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# The last mentsch

**Bayer, Peter**

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**THE LAST MENTSCH - REFLECTIVE**

The original draft of this reflective was produced in a style which sought to encapsulate some of the lingo, worldviews, life experiences, patois, trauma and (occasionally) humour of those characters who populate *The Last Mentsch*, which is a fact-based-on-fiction narrative sweeping from a young boy's arrival in Africa, aged 12, in 1862 until the death of his son in 1985.

There are two narrators – myself as the interlocutor, and Yitzhak, the son of Theodore. Yitzhak is the storyteller, who asks me to 'translate' his thoughts to make sense of the world in which he and his father lived. Indeed, one of the more important sub-texts of the work is the relationship between fathers and sons.

The reaction to an earlier version of the structure of my reflective proposal confirmed (for me) that my chosen approach to the work – revealing to the reader a character type which has become all but extinct – was correct. My contention was, and is, that the manner in which Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century expressed themselves, mangled the English language (while simultaneously adding to its lexicon) and generally survived a variety of brand new worlds by equal portions of humour, *chutzpah*, hubris and occasional fiscal acuity remains either unknown or misunderstood.

*The Last Mentsch* began life as a proposed book of short stories, all of which were connected to a novelette, which is defined in Collins as either:

1. *(Literary & Literary Critical Terms) an extended prose narrative story or short novel*
   or
2. *(Literary & Literary Critical Terms) a novel that is regarded as being slight, trivial, or sentimental* [1]

I sought the former rather than the latter as the foundation for the work which, in my proposal, suggested a herringbone structure – that is, a self-contained novelette which was the spine, to which were connected several short stories as the 'bones' of the fish. These 'bones' contained characters from the novelette.

[1] Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged HarperCollins Publishers 1991, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2003

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would be de facto 'back stories' relating to the novelette - each with their own Roald Dahlesque twisty endings.

The herring was stillborn at the Masters proposal stage: short stories were deemed not viable, so the novelette part – which was entitled *Yitzhak: a brief history* was extended into what has now emerged as *The Last Mentsch,* a 106 000-word narrative.

The novel's importance has, in my mind, always harkened to the gradual disappearance from memory of generations of immigrants to South Africa whom I choose to name the Child Pioneers. Historically, children (many in their pre-teens) were smuggled out of Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century and arrived in this country unable to speak English and forced to do anything to survive, hence the tag.

These children were sent to South Africa primarily to escape growing pogroms – xenophobic attacks on Jews, who were ethnically cleansed or moved away from major centres, much as the Apartheid government of this country did to ' people of colour' who did not fit the National Party's vision of a pristine white country.

The nineteenth century pogroms were nothing new. Anti-Semitism has been around since the creation of religion – however, this does not change the fact that the nineteenth century pogroms were something of a prelude to the attempted extinction of Jews by Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany.

The history of all but the most famous of those people who fled Europe in the nineteenth century has, much like the *lingua franca* of those European immigrants, Yiddish, faded into distant memory and resides mostly in anecdotal evidence handed down through the generations.

Yiddish, multiple sources such as the authoritative Warsaw-based Yivo Institute for Jewish Research and older Jewish people will confirm, is an Ashkenazi Jewish language based on High German and which was spoken almost exclusively by the immigrants who fled Europe's persecution.

It is in this milieu that the story is set: Southern Africa colonised by the British at the height of their Empire, and at a time when the country was slowly changing from being a halfway house port stop to the Indies and into an era where the mineral wealth turned a hot, hostile, scrubby land into bonanza country.

That is the era where history and my fiction-based-on-fact narrative intersect. While the earliest Voortrekkers, Colonists, Huguenots, diamond diggers and mining tycoons are remembered in history books, scant attention has been paid to the Jewish Child Pioneers by anyone other than Jewish historians.

Having said that, this work is in no way intended to be anything more than an adventure wrapped in the events and often-picaresque characters of the era. The characters and the history thus form a vehicle to carry the journey, the exploration, and the escapades of a people in a largely forgotten bubble in time.

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to those Child Pioneers, many of whom became giants of n the country in which we now live. Many, like the Oppenheimer family, converted from Judaism to Christianity to avoid being marginalised by the essentially white Anglo Saxon gentry who made up the country's 'upper class' in the nineteenth and early twentieth century ... in a country in which class became a measuring stick of humanity until, during and throughout the apartheid era. Some might suggest this measurement of the value of humanity remains unchanged, even in the new South Africa.

Many of the Child Pioneers finally set stakes in the mining camp that became Johannesburg, drawn by the promise of wealth and a future for their children in a country they hoped was not as xenophobic as their own homelands.

[2] Rubin notes that the Jewish population of Johannesburg soared from 100 people in 1887 (the year in which the fictional Theodore and his small family arrived in the mining camp) to almost 12 000 before the turn of the century.

These people established businesses, created synagogues, invested, became inexorably involved in what was to become the future political landscape of South Africa. They sought and enjoyed a kinship with others creeds, playing significant roles in, for example, the creation of the South African Communist Party and, later, the ANC.

As a relevant sidebar comment; of the people rounded up by the Police at Lilliesleaf farm in 1963 – leading to the Rivonia Trial which saw Nelson Mandela and key members of the ANC jailed for life for plotting sabotage against the Apartheid government - some 27 people were Jews who were either senior members of the ANC or served on the legal teams which defended them: thus, the names of Kasrils, Slovo, First, Goldberg, Goldreich, Sachs, Turok and so forth are all key figures in South Africa's new history ... as suggested earlier, kindred spirits to the oppressed black South Africans of the Apartheid era. History has shown that this generation was followed by the likes of Helen Suzman and other members of the Jewish community who contributed to the South African socio-political landscape in a positive manner.

Sadly, as with Yiddish and characters such as my work seeks to showcase, those have become largely forgotten facts.

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[2] Rubin, M (2004) The *Jewish Community of Johannesburg, 1886-1939: landscapes of reality and imagination*, MA (Geography), University of Pretoria, Pretoria, viewed at http://upetd.up.ac.za/thesis/available/etd-09212005-092700/

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me real characters, some composite characters and others

of Yitzhak is based on a man my father told me about ... a foundling left on the doorstep of a kosher delicatessen owned by a Yiddish-speaking couple at around the turn of the century.

The couple took in the child and raised him as their own. They named him Yitzhak, and he and my father became firm friends. [3]*Chaverim,* as Yiddish-speakers might say.

When my father told me about Yitzhak, he would already have been an elderly man. He certainly passed away before 1965. The foundling grew to be a man who lived with the old Jewish couple as their son and although he spoke some English (with a heavy Yiddish accent) he usually only spoke Yiddish.

There are thus two Yitzhaks: *The Last Mentsch* is clearly only about the fictional character. It would be wonderful (but unlikely) if the real Yitzhak knew his life would be used as a reference in a novel half a century after his death. My late father (also a refugee, from Hitler's Germany) similarly would have been delighted that the story he told me years ago would achieve some sort of life, even if *The Last Mentsch's* Yitzhak is just a tipping of the hat to his memory.

The fictional Yitzhak's father, Theodore, is a composite of several characters, one of whom was my maternal grandfather whose name was Theodore Isaacs. The real Theodore Isaacs fled Russia as a 12-year-old, whereas the novel's Theodore flees Lithuania at the same age.

The fictional and real Theodore have one thing in common: both their grandfathers were hanged, albeit that the real Theodore's father – my great grandfather – genuinely was a horse thief.

The novel, which examines the hardships and challenges faced by the young Theodore (as told by Yitzhak to the author as second narrator) is not a biographical study. Rather, it weaves plots and subplots into this tragic-comic historical narrative.

Theodore, in the novel, spends some years in Cape Town, then heads for Kimberley during the diamond rush, and then later moves to the Goldfields, via the Free State Republic. In his literal and metaphorical journeys Theodore crosses paths with a variety of characters, some real, some invented, some composites of several people whose stories were handed down to me, anecdotally, by family.

The composite characters in the work mirror actual people who inhabited the country from 1862-1900, and have been incorporated into the story as peripheral characters who contribute to the plot one way or another, anecdotally supporting the premise that the book examines ... survival against often stupendous odds faced by children. While *The Last Mentsch* does have just a smidgen of the 'triumph of the human spirit' about it, the overarching message is more about coping under unbelievable pressure in strange new worlds.

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[3] *Chaver* (s): In English, a friend. *Chaverim* (pl). This word has been adopted into the English language and the Yiddish plural – im – disposed of over time. Thus, 'friends' today would be, simply, '*chavers'*.

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of early Jewish settlers will see characters who resonate with
n name then, at least, in character type.

*The Last Mentsch* is, at best nominally, an historical novel: it offers historical characters, times and events, but as adjuncts to a purely fictional story. Hence perhaps a better genre pigeonhole would be historical fiction which [4]Sarricks et al, suggest is a genre which in its own right demands the asking of many questions.

Sarricks (1999) asks, for example, how accurate historical fiction must be? What degree of inaccuracy and fictionalising is acceptable in this genre ... and more importantly, what liberties the writer can take with verifiable history?

Sarricks and [5]Rainbolt (2009) concur that these questions can only be answered as 'indefinable'. Much as writers on journalistic objectivity struggle to define objectivity - is objectivity balance? Is objectivity the polar opposite of bias? Is it a best version of the truth? - so too do opinions on what constitutes historical fiction vary.

'Fiction allows for some fudging of the facts,' Rainbolt argues 'but how much? Historical fiction should present *believable and plausible representations* (my emphasis) of the past.'

Having said that, Rainbolt then concludes that history 'should not be judged as fiction'.

He adds that 'egregious anachronisms are *unacceptable violations of genre expectations* (my emphasis again) for Historical Fiction (e.g. introducing cars into nineteenth-century historical fiction or giving women rights that they did not have during a past setting of a historical fiction'.

*The Last Mentsch* thus sets itself as fiction placed in the aforementioned bubble of time, although the work's timelines, historical accuracy and such detail as clothing, firearms and geography are totally accurate. This detail ranges from the accuracy of firearms of the era [6] (Currah's The *Lee-Enfield Rifle)* to the brands of ale available in Kimberley in the late nineteenth century. Having said that, I am not sure if the (fictitious) *Rat and Badger* pub would ever have served the beers suggested by [7]Cornell's *Beer: The Story of the Pint: The History of Britain's Most Popular Drink*

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[4] Sarricks, Joyce (2002). *Writers & Readers: Historical Fiction -- Rules of the Genre*. NoveList News, EBSCO Publishing

[5] Rainbolt, W. (2003) *He Disagreed with the History, But He Liked the Story*. Writing History/ Writing Fiction: A Virtual Conference Session, History and MultiMedia Center, University at Albany-SUNY. Viewed at *URL: http://www.albany.edu/history/hist_fict/Rainbolt/Rainboltes.htm*

[6] Currah, J (2000) The *Lee-Enfield Rifle,* extracted from http://www.enfieldrifles.ca/main.html

[7] Cornell, M (2004) *Beer: The Story of the Pint: The History of Britain's Most Popular Drink.*

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of nineteenth century information appears in the

Yitzhak prefaces his narrative by telling the writer that his facts may 'not be one hundred percent kosher' by way of sidelining pedantic criticism that, for example, a stagecoach may have only needed eight, not twelve horses. They did not, but the historical nitpickers might go in search of flaws rather than see the work as a fictional recollection by a dying old man.

Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa [8] states, 'When you write a novel you do not have the obligation to be true and exact; the only obligation you have is to be persuasive. And to be persuasive as a novelist in most cases you are obliged to transform, to distort reality, to lie, to invent something that is not true. That is the only way fiction can be persuasive.'

On the other hand, Hoffman[9] argues, 'There are two kinds of historical fiction. In the first the setting is historical but there are no historical events or persons in the story. . . . The second kind of historical fiction is where both the setting and supporting characters are factual.'

I submit that *The Last Mentsch* sits somewhere in between the obligation to distort reality while at the same time ensuring that the setting for this deed is as accurate as possible.

The use of actual characters from history is a device used by, inter alia, Kurt Vonnegut who frequently referenced real characters in his iconic science fantasy novels of the 1960s to 1980s. Latterly, [10]David Hare's play, *Stuff Happens*, includes Tony Blair and Colin Powell as active participants in the play.

*The Last Mentsch* uses those concepts, as does [11]George McDonald Fraser's *Flashman* series, which sees Harry Flashman (Tom Brown's schoolboy nemesis) as the roguish, raffish central

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[8] Llosa quoted in Rainbolt, W. (2003) *He Disagreed with the History, But He Liked the Story*. Writing History/ Writing Fiction: A Virtual Conference Session, History and MultiMedia Center, University at Albany. Viewed at
*URL: http://www.albany.edu/history/hist_fict/Rainbolt/Rainboltes.htm*

[9] Hoffman, B (2003). *Historical Fiction Criticism & Evaluation.' Historical Fiction. Internet School Library Media Center (*Inez Ramsey, Library Science Program, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA; 1997).

*Viewed at http://raven.jmu.edu/~ramseyil*

[10] *Stuff Happens* concerns the prelude to the 2003 Iraq War

[11] In an obituary following the death of MacDonald Fraser, the London Independent's Jack Adrian wrote: His wonderful Flashman series is an extended act of subversion against the kind of 'Victorian

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ituations and obliquely changes or affects history by dint of fortune.

McDonald Fraser's *Flashman* novels are steeped in interactions between Flashman and a plethora of actual historical characters of the era ranging from Emperor Franz Josef, to abolitionist John Brown to Queen Victoria. While Flashman is the undeserving hero in these books, neither Yitzhak nor Theodore comes anywhere close to acts of heroism. Indeed, the contrary is true, although Flashman and Theodore are similarly driven by self-preservation.

In *The Last Mentsch* such characters as philologist Herman Bleek; the brothers James, John and Fred Gibson (who founded the *Red Star Line* – the first stagecoach company in South Africa); the bandit Scotty Smith; Cecil John Rhodes and; Samuel Perilly, the first manufacturer of cigarettes in South Africa, play roles of varying importance.

There is more to Perilly's inclusion in the book: not only was he a pioneering cigarette manufacturer, he was also my maternal great grandfather: he did not have five ugly daughters (as the novel presents), but rather, four, and a son named Jack. His eldest daughter was Rose, my maternal grandmother.

Samuel Perilly did not, to the best of my knowledge, ever assist anyone in establishing a synagogue in Kimberley during the diamond rush as the novel suggests. Perilly, as with all the characters, serves to play a role which enhances the creation of the character of the fictional Theodore.

Leah, Theodore's common-law wife, Delphinia Adelheit Witbooi, Snuffelaar Caatje, Yitzhak's backward sibling, Harold, the Collingwoods and the 'notorious' Starkowitz-Rappoport Gang (among others) are pure fiction.

Twist Street School existed: my late mother was a student there. She and my father lived in Hunter Street, Yeoville. There were no anti-Semites named Shepherdson living at the end of the block.

There was genuinely an Auntie Cockeye who ran a bar and hotel in Kimberley and, years later, Randfontein. The novel's Auntie Cockeye on the other hand plays a major role in Theodore's fall from grace. She is one of several villainous characters who cross Theodore's path.

Another factoid: the real Auntie Cockeye was also a member of my family. She is described in the book as a wig-wearing midget who ran a bar and beat up troublemakers. Her name in the novel is Yetta Yudelman.

While the real Auntie Cockeye was a wig-wearing midget who broke up bar fights, she never married. Thus the novel's Nate 'Iron Skull' Yudelman is wholly fictitious.

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values' promoted by politicians who have no notion or understanding of history, and certainly no knowledge of the real nineteenth century.

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z the *Goniff*.[12] He is however a composite of some real 'men abused their perceived 'power'. As an example, approximately twenty years ago a Rabbi Poupko deceived Johannesburg's Jewry out of a fortune and fled the country.

More recently, Geoffrey Levenstein, an extremely pious Jew who held high office in an ultra-Orthodox Johannesburg synagogue, embezzled a fortune of money from South African Jewry in his capacity as CEO of Regal Bank.

Associated Press reported on October 18 2012 that Rabbi Mordchai Fish had been found guilty of laundering money for Solomon Dwek, who ran a Ponzi scheme in New Jersey, USA.[13]

Schwartz the *Goniff*'s role in the novel is as a pivotal character in Theodore's distancing himself from the religious bonds which provided an often tenuous connection between the early Jewish immigrants.

There was no Gilda or Moishe Katz either, however their characters are based on real people ... a 'type' so to speak, who have come to symbolise why, in many minds, Jews are sometimes perceived (and despised) as money-grubbers. This perception, incidentally, is NOT a uniquely gentile perception: Indeed, the Katzes would be typified by other Jews as 'Peruvians' - uncouth moneygrubbers lacking in any style or decency: the polar opposite of the Mentsch of the title.

Rabbi Gideon Shimoni, Professor of Modern Jewish Studies at the Institute for Contemporary Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, cites Milton Shain's depiction of a Peruvian – that is, a 'gross' Jew rather than a citizen of the South American country.

Shimoni [14] writes: ...

> 'Shain convincingly argues that the anti-Semitism of the 1930s and 1940s was able to resonate as strongly as it did because of the prevalence of potent, multi-layered, anti-Jewish stereotypes with roots in the late nineteenth century. Seeds transmitted from the European legacy of anti-Semitism had easily struck root and sprouted in forms and image constructions

[12] *Goniff* is Yiddish for 'thief'. As with other Yiddish words in the novel, *goniff* has similarly become part of the (informal) English language.

[13] AP wrote: 'Fish was one of five rabbis arrested in a massive money-laundering and political corruption sting three years ago that stretched from southern New Jersey to the Brooklyn neighborhood where he leads Congregation Sheves Achim.'

[14] Shain, M, Mendelsohn, R (2008). *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History*.

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ıtext. The most striking of these was encapsulated in the
plied to the immigrant Jews.

> The term is of obscure origin, perhaps an acronym for Polish and Russian Union, a Jewish club established in the early diamond mining town of Kimberley. The Peruvian was typically described as 'the apparition of a slovenly, unkempt and generally unwashed edition . . . of the wandering Jew . . . holding money clenched in his sinister hand . . .' A parallel and equally uniquely South African representation was the cartoon caricature 'Hoggenheimer', which stereotyped the Jew as the quintessential parvenu, a greedy and wily cosmopolitan financier. Shain intriguingly traces this image back to a stage character in a London West End musical comedy of 1902.'

Hoggenheimer was the creation of South African Cartoonist D.C. Boonzaier. The undated representation which follows shows Hoggenheimer, right, supporting the satirical force feeding of race hatred (*rassehaat*) by Jan Smuts to the media from a *potjie* labelled 'propaganda'.




Herman Giliomee, in *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* argues that while Boonzaier denied that Hoggenheimer was Jewish, there is little doubt that the cartoonist sought to represent Johannesburg Jewry as the 'parvenu ... quintessential greedy and wily cosmopolitan financier described by Shain.

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...other potentially contentious issue, that being the use of ...usness is, of course, in deciding whether there is a difference between typing and stereotyping.

Like it or not, there is no question that due to the far-flung nature of Jews who have, for centuries been cast into the wind by this pogrom, that inquisition or the other blood libel, certain traits have become associated with Jews.

There is no doubt that, for example, that Ashkenazi Jews and Sephardic Jews are poles apart in mannerism, linguistics and even some religious practices.

Theodore, the central character in the novel, is an Ashkenazi Jew, which means his descendants were from France, Eastern Europe and Germany. Sephardic Jews on the other hand, trace their history to the Iberian Peninsula as well as North Africa and the Middle East.

There are other subgroups, including Mizrachi, Yemenite, Ethiopian and Oriental  Indeed, the novel's unnamed Chief Rabbi in London whimsically ponders the possibility that the Rabbi requested by the Kimberley community might stumble upon the so-called Lost Tribe of Israel, believed to be 'somewhere in Africa'.

Within the sub-groups, there are even further subgroups: German Jews, for example, tend to be almost dismissive of Eastern European Jews from Latvia and Lithuania. The converse also applies.

There is also an arrogance concerning how Russian Jews view Lithuanian Jews and vice versa.

Each of the sets, subsets and sub-subsets of Judaism has vocal and non-vocal and verbal and non-verbal communications characteristics. Indeed, watching (from a distance) Jews from diverse backgrounds conversing in Yiddish would provide the eavesdropper with a decent kinesic guess as to their respective backgrounds.

Firstly, it must be noted that Yiddish is not so much a language as a linguistic smorgasbord which historically cannot be spoken in dulcet monotones or without the *de rigueur* supplementary sweepingly theatrical gestures, histrionics, facial expressions and a range of melodramatic excesses which would humble the habitués of Stratford-upon-Avon.

Practically, if you were observing at a distance a Yiddish speaker being asked directions to the nearest bus stop, it would appear as if the answering Yiddish speaker was conducting the New York Philharmonic Orchestra while simultaneously choreographing *Swan Lake.*

The actual Yitzhak who befriended by my father spoke fluent Yiddish, but very little English. There are, throughout this book, occasional words or phrases in the Yiddish language. I make no apologies for their use: rather, I am trusting that readers will embrace the use of this language and seek their own examples of some of the many Yiddish words which have been adopted by English-speakers, and which words have become a part of the lexicon of the English language.

What *chutzpah,* Yitzhak would have said of who took Yiddish words and made them part of the English language. *T'iefs!*

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uage which has become a linguistic mistress to a number of
German would speak Yiddish with a certain amount of restraint – Yiddish being a de facto corruption of High German – while Sephardim would generally add the physical dimensions, the gesticulations so typical of Mediterranean types.

Anyone noticed how Italian, Jewish and Spanish matriarchs all talk with their entire bodies?

How does one differentiate between a '*grobe*' Jew like Gilda Katz and, for example, Theodore's more sedate Lithuanian father or indeed, the taciturn Jewish Londoners, Yetta Yudelman and Klaus Schwartzman?

Transliterating accents was, from the perspective of pure imagery, the best means of differentiating these character types. The accents used are, from my lived experience, accurate reflections of those individual speech patterns.

The use of accents was a practice I did not extend to, for example, Cecil John Rhodes, who plays poker with Theodore in Auntie Cockeye's bar. I am not aware if Rhodes ever actually played poker in his life or drank whisky in a bar owned by Auntie Cockeye. (He did, however, have his own country and was gay. His lover was military man, Leander Starr Jameson.)

To turn his accent into a sort of Colonel Blimp delivery would have been the stuff of farce.

'*Feh*,' Yitzhak would say, in Yiddish.

Converting the novelette/short story genre into a sweeping narrative, covering the lives of an immigrant boy through to his manhood, and that of his son – the Yitzhak of the short story title – was, albeit briefly, a minor hurdle.

The John D McDonald model – that is, writing a story as a short story, then adding substance and filling it out until it evolves into a novel – was wholly appropriate in the construction of a novel from novelette length.

Merrill [15] notes that McDonald once told a writer's group in the 1960s that all his novels were created by this process, which was to write a short story – plots, sub-plots, beginning, middle and end - as a sort of skeleton, and then flesh out the short story into a novel.

Merrill details how the idea of expanding a short story into a full length novel first really saw life at a time when McDonald was writing 'hardboiled fiction'. McDonald began converting his pulp fiction short stories into novels after the Second World War, and became a novelist when the boom in the novel market grew.

His first novel was an expanded short story published as *The Brass Cupcake*, in 1950. It was a massive best-seller.

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[15] Merrill, H (2000). *The Red Hot Typewriter: The Life and Times of John D. MacDonald*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Minotaur.

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l McDonald today is recognised as a master of 'classy' e likes of crime writers Mickey Spillane and James Hadley Chase. His style is not to be confused with the procedural detective stories of, for example, Ed McBain.

I found myself initially mired in a mindset in which the phrase; 'you can't teach old dogs new tricks' held sway. As a career journalist (and for the past decade a teacher of journalists) the switch from journalism-style writing to novel-length writing demanded a new view of time and deadlines as well as the editing processes and their unique hurdles.

In short, I had been writing in my own style for a disgusting number of decades, so my writing self-image was of a set-in-concrete style with which I was exceedingly comfortable. Having set the mould, why change anything?

Old dogs...

Put in perspective, Wits Professors Anton Harber and Steven Friedman were both junior reporters when I was a senior journalist at the *Rand Daily Mail*.

Indeed, before the *Rand Daily Mail*, I spent six years in magazines and a year working for *The World* newspaper as a sub-editor. That the government of the day shut both down both newspapers is (I hope) purely coincidental. Or perhaps I was a sort of undocumented anti-apartheid media Typhoid Mary. The following newspaper cutting [16] is an expose on the appalling state of ambulance services. It won an SFW commendation. Note the year (1979) and that 33 years later the ambulance problem remains.

[16] Front page lead, *Rand Daily Mail* September 24, 1979

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RAND Daily Mail

JOHANNESBURG, MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 1979.

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...lances come under ...trol of municipal fire ... who are firemen ...nd, foremost — and ...nd to discard the am... services."

QUOTE

"Speed to the accident site is vital, but then there is poor communication with hospitals who are unprepared for accident victims."

TOMORROW'S Rand Daily Mail will carry a breakdown of the ambulance services in seven major centres — Pretoria, Johannesburg, Bloemfontein, Durban, Maritzburg, Cape Town and Port Elizabeth — and one town, Pietersburg. The on-scene evaluations were conducted by the National Institute for Transport and Road Research, CSIR. The findings, in many cases, are appalling.

QUOTE

"The cost to South Africa is R24 800 per fatality. Road accidents therefore cost the country R161-million a year."

QUOTE

Dr Du Toit says the average citizen is not aware of "the atrocious state into which the ambulance services have been allowed to deteriorate".

# Ambulance chaos

...ice's municipal ...services are in ...a state. Lives ...ot through inef... under-trained staff and ill... ...bulances.

...arges are lev... J G du Toit — ...s head of the ...department at ...Hendrik Ver... ...ital, past presi... SA Orthopaedic ...and at present ...e Ga-Rankuwa ...orthopaedic sec... Mr W N Van ...who has com... ...ee-year in-depth ...e CSIR on road ...emergency

...ms are that: ...South Africa ...re a particularly ...ce of road acci... ...es, the fatality ...out of propor... highest in the

SOUTH AFRICAN LIBRARY 28 SEP 1979 ONTVANG SUID-AFRIKAANSE BIBLIOTEEK

CSIR graphs showing South Africa's road traffic casualty rates. The deathrate, left, bears little comparison to the relatively low traffic injury rate. Although the death graph refers to 1974 figures, the CSIR report says the situation has not changed.

'MAIL' EXCLUSIVE by PETER BAYER

● Municipal services in "driven out" of ambulance hospitals is contributing to

He has found that response times for most services are poor, general vehicle equipment is poor and in several cases, vehicles were unhygienic.

Dr Du Toit says the average citizen is not aware of "the atrocious state into which the ambulance services have been allowed to deteriorate".

"Irrespective of the reasons why," he says, "we are faced with a serious problem through ignorance and public indifference. The public must clamour for an improved service."

He cited Mr Van Kralingen's report showing that a municipal ambulanceman's minimum educational requirement is Std 6. "He will need a diploma in basic first aid. He will earn roughly R300 a month and his status will be something between a hospital porter and a municipal bus driver.

"Potentially, the service can't be very good. In America for instance, am...



The story resulted in the then-Minister of Health being shuffled out of his cabinet post.

Approaching this Masters, I had to grapple with a paradigm shift in a style of writing which I had smugly honed and moulded over those decades. I tended in my earlier years, to write glib, funny 'stuff' – stories which made people chuckle before wrapping fish and chips in the pages. Depth and emotion in writing was an occasional event: I wrote the usual seventies poetry without the angst of the era and stopped when I found myself a) laughing at my own work and b) drifting towards the old glibness.

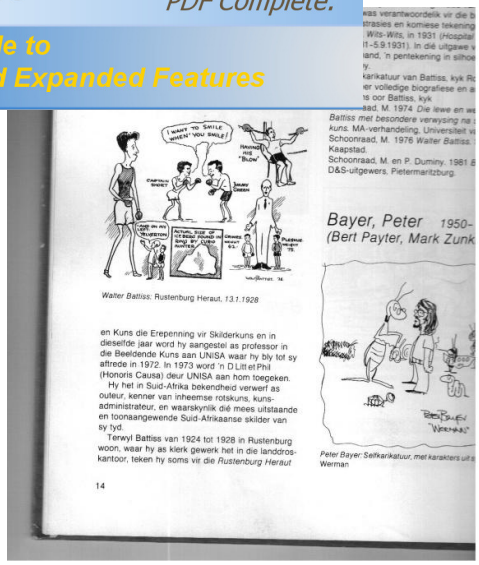
My writing influences ranged from Richard Brautigan (*The pill vs the Springhill Mining Disaster*) to the pithy, massively articulate SJ Perelman [17] (who was a screen writer for the Marx Brothers).

I read the mandatory Kerouac, essential *Siddhartha,* the alternative-to-Tolkien *Gormenghast* trilogy and, (sneakily) Ed McBain and John D. McDonald ... the latter two because I adored (and still do) literary escapism.

I also have every *Asterix* ever printed. (I am a less-than-adequate artist, although I did have a cartoon strip which ran in the *Sunday Tribune* for a year.[18] )

[17] Groucho Marx wrote of Perlman's The *Most of SJ Perlman*: 'From the moment I picked up your book until I put it down, I was convulsed with laughter. Some day I intend reading it.'' Gore Vidal claimed Perlman was 'the funniest man since ... you'.

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Walter Battiss: Rustenburg Herald, 13.1.1928

en Kuns die Erepenning vir Skilderkuns en in dieselfde jaar word hy aangestel as professor in die Beeldende Kuns aan UNISA waar hy bly tot sy aftrede in 1972. In 1973 word 'n D Litt et Phil (Honoris Causa) deur UNISA aan hom toegeken.

Hy het in Suid-Afrika bekendheid verwerf as outeur, kenner van inheemse rotskuns, kunsadministrateur, en waarskynlik dié mees uitstaande en toonaangewende Suid-Afrikaanse skilder van sy tyd.

Terwyl Battiss van 1924 tot 1928 in Rustenburg woon, waar hy as klerk gewerk het in die landdroskantoor, teken hy soms vir die *Rustenburg Herald*

14

Bayer, Peter 1950–
(Bert Payter, Mark Zunk

Peter Bayer: Selfkarikatuur, met karakters uit a Werman

To the mix over the years, add Spike Milligan (everything he ever wrote without exception) and Flann O'Brian (*The Third Policeman*), a multitude of really good sci-fi writers such as Robert Heinlein, a small library of African writers (*Drum* et al) ... and every single word published in the readable newspapers of the day. Together these constitute a bizarre blending of Irish surrealism, Africa and stuff-hippies-used-to-read.

I also wrote for television ... the odd drama, and a few episodes of local soaps such as (God help us) *Orpen House*. Sidebar: Everyone who was in Orpen *House* has subsequently died of old age. Gordon Mulholland was the romantic lead. Perspective again: Gordon was the same age as my mother, who died aged 92 in 2010.

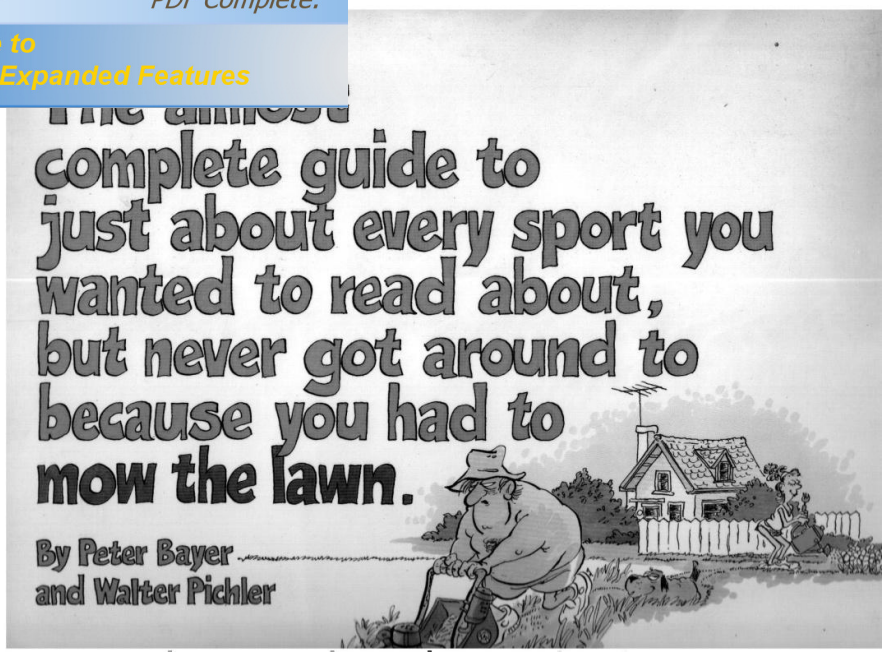
I wrote a 13-part comedy series for Noel Glover. It was hysterically funny. It was never aired because Noel died of a brain tumour before shooting began.

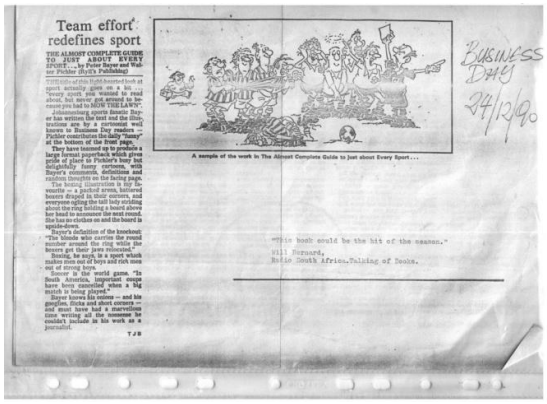
Disgusted I went back to hide in newspapers where I wrote colour pieces about tragedy, as well as the text for the best-selling coffee table book, below.

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[18] This was documented in *SA Strookprentkunstenaars,* a book by Professors Murray and Elzabe Schoonraad, published in 1983.

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Team effort redefines sport

THE ALMOST COMPLETE GUIDE TO JUST ABOUT EVERY SPORT... by Peter Bayer and Walter Pichler (Ryll's Publishers)

BUSINESS DAY 24/12/90

"This book could be the hit of the season." Will Hayward, Radio South Africa...Talking of Books.

It even received reviews... [19]

I noticed an aspect of my fellow candidates' writing which suggests that the further they became invested in their own work, the more the central characters in their novels became mirror images of the writers themselves. In one case, the persona the writer adopted for his lead character was clearly an image of his own intrapersonal self-image.

Apparently, many first novel writers tend to fall into this 'trap'. In *The Last Mentsch*, none of my characters has any essence of me, possibly because I am the first person narrator in the story. I present myself as an atheist who does not believe in organised religion, but has not turned his back on the core of what being a Jew means. As a journalist I always adopted the writing perspective of being the detached observer, rather than the embedded writer that gonzo journalists are. Indeed, in the original draft of *The Last Mentsch*, I was positioned as very much the Gay Talese-style New Journalism observer.

[19] *Business Day*, December 24, 1990.

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ly drafts because every journalistic bone in my body railed
bedded journalists or, to quote Ron Reason, journalists with a 'glory bias'.

> Reason [20] contends, 'Journalists, especially television reporters, often assert themselves into the stories they cover. This happens most often in terms of proximity, i.e. to the locus of unfolding events or within the orbit of powerful political and civic actors. This bias helps journalists establish and maintain a cultural identity as knowledgeable insiders (although many journalists reject the notion that follows from this – that they are players in the game and not merely observers). The glory bias shows itself in particularly obnoxious ways in television journalism. News promos with stirring music and heroic pictures of individual reporters create the aura of omnipresence and omnipotence.' (no page)

That said, later drafts of the book made it imperative that I insert myself (moderately) into the story as narrator-relaying-narrator, adding another voice to the telling of a simple-yet-complex tale.

Having denied that any aspects of the novel's characters are reflections of me, there is a strong flavour in the character of Yitzhak which reflects my late father, and indeed, his father. Both were men who had the last vestiges of faith and belief wrung out of them by history.

The novel occasionally touches on the concept of fathers handing down value systems and norms to their sons. Theodore connects to me only in his lapsed religious beliefs. Other than that, I can find no reflections of myself in any of the characters.

Notwithstanding my supervisor suggesting that Auntie Cockeye might be my *doppelganger*, I reject this notion. I am a six foot tall male with three sons, and not a misanthropic midget woman with a disconnected left eyeball.

The character of Auntie Cockeye did at an early stage bring into focus the potentially problematic representation of women in *The Last Mentsch*: the sense was that, at that stage, the women were perceived as either weak or evil. This needs to be contextualised. At that time in history the concept of strong, dominant women was largely unheard of. There was no franchise for women, although the book does talk (later) of Emily Pankhurst and Emily Davidson, who were famed suffragettes. In *The Last Mentsch*, women have been represented as follows:

Theodore's unnamed mother is subservient and peripheral in her extremely fleeting appearance, weeping at the departure her son.

Gladys Collingwood – elitist, fashionable upper class British who, with Leah, takes control of a dangerous situation when her husband cannot deal with their life-threatening circumstances.

[20] Reason, R (2007) extracted from *http://www.umich.edu/~newsbias/links.html*

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l for Theodore and is for some time the *de facto* 'power folds.

Gilda Katz is represented as the aforementioned 'Peruvian' type: an *uber*-controlling Eastern European matriarch. There is a deliberate parallel between her and Schwartz the *Goniff*'s mother.

Delphinia Adelheit Witbooi – again, a strong character who provides balance in the aftermath of Leah's psychological collapse into depression and dementia.

Auntie Cockeye thus remains as the only truly devious woman in the story. That she, like Gilda Katz, dominates her husband, does not suggest any Alexander Pope-like misogyny. The representation of 'evil' women thus carefully skirts a field in which the seeds have been sewn by the likes of Ovid's objectifying of women in *Metamorphoses*, Shakespeare's Kate in *Taming of the Shrew* and Hemingway's deviant Catherine Bourne in *Garden of Eden* ... ultimately arriving in a far simpler place where one woman is a bully another an abrasive con artist.

The others are either tough, strong, weak ... absolutely normal. There are no women in the work who are 'only around for breeding' as presented in Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale.*

The blending of 'lived experience' anecdotal information and research into the era was, I imagined at the outset, going to something of a challenge. Surprisingly, this was not so. I constructed at the outset a totally accurate timeline to take characters from 1862-1985 and wove them into a work of fiction.

I have specifically not read in depth the Jewish historical writings of other authors in any great depth: what I have seen tends to glorify characters of days gone by and generally appear to be based on idealistic perceptions rather than a gritty reality I have sought to present.

Where characters in most Jewish-SA Historic works speak, it is in a brand of English with which they were decidedly not familiar: there is no authenticity; no voice which resonates if listened to with the ear of one who knows the language structure, the dialect and the character types of those bygone days.

I am old enough to recall those people in conversation, and (happily) young enough not to have forgotten what they said. I chose therefore to not open myself up to slipping into a sort of quasi-biographical mode in which *Rabbonim*[21] and merchants in the *schtetl* of Yeoville enjoy Churchillian discourses.

Having said that, I have used a quote of Louis Cohen, who was Barney Barnato's cousin. Cohen, quoted by Manoim [22] noted elegantly and eloquently:

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[21] Plural of Rabbi, in Yiddish

[22] Manoim, I (2003) *The City Without Water*, article viewed at *www.joburg.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task...*

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> ...urnful and sad enough – a despairing, bare, sandy veld, with hardly a sign of life except here and there a poor Boer habitation, and some carrion birds lying around a stinking bullock's trunk festering on the road and fouling the air with its poison half a mile away. The wind, playing with the horrible biting dust, sharp as needles – sent its irritating particles to clog nose, ears and mouth, and drove the shapeless coppery clouds from one end of the uninviting sky to the other.'

That degree of articulation was typical of the likes of Cohen who, like Barnato, was intent on showing his 'British side' wherever possible. For the most part though, early Johannesburg – and specifically the areas which became known derisively (as pointed out by Gilbert [23]) as 'Jewburg' – were inhabited by the immigrant 'types' I have sought to use as grist for the mill of this novel.

To paraphrase my late father in one of his more caustically observant moments: 'Look at western movies (of the fifties and sixties),' he would say. 'The cowboys are always clean-shaven, well-dressed and have perfect teeth. The truth is that those men were filthy, piss-poor and probably all of them lost most of their teeth because there were no dentists.'

He would have ventured that early Jewry were neither Hoggenheimer nor Oppenheimer bur rather somewhere in between.

And so it goes, as Kurt Vonnegut would say by way of a transitional device.

Blending the (often sparse) historical information (viz, Cape Town in the mid-nineteenth century; middle Europe in the mid-nineteenth century; Kimberley in the late nineteenth century; Goldfields in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century) with provable documentation ranged from simple to almost impossible.

An example of the latter includes finding any information other than Rob Turrell's [24] notes on the Gibson brothers in Kimberley. Eventually, I tracked down a self-published book on the Gibson brothers by AB Louw, who died and left no copies of the book. The real Gibsons were most likely totally different to the adventurous brothers I have created: it is in Turrell's theses that I have found the information about the *Red Star Line* stagecoach company.

The simplest research tasks included confirmation of factual information relating to venues (schools, synagogues and so forth in all locations) plus such aspects as correct shipping movements,

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[23] Gilbert, M (2001) *The Jews in the Twentieth Century,* (New York: Schocken Books, 2001). This largely referred to the substantial Lithuanian immigrant population in the area.

[24] Turrell, R (1987) *Capital and Labour on the Kimberley Diamond Fields (1871-1890),* Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.

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and Kimberley, the arrival of stagecoaches (and their
ng in the Kimberley area and – perhaps most interestingly - ensuring that the clothing worn by the people of nearly two centuries ago, the toys their children played with and the books they studied in school and the guns the early settlers and the military used were correct.

I considered and rejected deliberately messing with some of the timelines and facts to enhance the 'authenticity' of the narrator's character.

As to the accuracy of transliteration from Hebrew and Yiddish to English to ensure that Sephardic (Mediterranean) and Ashkenazi (European) Judaism did not cross wires, I consulted Rabbi Yehuda Stern, who had declared my transliteration as altogether Kosher.

An example: the word '*yitgadal*' in Sephardic Hebrew transliterated into '*yisgadal*' in Ashkenazi.

Rabbi Stern's approval was important to a Hebrew-illiterate atheist who has intoned the prayer for the dead, *Kaddish,* for both parents ... without actually understanding the meaning of the words.

In order to add to the novel's cultural accuracy, I have inserted – either as direct speech, or in text or as chapter 'teasers' – a scattering of some of the old-fashioned Yiddish wisdom and philosophies which abounded. Some were wry, others risqué even at a time when socio-religious conservatism was *de rigueur*.

The phrase, partially transliterated as, 'if my *bobbeh* had *beitzim* she'd be my *zayder,*[25]' is self-explanatory. One does not need to understand Yiddish to grasp the essentials of this Jewish perspective on improbability

Much of the 'history' in the book is based on anecdotal evidence – stories handed down from fathers to sons. What value is there in oral history?

Hardy III and Pirelli [26] contend:

> 'Oral history might be understood as a self-conscious, disciplined conversation between two people about some aspect of the past considered by them to be of historical significance and intentionally recorded for the record. Although the conversation takes the form of an interview, in which one person - the interviewer - asks questions of another person (variously referred to as the interviewee or narrator) oral history is, **at its heart, a dialogue** (my emphasis).

[25] Literally, 'if my granny had balls, she'd be my grandfather.'
[26] Hardy III, C, and Portelli, A (1999) *I Can Almost See the Lights of Home — A Field Trip to Harlan County, Kentucky*. The Journal of Multimedia History 2

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> 'The questions of the interviewer, deriving from a particular frame of reference or historical interest, elicit certain responses from the narrator, deriving from that person's frame of reference, that person's sense of what is important or what he or she thinks is important to tell the interviewer. The narrator's response in turn shapes the interviewer's subsequent questions, and on and on.'

Portelli concludes, 'Oral history . . . refers [to] what the source [i.e., the narrator] and the historian [i.e. the interviewer] do together at the moment of their encounter in the interview.'

Thus the mythical history of my mythical source (Yitzhak) unveiled to me as the narrator (not mythical) underscores the earlier contention that *The Last Mentsch* falls unmistakably within the genre of historical fiction.

If voice refers to the writer's essential visions and worldviews, then defining the voice of me as the interlocutor and differentiating it from the voice of Yitzhak as the primary storyteller was not as difficult as I initially thought it would be.

In early drafts, writing a conversation between Yitzhak and me was clumsy and confusing. I attempted to segregate the two by using italics for one voice, but discarded this on my supervisor's advice. As narrator, in the final version of the novel, I converse slightly more with Yitzhak than in earlier versions. So my 'voice' switches over time from observational to participatory.

It is with this in mind that I offer the rationale behind writing dialogue in 'accents' where relevant. With a multitude of characters it was, for me, essential that dialogue was not one-voice repetition.

The challenge was ensuring that dialogue did not slip into Vaudevillian burlesque. Tackling the concept of 'writing in accents' was raised early in the work and there were suggestions that I should consider changing this. With the Katzes and the Irish Doctor, McFee, I made a decision to defend this choice and, in hindsight, I am happy with the result.

Without overdoing the accents in all characters (Cecil John Rhodes et al converse in the jargon and slang of the day but not in excessively 'posh' accents) I believe those characters who are 'accented' have their characters enhanced.

Hence, the odious Gilda Katz saying in 'Yiddish' but transliterated into English*: 'So ... what kind work you can do?'* goes towards underscoring the syntactical structure of Eastern European speech.

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rent languages were used in the first few chapters. In one
n boy, Jerzy, battle to discover a common language. They run through Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, German and more until they hit on Yiddish as a *lingua franca*. That interchange was pared from three pages to less than half a dozen lines.

Similarly, huge chunks of Yiddish conversation have been stripped away, leaving just recognisable words which have become part of the English language – *Chutzpah*[27], *mamzer* [28], *tsores* [29]and *toches* [30] are examples – in dialogue.

The objective was to not have a celebration of languages, but rather to not chase away readers.

One of the more enjoyable aspects (as the writer) in this work was the creation of back stories for some of the book's more important characters. Hence the reasons why Schwartz the *Goniff* was such a disagreeable person, or how Auntie Cockeye's cockeyed eye came to be and the background of how Scotty Smith stole his name and identity off the body of a dead British soldier all go towards reinforcing the characters.

Film Director Quentin Tarantino - in specifically *Kill Bill Volumes 1 and* 2 – frequently uses back stories to provide context and causality.

At the end of the sixteenth draft, about 5 000 words were deleted, as were several characters whose roles offered no relevance to the plot. My original instinct was to protect the words at all costs. Then I realised how over-writing would comprehensively damage the work. I happily chopped a swathe through conversations, as with the easily identified adjectival overdose which infested earlier versions of the work.

During a module I did with the Creative Writing Honours class in 2010 – experiments in telling - I found myself writing about events in my journalism career which I had deliberately never written before: the bloodbath that was the Volkskas bank massacre and an interview with a schoolboy who survived the Westdene bus disaster but who had suffered the agony of seeing his sister drown before his eyes are two examples.

It was cathartic – I had locked my creative writing urges in a box years before and focused on writing textbooks for journalism students. The module kicked open that box, and resulted in binge-writing. Very kind people did a Masters level intervention and told me this was essentially unacceptable.

What to do?

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[27] *Chutzpah* - gutsy

[28] *Mamzer* – spoilt, corrupt, a bastard

[29] *Tsores* - trouble

[30] *Toches* - backside

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yself what the real story was that I wanted to tell. It struck me
ny comprehensive failure to be a pious religious fundamentalist, opting to rather be a secular distruster of organised religion. Yitzhak in the planning of the work becomes the Jew who clings to fundamental beliefs, while his father, Theodore, in the face of overwhelming reversals in his life, slowly loses all his faith, but not necessarily his religion. For no other reason than there was no way I wished to produce a book-length examination of faith (it would always have been massively tainted by my own lack of objectivity... and right there is the curse of journalism: objectivity vs. subjectivity and my own code of media ethics) I opted to revert to basics. That is, write what I know about, which is the characters and history of that bygone era. The 'faith;' aspects would have to be key, but not the overarching theme of the book.

Thus, plots and sub-plots ebbed and flowed until the final work. It is presented in a style with which I am comfortable. The final version is the twentieth draft.

The trick is to not edit it to death.

Another strange thing happened during the gestation of this work: *The Last Mentsch* started off whimsically, leaning more towards humour than emotionality. The more I developed and the deeper I delved into the spirit of Theodore and Yitzhak, the more I realised that psychologically neither could not possibly have grown up to be well-balanced pillars of society such as the characters initially presented.

The human condition precludes people like Theodore and Yitzhak from growing up 'normally'. Their characters - and those characters with whom they came in contact - led to a need to 'darken' them.

In both cases, these changes are gradual.

I have tried to keep the humour relatively subtle. Apart from the Yiddish witticisms and the dappling of text with both Yitzhak and Theodore's mangled English ('it runs off my back like a duck') there is little of the early Munchausenesqueness of the tale told to me by Yitzhak.

As an example, Theodore's first confrontation with the British Empire now appears as a clash between two diametrically opposed cultures. It began life as a slice of ribald humour, pigeon-holing British Empire civil servants as a sort of memorial to Peter Sellers' post-war anti-Conservative Party satire: '*what about the workers indeed, sir.*'

The redraft of this chapter has made it less punitive of the Empire and it has become more about the failure to communicate (as The Captain in *Cool Hand Luke* had it). It became more about frustration and an inability to follow basic Stuart Hall encoding and decoding of messages. Marshall McLuhan might have had something to add there.

Having been exposed to the writing of journalists and the sub-editing requirements of feature journalism (as both practitioner and teacher) the development of writers who come from different

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While there are two other journalists in the Masters group – ure – the non-journalists provided a developmental freshness: creative writing through the minds of people who have not been steeped in the recording of history tends not to carry the baggage of professional journalism's rules, formats and styles.

Human interest, conflict and intensity and extensity are thus viewed differently by people who do not see news values in stories, but rather see life unfolding before them without requiring media labels.

Hence, the quirky surrealism provided by a banker and the sensuousness of a lapsed Muslim actress added a new dimension to the way in which I perceived the development of a lengthy written work. Indeed, I found as much pleasure in watching their respective works develop as I did my own: possibly because I find myself enthralled by their character development styles which are in many senses the converse of my own characters.

Listening to and reading the works of other writers helped me massively in the creation of voice for individual characters. In *The Last Mentsch* the characters are based wholly or partially on real people. Voice – literally and metaphorically – is represented in my book by dialogue, accent and linguistic differences. I saw little of that in the other works, which is not to say their respective books' characters had the same voices, but served rather to reinforce the way in which I have used language and dialogue to reinforce the cultural divides within the work.

The critiquing presented some frustrating aspects: how does one point out a flaw in a plot which may in fact NOT be a flaw? This was a perceived problem of mine with early critiques of *The Last Mentsch* – there are aspects of the plot which might seem out of context at the time of reading, but which ultimately make sense.

Hence criticism of Leah's 'adventure' in the Cape outback (in which her employers die in circumstances which Yitzhak battled to justify or explain) cannot be explained in detail too early. Leah's character later in the story develops BECAUSE of what happened. Too much detail in the early part of the narrative would serve to give away a substantial part of a sub-plot of the story – that is, Leah's early onset dementia as the result of several traumas in her life. These are pivotal to the main plot and thus cannot be revealed too soon.

Theodore's reliance on Leah's very groundedness when they first meet is one of the reasons why his later life takes so many turns for the worse when Leah's character crumbles. Suffice it to say, there are ample clues are planted in the early parts of the story which will make sense to the reader in later chapters.

What is incontrovertible is that despite the changes in plot and characters, the diluting of literary excesses and the hacking away of multiple languages (and some characters), the ending of the narrative remained a constant, as it had been presented in the original novelette.

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'All writers produce text content and ideally connect it together according to discourse conventions. .. Writers tend to produce new text in such a way that it is causally connected to the prior text. Causality is, in essence, asking the repeated question, 'why?'

This is what *The Last Mentsch* seeks to reveal ... not so much the 'where' or the 'when' or even the 'how' or 'who' of the history of an entire immigrant population, but rather as a means of explaining why the characters in *The Last Mentsch* mirror those characters in real life who frequently become the forgotten people of new lands.

Or perhaps it is just a book with entertainment as its primary objective.

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