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Jewishness and World History in Clive Sinclair's *Death & Texas*

JUDAIZM I HISTORIA ŚWIATA W ZBIORZE OPOWIADAŃ CLIVE'A SINCLAIRA *ŚMIERĆ W TEKSASIE*

Streszczenie: Tytuł czwartego zbioru opowiadań brytyjskiego pisarza żydowskiego pochodzenia Clive'a Sinclair, *Death & Texas* (2014), jest nieco mylący, ponieważ Teksas nie jest lokalną sceną dla wszystkich opowiadań, ponieważ niektóre z nich rozgrywają się w innych częściach Stanów Zjednoczonych, a nawet w innych krajach. Śmierć jest głównym tematem we wszystkich ośmiu historiach, ponieważ bohaterowie stają w obliczu zagrożenia śmiercią lub radzą sobie ze śmiercią bliskich. Niektóre historie umieszczają temat śmierci w kontekście przemocy w historii, zwłaszcza z perspektywy żydowskich bohaterów, pisarzy lub artystów zajmujących się historią świata i przedstawianiem wydarzeń historycznych w kulturze popularnej. Niniejszy artykuł ma zatem na celu zbadanie przedstawienia judaizmu i odzwierciedlenia historii świata w omawianym zbiorze opowiadań.

Słowa kluczowe: brytyjska literatura żydowska, Clive Sinclair, *Śmierć w Teksasie*, judaizm, historia

ЕВРЕЙСТВО И МИРОВАЯ ИСТОРИЯ В *СМЕРТИ И ТЕХАСЕ* КЛАЙВА СИНКЛЕРА

Резюме: Название четвертого сборника коротких рассказов британского писателя еврейского происхождения Клайва Синклера, *Смерть и Техас* (2014) кажется неточным, поскольку Техас не является местом действия каждого из восьми рассказов. Можно утверждать, что смерть является центральной темой во всех восьми рассказах, поскольку некоторые из персонажей сталкиваются с угрозой смерти или скорбят по близким людям. Некоторые рассказы помещают тему смерти в контекст насилия в истории, рассматривая её с точки зрения протагонистов, еврейских писателей и художников, интересующихся историей, а также отображением исторических событий в массовой культуре. Таким образом, данная статья рассматривает репрезентацию еврейства и отражения мировой истории в данном сборнике рассказов.

Keywords: британско-еврейская литература, Клайв Синклер, *Смерть и Техас*, еврейство, история

Historical Background to Jewish Culture in Anglophone Countries

In a 2012 interview, British Jewish author of experimental novels and short stories, Clive Sinclair (1948–2018), characterized the

themes of his writing as love and death, “Eros and Thanatos.”¹ This description could be applied to his fourth and penultimate short story collection *Death & Texas* (2014) as well; while readers may be surprised Texas is not the spatial setting in all eight stories, in the interview, Sinclair points out that Texas is also an anagram of *at sex*.² Moreover, dedicated to the author’s son Seth and partner Haidee Becker, the collection is characterized on the book cover as dealing with, among other things, “love, most especially that between husbands and wives, fathers and sons.” It is no coincidence Gerald Jacobs writes that “the types and motifs that recur throughout the book – writers, painters, cuckolds and kidnapped offspring – all seem to be drawn from life viewed through a Freudian prism,”³ as the terms Eros and Thanatos have been extensively used by Sigmund Freud. According to Freud, there are two aspects of Eros – “the instinct to preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units,” while Thanatos is a “contrary instinct seeking to dissolve those units and to bring them back to their primaeval, inorganic state.”⁴ However, as Timofei Gerber observes, Eros itself is imbued with Thanatos: “What is the conditionality of love, if not the realisation that love necessarily dies, ‘that everyone you know someday will die,’ [...] and that we need to start loving on our own, if we want it to continue?”⁵

Death is arguably a central theme in all stories, as their characters often face the threat of death or mourn the death of their close ones. Some stories also contextualize the theme of death in relation to violence in history, especially from the point of view of their Jewish characters, the protagonists usually being Jewish writers or artists concerned with history as well as the rendering of historical events in popular culture. These stories thus consider the legacy of historical figures and the relation of history to our time. Regarding Jewishness and world history, there come to mind the concepts of Hebraism and Hellenism, compared in a famous essay by Matthew Arnold. While Arnold highlights both being “contributions to human development,”⁶ they differ in that

¹ Matthew Asprey, “El Hombre Valeroso: An Interview with Clive Sinclair,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 18, 2012, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/el-hombre-valeroso-an-interview-with-clive-sinclair/>.

² Gerald Jacobs points out the title is also a play on Benjamin Franklin’s reminder of the inevitability of death and taxes. See *Review of Death and Texas*, by Clive Sinclair, *Telegraph*, March 26, 2014, 32.

³ Jacobs, *Review of Death and Texas*.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 77.

⁵ Timofei Gerber, “Eros and Thanatos: Freud’s Two Fundamental Drives,” *Epoché 20* (February 2019), <https://epochemagazine.org/20/eros-and-thanatos-freuds-two-fundamental-drives/>.

⁶ Matthew Arnold, “Hebraism and Hellenism,” in *Culture and Anarchy* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1869), 157.

“the governing idea of Hellenism is spontaneity of consciousness; that of Hebraism, strictness of conscience.”⁷ Arnold thus finds the triumph of Hebraism in Christianity and the triumph of Hellenism in the Renaissance. He further states that “Hellenism is of Indo-European growth, Hebraism is of Semitic growth; and we English, a nation of Indo-European stock, seem to belong naturally to the movement of Hellenism.”⁸ Still, he adds that “our race has yet (and a great part of its strength lies here), in matters of practical life and moral conduct, a strong share of the assuredness, the tenacity, the intensity of the Hebrews.”⁹ Among English speaking countries, the significance of the Jewish community has been particularly striking in the USA, where people of Jewish heritage have formed a considerable part of the nation’s intelligentsia since the postwar period; as early as in 1915, the American philosopher Horace M. Kallen observes “the Jewish ardor for pure learning is notorious.”¹⁰

Accordingly, the epigraph to *Death & Texas* (“On the knees of your soul? Might as well be useful. Scrub the floor.”) comes from the 1964 novel *Herzog* by Saul Bellow, the Jewish American writer and laureate of the 1976 Nobel Prize. The novel’s link to the themes of Sinclair’s collection lies in its Jewish protagonist’s trying to make sense of his own life by writing letters to his relatives as well as people in public life, alive and dead. This article thus aims to survey the representation of Jewishness and the reflection of history in *Death & Texas*.

Revisiting Early 20th Century New Orleans in “Storyville”

Besides diverse spatial locations of the stories, there are also striking differences in their temporal settings. For instance, the first story, “Storyville,” does not deal with history as a subject of its characters’ study, but its plot is completely set in early twentieth century America. While Michael LaPointe considers “Storyville” “the collection’s most successful tale,”¹¹ it is not central to this article due to the absence of Jewish themes.

The story uses a third person omniscient narration and opens

⁷ Arnold, “Hebraism and Hellenism,” 147.

⁸ Arnold, “Hebraism and Hellenism,” 162.

⁹ Arnold, “Hebraism and Hellenism,” 165.

¹⁰ Horace M. Kallen, “Democracy versus the Melting Pot: A Study of American Nationality. Part II,” *Nation* 100, no. 2591 (1915): 218.

¹¹ Michael LaPointe, “Inevitabilities,” review of *Death & Texas*, by Clive Sinclair, *Times Literary Supplement*, April 25, 2014, 22.

with an upper-class woman named Adele Beaufait, whose young son is cured of influenza by Dr Astrov, of Russian heritage and a newcomer to New Orleans. Adele finds Dr Astrov charming and when her husband leaves for Louisville, she meets with the doctor and they take a boat trip to the bayou. He saves her from being bitten by a snake, raising her awareness of the strength of nature as well as appreciation of its beauty. This feature of Dr Astrov's character is consistent with his namesake in Anton Chekhov's play *Uncle Vanya* (1898), a country doctor who is strongly preoccupied with ecological problems. Adele also finds out Dr Astrov caters to the respectable upper class society as well as to prostitutes; the very title, "Storyville," refers to the red-light district of New Orleans, from 1897 to 1917. Adele starts an affair with Dr Astrov and runs away with him to Baton Rouge, although she is pregnant with her husband. However, after Adele gives birth to a daughter, the husband tracks her down to take her and the children back. He shoots the doctor and, thanks to his social standing, is not punished for the murder. As Adele looks satisfied with going back to her old way of life, the story of sexual awakening and revolt against social conventions seems to have a rather conservative ending. The final sentence, however, relativizes such a closure: "Had Adele awoken and looked toward the heavens she would have seen only darkness, for that night the moon and stars were hidden by gathering clouds."¹² The future of the Beaufaits' marriage thus may not be as idyllic and bright as it appears.

The story features no elements of Jewishness or Judaism; regarding ethnic and religious minorities, it refers only to African Americans and their spiritual beliefs by means of the character Mama Congo, Adele's servant. As Adele cannot understand "how Mama Congo was able to reconcile a belief in Christ with a continuing adherence to the ancient ways of Africa,"¹³ the story highlights the limitations of upper-class white Americans' cultural assumptions and view of the world.

Transposing Billy the Kid to Israel and the Wild West to Germany in "Billy the Yid"

The title of the second story, "Billy the Yid," is a pun on the American outlaw Billy the Kid (1859–81), revealing its inspiration by American history; however, its plot is set in contemporary

¹² Clive Sinclair, "Storyville," in *Death & Texas* (London: Halban Publishers, 2014), 28.

¹³ Sinclair, "Storyville," in *Death & Texas*, 10.

UK, Israel, and Germany. The text juxtaposes facts and fiction, as the protagonist and narrator is Izzy Adler, a British Jewish writer who grew up in Hendon, North London, like Sinclair. Moreover, like Sinclair, Izzy does not idealize the Jewish community and describes sex rather openly in his works, as he explains that the title of his novel *Rabbi Goldfinch's Folly* refers to the rabbi's "trying to rape a German au pair at the barmitzva of one of his congregants."¹⁴ At the same time, the story playfully challenges the limits of biographical approach to literary interpretation by saying that the rabbi "of the synagogue to which [Izzy's] parents belonged chose to take the book personally,"¹⁵ which was not the writer's intention at all.

Izzy is currently working on a book of biographies of minor historical figures such as Morris Bernstein (1856–1878), a Jewish man whose only claim to fame is that he supposedly stood up to and was shot by Billy the Kid.¹⁶ Izzy's retelling of Bernstein's story is even published in the *Jewish Chronicle*. According to his further research on the historical figures, Izzy concludes that Billy the Kid only became violent after the murder of his employer, the rancher John Tunstall (1853–1878). Izzy even proposes that the Kid was Tunstall's catamite rather than only his employee.

The story proper moves from the UK to Israel, as Izzy travels to Jerusalem to attend his cousin Tatum's third wedding. As Izzy's wife, a famous painter, chooses not to accompany him, Izzy goes without her, but does not tell her he is bringing his old Israeli friend Vivian Ben Duchifat with him. This subplot finally explains the title of the story: after the wedding ceremony, Tatum confides in Izzy with his critical view of Israel's policy via a reference to Izzy's article in the *Jewish Chronicle*: "In the settlements, but elsewhere too, we are raising our sons to take what is not theirs without pity or remorse. God help us, Izzy, but we are raising a generation of Billy the Yids."¹⁷ Tatum thus compares Israel's treatment of Palestinians to the violence perpetuated on Morris Bernstein by Billy the Kid. On a more personal level, the phrase "Billy the Yids" is used by Izzy in reference to a group of six young yeshiva students who harass Vivian at the petrol station. Sinclair himself said the story "expresses the fear that a generation of outlaws is arising [in Israel], pre-

¹⁴ Sinclair, "Billy the Yid," in *Death & Texas*, 31.

¹⁵ Sinclair, "Billy the Yid," in *Death & Texas*, 31.

¹⁶ However, Robert M. Utley does not confirm this interpretation. See *Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 104–5. As Izzy aims to present the Jewish man as a martyr, this case of deviation from history provides another element of juxtaposition of facts and fiction in the story.

¹⁷ Sinclair, "Billy the Yid," in *Death & Texas*, 42.

pared to snatch what it wants without restraint or remorse."¹⁸ In the story, Vivian is impressed by the way Izzy handles the young Israeli men and later, the two have sex at her home. Unfortunately for Izzy, after the act, he accidentally injures his head so that he has to be treated at the hospital and postpone the return flight. The trip thus does not go according to Izzy's expectations at all.

The final section of the story develops from Izzy's email communication with a German student of English literature at the University of Bonn, Evelyn Turteltaube, who praises *Rabbi Goldfinch's Folly* as the best novel at the seminar on Holocaust literature. Izzy feels flattered, as he imagines Evelyn as an "intelligent, highly-sexed"¹⁹ woman. Thus, when the travel editor of the *Jewish Chronicle* offers to Izzy to visit Pullman City, a Western theme park in Germany, thinking the idea of Germans dressing up as Cowboys and Native Americans will amuse her readers, Izzy accepts and uses the opportunity to meet with Evelyn. However, on arrival in Germany, Izzy is shocked to find out Evelyn is a gay man. Evelyn suggests Izzy may be an unconscious queer, as about 95% of heterosexual encounters in his books "are unsatisfactory if not actually humiliating."²⁰ The irony here is that Izzy had looked for homosexual attraction between historical figures, namely Billy the Kid and Tunstall, but not in his readers.

At the theme park, Izzy and Evelyn meet a Mescalero Apache who has moved to Germany from New Mexico, a place Izzy associates with Billy the Kid who died there. The characters' conversation provides another connection between Native American history and German popular culture, the novels by Karl May (1842–1912). May created the Apache chief Winnetou, whom Evelyn describes in a very admiring way: "Winnetou is everything we Germans would die to be: wise beyond moral understanding, virtuous, romantic, healthy in mind and body, and at one with the natural world. Not warlike, but unconquerable if provoked beyond reason."²¹ Yet, Izzy mentions May was also Hitler's favourite author and witnesses persisting manifestations of Nazism in Germany. The evening news report that Passau's chief of police was violently attacked by a skinhead because he had ordered the destruction of a swastika flag. This information makes Evelyn bring up the targeting of both Jews and queers by the Nazis.

¹⁸ Axel Stähler, "Of Shadow-Play and Promised Lands: Between America and Israel: Interview with Clive Sinclair," *European Judaism* 47, no. 2 (2014): 79.

¹⁹ Sinclair, "Billy the Yid," in *Death & Texas*, 47.

²⁰ Sinclair, "Billy the Yid," in *Death & Texas*, 55.

²¹ Sinclair, "Billy the Yid," in *Death & Texas*, 59.

Overall, the story portrays Izzy as less heroic than he would like to be, as his life could be described as a series of unexpected problems and misunderstandings. Furthermore, at the end of the story, Izzy is dealing with a serious health issue as he has been diagnosed with prostate cancer. Still, Izzy stays on top of things, even suggesting to his agent he could write about his diagnosis in fiction. Izzy could thus be characterized as a *schlemiel*, a typical character in Jewish literature described by Abraham Avni as “naive, weak, and bungling (‘bungler’ is the basic meaning of the word) in worldly affairs, but [showing] inner strength and in the worst of calamities [retaining] an uncanny belief that good will triumph over evil.”²² The ending of the story confirms these features of Izzy’s character by contrasting his determination to overcome hardships with his wife’s belated announcement she found out that Vivian accompanied him to Tatum’s wedding. As all the subplots of the story interconnect, Izzy’s secret is revealed after all.

Reinterpreting (Not Only) the Alamo in “Death & Texas”

The eponymous story is by far the longest one in the collection. Even more than the previous one, “Death & Texas” juxtaposes the past and present, as well as facts and fiction. The text also connects Jewish and Texan culture via the character of Kinky Friedman (1944–), Jewish American singer, writer and politician, who, according to Jonathan Bernstein, “styles himself in the mold of popular American satirists Will Rogers and Mark Twain.”²³ When Kinky Friedman ran for the Governor of Texas in 2006, he characterized himself as “the bastard child of two cultures, two cultures that have more in common than they know: for example, both encourage the wearing of hats, indoors and out. More importantly both revere sites where men willingly sacrificed their lives in liberty’s name; for Jews it’s Masada, for Texans it’s the Alamo.”²⁴ The siege of Masada was one of the final events in the First Jewish–Roman War, occurring from 72 to 73 CE on and around a fortification on a hilltop in present-day Southern District of Israel. The Battle of the Alamo (Feb 23–March 6, 1836) took place in today’s San Antonio, Texas, and ended with the victory of Mexicans, led by President

²² Abraham Avni, review of *The Schlemiel as a Modern Hero*, by Ruth R. Wisse, *Comparative Literature* 25, no. 4 (1973): 361.

²³ Jonathan Bernstein, “Kinky Friedman Comes Home,” *Rollingstone*, November 3, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/kinky-friedman-country-music-texas-willie-nelson-746620/>.

²⁴ Sinclair, “Death & Texas,” in *Death & Texas*, 78.

General Antonio López de Santa Anna. On the other side of the conflict were Texan commanders, many of whom, such as Davy Crockett (1786–1836), died. The early twenty-first century views on Crockett become crucial for the development of the story.

Besides connecting Jewish and Texan culture, Kinky also links the two major characters of the story who meet thanks to him: Zaki Feldman, a moderately popular British Jewish writer, and Cecelia Mayo, a Jewish American doctor. At the beginning of the story, Zaki, whose maternal ancestors had come from Poland, is a widower, as his wife died of cancer, and Cecelia is divorced; eventually, they get married. As LaPointe suggests, their courtship brings to mind the 1975 short story “Old Love” by Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Polish-born Jewish-American Nobel Prize-winning author.²⁵ Cecelia tells Zaki that one of her maternal ancestors, Dr Nunes Pereira, fought at the Alamo on the Mexican side, as he was a Marrano and Santa Anna’s private physician. As explained by Edmund Valentine Campos, the term Marranos refers to those Jews “who publicly professed Christianity while privately adhering to their original faith and its practices.”²⁶ Having witnessed the carnage at the Alamo, Pereira set out on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, reconverted to Judaism and found himself a Jewish wife. Eventually, he returned to America with his wife and children, finding a new home in Texas.

The characters’ personal histories and world history connect as Cecelia has inherited Pereira’s journal that describes, among other things, the last moments of Davy Crockett’s life. While Feldman is planning to write Crockett’s biography with the aim to portray him as a hero, Pereira’s journal provides a rather different description. Captured by the Mexicans at the end of the conflict and informed he is going to be killed like the other prisoners, “Davy Crockett – may God forgive him – fell to his knees [in front of Santa Anna] and begged for mercy, not for his companions, but only for himself.”²⁷ Santa Anna, however, argues that Crockett’s quick execution will raise him to the status of martyr.

Eventually, Pereira’s journal finds its way into Cecelia’s book recounting people’s various approaches to the information they may soon die. While most of the examples come from Cecelia’s medical practice, she includes the case of Santa Anna and Davy Crockett as “a metaphor for the doctor-patient relationship at

²⁵ See LaPointe, “Inevitabilities.”

²⁶ Edmund Valentine Campos, “Jews, Spaniards, and Portugales: Ambiguous Identities of Portuguese Marranos in Elizabethan England,” *ELH* 69, no. 3 (2002): 602.

²⁷ Sinclair, “Death & Texas,” in *Death & Texas*, 124.

its most extreme"²⁸ after her agent recommends to her to contain a story of a famous person so that the book attracts more attention. For the same purpose, the tentative title *Studied in His Death*, a quote from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1.4.10), is changed to *Breaking News*. The book becomes a bestseller, but Zaki disputes Cecelia's writing about Crockett in this way, and Kinky Friedman disapproves of her using the journal. Still, it is not only the disagreement of her husband and friend that makes Cecelia uncomfortable, as the book has a lot of media coverage. Some American commentators even regard Cecelia "as little short of a traitor. In their thesaurus Davy Crockett equals George W Bush, Santa Anna equals Saddam Hussein, Texas equals Iraq, and critic equals enemy."²⁹ Such statements reflect the commentators' simplifying and biased views of the complex external reality.

Due to this atmosphere of pressure and strain as well as numerous readings given to promote the book, Cecelia loses her voice. As her condition gets worse, Cecelia undergoes a series of medical examinations that conclude she has motor neurone disease. In turn, Cecelia gets increasingly anxious, having panic attacks, and ironically, she becomes rather distrustful of doctors. Eventually, she dies of physical as well as mental exhaustion. Zaki thus has to deal with becoming a widower for the second time; he even asks the rabbi: "Which of the two am I supposed to repossess in the afterlife; the late Mrs Feldman – because she was the first – or the late Dr Mayo – because she was the most recent?"³⁰ At this moment, Zaki's life appears controlled by Thanatos, as his union with Cecelia has been dissolved by her death; however, his later connection with another woman represents the gradual diversion from Thanatos to Eros.

While there had been a discussion of the authenticity of Pereira's journal even during Cecelia's life, it is not until after her death that Zaki subjects the document to forensic analysis. The analysts declare the document a modern forgery and rehabilitate Crockett. Despite this discovery, Cecelia's book remains famous and well-respected; only its future editions will have to be doctored. To enlarge Cecelia's posthumous reputation, Zaki accepts the invitation to address a memorial service hosted by the Royal College of General Practitioners. In his speech, he distorts the truth, saying his wife bravely struggled with the illness until the last moment, and he receives a standing ovation. His justification of the speech

²⁸ Sinclair, "Death & Texas," in *Death & Texas*, 125.

²⁹ Sinclair, "Death & Texas," in *Death & Texas*, 131.

³⁰ Sinclair, "Death & Texas," in *Death & Texas*, 143.

is that telling the truth would not do any good to the medical profession, which would benefit much more from hearing that Dr Mayo fought “to the last of her strength, like Davy Crockett at the Alamo.”³¹ Another inspiration for readjusting the past came from Zaki’s watching Quentin Tarantino’s alternative history film *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) shortly after Cecelia’s death.

Zaki goes to see the film at the cinema with Rabbi Siskin and Arnon Fetterman, a student at a yeshiva in Jerusalem. Despite its preposterousness, all the three enjoy the final scene in which the Nazi high command, including Adolf Hitler, are incinerated in a Paris cinema. Moreover, Zaki suggests that the character of Lieutenant Aldo Raine, played by Brad Pitt, reminds him of Davy Crockett “who was martyred by an evil dictator, and thereby converted into an honorary Jew.”³² Zaki further elaborates on this interpretation:

[Tarantino] wants to tell us that Davy Crockett is also a time-traveller; born to fight dictators through the ages. One century Santa Anna, the next Adolf Hitler. But he is more than that even. He is America incarnate; its authentic spirit made flesh. The Wild Frontier’s very own Jesus Christ [...]. In this alternative universe, in which time is a highway, it becomes possible to alter history, as Tarantino does so satisfyingly in *Inglourious Basterds*. We know it’s an illusion, of course we do, but it’s a grand one while it lasts.³³

The story “Death and Texas” thus features multiple examples of interpretations of history across centuries, whether Zaki’s personal history or armed conflicts in nineteenth and twentieth century history. The interpretations range from admittedly alternative history in the case of *Inglourious Basterds* to supposedly authentic documents that are revealed to be forged in the case of Pereira’s journal. Zaki’s speech about his late wife provides an instance of well-intentioned readjustment of history.

Denying the Holocaust and Slavery in “STR82ANL”

Zaki’s friend Rabbi Zachary Siskin reappears in the following story “STR82ANL,” where he accompanies his wife Ida, a famous painter, to Atlanta, Georgia, to promote her work. The story uses omniscient narration, and its American characters are art collectors Mr and Mrs Sapsucker as well as Art Kingfisher, a painter

³¹ Sinclair, “Death & Texas,” in *Death & Texas*, 147.

³² Sinclair, “Death & Texas,” in *Death & Texas*, 144.

³³ Sinclair, “Death & Texas,” in *Death & Texas*, 145–6.

of Polish heritage, and his wife. The three couples' initial conversation reveals various pieces of personal information; Ida Siskin is a breast cancer survivor but does not want that to be widely known. History also enters the conversation; when Art refers to the Holocaust as an event that "more and more historians are finding hard to swallow,"³⁴ Zachary calls him a Holocaust-denier and immediately leaves for the hotel.

As Ida stays, Art takes her to his studio. Despite her initial reluctance, she agrees to have a nude portrait painted; then, she lets him sodomize her. The story's title "STR82ANL" is finally explained, as it refers to a license plate of a car driven by a porno star Art had read about in a magazine. This subplot is rather less convincing; LaPointe even compares its "flimsy psychology"³⁵ to *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Meanwhile, the minor character of Hickory Waxwing encourages Zachary to have a few drinks. Heavily intoxicated, Zachary tells an African American man that "institutionalized slavery never existed"³⁶ to get evidence that the man will become offended similarly to himself getting offended by Art's statement about the Holocaust. The outraged man gives Zachary a black eye. Challenging the existence of slavery is the more unexpected in Atlanta, as Mrs Kingfisher earlier in the text mentions that their house had been built "upon the bones of [Joseph] Hooker's XXth Corps"³⁷ of the American Civil War.

At the end of the story, Zachary leaves the self-important and pretentious community of artists and art collectors to travel across the vast American landscape in search of a rare kind of bird called Ivory-billed Woodpecker whose existence he had learned about at the Atlanta Botanical Garden. In Brinkley, Arkansas, he thinks: "First there was Wild Bill and Buffalo Bill, [...] and now there is Ivory Bill. A holy trinity of American heroes."³⁸ Zachary thus finds peace when pondering the beauty of nature as well as the history of the American continent. Like "Death & Texas," the story warns against any kind of falsification of history, such as denying any aspect of the Holocaust or slavery.

³⁴ Sinclair, "STR82ANL," in *Death & Texas*, 164.

³⁵ LaPointe, "Inevitabilities."

³⁶ Sinclair, "STR82ANL," in *Death & Texas*, 182.

³⁷ Sinclair, "STR82ANL," in *Death & Texas*, 167.

³⁸ Sinclair, "STR82ANL," in *Death & Texas*, 192. Wild Bill is the nickname of the folk hero James Butler Hickok (1837–1876), and Buffalo Bill refers to the soldier and bison hunter William Frederick Cody (1846–1917).

Disappearance of Princess Diana's Double in "The Venus Mosaic"

The brief story "The Venus Mosaic" does not deal with Jewish themes. Set in the UK, it is narrated by a painter and art professor at the University of St Albans who describes his wife as "Princess Di's double."³⁹ The title refers to a Roman mosaic the couple discovered when unearthing a ruin in Kingscote, Gloucestershire. This discovery is contrasted with the wife's disappearance on the day of Princess Diana's death. The story thus hyperbolically challenges the reliability of media coverage of current events.

Tintin Albums by Hergé as a Parallel to Reality in "Prisoners of the Sun"

The story "Prisoners of the Sun" is narrated by a man of Polish Jewish heritage who grew up in London, between Hendon and Mill Hill. The narrator recalls his childhood, especially the moment when he discovered Tintin albums by the Belgian cartoonist Hergé (1907–83) which greatly impressed him: "It was as though their creator possessed an intimate knowledge of my inner life, knew that I was crazy about cowboys, space exploration, and treasure hunting."⁴⁰ Even the title of the story, "Prisoners of the Sun," refers to the English title of one of the Tintin albums. Much later, the narrator does his doctorate on political themes in Tintin, gets a job at Corsham College of Art, moves to Wiltshire and starts his own family.

The story of the narrator's personal and professional development is interspersed with his father's troubled history. The father co-owned a furniture company but was betrayed by his business partner and had to get a job as a representative for a company that marketed pillows and quilts. The father and his new boss strongly differ in their views on Israel. One day, the two men have such a heated discussion about the 1996 election of Benjamin Netanyahu (1949–) as Prime Minister of Israel that the father suddenly becomes dizzy, has to be taken to the hospital and dies soon thereafter. The episode emphasizes the importance of Israeli events for the British Jewish community.

The story moves to describing the narrator's relationship with his young son who asks him about Tintin's mother, as his own

³⁹ Sinclair, "The Venus Mosaic," in *Death & Texas*, 200.

⁴⁰ Sinclair, "Prisoners of the Sun," in *Death & Texas*, 209.

mother is no longer alive and Tintin's parents are never mentioned in the books. Searching for an answer to the question, the narrator comes across a theory of his colleague, Gabriel Benveniste from Universidad de Lima: "Maybe [Tintin] is the offspring of Marrano Jews, the *modus vivendi* of whom is forgetfulness. And so it was natural that when his parents were murdered in a pogrom he immediately suppressed all memory of them."⁴¹ In support of the theory, Benveniste further argues that in the album *Land of Black Gold* (1950), the protagonist is mistaken for a Jew. The narrator agrees with the theory, rejecting any claims that Hergé should be associated with fascism because of his friendship with the Belgian Nazi collaborator Leon Degrelle (1906–94).

In the summer of 1999, the narrator is going to a Tintin conference in Cusco, Peru, and taking his son, who has just completed secondary education, with him. During the conference, the narrator's son mysteriously disappears, and a phone call at the hotel reveals he had been kidnapped by Irbesartan, the mafia. As the police are generally considered rather corrupt, the narrator negotiates with the kidnapers that he will get his son back if he pays them three hundred thousand dollars. Anxiously waiting for the day of the swap, he recalls *Tintin and Alph-Art* (1986) which misses the ending, as it remained unfinished at the time of Hergé's death. The story thus has an open ending, like Hergé's final Tintin album, and fiction becomes disturbingly close to reality.

The Rabbi's Punishment in "A Bad End"

Despite its vaguely contemporary setting, the final story "A Bad End" is the most surreal of all.⁴² It provides a critical portrayal of Rabbi Goldfinch, who is described as a "swine" because of his behaviour, although still respected among the congregants, as he would "strike fear into the heart of a sinner"⁴³ by accusing them of various sins. The rabbi literally turns into a pig and, to his shock, is eaten by his son and daughter-in-law at Christmas instead of the turkey they would traditionally have as assimilated Jews. This twist refers to the rules of *kashrut*; as Chaim Steinmetz notes, in Yid-

⁴¹ Sinclair, "Prisoners of the Sun," in *Death & Texas*, 215.

⁴² I omit the penultimate story "Shylock Must Die," which was republished in Sinclair's last short story collection of the same name. For an analysis of the story, see my article "When Tubal Tells *The Merchant of Venice* as Jessica's Story: Clive Sinclair's 'Shylock Must Die,'" *American and British Studies Annual*, 14 (2021): 154–161.

⁴³ Sinclair, "A Bad End," in *Death & Texas*, 279.

dish, “the metaphor for something unquestionably non-kosher is ‘chazer treif,’ as un-Kosher as pork.”⁴⁴ The story thus hyperbolically highlights several features of the collection, such as non-idealized description of the Jewish community and complicated relationships between fathers and sons.

Conclusion

The wide range of spatial and temporal settings of the stories goes beyond the usual concerns of British Jewish literature. Overall, the stories in the collection urge the reader to aim for a careful and responsible attitude to history. “Storyville” and “The Venus Mosaic” differ from the rest, as the former simply recalls the conventions of early twentieth century life in the USA as well as a revolt against them, and the latter refers to a tragic event in late twentieth century British history. Most of the other stories pay attention to various historical periods and their legacies, especially from the Jewish characters’ point of view. The protagonist of “Billy the Yid” is a British Jewish writer who studies the life of the minor historical figure of the Jewish man Morris Bernstein, killed by the American outlaw Billy the Kid. By means of a pun in its title, the story creates a disturbing parallel between Billy the Kid and the youth in contemporary Israel. Similarly to “Billy the Yid,” which also mentions the manifestations of Nazism in contemporary Germany, “STR82ANL” features a character of a Holocaust denier, providing a reminder that claims distorting the Holocaust have persisted until the early twenty-first century. In contrast, “Death & Texas” switches the focus to affirming the legacy of Davy Crockett and the Battle of the Alamo as well as the power of well-intentioned alternative histories, such as Tarantino’s film *Inglourious Basterds*, which rewrites the end of World War II. The story also highlights some connections between Texan and Jewish culture. “The Prisoners of the Sun” sees Tintin albums by Hergé as similarly uplifting and affirmative texts, even from the point of view of Jewish readers, despite their author’s friendship with a Belgian Nazi collaborator. The story thus suggests fiction should be appreciated independently of its author’s biography. Like the texts from popular culture they refer to, several stories themselves playfully juxtapose facts and fiction, demanding not to be interpreted as strictly accurate portrayals of reality. This becomes the most striking

⁴⁴ Chaim Steinmetz, “Jews, Romans, and Pigs: An Impossible History,” *Jewish Journal*, March 25, 2022, <https://jewishjournal.com/commentary/opinion/346381/jews-romans-and-pigs-an-impossible-history/>.

ing in the surreal story "A Bad End" with the theme of cannibalism within the Jewish community, which symbolically closes the manifold collection.

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