

Nathan Englander: How I Write

Benedetta Grasso (October 22, 2010)



At the Italian Cultural Institute, during the event “Lezioni Americane: Libri Come” Nathan Englander and Antonio Monda discussed the author’s approach to writing as well as upcoming projects

[Nathan Englander](#) [2] might not be the most familiar name to many Italian-Americans and Italians.

It might be better known, though, to Italian Jews living in the old continent or abroad, because his writing and his upbringing sometimes reflect themes or depict atmospheres that are well understood by this well-connected religious community worldwide. Yet Englander is first and foremost a New Yorker, a contemporary American novelist, born and raised in Long Island and famous for his literary talents, regardless of his cultural and religious ideas.



With his collection of short stories “For the Relief of Unbearable Urges” he quickly rose to fame being recognized by the New Yorker as one of the “20 writers of the 21st century” and receiving illustrious literary prizes. His novel the Ministry of Special Cases, about a Jewish family in Argentina in the 1970s, confirmed him as an established writer in many countries.

His most immediate connection to Italy comes especially from the ongoing collaboration and conversations with Antonio Monda, professor of Italian Cinema at New York University, journalist for La Repubblica, and a New York cultural “icon”, who has interviewed Nathan many times, promoted his books, held conferences with him and traveled around the world. Together, they have often discussed the issues of faith, literature, and the relationship between the literary environment in Europe and the US.

Therefore it seemed natural to see the two of them together for Lezioni Americane: Libri Come, at the Italian Cultural Institute on October 20, 2010.

The theme of this cultural event that featured Carlo Lucarelli, Benedetta Tobagi, Jonathan Galassi and many others was the question “How I write?” and, in a way, it also helped to celebrate the connections between Italy and the United States.

Nathan Englander is one of those writers that write copiously: pages and pages and pages. Nathan confessed that his work requires time, decades sometimes. He even writes long-hand most of the time, and can be found scribbling in coffee shops. He talked about his approach with a lot of self-irony and no pretentiousness at all. As many writers, there is more material that ends up in the trash than in the book, during the creative process. Antonio Monda recalled a time when he wrote an article about Englander in La Repubblica, after reading the first two chapters of a book that didn’t even end up in the final edition of the book.

Once the book is done, Nathan said, you have to trust the editor with the changes. “It is easy to become deaf to critiques with time and fame, but it’s always better when they tell the story has a good heart but there are changes that need to be made”

Throughout the conference, Mr. Englander focused upon two upcoming projects, both with a particular spin on writing as a technique. One is a translation and the other is an adaptation.

The translation brings Nathan back to his religious roots. The Haggadah, in fact, is a holy text for Judaism: it’s read during the Seder, the first night of Passover (Pesach), and it provides a “guide” for that night’s the rituals, but most of all, it pays homage to storytelling, it is the pure magic of storytelling. Every Jew that night has to be able to retell the story of the Exodus (usually to one’s son or daughter). It’s not the text that is in the Torah, but the story obviously is the same. The Haggadah, much like the Song of the Songs is one of those Jewish poetic texts, which has been re-translated and reinterpreted by scholars, artists, and writers. It is a challenging text that sort of demands to be re-interpreted by those interested in it.

Nathan Englander is working on the translation alongside with another famous young Jewish author, also a New Yorker, Jonathan Safran Foer. Englander defines himself as a “failed atheist” and said that he felt the responsibility of writing a text from which people are not only going to look for the touch of their favorite contemporary authors, but are also going to pray from it.

It will be fascinating to see such young and fun, modern writers tackle something so ancient and traditional.

The other upcoming project for Mr. Englander is a play inspired by one of his short stories, The 27th Man, commissioned by Nora Ephron. Englander said that his approach to writing had to change now that more people were involved in his writing than usual, and that has taught him to “make an infinite number of decisions and stick to them”, to be more decisive and see both sides of an issue. For a writer it’s almost harder to revisit one’s own story than someone else’s material, but Englander said he fell in love with the enriching world of theatre.



The two speakers discussed the insularity and yet the overwhelming cultural spread around the world of American literature. Englander said that American editors should seek out more for European writers and translate them based on what they love, because it is always surprising who will be successful and who won't.

Although he is constantly inspired by his contemporary American writers he owes his literary passion to the major Russian writers such as Dostojevsky and to Italians like Calvino or French like Camus. In general, he said "the best books are those that seem like they were written only for you".

In recounting his upbringing he explained how every religious Jew, when a book falls on the ground, should pick it up and kiss it. This simple traditional gesture has taught him the respect for books since he was a child. He emphasized the importance of education and said that, as a kid, he never thought it could be possible to become a writer, but it is never too naïve to have big dreams.

For his next novel he plans to go back to Israel, where he lived for several years, and write a story set there. "Israel" he said "I feel is still the best place in the world where everyone really feels alive".

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