



marc estrin's golem song

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One of our most prominent living intellectuals, Professor Martha Nussbaum, makes an appearance in Marc Estrin's Golem Song, during a lunchtime conversation with the main character, Alan Krieger, who disgusts her (as he does almost everyone with whom he comes in contact). I mention this because I once had a real life encounter with Nussbaum in the mid 1990s, when I was one of several people the Boston Review invited to write short replies to an article she'd written for them (you can read that here.) I cracked up when I read the passage

"I was arguing that our primary loyalty should be to humanity as a whole, and not to some parochial national identity."

"So, what's wrong with that?"

"Oh, there were all kinds of objections—from silliness like, 'How can you be loyal to the world at large when there is no world state to be loyal to?...'"

because it kinda-sorta describes the reply I wrote for the journal. I guess Nussbaum heard it often. This brought the power of this novel home to me in a direct, contact sport type of way. While recognizing that this won't happen for everyone, I nevertheless feel this book has the potential to hit almost *anyone* concerned about the modern world with almost equal force.

Estrin's third is an extremely learned novel covering a host of important topics that I can't possibly get to in an article of this length. On seemingly every page, the author makes free use of folklore, religion, myth, literature, songs, poems, puns, allusions, and pop culture. He's also hilarious, often wickedly irreverent. Readers must be alert, here. And I'm choosing to limit my remarks, after a brief observation of the book's postmodern character—mainly to the issue of Krieger's racism and hatred of African Americans—then condensedly touch on the disintegration of Krieger's relationships with his girlfriends and family. There's a third large issue—Jewishness, the state and condition of Jews in history and in the contemporary world scene, as well as the fate of Israel as a state in the modern Middle East—which I'll mention only in passing, but it's no less important for that.

As noted, this tale has a thoroughly postmodern identity, as the occurrence of a well-known living person engaged in dialogue with a fictional character illustrates; but there's more to it than that. Estrin employs the device of "Paper Trails"—documents and letters which provide information about Krieger and commentary on events transpiring within the world of the fiction. He also uses chapter headings that tease by giving only a little information regarding what the chapter's about. (For example, Krieger's home life is discussed in "Krieger Domesticus"). Finally, there are, on the face of it, endless references—some direct, some allusory—to classic works of literature from the 'canon', if I may use that word (i.e. the novel begins with a nod to Joyce: "Stately? No. Ahh, but plump? Decidedly.").

So, who *is* Alan Krieger? He's an obese, chain smoking, foul-mouthed, racist nurse in the ER of a large and busy New York hospital. He lives with his mother and his pet snake, Shlong, in a Bronx apartment, darts back and forth between between two girlfriends, and despises his brother, Walter, and Walter's family (who live in Vermont), mainly due to disagreements over the Middle East situation and the state of Israeli politics. It's hard to say exactly when it happens, but, at some point, Krieger's mind tips sideways and he begins to fancy himself a latter-day messiah for the Jews. He also becomes fascinated with the Biblical concept of the Golem; hence, the novel's title.

The word 'golem' is used in the Bible to refer to an embryonic or incomplete substance: Psalm 139:16 uses the word 'gal'mi', meaning 'my unshaped form' (in Hebrew, words are derived by adding vowels to triconsonantal roots; here, g-l-m). The Mishnah uses the term for an uncultivated person ("Ten characteristics are in a learned person, and ten in an uncultivated one" [Pirkei Avoth 5:7]). Similarly, golems are often used, today, in metaphor—either as brainless lunks or as entities serving man under controlled conditions but hostile to him in others. Similarly, it is a Yiddish slang insult for someone who is clumsy or slow.

-*Wikipedia*

Some aspects of Estrin's work are extremely confrontational and may make a lot of readers uncomfortable. Krieger slowly develops into a Kahane-like figure—a warrior Jew who advocates violence as a means of achieving socio-political goals and satisfactions. In an interesting review of the book, for Pop Matters, Jason B. Jones points out that some readers, not knowing much about Estrin, may tend to assume that Krieger's just a thinly disguised version of the author, himself, when, in fact, it seems that exactly the opposite is true. (Jones' review is also highly perceptive in talking about binary concepts that exist in the novel—something I'm not at all sure I would have picked up on).

Estrin applies a strategy of references to get all of his fundamental points across to us, but, in particular, to point out just how isolated and lonely his main character is. The vastness of Krieger's learning is an indication; we wonder if this guy ever does anything other than read books. His temperament and erudite lifestyle function as a wedge between himself and less scholarly folk (which includes almost everybody); but, even more, it exists to show us how quickly an educated and knowledgeable person can become a monster. Simply as a fun exercise, readers might want to glance at the following list of unexplained allusions Krieger makes, in the course of the story, and determine how much they know about each item—without performing a Google search.

- Toshiro Mifune
- the Bishop of Hippo
- Count Chocula
- the Big Ham
- Something to Be Desired
- H.P. Lovecraft

When pellets such as these are slipped into dialogue and interior monologue, reading becomes both challenging and enjoyable. It's an ordinary device brought into play extraordinarily well.

The question of what it means to be a Jew in modernity has, of course, been investigated, at length, in American fiction by three great twentieth century writers—Bellow, Malamud, and

Roth; twentieth century Jewish theology and philosophy had plenty of heavyweights, such as Buber and Fackenheim. Estrin, I think, has clearly learned from all three of the novelists—not only thematically, but stylistically. The author understands (and acknowledges) some literary heritage, and I feel that these small accedences are more subtle, more masked, than the numerous outright references he makes to other writers and musicians.

The opening chapter of Golem Song nods to these predecessors in three slyly differing ways. In the staff room of the hospital, Krieger finds a brownie—half eaten, left for dead—and he debates the best way to eat the remains of it without being seen. This is strongly evocative of one of the opening scenes of Bellow's Herzog, wherein Moses Herzog leaves remains of his toast for the mice in his kitchen. In quick order, Krieger accidentally knocks a coffee cup off the table and it flies through the air, landing perfectly, bottom down, on the carpet, the coffee quivering inside, not a drop spilled. This, again, recalls the otherworldly magic that the characters in Malamud stories (i.e. The Magic Barrel, or "The First Seven Years") experience; and, lastly, the outrageous humor of which Estrin makes use, in every chapter, channels Roth—especially in earlier novels such as Portnoy's Complaint and The Great American Novel. (The latter begins with a small nod to Moby Dick in the exact manner that Golem Song nods to Joyce.)

In Krieger's twisted mind, the principal enemies of the Jews are African-Americans—specifically, the Nation of Islam. There's all manner of lunacy in New York on the subject of Jews vs. Blacks and, in the '90s (the novel's set in 1999), we had the Crown Heights Riots, Professor Leonard Jeffries, and the aforementioned Kahane and his followers. From the get-go, Estrin sets up the later scenes of confrontation and dementia. Much of significance ensues between Krieger and African-Americans. In the first chapter, Krieger encounters, in the hospital chapel, a Mr. Brown, who thinks he's Jesus. In the second chapter, he has nasty racist and sexual thoughts about a black woman in the subway; then, the door to the subway car opens and "in swaggered two youths of color, equipped with acoustic accoutrements", who proceed to smoke—even though there are signs everywhere announcing that this isn't allowed. Later, Krieger produces a rap lyric for one of his girlfriends, Ursula (a psychiatrist and *shiksa*):

How you spell girl, girl with a G?
Well, you know I spell girl, girl, with a B!
'Cause I know what the *@!\$ you fo
Ain't no mischance you called a ho
Hey, a brother like me, he need only one thing
And that thing a target for mah .44 ding-a-ling!
Ain't my vernacular simply spectacular?
I'm a killa, a Godzilla, that's the ganze megillah

Krieger really starts to fall apart when it's revealed that Ursula has a black lover who has converted to Judaism. Shortly after that, Krieger's attacked in the parking lot of St. Vincent's and, as might be expected, assumes it was at the hands of a black assailant, although he has no proof of this. He's passed over for a promotion which goes, instead, to a black female colleague. When a black patient named Eddie, who's been stabbed and has assaulted a policeman, is brought into the ER, Krieger, in a "joking" manner, threatens to emasculate the man. Perhaps what pushes his bigotry totally over the edge are some of the speeches he hears at a Nation of Islam rally, held at the Statue of Liberty:

...is none other than the black man. The black man is the first and the last, the maker and the owner of the universe. Allah is proving to us that the white race is

not—and never *will* be—the Chosen People of God. They are the Chosen People of their father Yacub, the devil.

And:

Jewish victimization is part of a great hoax that explains how Jews have come to influence Western civilization out of all proportion to their small numbers. Jews are not victims: they are *victimizers*. They were the main people responsible for the genocide of the Native Americans. They were one of the main slaveholders of our people before—and after—the Civil War.

So, Estrin presents us with all of the usual justifications an imbalanced person will wield in order to palliate his/her racism, culminating in a Rambo-like reaction to the anti-Semitism of the Nation of Islam.

A couple of Krieger's rants:

- Violence is as Jewish as potato latkes, Calvin. This world ain't "Fiddler on the Roof". That was bad enough. But after the Shoah show, non-violence doesn't cut it anymore. For Never-Again-ists, we need force and power, and not just brain power.
- I have in mind blacks chanting, "More lampshades!" at a cannibal demo in Crown Heights. I have in mind my little Jewish nephew singing gangsta rap. Makes marrying a non-Jew seem like *yeshiva*.

However, the imagined tormentors of the Jewish people are not the only ones with whom Krieger has serious issues. He ruins a seder at the home of his girlfriend, Debbie Goldenbaum, shocking the guests with his contemptuous ridicule of their traditions and beliefs. He fights with his brother over their conflicting views of Israel (Walter is a pacifist who's appalled by the behavior of the Israeli military—as he puts it, the policy of "a thousand eyes for an eye"—and who takes Krieger's "JDL swagger and machismo" deeply to task). The other girlfriend—the German Ursula—elects to dump Krieger for her long-lost African-American Jewish friend, Calvin, whom she happens to bump into at a restaurant where she and Krieger are having dinner (another miracle coincidence!). Even his mother can't stand him anymore and goes to live with her other son and his family in Vermont. (We learn of this from one of the Paper Trails with the subtitle of "First Epistle of Ma to the Floridians".)

Readers wishing to explore further should consult the Jones review mentioned earlier, as well as one by Gordon Hauptfleisch. There's also a long interview with the author that provides quite a bit of exposition into Estrin's planning for the book.

Golem Song is fascinating and disturbing, and it may be the only hysterically funny novel about the possibility of a race war that you'll ever read.

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