To Build A Life

Agnes Borinsky

City of Laughter
by Temim Fruchter
384pp. Grove 2024

Greasepaint
by Hannah Levene
172pp. Nightboat 2024

City of Laughter, Temim Fruchter's debut novel, begins with the death of a patriarch, though it's really a novel about matriarchy. Shiva Margolin, named not after the Hindu god but after the Jewish ritual period of mourning, was born the day her maternal grandmother Syl died. Shiva craves more knowledge about Syl—described alternately as superstitious, a mystery, and a storyteller—but her mother Hannah seems reluctant to share. Shiva feels more connected to her deceased father than to her mother, and suspects that the grandmother she never knew holds some key to who she is.

Meanwhile, Shiva feels that her life is at a point of collapse—in the aftermath of her father's death, her first queer relationship is ending. The events that follow center around attempts to dislodge the wall between herself and her family history. She applies to and enrolls in a masters' program in Jewish studies. She applies for and accepts funding to attend a conference in Warsaw. She flirts with a Polish woman on a dating app, who eventually stands her up. She returns to New York.

Other stories drift in and out of the book. There are first-person sections in the voice of a queer messenger who seems to travel across time. There are letters from Mira, Shiva's great-grandmother, to her (spoiler alert) queer lover. There is a recurring vignette involving an older, ambiguously gay couple in a park in Warsaw. Meanwhile, Shiva is proposing to study the work of Russian-Jewish writer S. An-sky, whose ethnographic work on Yiddish folklore and whose play *The Dybbuk* figure prominently in Shiva's sense of self and legacy. The text is larded with Yiddish culture, with speculations and insinuations about the potential queerness of the ancestors, and An-sky himself. Fruchter has written a novel about Yiddishkeit, queerness, and family knowledge as a form of spiritual geolocation.

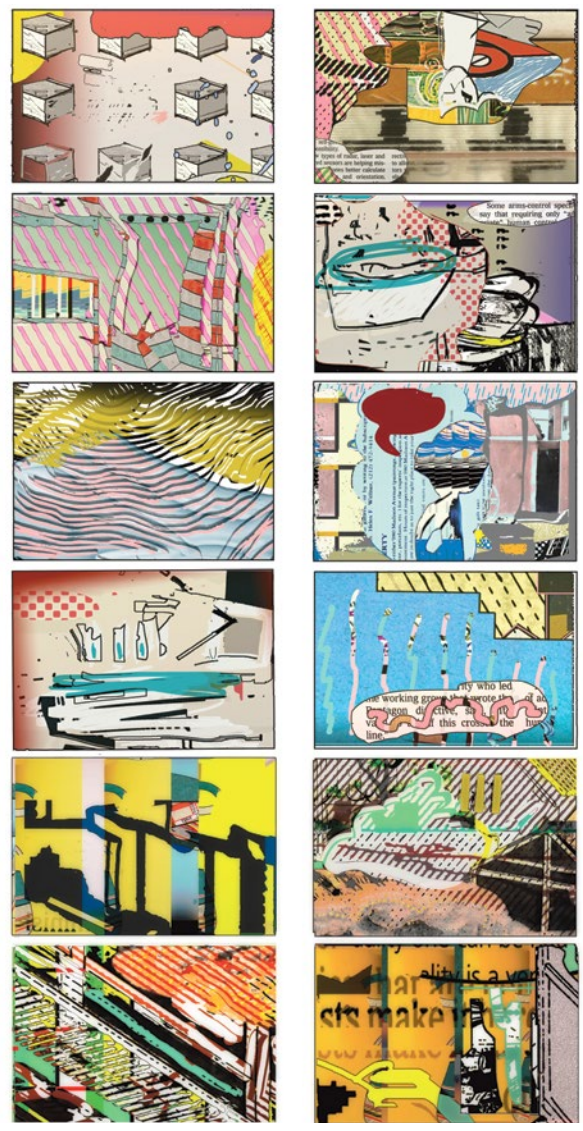
Shiva is a character with passionate desires; on one page, she "wanted desperately"; on the next page, she "desperately wanted"; two pages later, she "desperately worried." A page later, Fruchter refers to "the exponential depths of her solitude." She is a character who is regularly "enthralled," "exultant," "ecstatic," "rapturous." Even small moments feel wrenched into melodrama; adjectives and adverbs feel anxiously operatic. Later, Fruchter tells us of another character who "broke the desperate quiet with aggressive nonchalance."

I love excess, I am here for passion. I just wish the happenings confronting Shiva were more unruly, less centered around forms of institutional sanction ("Possessed, she applied. Possessed, she got in"). Intense narrative shvitzing accompanies things like sending an email, buying a plane ticket before university reimbursement has come through. Shiva worries that her fascination with S. An-sky is somehow feverish, unhealthy, weird ("deranged"). In the last pages of the book, when, in novels with traditional narrative structures (like this one), we are meant to be feeling a succession of catharses, one of the big things that Shiva pulls off is sending a five-sentence description of a planned talk to her advisor ("Composing the long-avoided email, she'd felt euphoric with doubt").

Fruchter is rendering a vision of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ashkenazi Judaism laced with queerness. She is taking up questions of intergenerational trauma, parental silence, loss, and the shunning of queer people. So why does the book feel so muffled, so domesticated?

Fruchter has given us a character who identifies as new to queerness. And there are times when Shiva's life with other queer people, a life that gets referred to in shorthand as "Brooklyn," feels a little too cute, too potted. There are certain kinds of romanticism that feel impossible in the gentrified New York of the 2020s. What does it mean to feel overwhelmed with look-at-my-life bliss, biking across the Brooklyn Bridge and drinking an iced latte in Tompkins Square Park? Is the East Village not overrun with straight white people who work in marketing? We're not in Chelsea Girls anymore, Toto.

I am hesitant to object to anyone else's rendering of queerness. But what chafes here is that the audience is not other queer people. That the queerness, here, is a form of tourism, an endearing quirk. When Fruchter describes one of Shiva's "experiments in desire" as "buying a cock at an inappropriate hour of the morning," that "inappropriate" feels like an adjective slipped in as a concession. Elsewhere, the imagined audience for her queerness is her dad: "she'd want to tell him everything, to regale him with her triumphs and flirtations and foibles, the Brooklyn tales that had always made him laugh." "Queerness," "the queers," and "queer" are all over this book, but they feel like a kind of charming way to move through one's youth, rather than an orientation to the world, an experience of self, a life.



Postcardz by Rosaire Appel. Digital drawing 2020

I do understand the ache at the center of Fruchter's novel:

> But at her core, what she was really looking for, past the vortex of her family and the dullness of her grief, was a kind of existential precision. She craved a spiritual articulacy she'd never had, something sharp and clear she could hold up and look at. An-sky, she knew, had craved this, too. His life had unfolded in the realm of questions and chameleonic gray areas, but he'd remained relentless in his search for the things that might confirm his presence in the world as having been something definite. Something people could touch, could name, could remember.

In one of Mira's letters, she says, "I can't speak, but I think you see what is in my eyes." So many of the characters in this book feel they can't speak, don't have words. They wait for someone else, a lover, a friend, an ancestor—someone more magical, perhaps, than they are—to make the utterance, and, by sheer proximity, to save them. I want to tell Shiva that as long as queerness is nothing more than a series of charming stories for "regaling" lost fathers, she will continue to feel that she can't speak. I want Shiva, perhaps Fruchter, to risk an utterance beyond *I am a seeker*, or, *I have an insatiable appetite for questions*.

Shiva will ultimately uncover traces of queerness in her own family—which becomes a way of saving queerness's integrity. Fruchter writes about "the vertical line through history, through her body." And of course biological inheritance will always trump a lived queerness, if lived queerness is just an iced latte on a park bench and a purple silicon cock. There must be something beyond the vertical line. What happened to the horizontal?

Hannah Levene's *Greasepaint* lives in the horizontal. Early in the book, there's a conversation between Sammy, "a Jew I mean sort of" and Harry, "a Black butch in America," printed in the newsletter (circulation twenty-five) of the BOP (the Butch Piano Players Union). In this conversation, Sammy asks: "When we play a song like Summertime, are we, as Jewish and Black Americans, collaborating?"

The question feels central. It's a way of asking a deeper question: We who are on the outside, but on the outside differently—are we bound together?

Another way into the question comes via the relief of recognition:

> How do you explain the elation of a dog seeing another dog? You're walking in the park. So far you've seen only pavements and people's shoes and every now and again something else you wanna sniff. Then suddenly there's this scent in the air then paws, paws on the pavement and you've got paws too, and you wanna cry out I'M A DOG TOO I'M A DOG TOO but all you can do is bark. BARK you say, BARK BARK and your tail starts to wag like a windmill, and your heart's racing what's the news? What've you got for me? What can we do together, now, here, on the pavement how can I tell you what it means to me that we're both dogs and we're here together?

We are here together in New York, in the 1950s, and there is a cloud of violence and exclusion hanging over queerness. Levene shares many of Fruchter's concerns—Jewishness, belonging, family—but Levene's characters just feel more in it. There isn't language for who they are, and there are felt limitations to who they might become. "'Sometimes I think I'm an alien' 'How come?' … 'Because I sure as hell ain't a woman or a man.'" But Levene's characters pick up words, try them out. The prose hums and sings, running on the juice of an endless succession of similes: "her frame of reference as closed off as her shitty apartment"; "If Teddy was a piggy bank he'd be empty"; "Marg was like a gorilla yeah, just like a gorilla"; "Frankie was beautiful like a bed that's been slept in."

Words don't resolve, don't make definite. They are provisional, shifting, a piano riff; they offer a blush of pleasure, a spot for two humans to meet, and understand something, even as they know the spot is not perfect, never will be. Levene's characters flirt, make each other laugh, and it's in the semantic collisions that happen inside words that the novel cozies up with its larger questions. If life is "just a series of meetings," is this union meetings, or meetings at the bar? Are we butchering meat, butchering songs, or are we just butches?

At the front of the book is a character list—like a playbill ("Featuring")—and the names are organized into groups, "THE ANARCHISTS," "THE ALL-AMERICANS," "THE BOP." Each name has its epithet, "the singer," "the doer," "the bartender," "the butch belle juive." Even with the list, I'll confess I had a hard time keeping track of who was who, but the confusion feels like part of it. (Frankie, I'm pretty sure, is the main character. There are two Sammys.) The shape of the book shambles between an endless loop and something like progress. Chapters are titled, "A Friday Night," "Friday Night," "Some Friday," "Meetings," "Another Friday Night," and "Last Call," with the occasional variation thrown in (one chapter, named after a dream and a song Harry is writing, is called "Night Sweats and Showtrain to Leningrad").

We begin at the annual meeting of the BOP and end a year later, at another annual meeting. I could attempt to narrate some of the shifts that happen in the meantime, the relationships, the meals, the decisions, the breaks, the arguments—but none of this is the point, really. The point is that we move with these characters, feel deeply the feelings they only occasionally allow themselves to experience. The point is that we witness a world in which disconnect generationally does not bely an essential belonging to a legacy, to a tradition: "Frankie had been born an anarchist like people are born Catholic."

There is a vertical line here, too—and there is a blockage between generations, a blockage attributable to trauma, to queerness, to any number of things. But the

blockage is also just a part of the fabric of reality, worn with a little sadness, but also a shrug. Levene beautifully articulates the ways in which a project can be shared, generation to generation, even as its terms might resist mutual legibility. Roz, for instance, is an anarchist, child of a kosher butcher. She is both her father's child, and not; she feels connected to her lineage even as her father refuses to see the connection:

> The anarchism [Sammy] engaged in with Frankie and Sid and Roz was the same but forever different from the one she had grown up with. Roz felt the same about Jewishness, the Jewishness she engaged with now at the deli with Frankie and Sammy and Sid, it was nothing she could talk about with her father the kosher butcher whose namesake had made her Roz the Kosher Butch, a homage to her father, to her family, how it made her feel closer to them but they'd never know anything about it.

These are characters who want to change the world; they are only secondarily concerned with some kind of perfect resolution for themselves, though of course they want some love, some comfort, to feel decent enough in their skins. *Greasepaint* is a book about how one manages to build a life in spite of marginalization and threatened violence. Because—on we go.

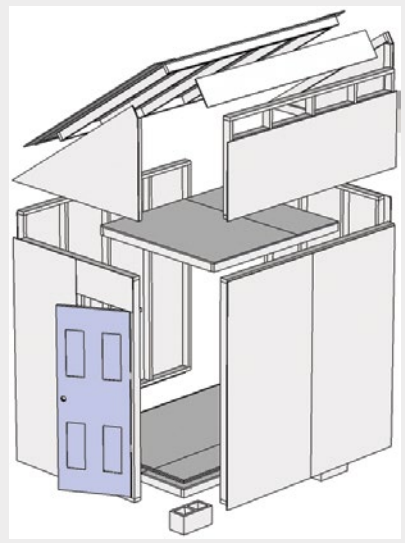
Levene's shambling, butch, melodic prose wears its melancholy and tenderness and resignation and humor lightly. Her characters envision a just world. (The BOP was organized with clear demands: equal pay for all players, regardless of race and regardless of renown; equal access for all players to a piano for practice "in order to encourage the best level of piano playing among homosexuals.") Levene takes the political projects of these characters seriously, but she also knows that it is in the shuffling, fumbling, unfolding tendernesses and conversations that accompany any larger political project that some version of a new world gets built.

There is sweetness there, and a kind of sadness, too. "Anarchism is unrequited love. It is hope without end, do you know how tiring that is?"

***Agnes Borinsky** is a writer who mostly lives in Los Angeles.*

ARB DIY

Mad Housers



The Mad Housers was founded in 1987 by several Georgia Tech architecture grad students who realized that homelessness was becoming a problem in the Atlanta area, and that with simple, inexpensive materials they could design and build warmer, safer shelters than what the homeless could do on their own. The first Housers combined service with protest, but today's group, headed by Nick Hess and Tracy Woodward, focus on the direct action of building small homes and working with community groups to get their unhoused clients support and assistance. And the Housers have unleashed their plans upon the world—you can download the shelter blueprints at madhousers.net and start housing the unhoused around you now!

ARB: How many buildings are up at any given time?

MH: Hard to say. Several people downloaded our blueprints and built their own during the pandemic, but offhand Atlanta has thirty still being occupied on a regular basis. This is due in large part to our being able to offer case management and navigate people to permanent housing, and rapid urban development that makes it harder to find stable encampments where we feel we can build without attracting undue attention.

ARB: How long do they last?

MH: Ten years before you need major repairs, some are thirty years old and still going strong.

ARB: Do you maintain them?

MH: We'll replace the odd door or roof tile, especially in the winter, but most of our clients are shadetree mechanics who do their own repairs.

ARB: Do the residents repair and improve on the designs?

MH: Absolutely. My favorite was an electrician who Dumpster-dived for old solar panels, attached them to his roof, and built a series of light switches using popsicle sticks.

ARB: You've been working out of Atlanta for a long time. Are there Housers (and houses?) elsewhere in the U.S. or around the world?

MH: Yes, we've had calls from builders in other states who liked the simplicity (and low cost!) of the design, especially now that so many cities have embraced alternative shelter models such as repurposed shipping containers or old quarantine trailers. Do museums count? We have Housers shelters erected in some really top-notch spaces—the Triennelle in Italy, the Cooper-Hewitt in New York, the Museum of Design in Atlanta, Il Duomo in Milan, etc.

ARB: Mad angry or mad insane?

MH: Both? It's always frustrating that we can help so few people. Ever read Italo Calvino's folktales? He has a great one about Jesus sending an angel to pull Saint Peter's mother out of hell, except the angel could only use a leek peel and the mother kicked the whole way up. Some days are great, you get clients what they need and into apartments, but only crazy people keep doing this gig.

Terry Bisson (1942-2024) was a writer, editor, activist, and humorist. His notable novels include *Fire on the Mountain*, in which Harriet Tubman's involvement in John Brown's Harper's Ferry raid leads to the creation of a space-faring Black socialist republic, and *Any Day Now*, also an alternative history in which Robert F. Kennedy initially survives an assassination attempt. Bisson was more well-known for his short fiction, which combined science fictional ideas with the "tall tales" of the Kentucky milieu in which Bisson grew up. His most well-known stories are "They're Made out of Meat" (they are us!) and "Bears Discover Fire" (what it says on the tin).

A self-described "TVA Baby" who benefitted from the technological and economic development of the New Deal in his hometown, Bisson's work and activism often focused on the possibilities and discontents of technology and the radical potential of collective action. Bisson was a member of the May 19th Communist Organization—the legal wing of the Weather Underground that was also associated with the Black Liberation Army. Later, as a member of its front group, the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee, Bisson spent several months in jail as a political prisoner for refusing to appear before a grand jury.

In addition to his science fiction, Bisson also edited the "Outspoken Author" chapbook series for anarchist publisher PM Press, wrote the biography *On a Move: The Story of Mumia Abu-Jamal* and edited radical actor Peter Coyote's memoir of the counterculture, *Sleeping Where I Fall*. Always a true "working writer," Bisson wrote two novels about the Star Wars character Boba Fett and co-authored *Car Talk*, a book by the famous auto mechanic brothers and NPR hosts of the Car Talk show.

He will be missed.

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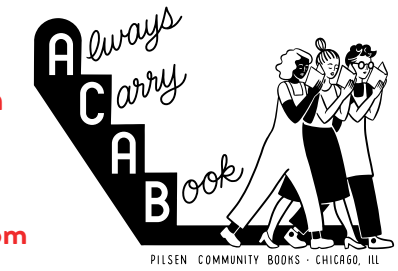

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