



Krista Goodman/Index

Jewish folklorist, author, poet and editor Howard Schwartz became interested in writing after a girlfriend broke up with him during college. He said he started banging at his typewriter and when he finished, a poem had emerged from his writings. He retold several Jewish myths in the SUB Georgian room last Thursday.

Q&A with Storyteller Howard Schwartz

BY CASSANDRA MCCARTY
Features Editor

In fourth grade, Jewish folklorist, author, poet and editor Howard Schwartz said he read through his mythology textbook and noticed the absence of Jewish myths within the pages. Schwartz said he questioned his teachers for years about Jewish mythology and was told there was no such thing.

Schwartz's interest in the subject became a lifelong passion, and he eventually became a storyteller of the Jewish myth.

Last Thursday, Schwartz visited Truman and retold Jewish stories for his audience. The Index interviewed Schwartz to learn how he became interested in Jewish mythology and how he finds inspiration in his work.

Index: You started writing poetry at age 20 when you were at Washington University for your undergraduate degree. What was your inspiration?

Schwartz: A girlfriend broke up with me. I sat down at a typewriter and started banging out things — you know, those were the typewriter days — and when I finished, it

read like a poem, and I was astounded, so I forgot about the girlfriend and started writing poems.

Index: You didn't start your literary career by exploring and writing about Jewish folklore and mythology, so how were you drawn into that subject?

Schwartz: I was interested in reading Jewish folklore because I am Jewish. I wrote stories, but what I remember is that I was in Boulder traveling with a friend of mine, and we were traveling to San Francisco in 1967, and we stopped in Boulder. I was driving down, and I felt very lost, so I sat down at a curb, and I wrote a little story called "How the 10th Tribe Lost It's Words," and ... I took a traditional Jewish concept, and I relived it through myself. When I got back I showed it to a Rabbi, and [he] said it was a Midrash, and I said, "What is Midrash?" Midrash are rabbinic legends, and he went to a shelf and showed me a book, a big compilation of rabbinic explanations of a perceived problem in the biblical text, a Midrash.

I read that, and I became extremely interested. But the really big turning point was

that I had a sabbatical in Israel in 1977 and 1978, met my wife Tsila, but I also met a professor at Hebrew University named Dov Noy. And he is the world's leading Jewish folklorist, and he had created an archive of collected verbal stories from all over Israel.

For some reason he saw a potential in me that I didn't see in myself, and he basically said to me, 'You can have the keys to my kingdom.' In other words, I can use the archives for anything I want. I got the idea of doing a book about Jewish fairy tales, which hadn't been done, and I worked on that for several years and took about a third of the material from his archives. So it was the first time anybody had used this oral material alongside this traditional material.

Index: How has your voice as a writer developed throughout the years?

Schwartz: I have one voice in poetry, which has evolved now from that first book of poetry. And that was a slow, hard evolution, but I think my voice is more natural now than it was before. But remember, I was working on folklore a lot, so what you have to do with folklore is subsume your voice,



Howard Schwartz

and it becomes a kind of unanimous voice of folktales because that's how folktales are told. I became very good at writing in the sort of folktale voice, where you really can't say that this sounds like this author, but it sounds like a fairy tale or folktale.

Index: How were you able to create a unanimous voice for the folktales you told?

Schwartz: There is this famous series of rainbow books by Joseph Campbell, a book of fairy tales in every color of the rainbow, and I read all of those as a kid, so I was sort of steeped

in fairy tales. Basically, what I learned is that in order to be a writer you have to read. So I did a lot of reading, and then when it came time to write, it came pretty natural.

Index: You are quoted on your profile from the University of Missouri's Web site saying that you believe your greatest skill is teaching how to revise poems and stories. How has that affected your teaching and your own writing?

Schwartz: What I tell the students on the first day [is] 'I can't teach you how to write poems, but I can teach how to revise poems.' In other words, they have to come up with their material, and then I will show them how to shape it.

There are two stages of writing poems. One is the inspiration stage where ... the idea or image comes to you, and then you have to write as fast as you can, as very long as it comes to you and not wait at all and keep going until the inspiration is gone. Then, you sit down with it later, and you shape it. You know, you find the best lines, you cut out the worst lines, you move it around, you add lines to it. It's a process that might go on for 100 revisions easily, and that could take a long time. But that's how you do it, in two stages — one is the inspiration, and that's the hardest. It's hard to find something to work with. And the second is revision, where you have to shape something.

Index: You said that everything that has happened to you has been an accident, nothing had been planned, so how do you decide what you are going to write about next regarding poetry and Jewish folklore?

Schwartz: In poetry, you can't decide what you are going to write about next. You have to actually wait until the moment when an eclipse, an image comes to mind. The first line is enough. And then you have to have the sense to stop whatever else you are doing and start writing.

It's like hearing the Muses knocking on your door, and you have got 50 seconds to open the door, and you either do it or you don't, and it's gone. All of the stories that I have worked with were stories that were powerful to me. I never took any story that I didn't feel very strongly about.

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