

Willa Schneberg's latest book poetically maps evolution of a family

By Paul Haist, Oregon Jewish Life, September 2014

Portland poet Willa Schneberg's latest volume, *Rending the Garment*, her fifth book, is a compendium of interconnected narratives that includes much poetry interspersed with prose, some of which speaks eloquently in the language of poetry. When taken as a whole, it maps the evolution – or “trajectory” – of one Jewish family in America, Schneberg's family.

The book's publicist calls it “a narrative tapestry encompassing persona poems, prose poems, flash fiction, imagined meetings with historical figures, ancestral appearances and ephemera.”

While I scratch my head over the phrase “persona poems” (never mind “flash fiction”), I think the publicist's account is otherwise a good summary, although it does not communicate the dramatic plangency that Schneberg sets down in print – the intensity of experience that makes seemingly ordinary lives extraordinary.

That plangency is strongly suggested in the book's title, which refers to *keriah*, the Jewish ritual of mourning in which one tears one's clothing as an expression of grief over loss of another.

There is no shortage of grief in Schneberg's new book. It begins in the first poem with Schneberg's mother, Esther, acknowledging that she's “good as dead” and continues in the second poem with Wolf, (the author's paternal grandfather) having “no time to grieve his Leah. He must find another mother quick” for his four children.

There follows immediately a prose entry in which Schneberg's maternal grandmother apparently passes shortly after her arrival in America when Schneberg was 10 years old.

Schneberg moves fluidly back and forth in time. The book's chronology is a patchwork of various pasts and presents.

For example, after the just-described section in which the author meets her maternal grandmother for the first time in the 1950s, Schneberg presents a series of vignettes of Jewish life and life in general in New York and elsewhere, such as an entry from her mother's diary written in 1943 in barracks at a Women's Auxiliary Army Corps camp at Fort Benning, GA. “We're still interned in this concentration camp, a ramshackle, former CCC site. We might as well have barbed wire with all the freedoms we have.”

If that is still a little dark with the echo of its time from occupied Europe, there is much else in the way of insight into ordinary life that, for all its ordinariness, stands out as remarkable in the author's memory or imagination: the freighted ritual of her parents' smoking, the bizarre incubator baby exhibit at Coney Island, the clicking of mah jongg

tiles at a Brooklyn project, a grandmother's corset shop and the horse-drawn carts of the junk collectors, all icons of a time.

The book progresses in this way through three sections titled for progressively fewer family members: "Ben, Esther and Willa," "Esther and Willa" and then just "Willa."

The poem earlier in the book entitled "Smoking Raleighs" was prescient. In its portrayal of the elegance once associated with smoking, it grimly foreshadows Esther's later diagnosis with throat cancer and the laryngectomy that followed, and all the unpleasantness that followed that.

Much of the remainder of Schneberg's journey in this book is about the end of her mother's life. It is not easy to read, certainly not for anyone who has stood by their parents to the end. But it is not a maudlin story; it is just real and, while the writing is good, the reality is grim.

The final section of the book includes just six little poems. In the third of those, "Ode to Rothko," the poet speaks hopefully of the Ayn Sof of Kabbalah, the boundless infinite of the Divine. At the end of the last poem of the book, "Fifty Two," she finds the Ayn Sof for a moment and with it, perhaps, some reason not to despair: *When we lie in bed, and you press your cheek to mine, we are out of time, neither old, nor young – bodies.*

Paul Haist lives and works in Astoria.

COMING EVENTS

- "Writing the Jewish Experience," 11 am-3 pm, Sunday, Sept, 14.

Willa Schneberg will be conducting this workshop in Ashland. Participants will explore in their own words what they consider the Jewish experience. In this generative workshop, works by Gerald Stern, Adrienne Rich, Philip Schultz, Grace Paley, Yuvi Zalkow, and others will be considered as motivations for writing their individual experiences of what it means to be Jewish.

Temple Emek Shalom, \$60, 12 participants max. For more info, and to register contact Jonah Bornstein, wellstonepress@gmail.com or call 541-531-0671.

- Willa Schneberg will read from *Rending the Garment* at Bloombury Books, Sunday, Sept. 14, 290 E Main St., Ashland at 6:30 pm.

- "Writing the Jewish Experience" workshop, repeats Nov. 23 in Portland at the Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education.

- Willa Schneberg will read from *Rending the Garment*, Dec. 8 in Portland at the OJM/CHE. Details TBD.