

Q&A with Temim Fruchter

2020 Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer's Award Winner

Who or what has been the greatest influence on your work and in your life?

Shabbat observance was pretty central to my upbringing, and it was also a time for sitting around and telling stories – from ancient Jewish traditional texts or from folklore or from anywhere in between. Friday night brought with it a feast and a crowd, after which we'd retire to the couch to hear about a demon putting on a prince's robes, or a cursed cave at the end of the world, or a benevolent spectral flutist, or some quest with some strange and existential outcome. Very early on, I learned to insist on the strange and the otherworldly, even if I couldn't see it.

What book have you read this past year that really surprised you—stretched you in some way?

Helen Oyeyemi's *Gingerbread*. It managed to maintain dream-grade weirdness but still keep me in its shimmery narrative throes. I really admire writing that feels like confection when I'm inside of it but is actually the opposite of easy. And as someone whose writing is often rooted in really old lore, I'm grateful for the most expansive and challenging kinds of revisitings.

Who is one of your favorite characters in literature and why?

Geryon, from Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*. Probably the first queer literary character I ever knowingly loved. A desirous winged monster in a book that fittingly also taught me that poetry and fiction could exist in the same breath.

In addition to writing and literature, what else informs your days?

Mischief. Big feelings. Intimate friendship. Running. Cooking experiments. The epistolary. The divine. Coincidence. Ritual. Festival. Convening people in one shape or another. Excess. Puns. Radical imagination. Mutual aid. Solidarity. Drawing. Music. Singing. Saturated color. Big weather. The ocean any day I can.

What has been your greatest challenge so far as a writer?

Focus! I am subject to desires and curiosities of all kinds, and it is a great challenge for me to stay the course in a long, sustained project like a novel. I'm grateful to say that I'm finally building that muscle, and it's been rewarding to look down at these pages and to say, "*hey wait — I wrote ALL of these?*" It's a really nice feeling.

What project(s) do you hope to work on with the help of your Writers' Award?

I want to bring my big polyphonic novel over the finish line! It's a project that draws on my love of Jewish folklore, my appreciation for Jewish death ritual, my stubborn insistence on the spectral and the synchronous, the mysteries and elisions threaded through my own family's history, and my curiosity about my great-grandmother's hometown – the Jewish Polish village of Ropshitz, renowned for a particular Jewish wedding jester (*badchan*, in Yiddish) who was born there. I'm trying to bend time, to reach back into a shadowy family history, looking for queer ancestry in the echoes and implications. I'm also working on a short story collection rooted in the structure and festivals of the Jewish calendar year, and I'm hoping to make progress on that, too.

Celebrated novelist Rona Jaffe (1931-2005) established The Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Awards in 1995. The program identifies and supports women writers of unusual talent and promise in the early stages of their writing careers. The Foundation has awarded grants to 164 outstanding emerging women writers. www.ronajaffefoundation.org