



CREATIVE WRITING

Leslie Epstein

The author of *King of the Jews* is again making literary headlines with his new novel *Regina*

PETER BATES

LESLIE EPSTEIN'S NEW NOVEL *Regina* presents New York as a microcosm of American urban life in mid-decay. It is harsh and alien, a borderline wasteland where the homeless spend nights huddled by the river and where a combination heatwave and drought assaults the city. Regina, the title character, is plagued by what Sartre called "the despair of awareness," an overwhelming consciousness that something is terribly wrong with her world.

Within these bleak surroundings, Regina still manages to create. She is an ex-theatre critic, auditioning for a role in a revival of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, in which she had starred years ago. Originally the youthful Nina, she is now slated to play the old crone Arkadina. The revelation sparks a spiritual crisis that forces her to reexamine her life direction, but by no means does it paralyze her. In fact, as the hostile forces acting upon her multiply, she becomes even more resolute. A "Son-of-Sam" style killer is loose in her neighborhood; her ex-husband starts making nocturnal visits; her eldest son becomes a religious zealot; her migraines increase, yet still she shows up for rehearsals.

"I hope readers will feel for a person who flounders like Regina," said Epstein. "She's meant to capture a certain kind of personality caught up in forces of all sorts, both natural and unnatural, man-made, avoidable, unavoidable."

Epstein originally wrote about her 10 years ago in a story called *Memory* that ended with the words "She went towards another door." Clearly there was more to be written about her. In fact, *Regina* took on a life of its own. Starting out as a short story about the role confusion incident, it grew into a novella and eventually culminated in a short novel. He wrote it in 10 months, a page a day, not quite a white heat, but "far from the ice freeze I'd been in."

During the research period for *King of the Jews*, Epstein remembers forcing himself through the many grisly accounts of the Holocaust by turning off his emotions. "It was as if I'd made a pact with myself not to feel, but had forgotten to set a date to end the arrangement." It took a new novel, set 40 years ahead and 4000 miles away, to free them.



"My difficulty with writing in the last four years since *King of the Jews* (his 1979 bestseller about the Holocaust) is also partly Regina's struggle," stated Epstein. "She is a woman who is numbed in some ways and overresponsive in others." During the research period for *King of the Jews*, he remembers forcing himself through many grisly accounts of the Holocaust by turning off his emotions. "It was as if I'd made a pact with myself not to feel, but had forgotten to set a date to end the arrangement." It took a new novel, set 40 years ahead and 4000 miles away, to free these emotions.

But *Regina* is not only a private triumph for the author or a parable of how the human spirit continues to create, although surrounded by erosion and dejection, it is a composite of people he has known. Epstein has injected much of himself into Regina's character, particularly in the way she perceives the contradictions of New York life, its paradoxes of rich cultural life and urban dissolution.

It is a world Epstein knows well. He moved to New York in 1965 to teach English at Queens College and to write. It took several years before he adjusted to the city, and it was not until his return from Holland in 1973 that he actually fell in love with it. Living in the Upper West Side, he found an energy and intensity there that was unique. In fact, it was there he wrote his first novel *P. D. Kimerakov*, his first collection of stories, *The Steinway Quintet Plus Four*, as well as *King of the Jews*. But as vibrant as he finds the city, he also thinks it's dirty and somewhat dangerous. "One is not necessarily happier there, but rather more interested in one's surroundings. It's impossible to go out the door and across Broadway and not see something that reminds you that you're alive."

The Tasks of Fiction Writers

If society can be said to assign tasks to fiction writers, then perhaps the foremost one is the penetration of life's exteriors to arrive at truths the reader can use. On the opposite end of the scale, but no less artistic, is the manufacturing of illusions. For Epstein, the perception of art's double-edged powers began in his California childhood as the son of the famous Hollywood screenwriter, Philip Epstein. He remembers going to the soundstage at Warner Brothers where they were filming *Dive Bomber* and seeing the "pilot" sitting in a cutaway fuselage resting on two sawhorses, his legs sticking out. When he saw the actual movie, "the sham of those protruding legs utterly disappeared," and he realized he'd been duped by movieland sorcery.



The Epstein family—Leslie, Ilevn, twin sons, Theo and Paul and daughter, Anya.



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LESLIE EPSTEIN

Humor, the unexpected loosening of convention, is one method authors use to deal with the many shams and illusions of life, while simultaneously tugging at the reader's attention. Irony and wit are devices that permeate much of Epstein's writing and are techniques he urges his students to use. As director of Boston University's Graduate Creative Writing Program, he tries to infuse his students with a feeling for clarity, self-criticism and deeply felt emotion. He also stresses that a pencil has two ends and that the mark of a good writer is to know when to cut and revise. He feels the best way to learn is by listening. That isn't difficult because each fiction class, screened from 100 applicants, has no more than 12 students at one time. "Of course, you can't make people into writers if they aren't meant to be," he added. "One of the most difficult things I have to do is discourage some people. It's very hard to be a writer."

One of Epstein's most successful students is Susan Monsky, whose first novel, *Midnight Suppers*, was published this winter by Houghton Mifflin, partly through his efforts. He brought her to a New England P.E.N. (Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists and Novelists) meeting where established writers introduce younger ones. There she was discovered by an editor in the audience who took samples of her writing to New York and consequently published *Midnight Suppers*. "Leslie's course helped me in other ways," said Monsky. "When I got into the program, I hadn't been writing that much. I didn't have much to show him, so he was, understandably, a bit wary. Later on, he helped me tremendously, encouraging me to get my material out."

However, in a course on creative writing, where one is dealing with subtle feelings, delicate nuances, as well as writers' egos, it would be foolish to expect things to always flow smoothly. Sue Miller, who won the first fellowship Boston University offered with the program, remembers her disagreements with Leslie Epstein. "We had some real clashes over what constituted fiction," she said. Yet, despite their conflicts of opinion, Miller feels his comments on her stories stay with her today as she writes. "He made me think

about what was worth holding onto and ways I might change the action to make it more effective and exciting." The advice paid off. Since leaving the program, she has successfully placed her short stories in many publications, including the *Atlantic Monthly*.

A Creative Family

The creativity in Leslie Epstein's daily work overflows into his personal life. His daughter Anya, now 12, wrote a story when she was eight about a starfish and a star that found its way into her father's recent book. *Regina's* ending features "The Starfish and the Star" as a parable of life told by the heroine's father to his grandchildren.

Epstein's twin sons Paul and Theo, age nine, "are leading an idyllic existence" playing soccer, baseball and attending a public school in Brookline, and his wife Ileen operates a discount designer clothing store on Harvard Street called "The Studio," that was recently profiled in *The Boston Globe*.

So, how does a transplanted New York author spend his spare time? Does he have hobbies unrelated to writing? "I've tried many out. I bought *Beard on Bread*, baked one loaf and that was it," he laughed. Traveling is highest on his list of pursuits. He is planning a trip to Israel in May where he will see author Aharon Appelfeld, an old friend, whose writing he has reviewed extensively in this country. When they see each other again, one of the things they will likely talk about is Epstein's current endeavor, a novel about the Old West.

As yet untitled, this latest effort, set in California during the Gold Rush era, was begun four years ago, shortly after *King of the Jews* was finished. Its first chapter was published as the short story "Life Without Pain," in last June's *Atlantic Monthly*, but Epstein admits he's had a lot of trouble with the book. "I've thrown it away many times," he said smiling. "Taken it out in the backyard and shot it 10 times."

Perhaps it's an occupational hazard that Leslie Epstein is stalled now and then on a project. Success and recognition bring glamour to the writer, but they do not dispense instant fulfillment. Creators, if they are honest, should always be in competition with their inner selves; they must not duplicate earlier efforts or they become hacks. "When one feels satisfied and content, that's dangerous," remarked Epstein. "All I know is I feel the struggle more acutely and with more consciousness than ever before. I realize that after a certain point, the world looks on and writing is not this anonymous and instinctive activity anymore. One has to live with what one knows. And that's difficult."



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PETER BATES

A young runner proudly displays a diploma in her home. It reads "Julie Schaeffer has successfully completed the Big Ten at Sargent Camp this Summer of 1982." What happened at Boston University's Peterborough facility makes that diploma a unique achievement as well as a collector's item.

For the last two summers, Dr. Gary Skrinar, assistant professor of Health Sciences at Sargent College, and Nutritionist Beverly Bullen, director of Sargent College's Master of Science in Nutrition Program, have teamed up with Dr. Janet McArthur, a specialist in gynecology and endocrinology at Massachusetts General Hospital. Their goal has been to determine the effects of vigorous exercise on menstruation. Twenty-eight women between the ages of 20-23 participated in the eight week exercise experiment both summers. The results have not been fully tabulated, but when they are, the researchers hope to discover co-relations between diet, hormonal activity and training to determine why some athletic women suffer amenorrhea (lack of a menstrual cycle) and others don't.

"These women had nothing to do but exercise," said Dr. Skrinar. "That was their job. They were paid \$800, in addition to room and board, to run two hours a day, stick to our diet and perform three and a half hours of moderate activity (volleyball, softball, hiking, cycling)."

It seemed like an idyllic existence, being close to nature, eating good food, living among peers and scientists concerned not only with your physical health, but also your psychological well-being. "It was great being away from the hustle and bustle," said Julie Schaeffer, a 23-year-old Simmons College senior. "Everyone was really supportive," added Cindy McElvery, a recent Simmons graduate. "I never felt better about my physical health than after that summer."

In order to qualify for the study, the women had to have what Dr. Bullen termed "a normal body composition. We wanted to rule out obesity and thinness as variables. Also, some people had to be screened on the basis of abnormal menstrual cycles or orthopedic injuries." For



The Female Athlete

How Vigorous Exercise Affects Menstruation

two weeks before each summer session, the prospective subjects underwent extensive tests for body fat composition, physical endurance and basal metabolic rate (the energy required to perform daily activities). Age was also a factor in selection since many teenaged women undergoing physical stress experience more irregular cycles than women in their early twenties. But most importantly, the researchers knew they had to select women who would stick out the eight week ordeal. "We knew we needed people who liked sports," said Dr. McArthur. "And we didn't want anyone who preferred sitting under a tree reading a paperback to performing moderate exercises." The subjects also couldn't smoke, ingest alcohol or take birth con-

trol pills.

The origins of the study date back to 1980, when Dr. McArthur noticed that a lot of mothers were bringing their daughters to her for treatment of amenorrhea and delayed menarche (a woman's first menstrual cycle). During a two-month period she saw seven young women who all had something in common: they were all distance runners. It was confusing at first, because until recently, there had been no studies on the effects of exercise on the menstrual cycle. It wasn't necessary until the 1970s when there was a rapid growth in the number of Americans exercising, now estimated to be about 20 million, including women who never exercised before.

"We also have to realize," said

McArthur, "that there is still a great deal of public misconception about women's menstrual cycles. Mothers still tell their daughters not to swim or even shower during their cycles. It's treated as an illness, thus inculcating bad attitudes among the young."

She contacted Dr. Skrinar and persuaded him to conduct a pilot study to see if they could induce amenorrhea through exercise. They subsequently recruited seven Sargent students to run 45 minutes a day, five days a week. While none lost her period, Skrinar and McArthur noticed a rise in the level of beta-endorphin, the highly discussed natural opiate produced in the pituitary gland. After the results were published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, they realized that further experimentation with greater degrees of control was necessary. In the pilot study, diet was not regulated and aside from the required running, the women's free time was unmonitored. In January 1983, the researchers applied for and received a \$376,000 grant from the National Institute of Health to continue their study.

Once the participants were selected and put through the battery of hormone and treadmill tests, they waited until they cycled and then contacted Bullen or Skrinar. They were then immediately transferred to the camp and began their running regimen: two miles in the morning, two in the afternoon the first week, increasing in two-mile increments until they reached 10 miles by the fifth week. For some, the rapid increase in an already intense program was a strain. Julie Schaeffer remembered: "The first week I asked myself what I was doing here. I was having trouble running two miles and I kept wondering how I was going to do 10."

There wasn't much time to complain. The women were up at eight and running after a light breakfast. When they reached the 10 mile figure at week five, they ran an average of two hours in the morning, then participated in some form of moderate activity after lunch. There was no pressure on the women to compete or to best their previous times, as in the case with boot camps or training centers. The most important objective was to keep the participants active, monitor their activity as much as possible and create a varied atmosphere to deflect

some of the stress caused by exercise and isolation.

"The moderate activity period was the hardest thing to control," said Skrinar. "The second summer we had a much better handle on it. Also, the diet was much more controlled."

Diet was such an important component of the exercise/sleep/diet triangle that two control groups were set up to probe its effects on the menstrual cycle. "We divided them into weight loss and weight maintenance," said Dr. Bullen. "We wanted to see if women in the weight loss group, doing the same amount of exercise as the others would have more disruptions in their cycles. That way we could conclude that weight loss through a restricted diet was a definite factor."

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What Dr. Bullen will be testing when the results are in is the hypothesis that a certain percentage of body fat is needed, or is at least more conducive for normal menstrual cycling. Many theorize that a woman stands a better chance of becoming pregnant when there is enough stored energy to support the growth of a healthy fetus. Dr. Rose Frisch of Harvard University, for example, believes that estrogen, the essential female reproductive hormone, may be in short supply when body fat stores are low. One third of the estrogen produced comes from the body's fat tissues; the rest is manufactured in the ovaries. Thus, if there is sparsity of fat, there is less estrogen present in the system to incite a cycle.

"After observing what food the women gravitated towards in the 1980 pilot study," Bullen continued, "we devised a diet of 50% carbohydrates, 35% fat and 15% protein." The original goal of the studies was to have the weight-loss group lose about a pound a week and, of course, maintain the other group. But that was not the way things turned out.

"It was almost impossible to keep the women at weight maintenance," continued Dr. Bullen. "They were exercising so vigorously they couldn't eat enough to keep up with their metabolisms." Even though the weight maintenance group often ate more than they wanted, they too couldn't avoid losing some weight.



After participating in the Sargent study under the guidance of DR. GARY SKRINAR (left), CAROL TERCYAK (center) and CINDY MCELVERY have continued their running regimen. Tercyak, in fact, ran the Boston Marathon this year in just over three hours.

Another side of the study receiving a great deal of analysis is hormone activity. Since the invention of radioimmunoassay in the 1970s, a process whereby individual hormones suspended in body fluids are isolated, scientists have been able to measure concentrations. The Sargent researchers took blood and urine samples of the runners frequently to determine which hormones rose during peak activity.

Beta-endorphin was one of those hormones that rose sharply. It was originally thought that it caused or contributed to the "high" or "second wind" that a runner feels. Today some doctors discount this, feeling that beta-endorphin would have to have 1000 times its exercise strength to induce any euphoria. Instead, Dr. McArthur feels the hormone is more significant as a possible menstrual inhibitor.

"We know that beta-endorphine attaches itself to receptors in the brain, possibly blocking the release of estrogen," she said. "As a clinician, I find it difficult to tell a woman to cut down on exercise to regain her cycles, especially if she's worked herself up to a tremendous state of physical fitness."

Another effect of beta-endorphin is the impairment of the corpus luteum, a tiny endocrine gland formed in the cavity of the follicle out of which the egg is released. Normally it secretes progesterone and estrogen that change the lining of the uterus so a fertilized egg can imbed. If inhibited by excessive beta-endorphin production, the luteal phase is shut down and the egg dies.

The anti-reproductive hormone prolactin, ordinarily produced by the body during lactation to prevent conception is also undergoing scrutiny in the Sargent study. "Exercise causes it to rise tremendously," continued McArthur. "Running can almost be like suckling; every time they run they get a flash of prolactin. Of course, the secretion is not sustained enough to induce lactation."

One possible answer to the anti-reproductive hormone dilemma could be to administer inhibitors similar to Naloxone, a drug used to counteract the effects of morphine. Dr. McArthur added that such an approach would have to be thoroughly tested and approved before it's even considered as an alternative.

Meanwhile, the women who participated in the Sargent Camp program have apparently found their own solution to secondary amenorrhea. In the summer of 1982, 85% of them failed to menstruate and the few who did had shorter cycles. Within a few months after the program, they were all back to normal but not because they stopped exercising. On the contrary, most of them continued to run, and with more intensity and duration than before attending the camp.

One of the goals of the Sargent study, as soon as the last scrap of data is interpreted, will be to help women design a personal exercise regimen that will maintain menstrual cyclicity.



DR. GARY SKRINAR (left) and DR. BEVERLY BULLEN (right), devised a diet of 50 percent carbohydrates for the Sargent study group. They recommend it for serious distance runners, theorizing it helps maintain energy levels and reduces the tendency to lose weight rapidly.

They cycled, the researchers believe, because they are not exercising as hard as they did during camp and because they'd also gained weight. "They are not suffering the same insult to their bodies now," said Dr. Bullen. Even the ones who are running a great deal, have done so gradually over a nine or 10 month period.

Elizabeth Norton also finds that she doesn't have severe menstrual cramps

anymore, and suffers less pre-menstrual tension. Most of the women interviewed reported similar conditions. They have apparently reached that ideal point between strenuous exercise and moderate jogging that causes no disruptions in their cycles and very little discomfort. One of the goals of the Sargent study, as soon as the last scrap of data is interpreted, will be to help women design a personal exercise regimen that will maintain menstrual cyclicity.

The women also find that they feel better about themselves. One of the tests they took at the camp was a Pomm's mood test. Each evening meal they would mark the degree ("not at all," "moderately," "extremely") of such moods as "grouchy," "trusting," "bushed," "peevish" and "carefree." The purpose was partly to determine the effects of hormone release during running (i.e. euphoria), but also to measure how the camp situation contributed to certain emotions and self-perception.

Dr. Jonathan Cheek, assistant professor of Psychology at Wellesley College, is part of the team evaluating the mood tests. "The results of one test are in," he said. "The Body Consciousness Questionnaire, administered before and after the summer sessions, showed significant changes. The women were more athletic to start with than average college women. I thought there'd be a ceiling effect with self-esteem and not much change over the summer. I was wrong. It was *much* higher after the eight-week period."

The Sargent researchers plan to publish their results after final tabulation, perhaps within a year or two, in both standard medical journals and sports medical journals. "Once it is published," said Dr. Skrinar, "we hope then that women will get some idea of their exercise thresholds necessary to avoid amenorrhea. If that happens, I can see possibilities for further studies with a whole new set of variables."

If Skrinar's wish comes true and Sargent College received another grant for further research, it's doubtful they'll have any difficulty finding volunteers. "I'm ready to do it again," said Candy Harrington. "If the summer I spent at Sargent Camp is any indication, I think I'd like being a full-time guinea pig." ❁