

Etgar Keret Has a Cold

Rebecca Frankel



Soon after, we were sitting down at a table in a local café. At 39, gray streaks through Keret's slate brown hair, blooming white at his temples. A man of modest height, he wore a forgettably casual blue shirt and jeans, and seemed more like that friendly someone you nod hello to while waiting for your morning cappuccino, the kind of guy who'd let you cut ahead of him in line, than a world-renowned writer whose work has overwhelmed an Israeli literary scene dominated by giants like A.B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz and David Grossman.

Hailed as "the voice of Israel's youth," Keret is a writer of short fiction, graphic novels, children's books, plays and screenplays. His collective works have sold over a million copies in Israel, a country of just six million. He moonlights as a film director and over 40 short films have been based on his stories. Yet, nowhere did I see the curling lip of a brash Israeli hard mouth. He was instead soft-spoken, thoughtful.

"Is your drink good?" he asked as I sipped my iced mocha. I said it was and offered him one of my animal crackers. "I can't," he told me. "I'm a vegetarian."

The café was busy, noisy. There was the occasional clatter of silverware against the

When I met Etgar Keret he had a cold. His head was aching and he was feeling a little feverish. Which is how I ended up in the cold and flu aisle of a Washington, DC, drugstore with one of Israel's most popular fiction writers. We gazed down the long stretch of plastic-capped bottles and red and blue boxes, all promising fast relief. "So," he said with a kind but tired smile, "which one do we get?"

Keret was in town for a book reading. It was one of the last stops on his U.S. tour and the cold, he felt, was perhaps a result of too much air travel. He seemed happy enough while we weighed the possible side effects of Advil Cold & Sinus over those of Sudafed instead of discussing the state of the world or life in the Middle East, topics which have so heavily influenced his writing.

We agreed on what appeared to be a trustworthy brand and began a new search, this time for fingernail clippers. As we rounded a corner, the writer bowed to the drugstore floor without stumble or pause to retrieve an enormous, neon-pink package of Maxi Pads, and returned it to the girl stacking shelves with all the charm and grace of a knight presenting his queen with the most royal of gifts.

old-fashioned ceramic tiles and the large open windows drew in the breeze and sunlight. Keret was a courteous listener; his thick accent had a soothing quality. We ordered and continued talking books. He loves the Russian greats, Nabokov and Chekhov, but his palate is broad and names like J.D. Salinger and John Cheever soon followed.

I was curious about his work habits. What rituals or formulas, if any, did he follow? "I don't write every day. I write only when I have stories. Sometimes I cannot write for many months," Keret told me, as he started on a bowl of lentil soup. "When I write, I never know the endings. What I think works in [my] stories is the fact that when I write, I really want to find out what is going on—I'm writing for myself as a reader. It's like when you dream a dream. I want to know what's behind the door. If I navigate, it's from a place that's totally intuitive."

For Keret, who writes exclusively in Hebrew, the brief form his oeuvres take is not a choice. Novels and short stories are anatomically different, and he imagines that a writer either has the talent to be a novelist or the talent to be a short story writer. To compare the mechanics of writing a short story to the methodology behind novel writing seems, to him, as useless as asking whether it's more difficult to win a hundred-meter dash or a marathon.

If short stories are slices of life, then Keret's are the

splinters. Like wolves in sheep's clothing, his vignettes deliver biting social commentary and musings on human appetites, served up by tenderly drawn characters in an intoxicating mix of fantasy, politics and humor.

The jacket of his 2006 book, *The Nimrod Flipout*, features a little man with wide-set, bulging eyes wearing a pink bunny suit. A rifle held slack in one hand, he stands amid a sprinkling of dead bird-fish. It could be the cover for a warped version of *Where the Wild Things Are*. In this latest collection, Keret presents 30 of his trademark short, short stories. *Flipout* opens with "Fatso," a tale Keret penned for his wife, about a man who discovers that each night, his near-perfect girlfriend turns into a steak-eating, beer-drinking, foulmouthed man who carries more than a few extra pounds around his middle.

Opening any of his compilations at random, one finds such titles as "A Souvenir of Hell," "Glittery Eyes" and "Missing Kissinger," the reader finds himself in a world pulling at the seams of reality. But despite the peculiar and sometimes provocative appellations—"Actually, I've Had Some Phenomenal Hard-ons Lately"—Keret contemplates the base complexities that afflict us all, things like love, uncertainty

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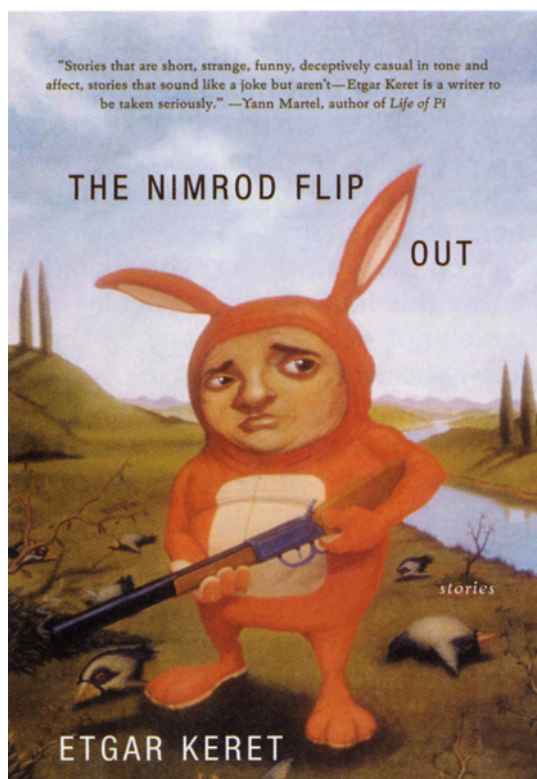
Or, holding a loaded weapon to someone's head. I'm not sure that there are so many Americans who weren't on Jerry Springer who would know this feeling. But basically in Israel, not every, but many, of the soldiers who work the roadblocks do this on a daily basis. They say to someone, 'You can't go any farther,' with rockets aimed at people's faces."

and grief. Keret's dry wit resonates in his stories. While there's irony and humor in such situations as when a halibut commiserates with the patron who's just ordered it for supper, his narratives do far more than make jokes. Whether it's a crass taxi driver who honks relentlessly at the "finer" qualities of the young, pretty girls, or a boy who names his cat Rabin, many of his pages are laced with a melancholic tension.

Keret was born in Ramat Gan, a suburb about five miles outside of Tel Aviv. He was raised in an open and loving household. His eclectic family members remain a close group and, as rendered by Keret's pen, could be characters in their own fables, and perhaps are. His parents survived the very real monsters of the Holocaust. His older sister, who became Orthodox as an adult, is now the mother of

eleven. Keret's brother, one of the first people with whom Keret shared his writing, once led the movement to legalize marijuana in Israel and now lives in a tree house in Thailand.

In addition to having been introduced to Hasidic storytelling by his sister, the feel of which permeates his stories, his family has afforded him perspective. "When someone tells me what to expect from an extreme ultra-Orthodox and I look at my sister, she's not what I would expect from an extreme ultra-Orthodox. If you ask me what to expect from an extreme left-wing social activist, the stereotype is very far from what my brother is. I think it shows that really, the differences between points of view are not that far when there are people behind them. Ideologies are text, but really what's more important when you listen to someone who speaks about ideology are the subtexts behind it."



Keret lives in Tel Aviv, not far from his childhood home, with his wife, Shira Gefen, an Israeli actress famous in her own right. The couple, who have collaborated on film and children's book projects together, had their first child this year, a boy they named Lev, which means "heart" in Hebrew. When I asked how life with baby was going, he pulled out his cell phone, offering it to me from across the table—the modern equivalent of wallet photos. On the screen I saw a happy baby with dark hair. "Wait," he said, and reached to push a button. Another picture of Lev appeared; this time his

chubby cheeks filled the frame. "I call him Jabba the Hutt," Keret told me. Clutched between those tiny fingers, and in his mouth, was a familiar white-and-blue banner. "It's the flag," he said, smiling, a proud and happy daddy. "He's biting it."

The flag reminded me how much Keret's life as an Israeli is reflected on his pages. In many of his stories the country is as much a living, breathing thing as any of his human characters, however subtle its presence may be. I asked him how different he thought his writing would be if he hadn't been in the army, or if Israel were no longer his

home. He put his spoon back into the bowl.

"I think that I would basically write about the same emotions," he said. "In Israel, politics dictate the human situation, the emotions. People are more stressed, more violent, more afraid, sometimes more xenophobic. This is what you find in my stories, this kind of feeling of living in a world that's completely unstable, one that can change at any moment; it can turn on you. It's a very Israeli feeling."

As Keret sees it, while life in Israel is not altogether disparate from life in the United States or Europe, the psychological makeup of an Israeli is inherently different. Israelis, as he reasoned, live in a state of perpetual unrest where time is sliced by hourly news reports, listening for word of a bombing or to see if there has been an air strike. It's a day-to-day kind of living he imagines would be very foreign to most people living outside the Middle East.

"I was just telling my friend," he said, naming an acclaimed American writer, his eyes glinting with something akin to mischief, "what's the greatest issue America can have? That they'll close Starbucks or there won't be another [season of] *The Sopranos*?" As Keret put it, serious once again, most people aren't worried about genocide, but Israelis and Palestinians think about it all the time. The reality that Israel could at any time become a smoking hole in the ground is a consuming fear.

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doors open is something that most Americans aren't trained to do, but Israelis are. Or, holding a loaded weapon to someone's head. I'm not sure that there are so many Americans who weren't on Jerry Springer who would know this feeling," he said, his smile fading. "But basically in Israel, not every, but many, of the soldiers who work the roadblocks do this on a daily basis. They say to someone, 'You can't go any farther,' with rockets aimed at people's faces. When you're in the army you look at those around you and you know that they are breakable. It's something that stays with you."

As a student whose compositions were "too weird" for his teachers, Keret's life as a writer began when he was in the army. His best friend committed suicide while they were on guard duty together, and two weeks later he wrote his first story.

Keret's army experience is visible in many of his characters and plotlines, though he homes in on emotion more than specific people or places. In his stories about fighting in Israel and guarding its borders, Keret's prose goes right for the gullet. In the scathing "Cocked and Locked," from the anthology *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to Be God*, Keret exposes the mind of one Israeli soldier who has been pushed to the brink by the stress of his border patrol responsibilities and the daily taunts of one equally strained Palestinian. The parallel Keret draws between these two

young men is as stunning as the rage and hate that fills each one. The story climaxes when the Israeli soldier throws his rifle so that it lands directly between them, leveling the otherwise obvious disadvantage so that the chances for each to retrieve the weapon are equal: "Now I'm just like him, and with the rifle in his hand, he'll be just like me. His mother and his sister will make it with Jews, his friends will vegetate in hospital beds, and he'll stand there facing me like a fucking asshole with a rifle in his hand and won't be able to do a thing."

The scene is indicative of how Keret writes—opting to present the conflict through the eyes of two men, rather than speak for, or against, one or the other. Keret lets his art reflect the modern Israeli experience, with all its struggles and complications. His stories, he says, are marked by "eruptions of violence, this feeling of something anarchistic or chaotic." It's in this way that he allows the reader to feel the potency behind the moral ambiguities of war, rather than pointedly marking right or wrong.

This is an approach that has earned Keret and his contemporaries—other young Israeli writers such as Ronit Matalon and Shimon Laor—a lot of flak. Literary critics have lamented their departure from the path paved by Zionist luminaries like Natan Alterman and Uri Zvi Greenberg and denounced the turn to a brand of literature that

explores the individual, a realm where the country's woes aren't directly addressed.

The desire to present duality led Keret to collaborate with Palestinian writer Samir el-Youssef whom he befriended while attending a writers' conference in 2000 in Switzerland. El-Youssef, was someone Keret felt close to right away because he "spoke what was on his mind, and said how he really felt." During the intifada, el-Youssef suggested that they publish a book of stories together and the end result was the 2004 collection called *Gaza Blues*.



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From Keret's voice, I could tell he was proud of this work. "It was a way," he said, "to show that for the time being, if Israelis and Palestinians can't co-exist in the real

world, then at least we can co-exist on the pages of a book. Samir really saw that this book could reach both Jewish and Muslim audiences and expose each side to the other."

Not long after his U.S. visit, Hezbollah began shoveling Israeli cities with missiles. When we spoke by phone on an August afternoon, after Israel had accepted the ceasefire, Keret was at home, feeling relieved. The tension of the past few weeks, along with the continu-

penning short stories during the crisis, but he produced a series of essays and columns, many of which made their way outside of Israel. His article "The Way We War" appeared on *The New York Times* op-ed page and "Israel, Lebanon, And the Metrics of War" ran on *The Huffington Post*, a group weblog and newsite. He responded to the "blind fervor" of the more visceral pundits on both sides of the debate on Israel's war with Hezbollah and made a passionate case against evaluating the conflict with what he called a "calculus of blame."

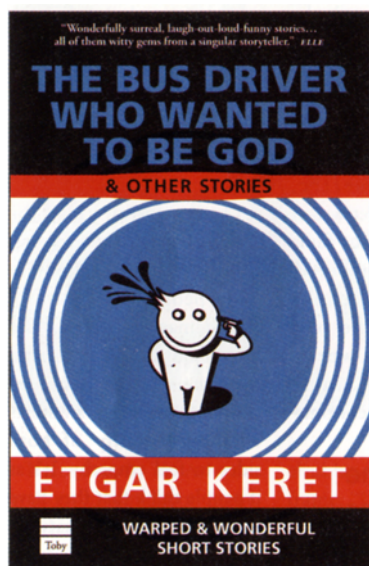
"Any solution [for] the Middle East would come out of negotiation, and out of some people giving up on their demands," he said. "But it's very difficult for you to negotiate when you only see yourself. I think it all starts with an inability of both sides to feel empathy. It's as if people think that they have some kind of exclusivity on pain or suffering. It's very, very rare when an Israeli or a Palestinian, or a Syrian or Lebanese tries to imagine how things are felt by people on the other side. People in the Middle East tend to see themselves as victims and as people who really don't initiate, but just react. For people who feel as though they are under attack or in danger of annihilation or some sort of genocide, it's a very difficult position."

Keret remains reluctant to contribute what he refers to as the "traditional political essay

ous attention to newscasts, had proved distracting. "I hope that I'm writing fiction soon," he told me, "but right now I'm finding it too difficult."

He may not have been

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written by Israeli writers," the ones that say "'Israel should do this, Israel shouldn't do that,' 'Israel should start a cease fire,' 'Israel shouldn't attack with ground soldiers and just bomb things from the air.'" He is not comfortable instructing the government on what should be done. "I just try to show a different angle of things," he told me. "And I try to do what I always do in fiction: I try to write without dehumanizing any of the sides involved in it or

without reducing any of the people who take part in this situation to victim or victimizer. I try to show it in the same complexity as I experience it, and not to simplify it or push for some bottom line."

I could hear the sounds of Lev playing in the background and remarked on how happy he sounded. "Yeah, he's happy," Keret agreed. I

wondered how being a father had affected his views. What would he tell Lev when it came time for him to serve?

"This is a decision that he has to take for himself. If my son will be a general or a conscientious objector, I'll have him the same. In Israel, going through the army is not a political declaration. In some sense, it's a necessity. And if he decides he doesn't want to go into the army, then you know, I'll still love him."

The café had started to empty, and the din was dissipating. In his story "More Life," Keret proposes a curious and thought-provoking notion that had stayed on my mind. Set in Florida, the tale opens with identical twin sisters who meet and

marry a pair of identical twin brothers. There's an affair—one sister sleeps with her sister's husband, who is also her husband's brother—and a love quadrangle forms. The situation makes for a sad end but the surprising idea introduced by these star-crossed sets of twins is that a person can, if he or she leads a "double" life, in some way live more life. It's suggested that infidelity is one such means of obtaining more life.

Keret told me that the story wasn't meant to be a commentary on adultery. "It came out of the feeling that life is closing in on you."

He paused to shoo away a bee that had taken a prolonged interest in my nose. "Go, go away," he told it, waving at it with his hand, or more likely, given his disposition, simply bidding it farewell.

"When you're five years old you can still be the world tennis champion or the number one chess player in the world, but when you're 15 you know that tennis is out of the picture. If you're a professor and you have a relationship with one of your students, then you're young again. If you're

a lawyer and you have a relationship with a bohemian painter then you're a bohemian. That's the idea."

More life for Keret, who has aspirations of acting (he's had small cameos in films as "the writer playing himself"), comes from something else. "Writing is a way of living other lives. It is a way of expanding your life." The idea of having an identical twin was a way for him to envision, and create, the idea of expansion, but only theoretically. "It's not actually living a different life, it just means that you're hungry for life. There are so many things you want to do. Like me: I write and why can't I just be happy with that? Then I think, hey, I want to do a film, I want to do this, too."

His voice trailed off. I sat and watched his thick eyebrows drawn together in a knot of thoughtful expression. He looked at me, his hand raised, holding his sandwich aloft. I leaned in, waiting. Etgar Keret was going to tell me how to expand life.

"What do you think?" he asked gesturing to the tomato, cheese and bread between his fingers. "Do you suppose I can put ketchup on it?" ☺