

Whose Parable Is it Anyway?



Rachel Kadish revisits
Richard Adams' tale of
(Zionist?) rabbits.

I don't tend to spot Jews under every literary rock and tree. I like to think that I can appreciate Serbian and Bangladeshi and Antiguan writers, and Shakespeare too, without conflating their works and themes with Sholom Aleichem's. Yet I can't deny that I've long cherished the notion that *Watership Down*, the 1972 English novel by Richard Adams, begs to be read through Jewish-colored glasses.

Here's a quick plot summary: Rabbits are living complacently in their warren (Europe?) when one of them, Fiver, has a vision of impending destruction. Few of the warren's residents wish to believe in the impending danger—still, Fiver and Hazel (Herzl?) lead the small band of believers out of their doomed warren. Shortly after their departure, the warren is bulldozed, and all of the rabbits who stayed behind—bucks, does and kits—are gassed. The struggling band of survivors search for a new home, where they'll have safety and self-determination—and, after passing through a warren where worldly goods are in abundance but the rabbits have lost their native culture and souls (the Golden Medina!), they establish a scrappy homeland. But they need to populate! So they send undercover agents to the repressive warren nearby, infiltrate its distinctly

KGB-like police, defy the Stalinesque General Woundwort and set free the entrapped (Soviet Jewish?) females. Everyone goes back to the new warren high on the hilltop, where life isn't cushy but the rabbits live in safety and freedom, fruitfully multiplying. The original band of rabbits die happy, their dream fulfilled. Cue strains of *Hatikvah*.

Surely growing up around Holocaust refugees predisposed me to read epic wanderers as Jews. In fact, characters in fantasy novels who are cursed to walk the earth in the aftermath of a great loss often seem powerfully familiar (Aragorn in *Lord of the Rings*; the ever-outcast Remus Lupin in the Harry Potter series, whose melancholy wisdom sounds here and there in Harry's tale like a minor chord). Seeing these characters as just a tiny bit Jewish—or at least suspecting them of being Good for the Jews—isn't necessarily solipsistic. The story of the Jewish diaspora and the return to Israel has been compelling enough to be adopted and adapted worldwide by ministers, street preachers, historians, politicians, slaves—anyone in need of fortification, justification, assurance that they can endure and even prevail.

Jewish texts are among the central writings that have shaped the world's understanding of itself. Why, then, should it be a surprise to find echoes of them in literature? These echoes needn't be deliberate—and as a writer, I know better than to spend too much time speculating over whether Adams (or Tolkien or Rowling) had us Jews in mind. While nothing in Richard Adams' biography leads me to think he has any particular interest in the Jewish narrative, I do assume he's familiar with Genesis. And when the sun-god Frith says to the progenitor of all rabbits, "All the world will be your enemy, Prince With a Thousand Enemies, and whenever they catch you they will kill you. But first they must catch you," and when Frith goes on to make a promise (covenant?) with the rabbits that they'll never be destroyed—I want to pull out a copy of Genesis and start comparing lines.

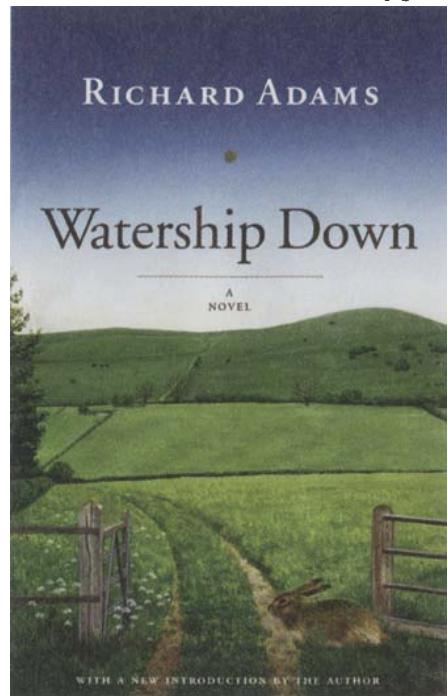
How easy, then, to spy the watermark of Jewish history in a book like *Watership Down*, or to spot characters who seem based on Jews. But on a deeper level, it can be hazardous, in that it compounds a sensation I find all too familiar: a feeling that our exceptional history is coveted property, our tragic sense of purpose the envy of the world. Seeing our suffering as

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wholly unique risks setting off a dangerous mindset—and while I may be discussing a book about rabbits, this mindset raises questions that have real-world ramifications. Is Jewish suffering necessarily worse than everyone else's? Worse than other people's slavery, oppression or genocide? Is there a ranking system for suffering? And what happens to us if we win? I step into these issues knowing, as a granddaughter of survivors, how dangerous it can be to minimize the uniqueness of the Holocaust—yet also aware of the dangers of seeing only our own history. And because I think if we Jews always win the suffering game—if our story is de facto the most powerful one out there—then telling the story of the Jews can feel like looking up at the stars at night, with their mysterious planets and moons, and wondering: Is there anyone else out there? Anyone who might remotely understand?

Evidently there is.

Continues on page 79

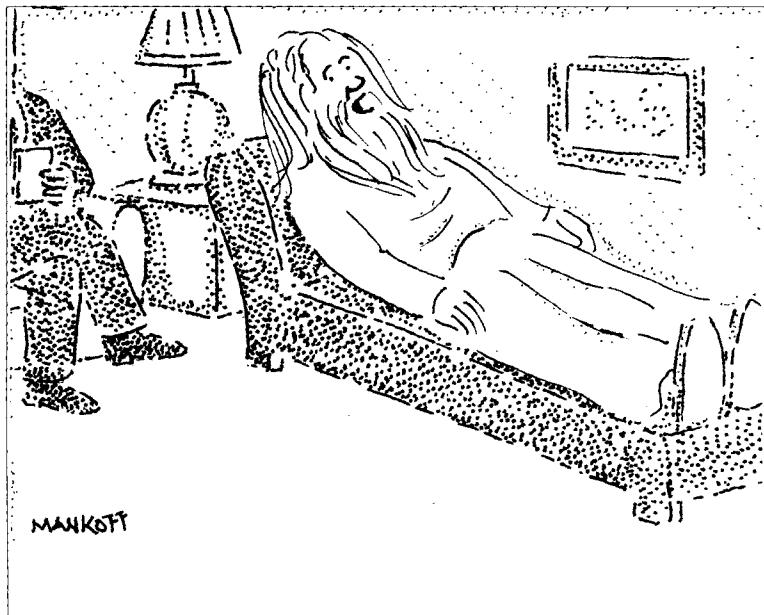


COURTESY OF ANDREW KELLY/SCRIBNER

MOMENT CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Welcome to the *Moment* Cartoon Caption Contest. In each issue, we publish a cartoon drawn by *New Yorker* cartoon editor Bob Mankoff. Suggested captions for this cartoon must be submitted by October 10, 2011, at momentmag.com/cartoon.html. Finalists will appear in the November/December 2011 issue. To vote for the winner of the July/August contest (see finalists at right), email votecartoon@momentmag.com. The winner will receive a free subscription to *Moment* to give to a friend. Any U.S. resident age 18 or older can enter.

THIS ISSUE'S CONTEST

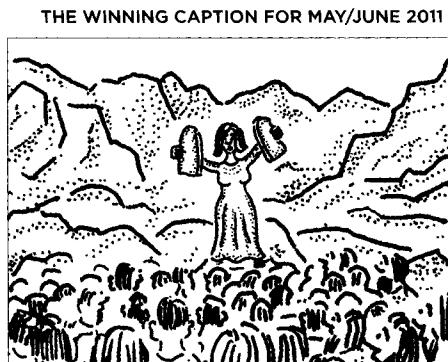


JULY/AUGUST 2011 FINALISTS

"Can I interest you in trying on a pair of tefillin?"
Cary Antebi, Brooklyn, NY

"Don't worry, my synagogue will find me when they don't hear my pledge."
Cary Antebi, Brooklyn, NY

"I didn't expect rising sea levels to affect Florida so soon."
Lewis Shilhane, Joplin, MO



Continued from page 77

Recently I read a new introduction by Richard Adams to his 2005 edition of *Watership Down*. "I want to emphasize," he wrote, "that *Watership Down* was never intended to be some sort of allegory or parable. It is simply the story about rabbits made up and told in the car." Reading Adams' protest, I realized what should have been obvious all along: that I wasn't the only one laying another template atop the story of *Watership Down*. Turns out plenty of other people have seen their histories in that book. Turns out some people see it as an allegory for struggles against the Cold War, fascism, extremism. Or a protest against materialism, against the corporate state. *Watership Down* can be Ireland after the famine, Rwanda after the

massacres. A quick online search for "Watership Down, allegory" definitively proves that the book is actually an adaptation of Homer and Virgil, or of the life of Jesus, or of Native American religion. How lovely, to be put in my place by a search engine.

So let me pause here to sing a song of praise to the good old-fashioned fantasy novel, a genre that's often scorned by literary writers, but that I like for the same reason I'm fascinated by myths, fables and fairy tales: their redemptive universality. If that sounds grandiose, then I suppose I mean it to be. I think fantasy novels do something good for people—something that's hard to achieve in other forms. What these stories sometimes lack in nuance or sophistica-

tion, they compensate for in sheer scale of ambition—vaulting us into orbit so we get a satellite view of something we're otherwise too close to see properly.

Displacement and wandering, prophecy and faith, terror and struggle and peace: These motifs hit home in every culture. If *Watership Down* is Good for the Jews, maybe it's simply because it's reflecting the basic myths that fortify humanity and, like any good fantasy novel, carrying the watermark of our biggest cultural concerns. And all passersby are welcome to bring their own subplots and plug into the archetype.

What a relief, then, to set down our isolation for a moment and see: We're all in this storyline together.