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Supplemental Interview Questions

Questions were taken/modified from the New York Times “By the Book” interviews.

What books are on your nightstand?

Drunk on All Your Strange New Words by Eddie Robson, *Index, A History of the* by Dennis Duncan, and *If All the Seas Were Ink* by Ilana Kurshan. We read a portion of Kurshan’s book for this class and I really enjoyed it, so I bought it to read the whole thing! I thought the way she wove her personal narrative with insightful commentary on the Talmud was really compelling, and I even wrote my final essay on her work!

What’s the last great book you read?

I just finished *Plum Rains* by Andromeda Romano-Lax. It took a really interesting dive into the role that women and caregivers play in societies and how they are often silenced and undervalued.

Describe your ideal reading experience (when, where, what, how).

0 worries, snacks and water nearby, outside in a comfortable spot against a tree on a sunny day, with people to watch when I look up from a book. I wish I could take more notes when I read and slow down to absorb the information more meaningfully but it’s hard not to rush things!

Which writers — novelists, playwrights, critics, journalists, poets — working today do you admire most?

Roxane Gay. Emily St. John Mandel—her style of writing and ability to weave such complex stories is so impressive. I think that her and I’s writing styles are very different and I don’t know if I want to model mine on hers, but it would be amazing to be able to write like her. Ilana Kurshan and Dana Horn.

Which subjects do you wish more authors would write about?

I wish there were more adult queer Jewish romances. I wish there were more contemporary women Jewish fiction writers in general. What would be even cooler is Jewish sci-fi and dystopian writers. I want to read books that decenter men and explore themes of Judaism, navigating social communications and relationships, and the uncertainty of being in your early 20s all combined. I would also love Jewish books set in big communities in places other than New York and Israel because there is such a diverse range of experiences!

What moves you most in a work of literature?

I get really emotional when good characters get beaten down over and over again, like in the book *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus. Even though that book ended on a hopeful note, I was left with a deep feeling of unfairness. I like stories to feel morally balanced by the end because otherwise, they do not feel satisfying. Books that do not give me that satisfaction always

stick around in my brain for much longer. Of course, I love writing stories with unsatisfying endings, so I don't know if I would like to read my own work!

What first inspired you to write your short story?

In our first meeting, Professor Sokoloff mentioned the short story "The Four Questions" by Allegra Goodman. It is a story of three generations of a family having a Passover Seder where the four adult grandchildren embody the four children of the Passover Haggadah. I thought this concept was really creative but I was not sure how I could incorporate that into my project. Then, the beginning of spring quarter brought Passover and all of the struggles of trying to stay kosher for it. I do not eat kosher during the year, so to switch from nothing to everything at once: no pork, no meat and cheese together, *plus* no chametz? It was a great challenge for me. I made it through though, and about a week later I started my period. I just thought to myself: *how awful would it be if I was on my period last week during Passover?* I would be completely miserable with constant cravings and no way to access my comfort food. That's when the "what if" scenarios started, which is really when I started writing the story in my head.

I thought that mirroring the story of 10 plagues made sense because the first plague was blood, so that could correspond with the start of a period, and I did not think much further than that. As I started to write, I realized that the plagues mirrored struggles with periods and staying kosher in so many unique ways, and it all fell into place! The only challenge was the number of plagues related to bugs. I even thought that I would skip the death of a firstborn son, but her brother being in a hospital with the doctors being the angels made perfect sense for the emotional climax of the story. The use of the 10 plagues ended up enhancing my writing more than I could have anticipated.

What is your favorite moment in your short story?

My favorite moment is on Day 6 (plague = boils) where Edith is frustratedly popping her period-hormone-induced pimples. It was one of those unplanned moments where the themes of the 10 plagues, the woes of menstruation, and struggles with body image all overlapped in an almost comedic way. It was not part of my initial plan but it ended up being the most obvious and poignant choice.

Why does the short story end the way it does?

At first, I thought that I would write the 10 days for the 10 plagues, then two more days after. On the eleventh day, Edith would get fired from her job as a way to mirror the Jews being emancipated from slavery, and she would stop her period and follow their journey and eventual celebration with the final day. It also would be apt because "the Red Sea has parted" is an idiom for the end of a period. However, that did not end up making sense for a number of reasons. For one, the 10 plagues ended up being much more important to shaping the story than originally planned and adding days after that would decenter that relationship. Also, as I mentioned earlier, the 10th plague offered a natural emotional climax to the story. I also did not plan on the story being centered so much around Edith's relationships with her family, specifically her mother. That relationship ended up being really important and again strengthened the natural ending to her story being an event related to her family, not her job.

The other aspect (that readers may be upset about) is a seemingly unhappy ending. Edith's brother is in the hospital and she does not know if he will get better. She loses her job. She has an upsetting conversation with her mother and throws up, displaying another unhealthy

eating habit. But I think the benefit of this story mirroring the 10 plagues is that readers already know in some way that the story of Passover ends after that moment of initial liberation and it ends on a hopeful note. Edith may not see it, but the readers can understand that the job at the post office was not healthy for her. Her period will end, and her Red Sea will part. The story ends with Edith in a place of uncertainty, but a reader familiar with the Passover story will have the knowledge she lacks that things will get better.

Who's your favorite type of fictional protagonist? And the best antagonist?

I love protagonists that don't know how brilliant or amazing they are. I really like Sherlock Holmes in the TV show *Sherlock* because he is not self-aware and completely subverts typical social expectations of conduct. It makes viewers and readers feel like they have a deeper relationship with the piece of media because they know something that the main character doesn't. For my favorite kind of antagonists, I love ones that end up being complex and sympathetic and may even end up siding with the protagonist. It gives a sense of satisfaction to have an explanation for their harmful choices, even when in real life, we often do not receive those explanations.

How has your writing changed over time?

I feel like my writing has changed with each book I read and each new influence I receive, but I do not know if there have been many significant changes, even between when I started creative writing in elementary school and now. I have always written stories with an emotional rather than material resolution, even though I may hate reading those kinds of stories. This project helped me push my writing more than if I had written a "normal" prose piece, but I want to continue to take intentional risks in writing and try new things.

What do you plan to write next?

Well, I definitely want to continue working on this prose piece. I feel like it drags on in the middle at times and I would want to rework some of the days. But I am also proud of the work that I have done already and recognize that regardless of the final result, the process really helped me engage with the course material in ways I couldn't have imagined. Beyond that, I always want to write when I travel, and the longest trip I have planned in the near future is to study abroad for 5 months in Prague this upcoming school year. I think living there long enough to get a sense of a way of life combined with the Jewish history there will really inspire me!