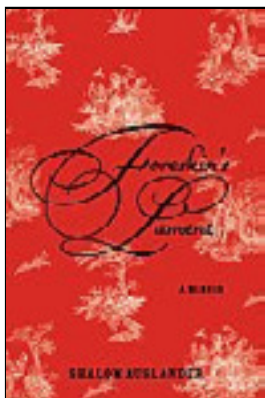


Not on Memoir by Shalom Auslander



What is the nature of the memoir? Where does the memoir situate itself, along the literary continuum and within literary history, between fiction and nonfiction? Is the popularity of the memoir a reflection of our voyeuristic times, or a rebellion against it? These are terribly important questions to roughly eighteen people, half of whom work for literary journals with pseudo-meaningful flowers on the covers, and half of whom work for literary journals with pseudo-meaningful graphics on the covers, and none of whom will be reading this anyway because a) they know everything already and b) they're too busy discussing the plight of book reviewing in America. If they did read this, I'm afraid they would learn nothing about the nature of memoirs, because a) they know everything already, b) I don't know anything and c) I don't particularly care; the world would have to be in considerably finer fettle than it is now for me to have space in my "Top Ten Things to Worry About" for "The State of the Memoir." All I can talk about is the one memoir I wrote, and all I can tell you about the memoir I wrote is this: I didn't want to write it.

Foreskin's Lament: A Memoir by Shalom Auslander

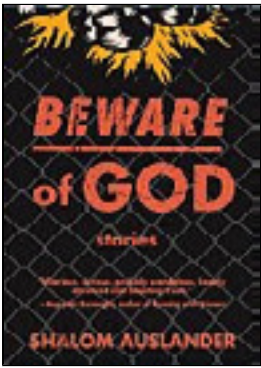
"[A] terrific book I was sad I read in so few sittings, because I wanted more." *San Francisco Chronicle*

"Writing funny and angry columns is one thing, but sustaining that pitch of laughter and fury for the length of a book is extraordinarily difficult. Auslander succeeds." *Philadelphia Inquirer*

I really, really didn't want to write it. I wanted to write a novel. I wanted to write a Big Novel. Something with a journey, a child narrator who is wiser than his years, something wherein I could "play" with language – misspelling English words because my child narrator who is wiser than his years is also foreign, or combining English and some other language because my child narrator is an immigrant and Shakespeare played with language and he verbed nouns and nuned verbs and look at the juice that guy has. That is what I wanted to write. Generally speaking, and I say this with all due shame and self-loathing, I set out to write for two reasons:

1. Mind-bending, all-encompassing, dumbfounding, seizure-causing rage at the world – at fate, at God, at nature, at humanity, at stupidity, at cruelty, etcetera, etcetera. Or:
2. Mind-bending, all-encompassing, dumbfounding, seizure-causing need to be respected and loved by the very same awful world. (Burning down someone's house probably isn't the best way to get that someone to love you – arson isn't a great Valentine's Day gift – but there you have it. I never said this made any sense.)

And so even though it had been suggested to me that I try to write a memoir, and even though I thought it might be an interesting personal challenge, Respect came up to my office one day, sat down beside me, closed my laptop and said, "Let's talk." Whatever memoir is, Respect said, it isn't respected. It's been Oprahed, it's been Springered, it's been Povighed. It's "easy," it's "dirty laundry." It's – thanks, James – a pack of lies. And then Respect took me by my hand, and he led me out through the window and we flew and we flew until we flew into the future, and we flew until we came to a great concert hall, and inside that concert hall they were giving out Pulitzer Prizes, and I saw that I wasn't even in the audience. And then Respect took my hand and we flew again, and we flew even further into the future, and we flew until we came to another great concert hall, and this time I saw myself in the audience, and the man at the podium (it



Beware of God: Stories

by Shalom Auslander

"[A] fresh voice, and
wonderfully fearless."
Kirkus Reviews

may have been Garrison Keillor, I'm not sure) called my name, and I saw myself stand up and walk up to the stage and Garrison handed me a prize (it was a chocolate bust of a writer, possibly Dostoyevsky but also maybe Rushdie) and a tear rolled down my cheek, and Respect clapped me on the back, and I turned to him, and I looked into his eyes, and Respect nodded and said, "Novel, asshole. Write a goddamn novel."

And so a few days later, I went to my office and sat down at my desk and started to write a novel. Something with a journey, and a child narrator who is wiser than his years. Also, he was an immigrant. Respect sat beside me, sipping a latte and wondering what he would wear to the National Book Awards party. It was all going quite well — verbs were nouncing, nouns were verbing — until a few days later, when I found myself in a doctor's office, standing beside my wife, who was lying on the exam table with clear gel on her belly.

"It's a boy," said the nurse.

Some history: I was raised in an ultra-orthodox Jewish community, and was taught, from a very young age, to be terrified of God. God was a bit of a bastard, and He killed great amounts of people for very small reasons. And so when the nurse told us we were having a boy, I thought, "Foreskin," and then I thought "Shit," and then I thought about circumcision, and I thought about whether I should do it, and how God would react if I didn't, and whom He would kill — would he kill my son? would he kill my wife? would he kill me? would he kill us all? would he kill just them and let me live so I could feel the pain of the loss for the rest of my days? — and I thought about it and thought about it, and that night I couldn't sleep, and I got up, and I walked through the dark halls of my house, and then I found myself at my laptop, and then I sat down, and then I turned, and Rage was sitting beside me. And I said to Rage, "This is fucked up." I was 34. It was 2004. There were Space Shuttle launches, and brain surgery and the World Wide Web, and here I was, about to become a father, and instead of feeling joy — instead of painting the second bedroom baby blue and buying tiny New York Rangers jerseys and size 1 Chuck Taylor's — I was feeling terror. And I was angry. And I thought to myself, "Maybe this is worth writing about. Maybe this is worth relating. Maybe this is it — maybe I can write a book that just explains what this feels like, that tries to tell how I got here. If someone calls it a memoir, fine. Respect will have to wait."

I stood up, made myself a cup of tea, sat back down at my laptop and took a deep breath. Jerry Springer, here I come. So be it.

Respect muttered, climbed out the window and said, "You're wasting your time."

Rage opened my laptop, pressed the power button and said, "Write."

And so I did.

÷ ÷ ÷

Shalom Auslander was raised in Monsey, New York. Nominated for the Koret Award for writers under thirty-five, he has written for the *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and is a regular contributor to NPR's "This American Life." His short story collection, [Beware of God](#), was published in 2005. He lives in New York.