why not end with your post-Holocaust trilogy and turn to nonfiction, or even go back to practicing law?

A. I think fiction writers have no choice but to write fiction. Writing a novel is about so many things, which makes it so very different from other forms of writing. It’s not enough to be able to string some sentences together. Many people can do that without being novelists. You have to have something to say, and it has to be said in a particular voice, and that voice, and the surrounding setting and characters, has to be fictional, because the mind processes information quite differently when it is received by way of a story than as nonfiction or journalism. It enters through an entirely different portal, and the novelist, intuitively, understands this. That’s part of his or her bag of tricks—the alchemy of story, plot, imagination, characters, dialogue, the shifting of time frames and points of view—all of these techniques are smoke screens that somehow bring clarity to the human condition. You simply can’t receive that level of human comprehension from reading the morning newspaper. The problem is this: while the novelist knows about these truths, how long can he or she continue to write them if readers are
more fixated on other allures for their eyes? The screen saver has replaced the mental picturing of the imagination. My guess is that the novel will continue to be written, even if unread, because the novelist won’t be able to help himself. Perhaps it will be written in invisible ink, as if fiction should only be read by ghosts, another category that knows something about truths.