

## Book Review

Lichtenstein, Rachel and Ian Sinclair. *Rodinsky's Room*. London/ New York: Granta Books, 2000.

All families have someone who's a bit of an oddball, usually the one who gravitates to the shadows, content to watch the others. Rachel Lichtenstein always had trouble finding a spot for herself within her busy family; she arrived last, the only girl, after four boisterous boys. The year was 1969, a crazy time everywhere, a sense of urgency in the air. It seems Rachel's arrival offered little comfort to those around her.

Oddballs learn early to seek comfort where they can find it. Rachel, a sensitive girl with artistic talent, found solace in the stories her grandfather would tell her. He had been one of thousands of Jewish refugees forced to flee the pogroms in Poland, and had arrived in the East End of London during the early 1930's. He opened a watchmaking shop, and tried to begin again, although the sounds and smells of his old home stayed with him always. Rachel liked listening to him remember.

Rachel's parents had spent most of their lives remembering to forget. Many years ago, they anglicized their family name from Lichtenstein to Laurence, and cultivated a successful family business. The business brought them financial security and a certain status in the community, which they enjoyed. They were uneasy with their daughter's preoccupation with the past.

Nagging feelings of uselessness began to plague Rachel as she grew older, and she was looking for something to take her away. She couldn't stop thinking about a story her grandfather once told her. When he was a young boy in Poland, he had dreams of becoming an artist. Whenever he was able to get pencils and paper, scarce commodities in his small poor village, he would spend hours sketching, lost in the beauty of his own creations. Miraculously, a relative is able to arrange for him to be tutored in another village. On the journey to his teacher's house, he is haunted by the sense that something terrible has happened at home, and insists on returning, thus relinquishing his one chance at a different life, the life of an artist. When he returns, he finds out that his brother had died shortly after his departure. He vows not to leave his family again, and places the few pieces of paper and pencils he has in his desk. He would never touch them again.

When her grandfather dies, Rachel is 17, and she reclaims Lichtenstein as her name, the only one in her family to do so. Already enrolled in her final year of art school, she stubbornly defies the advice of her tutors, and decides to write a thesis on Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe to the East End of London during the early part of the century. Unlike her beloved grandfather, Rachel would never turn back. Maybe she thought she could finish what he started.

She begins her research by exploring the East End of London, once a hub of Jewish life. Today, most of the Jews have vanished, and speculators have moved in, transforming several of the old synagogues and restaurants into seedy discos, their inhabitants oblivious to the unique world that thrived here, just decades ago. Rachel meets an elderly woman who remembers:

“The atmosphere was special. As soon as you came in there was a herring on the table, a cup of lemon tea on a white cloth. You didn’t have to make an appointment to see anyone, you just went in, you would go visiting, you just went, that was how it was.”

She told Rachel how children were able to safely wander the streets, even at night, and remembered that back then, the neighborhood was entirely Jewish.

It was around this time that Rachel met Ian Sinclair, who like herself, was irresistibly drawn to studying the remaining remnants of Jewish culture in East London. Both of them realized they were witnessing the slow deterioration of yet another Jewish world, this one unable to find sanctuary anywhere. It was just disappearing. Sinclair remembers his first impression of the neighborhood during the 1970’s:

“The Jewish ghetto was a memory trace and Bangladeshi immigration was still a trickle. There was one corner shop on Sheba Street, a dingy, cat-smelling cave with lurid boiled sweets in bottles, damp fag packets, fossilized Mars bars, pre-war newspapers...”

One day Rachel was touring one of the few remaining majestic synagogues that had been left untouched, a precious relic of what once had been. It was here that she first heard about Rodinsky. It was rumored that he had lived in the attic above the synagogue for many years, a caretaker of sorts, a deeply religious man. Some remembered him as an eccentric scholar, one who was well versed in many languages. Most people believed he lived up there alone, but there were a few who thought he might have been with his mother and sister, at least for some of the time. No one seemed certain. There was a man who said he saw Rodinsky playing spoons on the tables in the local restaurants, presumably in exchange for coffee and a roll. Others remember him joyously giving out coins to the beggars on the streets. One man recalls seeing him eating at one of the new Indian restaurants that had opened up in the area. Others are certain that can’t be right; he was Orthodox, strictly kosher. The stories Rachel heard were confusing and contradictory; they didn’t make much sense. There was only one thing everyone agreed upon. One morning in 1969, Rodinsky left and was never heard from or seen again, by anyone. His room above the synagogue was left untouched until the 1980’s. When it was found, everything was how he had left it. There were breakfast dishes still on the table amidst the clutter of his many books and notes, and his bed was ruffled, the pillows still creased.

When Rachel sees Rodinsky’s room, she is mesmerized by the belongings he has left, the “strange markings she found on the peeled pieces of wallpaper, markings on old piano keys, old gramophone records, empty dust covered beer bottles, kosher food packets, religious books, shopping lists for Shabbat, thousands of small scraps of paper covered in coded messages, in different languages, by his own hand.”

Her other work no longer interests her, and she finds herself drawn back to his room for long periods of time. She would sit among his possessions, and think about who he might have been:

“More often than not the cold, or the overwhelming sensation of being watched, would drive me out of the room, with the hairs on the back of my neck prickling. But every day I would be back

at the table, fascination overcoming fear. Gradually, over time, through careful examination of his vast collection, a faint image of a man began to emerge: a scholar harboring secrets, a meticulous annotator of texts, a comedian, an enigma.”

Sometimes it's hard to understand how one person can be drawn so completely into another person's orbit. Rachel does not often speak of her own psychic discomfort, but by choosing to follow Rodinsky's trail, she encourages the reader to speculate upon what drew her to him. Her extensive investigation reveals that they both share a love of learning and books, and enjoy wandering passions for many different things. Yet, one wonders if Rachel realizes that they seem most alike in what they both refuse to do. Often, in order to survive, Jews have been forced for centuries to reinvent themselves, to make themselves more palatable to others, usually at great personal cost. It seems Rachel and Rodinsky both stubbornly decided that the world would have to meet them on their own terms.

By this time, Rachel was working with Sinclair, trying to find out what happened to Rodinsky. Sinclair marvels at her passion, her refusal to stop looking for him:

“Lichtenstein was obsessive, ritualistic in her procedures. The quest for an identity, for a family that would confirm her essence and existence took her on a series of journeys: to Poland, to New York, to Israel - and inevitably, to Whitechapel. Each exploration-interviews, recordings, buildings, and contents listed and photographed-brought her closer to the point of origin. When it was all gathered (like the manic accumulations of holy junk in David Rodinsky's Princelet Street attic) she would cancel herself out. She would be free to travel in other dimensions.”

As her search for Rodinsky intensifies, Rachel has moments when she feels angry and confused, and questions the validity of her search:

“Has he been created from our desire to believe in an eternally wandering Jew, one who seems to vanish every time someone attempts to define him? I want to believe in Rodinsky, a Jew whose belongings are all intact, a Jewish scholar continuing the centuries-old tradition of learning, a cabbalistic genius who magically transported himself to a higher realm, a Jew who achieved the impossible and outwitted his own fate.”

The reader can't help but become engrossed in Rachel's search for this man, hoping somehow he will turn out to be someone spectacular, a modern day Moses of sorts, unforgettable. It's difficult not to hope that Rodinsky has survived, and is perhaps living elsewhere, speaking one of the many languages he knew, to a wife, or some children.

I will allow the reader to find out the fate that awaited Rodinsky. As Sinclair aptly writes, “to know everything is to lose everything. A story brought to its finish is a story abandoned.” This is an astonishing book by two talented writers that forces the reader to consider the fragility of our histories, and confront the unforeseen dangers of forgetting where we came from.

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