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## The World to Come

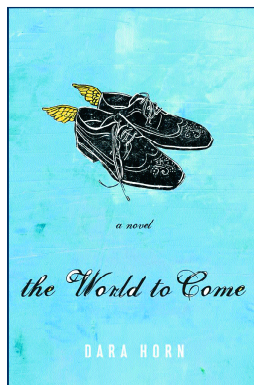
By Dara Horn

### REVIEW ESSAY BY GERALD SORIN

Despite the fact that both Dan Brown's lightweight but best-selling book, *The Da Vinci Code* and Dara Horn's magnificent, literary and philosophical second novel, *The World to Come*, begin with a painting pulled from the wall of a museum, they are not alike in any other way. Indeed, Horn's work is so good, it feels like blasphemy to mention both books in the same review. Dara Horn was inspired by the actual theft, in 2001, of Marc Chagall's painting "Study for 'Over Vitebsk'" (1914) from the Jewish Museum in New York City. From there, however, her novel takes us on a marvelously lyrical, non-linear historical journey. Though studded with magic realism, it is perhaps no more bizarre than the "real" story: the Jewish Museum's receipt of a ransom note demanding peace between Israelis and Palestinians as a condition for the return of the Chagall; followed by the recovery of the million-dollar painting months later at a post office in Topeka, Kansas.

The "thief" in Horn's work is Benjamin Ziskind, a recently divorced "schlemiel" still grieving over the death of his mother. He reluctantly yields to his pregnant twin sister Sara's persistent prodding to attend a single's cocktail party at the Jewish Museum. A former child prodigy, a "whizkind," who now writes questions for quiz shows, Ben recognizes a Chagall among the other paintings exhibited; he is convinced it is the very one that hung in his family's living room because there is a shiny spot on the canvas just where Sara dabbed nail polish when they were kids.

Horn, with pure genius, interlaces a narrative beginning in the 1990s about men and women, loss, and repressed personalities, with a series of stories nestled within stories, most of them with a Yiddish provenance. The novel



revolves around the Chagall painting, "smaller than a piece of notebook paper," and its meaning for the Ziskind family, alive, dead, and not yet born. Horn pulls us out of contemporary middle-class Jewish life in the northeastern United States, and drops us gently into Russia in the 1920s, where Chagall spent some time at the Jewish Boys' Colony at Malakhovka teaching art to traumatized children orphaned by the pogroms of 1919.

The writer Pinkhas Kahonovitch, better known as Der Nister ("The Hidden One") was Chagall's colleague and housemate at the colony. Driven by an unquenchable thirst for recognition and by envy of Chagall's growing reputation, Der Nister scratches out his folkloric, mystical, and disturbing stories on whatever scraps of paper he can get his hands on. This gives Dara Horn the opportunity to tell us many tales and adaptations of tales by Yiddish writers, including not only Der Nister, but also Mendele Mokher Sforim, Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz.

The contrast between Der Nister, who died in the Soviet gulag, unrecognized, impoverished, bitter, and possibly insane, and Marc Chagall, who left the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and went on to ever-increasing adulation and fortune, is a brilliant stroke. It allows Dara Horn to rise above sentimentality about pre- and post-revolutionary Eastern Europe, to show us some of the brutal realities of twentieth-century Russia and the communism that devoured its founding parents as well as its dissenting children.

One of Chagall's students, eleven-year-old Boris Kulbak, to whom the artist bequeathed "a tiny dark painting," is, we discover later, Ben and Sara Ziskind's maternal grandfather. How the painting changed hands over the generations is skillfully rendered by Horn and is seamlessly connected to the Ziskind family history, which takes us through the Soviet Union, to New Jersey, to South Vietnam and then

back again to the Northeast and the question of Benjamin's "theft." We learn that Sara also has a capacity for larceny as she tries to copy the Chagall that Ben lifted (which itself may be a copy) and outdo it. It also appears that Rosalie Ziskind, the twins' mother, a writer and illustrator of children's books, has been retelling, without attribution, classic Yiddish tales (all the more opportunity, I am happy to say, for Horn to give us yet more Jewish lore and legend). Ben defends his mother's "plagiarism" by crediting her with the rescue of "all these stories that were buried in library vaults and that no one would read ever again."

By the end of the novel Dara Horn has us not only wondering about the authenticity of the stolen painting, but also asking questions in new ways about art: what is art, and what is it for? Does a painting have to have meaning, does a story? What is an original and what is a copy? And why would a "forgery" that outshines the original not be art? For this alone, Dara Horn's *The World to Come* deserves acclaim. But even more is ventured here and, most of the time, gained.

As in her debut novel, *In the Image*, Dara Horn in *The World to Come* once more demands that we ask mindfully, seriously, who we are, how we were made, and just what it is we are obligated to do. We are shaped by our pasts, even, as Horn tells us (in an overly long, and not entirely coherent magic realism "epilogue") by our dead relatives, and angels, too, who put an imprint on us before our trip to the world to come.

The "world to come," a phrase that asserts itself many times in Horn's ingenious new work, is intended, it seems, to have multiple meanings: the world we come into from a gauzy stage of "preexistence"; the future of the current generation, or perhaps the next one; or, finally, heaven or hell, although as Horn, a doctoral candidate at Harvard in Hebrew and Yiddish literature, tells us elsewhere, there is no significant Hebrew scriptural foundation for the concept of an afterlife, angelic or otherwise. Horn does believe in an unknowable and awesome God, but hers is not just a supernatural vision. That we are shaped by our dead ancestors, is, as we are learning more every day, a reality of genetic inheritance.

The world to come, however, is also the world, and the self we bring into being with our own choices and behavior. It is also, of course, a matter of luck, not so much of our ancient genetic origins, as of the behavior and endowments of our immediate families. Dara Horn's family, she says, "is very

happy." But with due respect to Horn and Tolstoy, happy families are not all alike. Horn's siblings, for example, writers and artists all, are very close and "deeply involved in inspiring each other's work." Creative imagination, Horn admits, is in her case, as in the case of the Singer family (I. B., I. J., and Hinder Esther published as Esther Kreitman), a group effort. Growing up in her house, Horn says, denied her "the opportunity to believe art was the solitary enterprise of a lonely soul. Instead, creativity was something that flourished in very Jewish ways: communally, through public ritual and argument, among passionate people bound by their common past and future dreams."

In her writings Dara Horn allows that horrific things happen: untimely death, child abuse, fires, earthquakes, genocide. "We can't control circumstances," she told an interviewer. That is apparently God's business. "But people *are* responsible for who they become." Indeed, as Ben's mother Rosalie says, "Everything counts. Don't ever let anyone tell you that you're just rehearsing for your life." JR


## EXCERPTS

There used to be many families like the Ziskinds, families where each person always knew that his life was more than his alone. Families that still exist, but because there are so few of them, they have become insular, isolated, their sentiment that the family is the center of the universe broadened to imply that nothing outside the family is worth anything. If you are from one of these families, you believe this, and you always will.

Lately it had begun to seem to Benjamin Ziskind that the entire world was dead, that he was a citizen of a necropolis. While his parents were living, Ben had thought about them only when it made sense to think about them, when he was talking with them, or talking about them, or planning something involving them. But now they were always here, reminding him of their presence at every moment. He saw them in the streets, always from behind, or turning a corner, his father sitting in the bright yellow taxi next to his, shifting in his seat as the cab screeched away in the opposite direction, his mother — dead six months now, though it felt like one long night — hurrying along the sidewalk on a Sunday morning, turning into a store just when Ben had come close enough to see her face. It was a relief that Ben could close his office door. (PAGE 1)

What does a child resemble while it waits in its mother's womb? As a boy, Der Nister had been taught the answer: a folded writing tablet. Its hands rest on its temples, its elbows rest on its legs, its heels rest on its backside, and a lit candle shines above his head. And from behind eyelids folded closed like blank paper, it can see from one end of the world to the other. There are no days in a person's life that are better or happier than those days in the womb. When those days must end, an angel approaches the child in the womb and says, *The time has come*. But the child refuses – wouldn't you? (Didn't you?) Please, the child begs, please don't make me go. And then the angel smacks it under the nose so that it falls from the womb and forgets – which is why babies are always born screaming. But before that they are happy, and they wait. (PAGE 81)


The sages once taught that three things hang above a person's head every day of his life: an eye that sees, and an ear that hears, and a book in which all the person's deeds are recorded. Chagall and Der Nister had learned this as children, forced to repeat and memorize it word by word. At the time they laughed. But now as they reached middle age, only Der Nister remembered it.

The eye above Chagall saw all of the paintings that he created and displayed from 1949 onward as his fame crested toward the sky. It saw the major perspective in New York, in Chicago, the one in Paris, the big exhibition of new works in Amsterdam, the bigger one in London, the first prize the artist received at the Biennale in Venice. It saw the windows he made for churches around the world, and it watched as his flying lovers soared to the top of the Paris opera house. The eye also saw Chagall fall in love with his married British housekeeper, saw the child that he had with her, saw him move with his new unofficial family to a castlelike home in France, and the woman and their child abandon him. The ear listened to Chagall's hundreds of interviews with magazines and newspapers around the globe, his dozens of lectures delivered in the world's most prestigious auditoriums, his endless greetings to every Matisse and Picasso who graced his path. And then, as each of the Yiddish writers and artists he had known in Russia disappeared one by one – Shloyme Mikoels, Itsik Fefer, David Hofshsteyn, Peretz Markish, Dovid Bergelson, Leyb Kvitko, and nearly every person who had ever taught at the Jewish Boys' Colony in Malakhovka – the book recorded his silence. Only sometimes, on sleepless nights, did the artist notice. (PAGE 225) 

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) How does Dara Horn force us to look at art and literature in new ways? What, for example, distinguishes a “copy” from a “forgery?” And must a painting have “meaning,” or does Jackson Pollack's rhetorical response, “Does a sunrise have meaning?” satisfy you? Is Rosalie Ziskind guilty of plagiarism, or is Ben's defense, that she is doing a service by recycling old and forgotten Yiddish stories, persuasive?
- 2) Why are the Ziskind siblings so close to one another? Is there something else that unites them other than that they are twins? How are they different from one another and how the same?
- 3) Chagall left the Soviet Union in the 1920s and rose to extraordinary renown. Many other Jewish artists and writers remained in the Soviet Union, committed themselves to Soviet Jewish life, and pursued their art in Yiddish, but by 1952 almost all were murdered by Stalin. Is Dara Horn making a moral judgment in her treatment of this set of historical episodes? Is she suggesting that Chagall ought to have stayed in the Soviet Union? Or is she suggesting that more of the others should have left (or tried to leave)?
- 4) There are several “love stories” in the novel; but there is only one place in *The World to Come* where someone says, “I love you,” and he, almost immediately, in an act of shocking brutality, proves he does not mean it. What does Dara Horn intend by this? Are there relationships between people in the novel, in life, that are more important than love?
- 5) Is the novel shaped by an undercurrent of religious belief? Is it possible for readers who are not religious (Jewish or otherwise) to find meaning and enjoyment in Horn's work?
- 6) The author has chosen the surname “Ziskind” for her major protagonists. Intimately familiar with Yiddish, Dara Horn knows that “Ziskind” means “sweet child.” What do you think Horn's intention is here? And how does that relate to the major themes in the novel?
- 7) Some Jews believe that the dead will live again at “the end of days.” Sara asks her mother if she, too, believes in resurrection and reincarnation. Rosalie says no. If

you have an infinite number of chances to “get it right,” she tells Sara, living would become meaningless. Do you agree? How do other religious and philosophical traditions deal with this question?

8) What do you think about Horn’s unconventional vision of life before birth? And what does it suggest about the power of the past to shape us? 

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