

Sleuthing in Modern Hebrew literature: Investigating Israeli society

Dvir Abramovich
The University of Melbourne

The burgeoning phenomenon of Israeli detective fiction in the 1980s, and its graduation into the mainstream from a sub-canonical form to one of legitimate critical respectability, truly marked the ossification and acceptance of the shift from predominantly serious writing to lighter fiction in Hebrew letters. The boom in Israeli suspense novels (clearly visible nowadays) demonstrates that the focus of Israeli literature is finally multivalent and mature enough to embrace writings whose core is not cast purely in ideological terms. Critic Rochelle Furstenberg observes that the surge in this genre of literary entertainment is in line with the collapse of the notion of a global canon that has seeped into Israel (Furstenberg 1996: 53), while journalist Devorah Negbi remarked that Israeli readers have come to realise that Hebrew thrillers “are not necessarily grade B fiction” (Negbi 1990: 53).

If, as Hebrew poet Chaim Nachman Bialik once said, Israel would be a normal nation like all others when Jewish policemen arrested Jewish crooks, then this Zionist ambition has certainly been fulfilled. The flourishing of the homegrown murder mystery, catalysed by a crop of local writers, is another sure sign of this normality (Shilony 1989: B8). In fact, Hagorny Green writes that with her string of novelistic mysteries, Batya Gur has filled in the missing rib of Hebrew fiction that was absent from our literary shores (Hagorny Green 1992: 124-125). Similarly, American Professor George Demko heaps praise on Hebrew crime writing:

The Israeli mystery is very well developed... It has become a distinctive form of literary work with a tendency to broaden the genre and expand its boundaries to focus on character and theme development. Most mystery writers employ the genre as a very sensitive mirror to reflect social, political and demographic strains in the country (Ben-Dat 2004: 34).

Moreover, this form of literary expression spotlights arenas that are usually not the subject of thematic explorations in fiction. Almost exclusive attention to political views, once the operative current in Hebrew literature, forced the reader to rotate towards the counter-functional literature, as Ferver puts it, which does not subscribe to the overtly political streams affecting most other novels (Ferver 1989: 8).¹ Ferver adds this seminal point. She argues that the mass market of readers for the detective genre that began in the 1980s indicates a demonstrative shifting of cultural forces that should be a warning for Hebrew literature, which she asserts, has somehow crossed a red line, morphing from an admixture to a solely entrenched political literature (Ferver 1989: 8). Additionally, Yair Lapid contends that crime fiction was downgraded and consigned to a minor footing within the canon because of Israeli literary snobbery that defined and compartmentalised those who read mystery novels as ones who do not read fine literature (Lapid 1990: 54).

¹ See also Boshes 1991: B4.

At heart, the opening up of Israeli society in the 1980s to greater pluralism and the rejection of a monolithic corpus has promoted a more personalised style of expression, which naturally includes women writers. Rochelle Furstenberg points out that it was not unexpected that women pioneers such as Batya Gur and Shulamit Lapid were the ones who popularised the mystery genre. After all, it was women who for the most part were the group most conspicuously excluded from the national scene (Furstenberg 1996: 53). And it was Batya Gur that made detective fiction modish in Israel, allowing her readers to indulge in what on the surface appears to be light, escapist literature, but which in fact is a string of whodunits boasting a highly intellectual makeup. Correspondingly, as Dennis Porter notes, the typological claim by some academics that detective novels constitute a literature of escape and relaxation has for the most part continued to be an unexamined assertion (Porter 1981: 3).

In an astute close reading of the blossoming of the crime genre in the 1980s and 1990s, scholar Ziva Shamir finds interesting parallels with the 1930s—a period in which the Hebrew crime story greatly expanded. She notes that the phenomenon of detective fiction cannot simply be dismissed as an outshoot of cultural vulgarity. According to Shamir, the novels of Gur and Lapid contain innumerable overlapping strands of considerable complexity, appealing to Israelis who are in search of a thoughtful foray into the shadowy impulses of the soul, not just a diversion. The 1990s, like the 1930s, was an era of unease, violence and a perceived loss of morality—a period which gave rise to a profound national schism. Accordingly, the detective story, with its clear delineation of good and evil, offers a tried and true formula that alleviates social anxiety about leadership and stability when the murderer is caught and order is reinstated.

Although the fictions of Batya Gur and Shulamit Lapid deploy the traditional crime form, both frame their stories in terms of larger social, intellectual and ambitious issues. Their intricate portraits gain uncommon depth from the motivation to critique Israeli institutions, especially the Ashkenazi elites, by using their detective to oust the killer and put things right within that particular community. Indeed, both draw on elements of the classic private eye genre, but have not gone so far as to re-define literary conventions. Yet, in their works, they implicitly question, undermine and expose the breaches taking place within the closed establishment, signalling that the detective is as much the outsider as the genre is to the canon. What is at work here are analytical inflections of putting a pin into some of the dominant groups in Israel and exploring institutions in crisis—sub groups with their own rules and traditions. In compression, Gur's and Lapid's detective novels are an artistic medium for examining the evolving face of an Israeli society that is more politically divided and less ideological. The novels are a typographical correlative to the wider changes that contemporary Hebrew literature is witness to, touching on broad societal themes, as well as the changed consciousness that feeds on internal tensions.

Fans of Israeli detective fiction owe a debt of gratitude to Batya Gur, who perhaps more than any other author spearheaded a revival and resurgence of a genre that had been in deep sleep for far too long. In fact, before her novels appeared, most crime fiction read in Israel consisted of translated novels and short stories. Her murder mystery novels, which were best sellers in Israel and reached a wide audience in other markets, transcended the limited form of the story, endowing each work with real literary value. Labelled the Israeli P. D. James, Gur, who passed away in 2005, had shown a genuine grip on the traditions of the *policier*, co-opting stock in trade conventions to embroider intriguing suspense, all the while infusing her

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stories with a distinct Israeli atmosphere and tone. In point of fact, each of her detective novels is a social-philosophical tract, which probes elite, closed institutions. The works open a window to the rarely encountered underbelly of life inside those communities, elevating the work beyond the mere whodunit. With a keen eye and ear for sense of place, meticulously crafted narratives and multi-dimensional characters, Batya Gur shook up the standard stereotypes of the genre.

Gur broadened the scope of her detective mysteries by situating them in cerebral or ideological settings which her highly intelligent protagonist —Michael Ohayon—must enter and master in order to understand the mind of his suspects. In Gur's first three novel thrillers, examined here, Ohayon submerged himself and delved into the world of psychoanalysis, literary criticism and kibbutz living. His penetration of those self-contained, insular elites, acts as a springboard for the author to grapple with and ruminate on issues that are germane to Israeli society and culture. The discovery of the culprit takes a back seat to Gur's rendering of the closed atmosphere of the murder scene, as she moves beyond the constrictive conventions of the detective framework to offer caustic sociological and ethnic insights.

As Margalit Fox pointed out, "While Ms Gur's novels were ostensibly police procedurals, they were no ordinary whodunits. Her mysteries were less about the death of the body than they were sustained, thoughtful explorations of the life of the mind...Ms Gur's settings were always closed societies...whose tensions, factionalism and prejudices...mirrored Israel's own" (2005: 7). Referring specifically to Batya Gur, Devorah Negbi agrees, "...however light the subject matter seems at first, Israeli suspense fiction does touch on disturbing social issues" (53).

In an interview with Ayelet Negev, Gur expounded upon the creative reasons for sending Ohayon into those upper-class societies: "The crimes I write about take place inside decent and proper communities, because these are places where more is hidden. It is more interesting to peek inside and tear off their veil. I searched for closed, elite groups like the Psychoanalytic Institute or the Department of Hebrew Literature, that will allow Michael Ohayon to examine their true norms" (Negev 1995: 281). Katzman concurs: "These novels examine the internal apparatus by which these closed societies make themselves into a living myth. They succeed in doing so even before their death, quicker than nature intended" (1989: 37).

Gur's new-minted sleuth struck a responsive chord with readers. Divorced with a son, the 38 years old (in Gur's first novel) Moroccan-born Chief Inspector Michael Ohayon began his literary journey as deputy head of the Investigations Division of the Jerusalem Subdistrict. Tough yet sensitive, introspective and romantic, he has a Master's Degree in mediaeval history. Tagged by one journalist as Gur's own Poirot, and as a "compelling new hero" by author Kiki Olson (Olson 1992: 6D), Ohayon's world-weary resignation and superb intuition allowed Gur to deploy him as a reflective mirror—the novels are redolent with his aphorisms and maxims about Israeli society. At the heart of Gur's detective stories is a kind of a literary affirmative action, a democratisation of the traditionally Ashkenazi-dominated literary society that sees a Mizrachi protagonist, the quintessential outsider, enter the Ashkenazi establishment to which he is dispatched. Against this fact we understand the plot's curve, which presents the Mizrachi policeman, the social underdog, with a queue of Ashkenazi suspects who dislike him both professionally and culturally. As he investigates Jerusalem's exclusive strongholds, Ohayon shows that he can match wits, and sometimes even

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intellectually overshadow, the members of the professional community whose world he has penetrated. Here we have a Mizrachi Jew from the lowest social strata who is cerebral and cultured—his bookcase holds such literary luminaries as Chekhov, Gogol, Flaubert, Balzac, Faulkner and Alterman, to name but a few (*Literary Murder* 162)—enabling him to make fun of Ashkenazi arrogance and superiority.

Gur goes against the grain by never skirting along the edge of the typecast or hackneyed, tweaking reader expectations of the Mizrachi policeman by subverting Ohayon's characteristics. With precise modulations, Gur deconstructs the conceptions that the reading public may possess. With this in context, it is easy to see Gur's attempt to posit and re-fashion our reading of "otherness", setting the stage for a dynamic and energised Mizrachi hero.

It is not overreaching to state that when order is restored, the detective has not only solved the puzzle, but has also partly repaired the cracks existing between the various classes in Israeli society. Precisely said, in the Ashkenazi-Mizrachi conflict, the nominated minority hero has triumphed over the representative members of the ruling class. Indeed, Gur's oeuvre is staunchly in the service of showing a minority character as an idealist and seeker of the truth, as well as a figure embodying the law—twin characteristics that are a rare phenomenon in Israeli literature. This is a thematic strand that had previously not been easily embraced by the Israeli literary canon. Ohayon's immersion in the Ashkenazi bastions cuts across the class divide and triggers social observations and explorations of transcendent themes on the human condition, which are at once universal and parochial. In many ways, Gur's narratives explore that timeless overarching motif—that in every group lurks an individual whose act of moral stupor threatens to rupture the revered social order, until an outsider rights the wrong.

Above all, the murders that weave a dark thread through Gur's work, symbolise a breakdown of all the rules considered to be in place within respected Israeli institutions, hinting at a post-Zionist demythologisation process that is part of the experimental spirit of postmodernism. On this subject Gur explained: "I have a lot to say against the systems in which these disciplines operate. Any system eventually becomes monstrous, this is the nature of systems, and it always will be this way. In a way, they erase some aspect of the individual, and turn what were meant to be the means into the aim. To a large extent, every system is fascist" (Katzman 1989: 37). It is only the Mizrachi outsider who can detect the rotten deceptions gnawing at the core of those bodies in which Israelis have placed their trust and have respected for so long. In essence, the dangerous misdeeds that Ohayon unmasks in the rarefied Ashkenazi-controlled institutions, establish the idea that the ample faith those from the upper stratum enjoyed had to be re-evaluated so as to determine how such breaches eventuated.

The Saturday Morning Murder: A Psychoanalytic Case was Batya Gur's first foray into the canon of detective fiction. The book won second place in Germany's Krimi prize and was cited in 1992 by *The New York Times* as one of the ten best mysteries of the year. Chief Inspector Michael Ohayon is called to solve the murder of Dr Eva Neidorf, a highly revered psychoanalyst and teacher who is shot on a Saturday morning at the Jerusalem Psychoanalytic Society while waiting for a patient. Her personal documents, among them an important lecture that she was to deliver the next day on "morality and forensics" and which may have exposed one of her unscrupulous colleagues, are missing (*Saturday Morning Murder* 68). What's more, the plot derives an added dramatic thrust from the collision between the Moroccan born policeman and the mostly Ashkenazi figures. The gallery of

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potential rogues look down their noses at this intelligent and charismatic oriental outsider who proves he can master their esoteric discipline and turn the tables on them.

The animosity towards Ohayon is established at the outset, when Dr Shlomo Gold, who discovers the murdered Dr Neidorf, first catches sight of the stranger, “even before he had exchanged a single word with him, Gold was annoyed by the light, relaxed way in which he bore his boyish body, and above all he felt hostile towards the dark, piercing eyes that regarded him from between the high cheekbones and long, thick eyebrows” (*Saturday Morning Murder* 19). Soon afterwards, Ohayon encounters Professor Ernst Hildesheimer, head of the Institute. As he explains the Institute’s function as a place where psychoanalysis is performed, the German-born old man, who still speaks with a thick German accent, looks wearily at Ohayon, assuming the term psychoanalysis is unknown to the policeman. But then, congruent with Gur’s penchant for reversing stale expectations, Ohayon surprises Hildesheimer when he responds “You mean analysis” (*Saturday Morning Murder* 22). Significantly, the scene and the response elicit a smile ghosting over Ohayon’s face that sets the tone for the unsettling of the inherent smugness that will occur through Ohayon’s process of detection and his unconventional, intellectual demeanour. Indeed, in the same passage, Gold’s interior ponderings reveal the instant effect Ohayon’s presence has had on him: “He felt a certain embarrassment at his prejudice, but his reflections on the need to improve his attitudes were interrupted by the sound of a loud voice outside” (*Saturday Morning Murder* 22). The detective’s charm and authority in reconstructing the facts leading to the murder bring forth a new admiration in the overconfident members, especially the Director, who after an elongated exchange with the policeman shakes his head and views him differently, reassessing his initial impression (*Saturday Morning Murder* 66).

Another example occurs towards the end, when Dr. Dina Silver explains the reasons for her termination of a relationship with a patient. She tells Ohayon that the case is too complicated and abrim with professional jargon for him to understand. Asking her if she means transference, Ohayon again shocks the potential criminal with his knowledge of her specialised field, “Michael...observed with enjoyment the expression of surprise and new respect that came into her eyes” (*Saturday Morning Murder* 218).

Much of the book’s appeal comes from watching the dogged Ohayon turn psychologist, using the tools of analysis to quiz the victim’s colleagues and expose professional jealousies and ethical breaches. Again and again Gur makes an elegant parallel between criminal detection and psychoanalysis. During an interrogation of Gold, the inspector, with a calm and cultured voice, asks Gold to free associate about Neidorf’s personality, to say anything that entered his mind. The experienced psychiatrist is astounded, “Gold could not believe his ears. The expression ‘anything that comes into your head’ was one of the key phrases used by the therapist in the analytic process. He looked suspiciously at Ohayon’s face searching for a sign of mockery or the consciousness of parody, but he could find no trace of anything of the kind” (*Saturday Morning Murder* 27). Along the way, Ohayon’s quiet and assured manner results in pangs of insecurity in Gold who realises that he had been presumptuous regarding the man sitting in front of him. Persisting with his razor-sharp questions, Ohayon’s skilled handling of the subject’s prevarications shows him to be a man who knows that ultimately he will get what he wants. In the end, Gold recognizes that his world, with its obdurate complacency and principles, will never be the same again.

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Time and again, Gur deploys the characters belonging to the clique under investigation as a sounding board to damn and call into question the respectable image it projects. In this case, it is Joe Linder who, while wondering what led to Neidorf's demise, offers the following assessment of the venerated woman and clan: "What could she have done...to have so violently provoked someone who belonged to a group that stood, more than any other, for social order and control? He had always suspected that people who hid behind coolness and formality, as she did, must have terrible vices to hide" (*Saturday Morning Murder* 85).

In one scene, all the potential suspects are summoned before Ohayon. Their names call attention to their unmistakable Ashkenazi origins: Joe Linder, Nechama Zold, Lizie Sternfeld, Sarah Shenhar, Nachum Rosenfeld, Daniel Voller, Shalom Kirshner. With their eyes fixed on him, Ohayon thinks, "These people...are not all sure of my ability to solve anything and are full of prejudices about policemen and probably about people whose parents didn't come from Europe. At this point he called himself to order and warned his weaker side not to give way to irrelevant impulses, such as the need to make an impression" (*Saturday Morning Murder* 37). Elsewhere, facing them again, Ohayon situates this network of people, his characterisation laced with a dose of explicit irony:

The crème de la crème, thought Michael, the city's elite...There was something in the air that undermined the solidity of the crowd, who looked as if they came from the strongholds of bourgeois respectability...there was fear in the eyes, and anger, and sometimes even rage on their faces... They all appear so respectable, the ultimate in good, law-abiding citizens... they're afraid. All of them are afraid" (*Saturday Morning Murder* 179-180).

Visiting the elderly Hildesheimer in his 1930s apartment, Ohayon is made aware of how vital it is that the perversion that has afflicted the institute be uprooted, "I'm afraid that what has happened will destroy the institute, its inner life, the sense of belonging, our feelings towards it. I want to get it all over with as quickly as possible" (*Saturday Morning Murder* 50). And, "we can't go on living here together as long as this matter remains unresolved. Too many people depend on us for us not to know which of us is capable of murder" (*Saturday Morning Murder* 159). As he probes further, Ohayon compares the institute to the guilds of the middle Ages and the Renaissance, referring to the rigid rules which restrict the number of candidates accepted as members—a self-protective mechanism ascribable to all exclusive clubs (*Saturday Morning Murder* 59). In a report to his superintendent, Ohayon elucidates on the psychodynamics of the institute, capturing in miniature strokes the difficulty of penetrating the mindset of those people in authority, "They're a very closed group, with special laws and a special power structure" (*Saturday Morning Murder* 143).

The aloofness from Israeli culture displayed by those associated with the institute is further heightened by the case of Joe Linder, whose attachment to the German language and letters is a metonymy of the others. In an entire chapter devoted to him, a certain vignette stands out. At half past three in the morning, unable to sleep, he reaches for the bookcase, mechanically pulling out Holderlin's *The Middle of Life*, a leather-bound volume of German poetry. In his most stressful hours, the prescient narrator reveals, Linder would return to the German tongue, admiring the lettering and gothic print (*Saturday Morning Murder* 93).

It is noteworthy that Gur resurrects the ethnic element within the context of Ohayon's personal biography through a sub-plot involving his marriage to Nira, a spoiled Ashkenazi

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girl who falls pregnant during his first year as a doctoral student. This background story provides revelatory details that are critical to our understanding of Ohayon's longing for equality, and also comments directly on the patronising attitude of the Ashkenazim as exemplified by Nira's parents. In terms of representational semiotics, these Polish Holocaust survivors are typical models of the patron group that kept the Mizrachi immigrants under their thumb during the formative years of the state. In particular, Ohayon remembers the Passover Seder in the affluent suburb of Neve Avivim where Nira's Holocaust survivor parents lived, the glass fronted cupboards, and the distinguished guests. The loss of individual choice and honour is stressed when Ohayon recalls that after his marriage he did not attend his mother's Passover feast even once, compelled by his wife to visit his in-laws every year. Similarly, and to his dismay, Ohayon could not stand up to Nira's father Youzek, a diamond merchant, who did not allow his daughter to have an abortion and pressured Ohayon to marry her so as to save face, "Even today, eight years after the divorce, he felt waves of almost uncontrollable anger when he recalled the miserable scenes of surrender to blackmail unlike any other he had encountered" (*Saturday Morning Murder* 152).

This point is magnified in a scene between the two in a Tel Aviv café. Youzek succeeds in convincing Ohayon to marry the pregnant Nira with an undertaking of a partnership in the business. This is despite Ohayon's protestations that they did not love each other. After the marriage, the humiliation continued when Nira's parents tried to convince Ohayon to change his Moroccan name, relenting in shame after he informed them that it is a link to his late father (*Saturday Morning Murder* 152-153). Later, because of his principles, Ohayon refused to accept their financial assistance, assistance that would have helped him continue his dream of conducting research in Cambridge. Ohayon knew that the only reason Youzek offered to do so, as he told Nira when she pressured him to take the generous help, was due to his supposed ethnic inadequacy in his father-in-law's eyes: "What wouldn't he have done to be able to call his son-in-law 'Doctor'? If he were poor and a Moroccan, then at least let him be a professor..." (*Saturday Morning Murder* 191).

Gur's didactic intention is to rouse the reader's anger at this ethnic trampling and underline it on every level. For what we have here is an effort at the diminution, subjugation and undermining of a young Mizrachi man, rolled into several incidents. In various ways, it is a familiar, historically rooted discourse of Ashkenisation, in which the primary group attempts to force a 'secondary group' to assimilate its 'superior' cultural mores in place of their perceived "primitive" names and tradition. Ohayon's disdain for his father-in-law (and by extension the bourgeoisie establishment) is dramatised in an interrogation of Zeligman senior, the accountant of the murdered Dr. Neidorf. As Zeligman senior mumbles in a heavy thick accent, trying profusely to prove his guiltlessness, Ohayon cannot avoid but compare him to Youzek, his former father-in-law. A minute later, seething at the accountant's snivelling gesticulations, Ohayon thinks: "All I need is an excuse to hit him. God almighty, what idiots they all are!" (*Saturday Morning Murder* 168). Seeing the portly senior partner coolly finger his tie knot, while his young secretary Zmira bursts into tears, Ohayon struggles against the desire to pick up the Venetian glass vase sitting on the desk and smash it to the floor. On the way down in the elevator, Ohayon is unable to contain his scorn for the Polish gentleman, labelling him a "pompous ass" (*Saturday Morning Murder* 171).

In a like manner, during the course of the story, the police unit grills Colonel Yoav Alon, military governor of the subdistrict of Edom in the territories. A prime murder suspect, he not

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only suffers from sexual impotence, but is also guilty of adultery and of breaking the law (*Saturday Morning Murder* 239). This officer, whose extraordinary rise had been unparalleled and who was expected to ascend to the top, is broken down by the convincingly tough and no-nonsense hammering Ohayon delivers: “Colonel Yoav Alon began to shake, and then he uttered a kind of whimper. Michael understood that the strange sound came from vocal chords unused since childhood, and once more he wondered why he didn’t feel happy or triumphant” (*Saturday Morning Murder* 250).

By portraying a high-ranking official in the IDF (who is also of European origin) as impotent, Gur may be hinting at the army’s powerlessness in dealing with the Palestinian population, and on a deeper level, at the loss of values among Israel’s elite—Alon speaks about being a member of the Hashomer Hatzair movement, about their ideals and about his volunteering to serve in Israel’s combat unit. Gur again demonstrates her willingness to take on any institution, no matter how sacred it is, and to expose the unsavoury aspects of its leaders. At the same time, Gur accentuates Ohayon’s loyalty to his country, in a scene where the inspector promises to protect Alon from the papers as much as can, not out of concern for the commander’s reputation, but rather to preserve the standing of the army and the military government (*Saturday Morning Murder* 260).

The murder in the novel stems from an absolute betrayal by Dr. Dina Silver of the values and codes of psychoanalysis and therapy. Silver kills Dr. Neidorf, fearing that her honoured supervisor will expose her ethical sins and prevent her from being admitted as an associate. Entrusted with healing a disturbed young man, Silver manipulated the strong bond established between her and the troubled patient to satisfy her sexual appetite. As a result of her overt failings, his condition worsened and he committed suicide.

The storyline in Gur’s *Literary Murder: A Critical Case* revolves around the double homicide of two faculty members in the Hebrew University’s Literature Department. Hungarian-born Professor Shaul Tirosh, Head of the Hebrew Literature Department at the Hebrew University and Israel’s pre-eminent poet and critic is bludgeoned to death (*Literary Murder* 68). A few hours earlier Ido Dudai, a doctoral candidate and lecturer is poisoned by carbon monoxide that was injected into his air tanks during a scuba diving vacation on a beach where Ohayon is spending time with his son. Ido Dudai was the rising star of the department, while Tirosh’s elegant and brutal critical commentary had changed Israeli poetics. Ohayon soon exposes a maelstrom of hubris, unbridled ambition and adultery. We learn that a week earlier the two had fought at a televised seminar where Dudai criticised Tirosh’s literary views. We also learn that the flamboyant Tirosh, a womaniser, recently ended an affair with Ruchama, the wife of his sycophantic disciple Tuvia Shay, and with Ruth, Dudai’s wife, whom he seduced and abandoned. Ohayon capably leads the reader through the thought-provoking landscape of Israeli poetry and provides astute, intricate portraits of the varied life of the local scholars.

Gur draws parallels between the critical analysis of a poem and sleuthing, which affords the reader the opportunity to experience, discern and decipher hidden meanings. The book bristles with sharp-eyed observations about artistic ethics and intellectual life on campus, with Gur, a former Professor of Hebrew Literature, essaying an admirable wealth of insight about the ivory tower of academia.

Again, Ohayon’s ethnicity is much to the fore as he experiences the haughty and condescending attitude of those members belonging to the privileged halls of Israeli

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academia. Most of the players he questions superciliously assume that he is dumb, because he is a Mizrachi and because he is a cop, “a person who belongs to a body that hands out traffic reports and breaks up demonstrations can’t understand such things...” (*Literary Murder* 346). This comment is made by one of the lecturers about Ohayon while explaining the superiority of art over life. Over and over, the ‘outsider’ fulminates at the smoothness and self-importance of his suspects, as is the case with Marom, the President of the Hebrew University and former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, “He could not help feeling the old rage, and also—he had to admit—the envy, that these people had been born with a silver spoon in their mouths, which later... had turned into a silver tiepin” (*Literary Murder* 81). Still, employing his intellectual acumen, Ohayon succeeds in not only exposing the cracks in the seemingly staid facades of the department, but in convincing the suspects that he is a worthy equal for intellectual debate. In one scene, Ohayon attempts to extract a confession while discussing the role literature plays in life so as to keep his interviewee talking and to ultimately confess his crime. Manipulating his interlocutor, Ohayon goes in for the kill and succeeds by engaging in a passionate debate that traps his interviewee. In the end, the introspective underdog is victorious over his Ashkenazi rival, but does so only by identifying and getting close to his subjects, a duplicity that is tormenting at times.

In a sense, arming Ohayon with an MA and an unfinished doctorate makes up for the inspector’s wrongly perceived ethnic intellectual inferiority. (Hendelzletz 1988: 7). As in *The Saturday Morning Murder: A Psychoanalytic Case*, the author continues to chip away at the archetypal traits attributed to those of Mizrachi origin. In fact, Ohayon’s ex-wife Nira mockingly remarks that when it came to his son Yuval, they had switched roles, for he behaved like a Polish mother in his excessive care and concern for the boy (Hendelzletz 1988).

The complex ideas about nationality and ethnicity that are strewn throughout the text are given explicit foregrounding in a sub-plot involving Ohayon and the mother of a childhood friend Uri. This vignette is significant for it reinforces Ohayon’s early cravings to belong to the ‘noble culture’ that those homes represented, as well as his unimpeachable desire to distribute justice in the aristocratic fortresses he enters. Ohayon remembers the embarrassment he felt as a young boy when he could not recognise Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*, much to the disbelief of Uri’s father, who was astonished by the boy’s question about what music was being played. Returning home from those visits, after hearing Uri’s parents reminisce about Europe, Ohayon was filled with excitement at the close contact he experienced with a world so different from his own. At times, Ohayon wished that he could bring Uri’s mother for the parent-teacher meetings instead of his own parents of whom he felt ashamed (*Literary Murder* 34-35).

In the end, Ohayon’s fantasy of merging with European culture is fulfilled by a sexual relationship with Becky Pomerantz, Uri’s mother, a tempestuous union that serves as his first complete experience with the upper class (*Literary Murder* 36). The older, experienced woman, not only releases the central protagonist from the bonds of his virginity, but the year and half affair that ensues symbolises the Mizrachi man’s yearning and struggle to become a presence among Israel’s cultural ‘masters. Similarly, Ohayon confesses that during the first year of the relationship with his lover Maya, he was proud that she preferred him, the son of Moroccan immigrants, to her sprawling house in the nouveau riche suburb of Tivonim and her surgeon husband (*Literary Murder* 163). However, the omniscient narrator is at pains to

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point out that such adolescent desires or the discomfiture of those days had by now faded, intimating that the adult Ohayon's belonging to and pride in his roots were assured.

Further, Ohayon never uses violence in interrogation. His colleagues accuse him of being soft because he treats all of his staff with respect and civility, and is completely without arrogance, ensuring a relaxed atmosphere at work. At one point, reacting to Ohayon's claim that "I sense the person, I get inside his mind, I think like him, I hear him speak, and then often I know. Not the facts perhaps, but the principle", his boss Shorer complains: "That's dangerous...It's impossible to interrogate a person when you identify with him; you need violence, hostility too, when you're questioning a murder suspect" (*Literary Murder* 245). Shorer's protestations notwithstanding, Ohayon responds: "It's the only way I can do it" (*Literary Murder* 245). Ohayon's methods are significant not only in terms of self-definition, but also as a point of departure for further commenting on the narrative structure enacted by Gur. A large portion of the text takes the shape of extended conversations and interviews between Ohayon and likely suspects, with the action taking a back seat to speech. This is part of Gur's approach in circumventing the existing expectations of the genre and surpassing the plain thriller with the accent on dialogue, intertextuality and issues of artistic merit.

Along the way, a rich cast of suspects, motives, twists and turns and red herrings abound, as the Hamlet-quoting Ohayon² in search for clues, studies Tirosh's poems, attends classes and questions the various lovers the poet abandoned. It transpires that during his undergraduate studies Ohayon took a course on the development of Hebrew poetry. This knowledge makes possible Ohayon's excursion into the literary cosmos, despite the frequent outbursts from his chief Aryeh Klein that the police force "isn't a university, you know!" (*Literary Murder* 76).

Among the suspects are Professors Klein and Ahronovitz, lecturers in the department who often quarrelled with Tirosh about his style and teaching methods. Professor Klein turns out to be an adulterer who fathered a child with his mistress (*Literary Murder* 287). Laid bare are the tensions, both professional and personal, of Tirosh's colleagues, staff and students. The apparent paragons of art and aesthetics are shown to be morally bankrupt. The recipient of the Presidential Award for poetry turns out to be a killer and plagiarist, a man whose literary achievements were ultimately empty to the core—a misdeed which he pays for with his life. Tirosh's acclaimed oeuvre was not his, but was composed by a Russian dissident languishing in a Russian prison, a creative pursuit which kept him sane and gave him hope for triumphing over the political system. The poems were smuggled out of the Gulag by an American lawyer who entrusted them to Tirosh for editing and publication. Tirosh murdered Dudai, the department's most gifted lecturer when Tirosh discovered that Dudai knew of his fraud and was about to expose him. Quite apart from being a murderer, Tirosh's transgressions also include blackmail of his partners at the department, and a cruel selfishness expressed in his demand that his bride abort her pregnancy.

On the other hand, Tirosh's murderer, Tuvia Shay, embodies the fanatic, a man who places art and truth over human life—a passionate fidelity that leads him to killing his mentor, whom, he claims, betrayed the ideals of literature (*Literary Murder* 346-355).

On still another level, it should be pointed out that the book's title is a subtle attack on those Israeli critics who customarily regard detective fiction as a lower form of endeavour

² At one point, Danny Balilty, Ohayon's investigator says, "My dear Ohayon... we're not crazy about *Hamlet* in the police, you know. We like action, not hesitation" (*Literary Murder* 96)

and as a more poorly stylised work than the serious literary novel. By conflating the two—literature and murder—Gur resists the claim that these mysteries cannot aim at or aspire to the respected end of the intellectual spectrum. In other words, although the narrative may be a police procedural with dead bodies, it is still a work of literature. This intention can be discerned by the narrative space Gur devotes to the literature seminar that opens her novel. The first chapter is an exhaustive disquisition delivered by Tirosh, Shai and Dudai during a departmental seminar entitled “Good Poem, Bad Poem”, in which a variety of subjects is debated, including, amongst others, linguistic tradition and the types of poetic genre (*Literary Murder* 125).³

Hard core detective mystery readers who are interested solely in the straightforward question of “who committed the murder” will know by this point that semiotics and deconstruction are intimately linked to the plot’s engine and cannot be bypassed, in the same manner that social awareness and self-understanding are at the core of Gur’s books.

In addition to examining the lifestyle, attitudes, and politics of this self-contained society, *Literary Murder* conducts a genuine inquiry into the professors’ ideas and explores the relationship between literature and life. In addition, a sense of playful self-consciousness permeates the novel, bringing into focus the question of how academia views literary genres, and what is deemed bona-fide writing and what is not. For example, during the controversial opening seminar, Ruchama Shay (Tuvia Shay’s wife) is shown to be uninterested in poetry, preferring instead detective fiction and spy stories, which she indiscriminately reads (*Literary Murder* 15). Another character, Dr. Zellermyer, is ridiculed and lampooned by the other members of the staff because of her devotion to the study of folklore and love of popular culture, including crime fiction. Moreover, Tirosh shows a clear contempt for canonical heroes in his symposium paper when he takes on Bialik, the icon of Hebrew poetry, “I wanted to challenge a poem whose canonical standing is never challenged...because among other things, the time has come” (*Literary Murder* 5). For all their snobbish, grandiose posturing, it turns out that the department is a hotbed of lowbrow melodrama and scandal, fuelled by an underlying lack of friendship, trust and closeness that resembles the plot of a run-of-the-mill commercial titles — an overt salute to Gur’s métier.

Murder on a Kibbutz: A Communal Case continues Gur’s preoccupation with Israel’s elite communities. It begins with the poisoning by lethal pesticide of Osnat Harel, the reformist, 45-year-old Secretary of a Kibbutz in the southern region of Israel who battled the old veterans over ending collective sleeping and allowing children to spend the night with their parents. Harel’s progressive views, which provoked a great deal of dissension, included setting up separate living quarters for senior members. The politically savvy and shrewd Lebanon War widow fought furiously to bring the fifty-year-old commune into line with modern times, agreeing with those members, old and new, who felt that locking the kids up in a dormitory at night was emotionally abusive and left deep and unnecessary scars. Harel believed that her kibbutz was an anachronism, the only one in the movement that had not changed over to family sleeping, and was resolute that her goal to jettison its structural rigidities and transform it be fulfilled with vigorous urgency. Her vision was that of egalitarian elitism, a new concept that meant a renewed emphasis on the individual, which would ensure the continued existence of the Kibbutz into the new millennium, “Such a Kibbutz will have the power to compete against its rivals in the market for the ‘good life’”

³ See also Tuvia Shai’s brilliant exposition of Nathan Zach’s poem *Samson’s Hair* to his class (*Literary Murders* 186-198).

wrote Harel in her column, “which has become even more relevant in the wake of the declining attraction of the ideology and praxis of Zionist pioneering values” (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 273). Considered puritanical, Harel bore the wrath of the kibbutz men whose advances she spurned, simultaneously drawing the anger and hatred of their wives (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 58-60).

The question about her reason for choosing a kibbutz as the locus operandi for the unfolding of her plot was answered by Gur, who explained that the kibbutz represents the recto and verso of a society enclosed in dogma-fettered wrappings:

I never had illusions about the nature of the Kibbutz. It drove me mad, how people really killed themselves for this ideology. They were willing to see their kids for only a half an hour a day for the ideal of communal sleeping. They tore families apart because of the issue of separation. Today, after communism simply disintegrated, I feel sorry for the people who destroyed theirs and their family’s life because of this fanaticism. I ask myself—how do they justify the victims they sacrificed? What excites and attracts me is the relativity of things. How something that was once sacred, crumbles and is shown as an empty vessel. A man who does some soul searching has to deal with the clanging slap that he receives, when he realises that he devoted his life to a false idea (Negev 1995: 282).

Gur’s contextual strategy is to deploy the slow, luxurious rhythm of the *policier*, whereby on the surface life ticks at a steady, stable rate, but in its subterranean layers tempestuous and turbulent forces simmer and are about to erupt. The narrative’s momentum is propelled forward by Ohayon, who comes in and yokes those two polar currents, patiently waiting for the spillage that will reveal the bandit (Lapid 1991: 58).

The 44-year-old Ohayon is once again the ‘fish out of water’ that attempts to break the code of silence of the three hundred or so Kibbutz members who close ranks to conceal guilty truths and maintain the facade of an idealized family. Although they are terrified by the murder, many of the members prefer to keep their dirty linen strictly private. As he penetrates this closed society, Ohayon examines its philosophical and political underpinnings, carefully directing his surgeon’s scalpel at the relationships and tensions smouldering within this idealised citadel. At the same time, he prises open the protective shell, laying bare the acrid divisiveness that confronts the modern kibbutz member, aware that perhaps, when he saves the community from the subversion of its conspirator, “everything will be destroyed in an instant...it will crack and collapse after the Pandora’s box is opened” (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 117). Most importantly, this time around, Ohayon is promoted to Head of the National Department of Investigation of Serious Crimes, underscoring Gur’s championing of her ‘minority’ detective. In fact, Shorer, his former boss, lets him know that he expects him to become Police Commissioner one day (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 139).

Gur writes about the pivotal issues concerning the modern kibbutz in a manner that allows the spectator to reflect on the problems of the country as a whole. Time and again, politician Aaron Meroz is told, “Things aren’t what they used to be” (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 17). Some of the questions posed by Ohayon’s investigation include the following: Has the individual been sacrificed for the collective ideal? Are the new agricultural values sustained in the Kibbutz still valid? What of the clash between socialism and materialism? Was the Kibbutz right in encouraging the children it absorbed from the city or the Holocaust to repress and

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deny their early experiences? At one point Ohayon says, “People imprison themselves in the reality they invent” (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 17).

In one soul-baring monologue, the new kibbutz secretary, who vows to continue with Harel’s legacy, describes the ill effects sleeping alone had on the children:

Where were you? What were you thinking about then, on the nights, on the nights when we were afraid? How did you come to agree to let mothers see their babies for only half an hour a day? Where did you get the nerve to decide that the family cell was inimical to society, and at the same time make jokes about it and laughed at yourselves at kibbutz celebrations?... You arranged things so that it would be convenient for you. For the sake of the ideal of equality you organised things so that we would have a group ego, but you destroyed our own personal egos...I want to understand what went on in your heads when you locked the doors of the children’s house from the outside...we would sometimes stand there the whole night long banging on the doors and crying and nobody came (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 326-327).

In creating a criminal investigation inside an institution that is the iconic capstone of the Ashkenazi-Zionist enterprise, and a unique Israeli creation, Gur confects a truly heroic quest that is without doubt one of the most complete pilgrimages into the oak womb of the movement (Hirschfield 1991: 8B). Audaciously, Gur attempts to strip the kibbutz of its cherished position. She challenges those assumed idealistic qualities assigned by the purveyors of the Kibbutz movement, qualities which sustained and protected the kibbutz from an eddy of pillorying by its detractors. As Yair Lapid observes, *Murder on a Kibbutz* derives much of its strength from the author’s bravery in, “escaping from the stereotype. Batya Gur entered the ring with the kibbutz gloveless and came out the victor...She did not make it easy for herself by dealing only with individuals, but treated the kibbutz in the same way that it often treated itself, as a caterpillar”(Lapid 1991: 58). Lapid then decodes, with laser-beam clarity, Gur’s authorial intent:

The role of the ‘bad guy’ is played by the Kibbutz as a whole...Even in the barn there are no sacred cows. She places under the microscope a society that has killed itself, whose ideology has been burnt and it continues forward only by the force of its inertia. There is a blend of loathing and pity in her delineation of the Kibbutz. She does not believe them, and more than that, she does not believe that they themselves believe (Lapid 1991: 58).

During his investigation, Ohayon tangibly feels the waves of enmity and suspicion when one of the elderly members, a Holocaust survivor who resents his invasion of their traditional commune, dismissively tells him that he is wasting his time: “Anyone who has never lived on a Kibbutz... doesn’t understand the first thing about it. It’s impossible to understand from the outside, and this whole investigation of yours is pointless” (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 132).

At first, the common reaction of the Kibbutz members is to deny any likelihood of a slaying in an establishment where, “it’s like one big family” (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 128).⁴ Early in his search for the truth, Ohayon is scolded for even taking the possibility of murder into account, “Murder? What murder? Where? Murder—here? Osnat? Tell me...have you got

⁴ Midway, Ohayon tell his superior Nahari, “Don’t you understand? It’s like conducting an investigation inside a family” (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 210).

any idea of what the word *Kibbutz* means?... You don't know what you're talking about. You can eliminate murder right away. There's never been a murder here and there will never be!" (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 118). At a later stage, the notion that the crime was committed by one of the Kibbutz members is furiously dismissed. Rather, as Guta and Yocheved, members of the Palmach generation⁵ and the Kibbutz claim, it must have been perpetrated by one of the hired workers from outside or by one of the volunteers that live on the grounds (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 243).

The accurate portrayal of the modern kibbutz sketched by Gur will surely resonate with readers, as Ohayon, who is reminded repeatedly that to understand kibbutz life one must live there, pounds away. His probe reveals ideological divisions between the old and young; a liaison between the deceased and government minister Aaron Meroz; and crises of faith regarding the function and value of the kibbutz to the state. This is a novel about how communal and personal principles can be corrupted and distort into the grotesque

The novel is also a meditation on the chasm between the ideals of the pioneer generation that built the Kibbutz, and the disillusionment evidenced in Israel of the 1990s. The kibbutz, once integral and foundational to Israeli society, fêted and revered, has now turned into a capitalist unit that has surrendered to greed and selfishness. This is splendidly illustrated in a vignette involving the kibbutz treasurer Jojo. It is revealed that to save the kibbutz from a crushing bankruptcy, Jojo had committed industrial fraud by selling the Kibbutz's face cream formula to their Swiss competitors for a million and a half dollars, a deal that accentuates the deep recesses of malfeasance infecting kibbutz affairs (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 288-291). The novel affirms the encroaching reality that the kibbutz is either no longer what it was, or that it is no longer needed.

Ironically, the Mizrahi police inspector, the antithesis of the kibbutz establishment, serves as the focal point through whom questions are raised about whether the kibbutz is still vital to the sustenance of the state, or whether it has outgrown its function. Most obviously, Ohayon is the ultimate leveller. Although, to be sure, Ohayon would like to settle accounts with this establishment, it is up to him defend the status quo and to repulse the cancer that has infiltrated the Zionist acropolis, part of the superstructure that denied equality to Mizrahi Jews. Ohayon is told, "You're walking around feeling that you're carrying that whole kibbutz on your shoulders and you're going to save them and reveal the truth about themselves to them. There's a smirk on your face as if you've got the whole fate of the kibbutz movement in your hands" (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 228). Accordingly, Ohayon learns to understand the nature of the institution, the discord between the old guard who view Harel's suggestions as heresy, and the younger members trying to institute reforms.

There are various episodes where *Murder on a Kibbutz* continues the overall template of the series, stressing the ethnic element and reactivating perceived dissimilarities between the Ashkenazi and Mizrahi rhythm, underlining the novel's transgressive desire to strike at the European palette of frostiness. Such digressions create a fine counterpoint between the investigative mode and the intellectual and pensive tone of the thriller. One such example takes place in a restaurant, where Ohayon's brother-in-law, Ami, a member of the army's 'death squad military units' that notify families of those killed, tells him of the way some of the families react to the news: "The worst are the stiff-upper-lips, the Ashkenazim, the ones with style. They don't scream, they don't say anything" (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 115).

⁵ The Palmach refers to the Jewish underground army formed during the British mandate in Palestine of the 1940s.

That Israeli society still identifies with Ashkenazi culture is amplified in a conversation between Ohayon and the police psychologist Elrohi. Ohayon is angered by the police psychologist's remarks that much is being written on the trauma of children of Holocaust survivors. Ohayon wants to remind his Ashkenazi colleague that those Jews who came to Israel from North Africa were also hurt and isolated by the way the state and the host society treated them, "We suffer too, we're all fellow sufferers, and we've got a label to prove it" (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 176). Finally, in another stinging reminder of ethnic dissolution and shame, Ohayon delineates the pain that accompanied his absorption and childhood in Israel:

I remember all the years I was haunted by the wish to be like everyone else— an Israeli, a Sabra. I would have done a lot for people not to know that I wasn't born here...It's the wish to obliterate the past, to enter what in the early years of the state they liked to call the "melting pot". But if you think about it, what happens to a person if you put him into a melting pot is that he gets burned—or at least he gets burned among other things that happen" (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 295).

Gur delights in opening a window to the earthshaking changes that transformed kibbutz life, showing, for instance, how farming is now no more than a leisure pursuit in the kibbutzim. The kibbutz, we learn, relies on cosmetics manufactured from cactus in an industrial plant on the grounds, rather than on the traditional working of the land. It is not without irony that the cacti used to mass-produce the cream that abolishes wrinkles is grown on land from which plum trees were uprooted, a symbolic marker of the decline of the Zionist agricultural ethos. Indeed, the export profits of the factory are so astronomical that they subsidise everything else on the Kibbutz, in addition to aiding other Kibbutzim in financial ruin. It also comes to light that the Kibbutz movement had become involved in the stock market, but was smart enough to depart and sell its stocks before the great collapse of the 1980s (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 21). Parliament member Aaron Meroz, who returns to attend a Shavuot ceremony, bitterly reflects on how this fifty-year-old prosperous kibbutz has deviated from its original tenets:

Apart from the members of the choir, hardly anyone was wearing blue and white. Not even the kindergarten children, Aaron noticed with a trace of disappointment...and there was no sign of the national flag...He could not entirely suppress the feeling that once you took away the blue and white flags on the caterpillar, the whole ceremony seemed archaic and foreign...But now it was the farce of an agricultural ceremony in a place where agriculture was almost bankrupt—a kibbutz, a Zionist agricultural commune, that derived its income from an industrial plant...No one else seemed to be showing any recognition of the absurdity of celebrating an agricultural rite where only the manufacture and sale of face cream made it possible to go on working the land (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 4).

Earlier, Dvorka is utilised by Gur to express the belief of many that the kibbutz has lost its way. It is a view that seems to come naturally in her voice:

There's a slow and gradual process of decay. It didn't begin today. Hired labour...hired labour on the kibbutz! All the kibbutzim are prostituting themselves today, they're prostituting themselves! They're renting the lawns in front of their dining halls to the

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public for weddings and bar-mitzvahs, can you imagine... One thing leads to another, it's a process... Can't you see that it's a process of putting the individual above the group, putting the good of the private person above the general good, that it's the inability to postpone material gratification... you begin by speculating on the stock exchange and profiting from bank shares, and you end up having to give our own members credit points for picking the fruit off our own trees? For a long time you've refused to examine yourselves (*Murder on a Kibbutz* 155).

Through his indefatigable perseverance, Ohayon uncovers the reasons for the murder, including economic misjudgement and fraud. At the same time, and more tragically, he demonstrates that the kibbutz is not the linchpin of social organization and safety. We learn that one Kibbutz member, Dvorka, can turn homicidal due to a different set of ideals. Here the villain is a veteran member who represents the old style values of personal commitment and individual sacrifice. Her motive for murdering Harel is to preserve the original centralised kibbutz and to uphold the ideological underpinning she helped to found, ignoring that obvious truism that the sustaining of life is a greater and a more sacred ideal. Again, we find echoes of serious lapses of morality in the mystery plot that point to a far-reaching decay in the country's cherished institutions.

On the one hand, the book's coda can be read as foreboding for the future of the Kibbutz. After all, the beacon of change, Harel, is murdered by Dvorka, the emblem of fanaticism who represents a faction that is unwilling to compromise or agree to any amendments. On the other hand, the capture of Dvorka and her impending prosecution reinscribes order, ensuring that Ohayon's mission is realised—signalling a fundamentally positive outlook for the kibbutz.

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