**Hoffmann, Yoel (1937--)**

One of Israel’s most innovative prose-writers, Yoel Hoffmann is known for his unique style, which combines different genres and multiplies allusions within the framework of a fractured plot and a disjointed narrative mode. A Professor Emeritus of Japanese poetry and culture at Haifa University, Hoffmann published his first prose book, *Sefer Yosef* (*The Book of Joseph*) in 1989, and it was received with great excitement on account of its surprising style and method of storytelling. Hoffmann has published nine works of prose fiction since then, in addition to poetry translations and anthologies.

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Hoffmann was born in Romania and moved with his parents to Mandatory Palestine as a baby. Shortly afterwards his mother died. This biographical element found its way into a few of his works, including ‘Katschen’ (1989), published in his first collection of stories. It is the story of a boy whose mother has died and whose father is in a mental institute. The orphan’s elderly relatives are no longer able to raise him. His journey to find his next home (or to get back to his lost one) is depicted from his point of view, a method that allows a fresh look at a variety of metaphysical questions, as well as an estranged depiction of people in the arena of Israeli society.

At the center of most of Hoffmann’s fiction stands this experience of marginalised figures: orphans, new immigrants, women, people of age, single parents and widowers,

to name a few. Hoffmann uses unusual techniques to tell the stories of these others, and to represent them through the formal aspects of his text. One famous example is his use of Yiddish in the Hebrew novella ‘Sefer Yosef’ (‘The Book of Joseph’), which appeared in the collection of the same name. The story follows the life of Yosef, a Polish Jew who escaped to Berlin after his wife was murdered in a pogrom, until he and his son are murdered by a young Nazi boy on Kristallnacht. Yiddish words appear throughout the Hebrew text, representing Yosef’s and his son’s everyday language. The Hebrew translation of these words appears at the margins of the page.

This method appears in Hoffmann’s novels as well. His first novel, *Bernhardt* (1989), tells the story of an elderly widower living in Mandatory Palestine. Bernhardt is a German Jew, and here too, German words appear in the text, with their Hebrew translation at the margins of the page. Bernhardt marginal status is represented in the text by yet another special technique, which was to become Hoffmann’s signature. The novel is divided into stanzas composed of short lines. The ends of the lines are typically rhymed and the language is highly metaphorical. By employing these and other poetic elements in the novel, Hoffmann blurs two distinct genres, not adhering to either prose or poetry. Similarly, in his 1991 novel *Cristus shel dagim* (*The Christ of Fish*), Hoffmann tells the story of a group of elderly immigrants from Central Europe and their new lives in Zionist Palestine. Here too, as in all of his subsequent novels, Hoffmann uses this very special style, combined with a fragmental and fractured narrative.

In some of his later novels Hoffmann also includes non-verbal media. For example, he illustrates *Ma Shlomkekh Dolores?* (*How Do you Do Dolores?* 1995) with photographs, and both *Ha-shunra ve-ha-shmetterling* (*The Shunra and the Shmetterling*) (2001) and *Curriculum Vitae* (2007) with his own drawings.

**References and further reading**

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2. Herzig, Hanna (1994), *Ha-shem ha-prati* (The First Name). Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-me’uhad.
3. Shiffman, Smadar (2009) 'Orly Castel-Bloom and Yoel Hoffmann: On Israeli postmodern prose fiction. *Hebrew Studies*, Vol 50, 215-227.
4. Stahl, Neta (2010) ‘Not Being at One’s Home: Yoel Hoffmann and the Formal Representation of Otherness, *Prooftexts: Journal of Jewish Literary History*, 30:2.
5. Stahl, Neta (2012) ‘The Father and the Son of God – Jesus in the Works of Yoel Hoffmann’, in: *Other and Brother: The Figure of Jesus and the 20th Century Jewish Literary Landscape*. New York: Oxford University Press, 126-146.

**List of Works**

**Story Collections**

*Sefer Yosef* (*The Book of Joseph*) (1989). Jerusalem: Keter

**Novels**

*Bernhardt* (1989). Jerusalem: Keter

*Kristus shel Dagim* (The Christ of Fish) (1991). Jerusalem: Keter

*Guttapercha* (1993). Jerusalem: Keter

*Ma shlomekh Dolores* (*How Do you Do Dolores*) (1995). Jerusalem: Keter

*Ha-lev hu Katmandu* (*The Heart is Katmandu*) (2000). Jerusalem: Keter

*Ha-shunra ve-ha-shmetterling* (The Shunra and The Shmetterling, (Aramaic for: The cat and the Butterfly) (2001). Jerusalem: Keter

*Ephrayim* (2003). Jerusalem: Keter

*Curriculum Vitae* (2007). Jerusalem: Keter

*Matzavey Rua’h* (moods) (2010). Jerusalem: Keter

**Translations and Anthologies**

*Kolot ha-adama* (The Voices of The Earth) (1977). Giv’atayim: Masada

*Le’an ne’elmu ha-kolot*? (Where are The Voices?) (1980). Giv’atayim: Masada

*Omrey shir al saf ha-mavet* (Those who sing before their death) (1985). Giv’atayim: Masada

*Radical Zen* (translation from Chines to English) (2007). Tel Aviv: Bavel

*The Sound of One Hand* (translation from Japanese to English) (2011).

**Children**

Be-Fabruar kedai liknot pilim (In February it is good to buy elephants) (1988). Giv’atayim: Masada

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