Joseph Skibell

Joseph Skibell's debut novel, *A Blessing on the Moon*, received the prestigious Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Turner Prize for First Fiction from the Texas Institute of Letters. Skibell's second novel, *The English Disease*, received the Jesse H. Jones Award from the Texas Institute of Letters. Skibell's third novel, *A Curable Romantic*, is forthcoming from Algonquin in 2010. In addition, his work has been widely anthologized and his short stories and essays have appeared in *Story, Tikkun, The New York Times, Poets & Writers*, and other periodicals. A recipient of a Halls Fellowship, a Michener Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, Skibell has taught at the University of Wisconsin, the Humber School for Writers, the Taos Summer Writers Conference, and Bar-Ilan University. He joined the English Department/Creative Writing Program at Emory University in 1999, and is currently working on a book of essays about the tales in the Talmud. (Photo credit: Jeffrey Allen)

Brooke Hardy

Brooke Hardy is a graduate student at the University of West Florida where she is an editor of *Panhandler* and teaches English composition. She is also the president of the UWF chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, the English honor society.

Doug Moon

Doug Moon is a graduate student at the University of West Florida where he is an editor of *Panhandler* and teaches English composition. His thesis, a cycle of short stories, is forever forthcoming.

Doug Moon: We happen to be in the middle of National Novel Writing Month. It is an initiative where they encourage writers just to write a novel. Not write a careful novel, but essentially the goal is to write a 50,000-word novella in a month. We were wondering since you've written two novels, what are your thoughts about that? Do you think that is feasible?

Joseph Skibell: Every month is National Novel Writing Month in my house. I don't want to take a political stand on NNWM, but years ago I was training to teach at the UCLA Extension and I had to sit in a class with somebody and observe a teacher. This guy was a very skilled teacher and he went around the room the first day and said to people "Why are you here?" and one man said "I want to learn to write faster" and the teacher said, "I think from this class you'll learn that maybe it's better to write more slowly." I mean, I think that it would be nice if you could hurry, and that kind of rushing can sort of get you over a hurdle of your inhibitions, but — as Jon and I were talking earlier about guitar-building — would you really want your guitar builder to build your guitar in a month or take the time and make sure that it's really an excellent and exquisite instrument. Most people are inhibited about writing and that kind of deadline might help you get over the inhibitions. One of my old professors when I was an undergraduate said, "If you compare the actual text that you generate on a day that you feel is really good with the text you generate on a day that's really bad, there won't be that much difference between them." So you're always writing more or less at the same level, so why not hurry? But you want to listen to the story that your novel is telling you so that you don't just fall into clichés. Or even after you've written for a while, you don't want to keep doing the same familiar moves. You want to be quiet enough and slow enough so that maybe you can surprise yourself. I think National Novel Year might be better and it would be fast to write a novel in a year, anyway.

DM: I think that one of the ideas of it is that you find time to write everyday, regardless of your fulltime job, regardless of your kids.

JS: I think that's probably true.

DM: I wonder then how often do you find yourself writing on a daily basis?

JS: Well, when I'm working on something I always work on a dai-

ly basis, and I always find that it's better working in the same place, at the same hour. All that helps in a way because you can get more quickly back to the moment that matters. If you're going to different coffee shops everyday, you have to get used to that. I think that it is important to write everyday. But it is just one of the important things. Quality counts, too.

and you think, "Is this dark enough? Would this make a garment? No, I'll put it back." Eventually you start. One of the things I learned from telling stories to my daughter is that almost any image has a story in it, you just have to keep spinning it out logically. So, the real question is, does the image that you start with have enough gravitas for a novel. Then as you write more and more, you start thinking, "Do the themes

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Brooke Hardy: How do you begin the process of writing a novel? Do you begin with a short story? Doug and I both noticed in *The English Disease* that some of the chapters seem like they could be self-contained.

JS: They probably should have been. Actually, I always felt that that book didn't know whether it wanted to be a novel or a collection of short stories and I think it would have been better if it were a collection of short stories. It's a collection of short stories masquerading as a novel. In any case, I'm always looking for situations. I'm always looking for that little germ that tells you, "There could be a bigger story about this." I'm always looking for a character in a situation, which may just come from thinking more like a playwright than a novelist. And then you get this image or find this little kernel. Now, when I read non-fiction books, I'm always wondering if there's a story there. Like you tap this piece of wood. Would this be good? There's music in this wood. And then you just sort of think about it for a while and let it sit in the dye and then you take it out of the dye that image has in it mean anything to me now?" Once you understand these narrative laws you can say, "A man walks into an auto repair shop with a crutch." Now you can tell that story if you're just faithful to the image and the scenes. Who's he going to meet next? So eventually you have to say, "Well, it may take me longer than a month to write this novel, so is this important enough for me to really spend a year and a half, two years, five years on? Are these themes inherent in this image something that really matters to me?" I've done it telling stories to children. You can make a story out of anything and for a half-hour that's ok, but for the long haul you want to make sure its something that actually matters to you.

DM: I wonder, since you mentioned earlier that you think that *The English Disease* might be better as a collection of short stories, did it begin as a collection or did it begin with one short story?

JS: Well, it began as one short story and I had finished my first novel and I really didn't know what to do after that. I actually began a book which, in a transformed state, became my third novel, but I was obviously not ready to write that yet. I was new to having them published, I was new to writing prose because before *A Blessing on the Moon*, I was always writing drama. My editor said, "You know, you have to follow it up with a novel." I had that first short story and I thought, "How do you turn this into a novel?" It wouldn't turn into a novel, so I thought that there were other things that I really wanted to write about Charles and Isabelle. I really just started writing these other pieces. But in terms of readers' expectations, if it had said instead of novel—because he's writing about Mahler's song cycles—maybe a fiction cycle, I think the expectation that it's not really going to read like a novel would have made it a more pleasurable read for the reader than maybe it was.

DM: I thought when I read it that it recalled Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities,* where the discrete parts build upon each other. As I reader, I never had any expectation for anything else. I didn't find it jarring or unsettling.

JS: I ended up taking off the last line of the first story, which would have finished the story, but I thought, "Well, I can't put that last line there because it will finish everything." And that is where he ends up reaching at the end of the whole book. But, I think that that piece would work better with that last line. So, who knows? Maybe like Henry James, I'll rewrite everything.

DM: I know there are so many authors that have the opportunity, like Walt Whitman, to consistently revise and then re-revise. How does that feel when something is published? Do you feel like you have to let that be? Or do you still feel this nagging to revise?

JS: I would just love to do that. It didn't sell as many copies as the other books. There can only be so many thousands of people who would even notice. On the one hand, if you think about Sam Shepard , he became such a better writer when he slowed down and he was sort of embarrassed by his earlier, dashed-off plays, even though they had a fiery genius to them. Could you really go back and do it without spoiling them—how could you really go back into that mental space? If you still have your notes and your rough drafts and you remember that last line, then you can slip it in and nobody will notice. If I were to do this, there are probably five little changes and I would take out those chapter titles. Then I think I could leave it. But, at this point, I'd much rather do something new than rewrite something old.

DM: Writing a first novel, second novel, third novel, do you find it easier each time? Does it become harder?

JS: The third novel will come out next year. It's called *A Curable Romantic*. The manuscript was a thousand pages and now it's seven hundred pages. Having written that, I'm not concerned anymore with the question of whether I can generate prose. It took the whammy off of that. In that sense, it has become easier. What becomes harder is—you're harder on yourself and you can do more technically, so you want to do more organically. You want to really thrill yourself as a writer and thrill the reader because your reach is that much farther. I think that becomes a little harder. You see writers sometimes keep recycling the same thing, so the question is, how can you keep doing something newer, better, with some surprise in it for you and the reader and not get so far outside your thematic comfort zone that you don't even know what you're talking about anymore.

BH: Clearly, this book deals with notions of Jewish identity and I was wondering how central that idea of Jewish identity is to your writing.

JS: You burn through things with your writing. If you're having a personal issue, you put it into your work and then suddenly it isn't your issue anymore. You've objectified it so much that you liberate yourself from it or you work though it in such a way that it's outside of you now. That's one of the things I'm thinking about in these newer books I'm thinking about doing. The question of Jewish experience and Jewish identity isn't a burning thematic issue for me anymore. How do you move on and not even let that be a part of your writing anymore?

DM: One of the things that I found really interesting is the way in which the protagonist consistently defines Judaism as being almost defined by opposition and these inherent paradoxes. For example, you write, "I'm a Jew after all, a member of a tribe with a long history of measuring its preeminence and centrality to world events, at least in part by the ferocious wish of others to exterminate us." But then he also defines that belief in God is like having a crazy uncle who is a liability to the institution. I was wondering if you had any more to say about that.

JS: I was just reading this book called *A Bridge of Longing* which is about Yiddish storytelling and I really didn't get very far before it knocked me out. But on the opening page, there was a quote from a poem by someone named Jacob Glatstein and it's obviously a post-Holocaust poem and it said, "Who will remember You, who will flee from You, who will deny You, who will run from You across a bridge of longing only to return again" I thought, "You know, that is such a Jewish concept of the relationship with God." Now that we've been decimated, who's there to remember you and who's there to deny you. You would never think that in Christian or Muslim circles, for instance, that "who now will deny you now that we're so gone." That's the Jewish paradox. There is an old Catholic joke that there is no God and Mary is his mother. I think that seems odder in the Catholic world than in the Jewish world. One time I was at a Passover Seder and my uncle and cousin said, "I identify with the wicked son," and yet they're there at the Passover Seder. So you're observing this ritual, but you identify with the wicked son? I think that's so essentially Jewish in a way.

DM: I always find it interesting when authors talk about their relationships to the characters. They talk about them as if the characters are going to do what they want, regardless of what input they have. With Charles, it's particularly interesting because the near-anagram almost compels me to question what sort of convergence or divergence there is. I was wondering when you were writing, what sort of relationship did you have with that character?

JS: I think the near-anagram is also something I wouldn't do again. The protagonist of the first book is Chaim Skibelski, which actually was my great-grandfather's name. I thought perhaps one could almost think Charles is a descendent of Skibelski, but they cut off the other "ski." I think if you ask people who knew me, Charles is a lot gloomier than I really am. It's like a voodoo doll, in a way. You can put all your negativity and all your gloominess and all your melancholia onto the character. It wasn't very pleasant writing this book. That's when I started to realize that I take on these issues of the protagonist a little too much. But I

think he's a bit more curmudgeonly than I am. Now at least. I may have been more like that then. I don't know. He was a character type I used to work with a lot, those sorts of alienated, disaffected males. I had written that first short story before I wrote my first novel and then I went back to those characters and this was sort of my thank you to that character for his 25-years of service, if you know what I mean: Here's your book and we never have to meet up again. In fact, the protagonist of the third book, *A Curable Romantic*, is this guy named Dr. Y. Y. Sammelsohn and he lives in Freud's time. I think if you asked a friend of mine, he would tell you that I resemble Sammelsohn much more than I resemble Charles, even though the external situations of Charles' life are have a greater one-to-one correspondence with my life. But internally, not quite as much.

BH: You mentioned that you used the character of Charles and some of your other characters as ways of working though these issues that you were maybe facing personally. I was interested in how Belski changes so dramatically between the beginning and the end. In the beginning, he seems mildly neurotic about things. He's worried about his wife and if she's cheating on him. By the end, he seems much more self-assured. There does seem to be a more clear-cut progression in his character. It seems to me that the catalyst for this change seems to come around the time he goes to Poland. That seems to also mark when Belski starts to focus on this idea of Jewish identity, especially when he questions if he still needs to be married to a goy. How would you say the dramatic changes in the protagonist works in the novel?

JS: Again, I was learning, in a way. There was a moment in writing these stories in the Polish part where Charles looks down at Liebowitz, and he has a moment where he feels sorry for Liebowitz and it makes him get off the bus. To me, that was a revelation about character because I thought that Charles' typical thing would be aversion and avoidance, but because I went 180 degrees away from his normative response, he suddenly became a bigger, more alive character to me. That was the moment when he started being real. I thought, "What a revelation," because I do teach creative writing. I thought, "What a great little truism." If you take a character and you go 180 degrees from his typical response, he becomes round. I also think for him, to answer your question on a less technical level, it's the child. I think the child humanizes him and his worry becomes focused on her in a way that to be worried about her is more understandable than to have this free-floating anxiety and suspicious neuroticism.

BH: That leads into my question about Isabelle. She goes through one of the most dramatic changes in the novel. Going from being completely non-religious to practically converting to Judaism overnight. I'm interested to hear about your choices in changing her so dramatically.

JS: When I was writing this book, those were things that I was personally thinking about. It was fun to give those things to Isabelle. In that respect, in some ways, she issues mirror some aspects of my own personal experience. Just the idea of thinking, "Oh wow, there's this whole interesting world of Orthodox Judaism. How much can you embrace?" In that way, she is really much more like me than she is like my wife. To me, again, there's that knocking on the wood to hear if it will make a good guitar. Where's the story in this character? What story can you do? For me, it was to make Charles push her toward Judaism and then let her really embrace it. You see that happening to people and there's no fervor like a convert's fervor. So, in some ways, it was just fun. I didn't think that I could ever see Charles doing that. It seemed part of the book, but he would never have done it, so she had to do it.

BH: It seems interesting how in that last portion of the book, he's very disconnected from the whole process. We see a lot of her going to the different Rabbis, Rabbi Falconer and then the Orthodox Rabbi. It goes from this progression where she's going to Yoga group that just happens to be at a temple to completely covering herself, then they have to go through that month-long process where they can't be alone with each other. It was interesting how Belski initiates this conversion and then just sees how far she'll go.

JS: We have friends that this happened to, that had to separate and everything. But, also, I think for Charles there was that little bit of embarrassment that he had married out, so he didn't want to deal with anything.

DM: You've been talking about the ways in which both the ritual becomes its own referent, but also the way in which it becomes more. I think that what really interests me about the novel is how Charles and his relationship with people seems like it should be, but at times is not completely inseparable from his identity as being Jewish, his marriage to his wife. It seems like a particularly exigent question right now in the U.S., where we are having discussions about the role of marriage. Charles offers this perspective that, going back to this idea that God is a crazy uncle, if the ritual has

God at its source, that seems like a problematic thing. But then the ritual takes on new significances. It's important to his relationship with his wife, etc. That seems inherently paradoxical. How do you feel about that?

JS: That's a very fascinating question, actually. It throws me back to my own experience with ritual. Maybe it's not true for everybody, but for myself, again and again, I've had the experience of being sort of cynical and undergoing some kind of ritual and actually coming out the other side changed. I don't really want to go into all these personal things, but I can count, clearly, at least on one hand, moments where maybe even because I was resistant that the push through was even bigger. In the book, it's interesting to me that I do have moments like that. Maybe other writers don't: I was resistant to the ritual, the ritual happened, and it did nothing to me. In the literary world, people are much more comfortable with a fundamental atheism. I think in my books, even though God, as you point out, is problematic, that problematic nature doesn't allow you to just say, there is no God, and go on your way. I think that's one thing about my books. The idea of God is certainly alive and functioning and changing and doing things. I think that's probably because my experience of religious ritual or psychodynamic things is that you go through them and something does happen and you're aware of certainly a bigger self if not a bigger Self, capital S.

DM: On a different subject, one of the things that instantly struck me about the first chapter of the novel was how inherently comic the situation is. Charles clearly doesn't want to be there, and he seems to be reflecting on all the ways in which the situation does not fit him. It just seemed anytime he was reflecting it was becoming instantly comic, and his actions take on a comic turn. When you're writing, how easy is it to write humor, or does that just end up in your work?

JS: I think humor's an insecure person's way of knowing is the piece is working. "Yeah, it's funny, so I know it's working." In the book I just finished, there are many love scenes, and I became aware that I was always putting a joke in the middle of each one. It makes it more palatable, I thought. If I'm just writing about love and sex, who knows what notes you're hitting? But if you put a joke in, then you know you're in control of the material. It's probably a certain amount of insecurity. The first book, *A Blessing on the Moon*, really does have some pretty intense scenes, and if there's a moment where there's a little bit of humor, I think it only deepens the horror and tragedy. I come from a family that was always filled with jokes and witticisms, everyone trying to top one another. It just makes me feel comfortable. Art is laughter.

DM: I have a question as someone who has never been able to write a sex scene I've felt comfortable with. Is that the patented way to write one?

JS: Right, and there's that award in England that's given out for the very worst sex scene every year. So if you put a joke in that sex scene, nobody will think "This is terrible!" They'll think you're laughing at it, too.

DM: Can you tell us about your forthcoming third novel?

JS: It follows a fictitious character, Dr. Sammelsohn. As a child he gets thrown out of a Hassidic family for reading secular books around 1880. He ends up in Vienna and becomes a doctor. When the book starts, he winds up in a friendship with Freud. The first part of the book is a kind of reimagination of the Emma Eckstein scandal. In the second part, he ends up in the early Esperanto movement, and in the third part, he winds up in the Warsaw ghetto. He's this character who wanders through these historical situations. For the most part, I stay very close to the historical referent, but in other cases, I turn things on their heads imaginatively. It's a cosmic love story, actually. A love story extending through many lives. It took a long time to write, and a long time to edit.

DM: What do you think the book's relationship to Freud is, because I think he's a fascinating character to include.

JS: In this case, Freud totally functions as that materialist, atheistic renunciation of all that Dr. Sammelsohn is trying to leave. Freud wrote an essay about spirit possession. He writes that the spirit possessions of yesteryear are the undiagnosed cases of hysteria today. So he makes this comparison, and in the book, there's a question about whether Emma Eckstein, who was hysterical, is the dybbuk of one of Dr. Sammelsohn's earlier wives. So Freud in the book is this guy who is

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not prepared for a dybbuk. A dybbuk in Jewish folklore is the soul of a dead person, a sinner, who refuses to submit to divine justice, so instead of going to a heavenly court, the soul wanders. And it's punished by demons, punitive demons with whips and cudgels. It can hide in three places: it can hide in a stone, in an animal, and in a human being. And it can only hide in a human being if the human being is leaning toward the dark side. There's an entire literature about dybbuk exorcisms. You have to coax them out with psalms to get them to leave. So, anyhow, that's Freud in there. Esperanto is this one-world idealism. The Warsaw ghetto is what happened to our sophistication and our one world. It all stopped at the Warsaw ghetto. Sammelsohn is the curable romantic, which is to say, the incurable romantic.

DM: It's coming out next year?

JS: It's coming out autumn of next year. It's a big canvas.

DM: Do find it really helpful to have that kind of bridge to textual history to build off of.

JS: When I was younger, I wasn't a researcher. I didn't really enjoy history. I thought the easiest thing to do would be to write modern stuff, because you wouldn't have to do research. It's mysterious to me now, but I love it for some reason. For instance: I was reading about the Warsaw ghetto and because, when the Jews were finally put in the ghetto, they weren't going to let non-Jews in and out of the ghetto, they had to have a Jewish postman. It was the first Jewish postman they'd ever had in Warsaw. The residents of the Warsaw ghetto, with gallows humor, said, Oh, a Jewish postman, just like in Palestine! Such a great detail. The problem with history for a novelist is that you have to know so much of it, and when you put it in your book, if you ask your wife, she'll tell you have to take it all out. And you do, because it becomes tedious. It's a weird process. Now I'm thinking about writing a book about French violin makers, in 1880 again.

I spun my coffee cup on its saucer like a top, admitting that although I did not know the great Dr. Herzl, I had called upon him once, inquiring for him at the offices of the Neue Freie Presse, where he worked.

"Yes? And? So?" Sora Dvora leaned forward excitedly.

"Well." I shrugged, embarrassed. "Perhaps I didn't enunciate his name clearly," I said, explaining that I had been taken to meet not Dr. Theodor Herzl, but Dr. Theodor Hertzka, also a writer at the paper, also the author of a utopian novel, although his, Freiland, unlike Dr. Herzl's Altneuland, had nothing to do with Palestine or a Jewish State. As my interview with Dr. Hertzka wore on, I became confused: Why on earth would the great Zionist leader go on and on about public land reforms and urge me to emigrate, not to Palestine, but to British East Africa, where advocates of his ideas had recently founded a model community?

"But for that," I told my sister sheepishly, "I might be a Zionist as well."

(These sorts of confusions continued to dog my life. For example: arriving in the Promised Land myself, years later, a Zionist in fact, if not in theory, I made a fool of myself by purchasing a large bouquet of roses and hiring a taxi to Bethlehem one bright and ringing morning so that I might lay them, as a tribute, to the Yiddish poet Itzik Manger beneath what I'd anticipated would be a plaque erected for him in Manger Square. How fortunate, I told myself on that bright day, how fortunate it is to live in one's own country where one's own squares may be named in honor of one's own poets!)

-Joseph Skibell, from *A Curable Romantic*