



## Paul Zakrzewski

**Lost Tribe**  
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The idea for this collection took hold after I attended a number of readings, panels and conferences in 2001. I'd just become the literary director of the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan, and I was curious about the current state of Jewish writing. At panel after panel — particularly at academic conferences — I was struck by the absence of the current generation of writers. A brash new generation of writers such as Myla Goldberg and Nathan Englander — best-selling writers, both — were completely missing.

Concurrent with this startling omission was another disappointing phenomenon I found in magazines and newspapers: the stinging backlash against new Jewish writing by highly respected literary critics such as Cynthia Ozick, Ruth Wisse, and Lee Siegel. Wisse, for example, suggested in the New York-based Jewish weekly *The Forward* that authors need to spend too much time explaining the basics of Judaism to their assimilated readers — diluting the power and importance of their fiction. Meanwhile, in *Harper's*, critic Lee Siegel suggested that today's young Jewish writers don't have the "meshuga" (crazy spirit) of their literary forebears; sadly, he thinks, these writers have been softened up by the

material success of their parents.

These are debatable charges. But what these critics seem to miss is that writers such as Englander, Goldberg, Jonathan Safran Foer, Gary Shteyngart, Rachel Kadish, Ellen Miller — the list goes on — are writing about a world many Jews — thousands, if not hundreds of thousands — know and understand.

What these writers reflect is a new sensibility among young Jews — one that's ironic, post-punk, queer-friendly, socially conscious, Yiddish-inflected. It's a sensibility found in magazines such as *Heeb Magazine* or its predecessors *Tattoo Jew.com* and *Davka*; in the plays of Tony Kushner; or in the music of John Zorn and the Klezmatics. The stories of these writers reflect many of the realities that Jews grapple with today: the tension between the religious and the secular; the search for an authentic identity, the complexity of modern ethnicity, the rise in alternative spiritual practices and mysticism; the rise of political as well as religious fundamentalism. You have only to look at the success of recent fiction such as *Bee Season*, *Everything Is Illuminated* and *For The Relief of Unbearable Urges*, or memoirs such as Stephen Dubner's *Turbulent Souls* and James McBride's *The Color of Water*, to show the hunger for Jewish stories that reflect new cultural realities. A vast majority of the nation's Jews — 5.5 million strong at last count — are finding many ways to express their faith and culture. And they have shown they are on the look out for fresh, inventive voices at every turn. —Paul Zakrzewski