

# auto reverse

young narrative

*selected by Etgar Keret*

EDITION **AL** BERLIN

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Etgar Keret

*Introduction*

Anyone can write a good story. I can't tell you what it'll be about or whether it'll have a happy ending or a sad one, but I can promise you this: anyone can write at least one good story. It can be a true story about something that once happened to him; it can be an imaginary story that began in a dream. It can be a story that takes place in the neighbourhood he grew up in, or on a continent he's never been to. Anyone can write a one-and-only, special story that only he could have written. Anyone can write a story that is his and his alone, and that story can be good.

I've always thought that. Even long before I wrote my first sentence. And although it's a completely intuitive thought, I'll still try to defend it with the help of logic. I don't promise that my argument will be convincing, but nonetheless. If Aristotle is right, and as he wrote in his *Poetics*, the function of art is to imitate life. And every person, if he really wants to, is capable of knowing himself well enough to imitate his own life. And produce some kind of plot and emotion that will connect the readers to the one-time existence that is his life. That story cannot, of course, contain the entire existence of its writer. But in some way, it will have a family resemblance to the person who wrote it. The kind grandfathers and grandmothers love to find every time they see a new grandchild and say that he has "his mother's eyes" or "his uncle's lips." That resemblance, through the story, will illuminate something that exists in the person who wrote it, in his life and in life in general. And that resemblance will cause us, the readers, to nod in agreement and find in that story another name we can give to life. After all, "compassion," "fear," "longing" and "loss" are personal names for the all-encompassing experience we can call by an endless number of names, and all will be included in that same obscure concept only religious people pretend they are capable of describing in its entirety.

When I arrived in Berlin as a guest lecturer in the Comparative Literature Department, I stood for the first time in my life in front of a class of students, most of whom had never written a story in their lives. Unlike previous classes I had taught, students of screenwriting or beginning writers, here I met for the first time a class of students of philosophy, history and literature. I was surprised and very, very moved by the fact that this turned out to be the best class I had ever had in my ten years of teaching. All the students came from different places, which was obvious from their names and their various accents. However, it was not only their geographic origins, but the inner worlds they came from were so completely different that I sometimes felt as if each one of them had come to visit from another planet. And each one of those planets was fascinating enough to justify launching a spaceship to it.

As a teacher who has spent many hours listening to stories written by students, I remember that nearly every semester, there was always one story I knew I'd never forget when I heard it read in class. During the period I taught in Berlin, I heard a story like that in almost every lesson, and sometimes more than one. I don't know how many students who took the course will continue to write their whole lives, or how many simply enjoyed the adventure and will go their different ways. What I do know for sure is that many of them, during the short time we spent together, succeeded in giving their lives a name through their stories. And because so many bright, curious and passionate people crowded together in that same small classroom, those "names," some of which you will find in this book, are beautiful, perceptive and moving.

Maxime Stoecker

*auto reverse—just a tape*

Her ears looked beautiful, that's what I noticed first, they seemed to listen and talk at the same time, like shells made of pale rose skin. Sounds whispered around them, and her body, a stretched and simultaneously swinging string in attention, gave harmony to the stuffy space.

*Sixty, ninety, or one hundred minutes? Chrome or metal?*

We had met in an overcrowded train compartment, at night, Munich–Rome. I cannot remember how the conversation started, nor what we were talking about; but I precisely recall the moment when she put on my headphones and, as if in slow-motion, smiled and beamed to a Holiday Flyer song. And although I knew the tape in my walkman by heart (only *essential* songs I had especially compiled for railroad travels), it was as if her shining face let me listen to it for the very first time.

*Special theme, hidden structure? Many different styles of music, or an orthodox hipster selection?*

She had written her address on the wrapper of a chocolate bar before leaving the train in Bologna, and since then—two weeks and a half—the piece of plastic paper hasn't left my pocket.

*Handwriting or printing? Photograph, collage, or simply the tracklist?*



There are many golden rules and even more theories for how to make a perfect tape for the loved one. Most of them

become obsolete once you sit in front of your recorder because every love-story is different and unique, and because every tape is shaped so much by the moment in which it is conceived. Don't believe John Cusack in *High Fidelity*—it's never that easy; what's more, you probably don't own such a record collection!

The essential question is: Do you want to follow a sophisticated plan or spontaneously create a unity that would be much more than the *sum total of its individual parts*? It's all about the woman ears ...

Don't try to be too subtle, or too honest—consider the tape as a *living commodity*, but never as a *piece of art*; at the same time believe in structure, be it elaborate or instinctive. A tape-structure? Well, it consists of the dynamic curve of the track-sequence, musically and literally, and if you want to get a good pattern for it, then imagine its 90 minutes as a condensed day, from 6 a.m. till the end ... You can try to reflect the chronology by assigning a song to every hour: rising sun—ringing alarm—overcrowded tube—annoying people, etc.

As a matter of fact, there is an infinite number of nuances and subtleties in such a pattern, but a basic system can help you create a well-balanced emotional unity; a tape is never a CD, therefore the fast-forward button must be taboo!

What about the artwork? Sober and decent, or totally overloaded? No rules, really. Personally, I like to hide the tracklist on the inside and put a self-made movie still on the cover. Let the tape appear as simple as possible, but feel free to infiltrate it with a maximum of subtle innuendos. (To be honest, I don't think that's possible ...)



So what about the tape for the mysterious train-girl?

I'm just finishing it, and I don't think that ... It's simply too much, you know, too many different moods and styles, emotions clustered together. I feel like a shouting mute, my cries don't find their way out: before the magic play-moment even starts (0:00), the tape-recorder switches to auto-reverse—even before the very beginning, and this phenomenon seems to repeat itself endlessly.

It always happens, but never mind, because this has to be the first effort: *it's the second try that is decisive*. Forget about the subtle messages—like, for instance, the “X, I love you”-sentence hidden in the first letters of the track titles—and in the last ones on the b-side, contrapuntally inverted. Forget about the collector-standard, about the less-than-four-minutes-rule (although it can be helpful).

Instead,

a) make a list of your (and not her supposed ones, you don't know her that well) favorite tracks—not your all-time faves, mind you, but the current ones;

b) take it easy, be relaxed;

c) try to consider the songs as a bunch of waves you have to unify like a surfer trying to stay on his board as long as possible; there can be breaks, but it's essential to get a boost from time to time; play with them as with dice until they fit;

d) never forget that you are just recording a tape;

e) the cover? Take a look on the mountain of paper on your desk (or in the kitchen room), don't hesitate too long, take what ... fits;

f) listen to it once or twice in your car (or in the bus) to check if it works;

g) send it to the girl and, most importantly, visit her and ... LIVE.

I will, I will, I will.

(Are we talking rules?)

## The Samuel Fischer Guest-Professorship for Literature

A Russian pop author comments on black-and-white films of the Soviet era. The former vice-president of Nicaragua explains the contemporary Latin-American novel. A Japanese Nobel prize winner tells of the first time he heard the voice of the Tenno (the Japanese emperor) in 1945. A missionary scholar from Zaire teaches “Theories of Difference.” An Austrian feminist talks about “the dirndl” (the traditional German lass) as “text.” And an Israeli writer and film-maker analyzes how stories develop out of ideas.

Since 1998, international authors have come to the Department of General and Comparative Literature of the *Freie Universität Berlin* as “Samuel Fischer Guest-Professors for Literature.” In the first five years, the institute welcomed Vladimir Sorokin (Russia), Valentin Y. Mudimbe (Congo), Kenzaburo Oe (Japan), Scott Bradfield (USA), Sergio Ramírez (Nicaragua), Marlene Streeruwitz (Austria), Robert Hass (USA), Yann Martel (Canada), Alberto Manguel (Argentina/Canada), and Etgar Keret (Israel). The most recent guest professors were Feridun Zaimoglu (Turkey/Germany) and Nora Amin (Egypt).

The authors bring their own individual styles and attitudes to their work with students. As opposed to the genre of “poetics-professorships,” the writers neither adhere to a topic (literary theory) nor to a format (lecture). The guests choose the content and style of their courses individually: they teach their own or foreign, contemporary or classical, canonical or underground literature; they deal with themes of literary scholarship as varied as Moscow Conceptualism, US-American lyrical poetry, animals in literature, Jorge Luis Borges, cultural history of modern Japan or theory, philosophy and sociology of identity and alterity. They give lectures, concentrated workshops, or seminars.

The candidates for the Samuel Fischer Guest-Professorship

are selected by a jury to teach for one semester. During their stay in Berlin, they act as regular members of the department's teaching staff. They have an office at the Department of General and Comparative Literature, they hold office hours, consult students on term papers, and hand out graded course-certificates. Public appearances in cooperation with various institutions take place in the House of World Cultures, the Ibero-American Institute, the US-American and Canadian embassies, the British Council, the Berlin Festival (*Festspiele*), or the theater *Schaubühne*. The guest professors enrich campus life and Berlin's cultural reputation—and, beyond the city's borders, that of Bonn and Weimar, where the Federal Gallery of Art (*Bundeskunsthalle*) and the National Theater have held events in their honor.

The Samuel Fischer Guest-Professorship is named after Samuel Fischer, who in 1886, as a 26-year-old bookseller's assistant, founded a publishing house which was soon to become the most important of its kind for modern literature in Germany. His first release was *Rosmersholm*, a play by Henrik Ibsen. Fischer was able to market his understanding of literature by distributing complete editions of the works of living poets and discovering young talents: Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, and Alfred Döblin were represented by his publishing house, and among his foreign writers were Émile Zola and Leo Tolstoy. A one-volume edition of *Buddenbrooks* in 1903 bestowed him world success. During the Nazi era, the publishing house was no longer permitted to work independently. Numerous books were no longer sanctioned, many authors left the country. The Samuel Fischer Guest-Professorship for Literature hopes to honor and continue the work of its patron by bringing international writers to Berlin.

The professorship reflects Fischer's critical apprehension of world literature. The Department of General and Comparative Literature of the *Freie Universität Berlin* and the German Service for Academic Exchange (DAAD) jointly organize the Guest-Professorship with the S. Fischer Publishing House

and the *Veranstaltungsforum der Verlagsgruppe Georg von Holtzbrinck*. This form of public/private partnership is unusual and innovative, particularly in the humanities.

The tenth Samuel Fischer Guest-Professor for Literature is also the first to dedicate his course to creative writing. Etgar Keret is an Israeli, whose own literature deals with his country's current situation. He decided, however, not to focus on a Jewish topic, nor to speak about the conflict in the Middle East. Etgar Keret taught his students the art of storytelling, the craft of plot development.

He began his first class with an unusual challenge, one which the participants had probably never dealt with before: "I'm giving you half an hour. Write a story about time pressure!" And they did.

The course was held in English. Around 50 students followed Keret, the passionate storyteller, through various tasks and exercises: they wrote stories, the "plots" of which they were then asked to separate from their "subtexts." The purpose was to distinguish between the action (what's happening?) and the content (what's it about? what's underneath?)—which the former seems to carry along as an additional ingredient, but often in fact transports as its very essence. The next exercise consisted in keeping this subtext while "trading" plots with a partner student and generating a new story under these modified circumstances. In a third exercise, the participants were requested to tell their favorite "pub stories," funny, curious or interesting anecdotes that are sure-bets when it comes to entertaining a group of old friends or new acquaintances. But why, Keret asked, do they always work? What makes them so charming? What is a good story? A further technique to develop plots, the students learned, is to draw on traditional patterns, mythical narratives, be they classical (such as Oedipus) or pop-cultural (for example Marilyn Monroe).

A few weeks later, dozens of stories were told, many more written and discussed in class. The quality of work convinced



Etgar Keret to publish a selection of texts as a book. The result is *auto reverse*, this anthology.

Etgar Keret's students weren't the only ones who started writing. Inspired by their stay in Berlin, other guest-professors began to write as well. During his stay at the *Freie Universität*, Kenzaburo Oe began *Changeling*, a novel (which will appear in a German translation by S. Fischer Verlag) about—among other things—the experiences of a Japanese in Berlin. The lyricist Robert Hass, who taught at the Comparative Literature Institute in the summer of 2002, was thrilled: “We loved Berlin,” he declared.

I learned an enormous amount from the Berliners, students, and auditors who attended my seminar. The city is exhilarating. That it has reinvented itself so many times gives it a breath-taking rawness, and it is green, and the fact that it has survived its darkest time is rather terrible and was for me the subject of endless meditation and became connected to the rather innocent activity of parsing out American poems and German words on early June evenings in Dahlem when the amsels were singing like crazy and the air smelled of lilac and chestnut blossoms and then as spring turned into summer it smelled like rain and grass.

A selection of Berlin texts by Samuel Fischer Guest-Professors for Literature will be published in 2005 as *Berlin Hüttenweg*.

OLIVER LUBRICH

## Biographical Notes

ANKE BEIMS was born in 1979. From 1995 to 1996 she went on a student exchange to Poland, from 2000 to 2003 she received professional training as a photographer, and in the winter of 2003 she started studying Comparative Literature and French.

NADEŽDA (NADIA) BOLOHA was born in Riga, Latvia, in August 1977. She is a student of Film and Comparative Literature at the *Freie Universität Berlin*.

SOL BONDY, born in July 1979 in London, moved to Berlin in 1987 after growing up in Majorca, Spain. Studying Literature and Spanish for two years he loves life, film, and (nice) surprises.

NINA LUCIA BUSSMANN, born in 1980 in Frankfurt am Main, spent a year volunteering in Nicaragua, participated in off-theater projects in Berlin, and now studies Comparative Literature and Philosophy at the *Freie Universität Berlin*. She participates in the writer groups *lauter niemand* and the “Werkstatt Junger Autoren” (Neue Gesellschaft für Literatur Berlin).

KATJA CZARNECKI was born in Berlin, in 1980, and took her A-levels in 2000. She studies Comparative Literature, English Literature, and Modern German Literature at the *Freie Universität Berlin*. She has not published any other literary works so far.

MARA DETTMANN was born in Berlin in 1984, grew up in five countries on four continents and now studies American Studies and Comparative Literature at the *Freie Universität Berlin*.

SABINE ISABELL ENGWER was born in Bad Sobernheim, Germany, in 1980, where she grew up and went to school until she moved to Berlin in 2000 to begin her studies at the *Freie Universität Berlin*. She studies Comparative Literature, American Studies, and Contemporary History. Sabine Engwer has experience in journalism and plans to continue working in the field of creative writing.

STEPHANIE GRIMM, born in 1970, moved from southern Germany to Berlin in 1990. She studied American Studies and Media Studies at the *Freie Universität Berlin* from 1991 to 1998 and now works as a freelance journalist. Hauptstraße is one of her favorite streets in Berlin.

HILMAR HEISTER was born in Berlin in 1978. He spent three years of his childhood in Dublin, Ireland. Back in Berlin, he attended the German-American John-F.-Kennedy-School. Since 2001 he studies Comparative Literature, Philosophy, and History of Art at the *Freie Universität Berlin*.

C. RUDY HOPPE was born in 1971 in Berlin. After a short career as a musician, computer technician, and job hopper, he studied sound engineering for TV & Film at the film school in Babelsberg and accidentally discovered writing as a passion and profession. In 2000 he attained a scholarship from the EU program "POETRY2000" in Ireland. He studies Comparative Literature and History at the *Freie Universität Berlin* and works as a freelance translator and writer.

FRUZSINA JESSE was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1982. At home in Berlin since 2001, she studies Philosophy, Literature, and Film.

WELF LINDNER was born in 1974 in Hildesheim, Germany. After internships with film production companies he attended the *New York Film Academy* and made several short films. Since 1998 he studies Film and Comparative Literature at the *Freie Universität Berlin*.

JANA OBERMÜLLER was born in Munich in 1982 and grew up in Toronto and Brussels. She studies Comparative Literature in Berlin since 2002.

VERA PAPP, born in 1971, studied Comparative Literature, Theater, and Philosophy in Bonn, Hamburg, and Berlin. She worked as dramatic advisor and directing assistant in theater and opera, and published several articles about music and theater. In 2003, Vera also started writing short stories.

LOUISE ROSENGREEN, born in 1983, is a Danish girl who at the moment happens to be in Berlin, where she is studying Modern German Literature and History of Art at the *Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*.

WENCKE SCHUBERT was born in 1977 in Erlangen, Germany. She studied dentistry in Erlangen at the *Friedrich-Alexander-Universität* from 1997 to 2000 before moving to Berlin, where she soon switched to History of Art and Comparative Literature.

NICKLAS DAVID SOINÉ was born in Bremen, in 1981. After moving to Berlin in the spring of 2003, he began studying Comparative Literature, Modern German Literature, and French Language and Literature at the *Freie Universität Berlin*. In addition to his studies he mainly cares about acting and the performing arts in general.

MAXIME STOECKER (PELLISSIER), born in 1979, is French and German. He spent his childhood in both countries. He studies Comparative & Romance Literature at the *Freie Universität Berlin* since 2000 and spent a year abroad at Montréal, Canada (2002/03). His work emphasizes on diaspora literatures.

CORNELIA TEMESVÁRI was born in Leipzig, in 1977. She lived in Jerusalem from 1996 to 2000 (where, among other things, she studied at the Hebrew University), and in Budapest from 2000 to 2001. Cornelia has been studying Comparative Literature at the *Freie Universität Berlin* since 2001.

MIMMI WOISNITZA, born in Dresden in 1978, moved to Berlin in 1980. She is enrolled in Cultural Studies at Frankfurt an der Oder and occasionally participates in Comparative Literature courses at the Berlin universities. For years she has been actively practicing creative writing, which gives her the chance to put her own meaning into the miracles of daily life.

FLORIAN ZAPPE was born in Bavaria in 1977. He currently lives in Berlin where he is a student of American Studies, Comparative Literature, and History at the *Freie Universität Berlin*.



ETGAR KERET, born in 1967, wrote numerous short stories and one novel, cartoons, children's books and scripts for feature films as well as television. Four books are published in German (Munich: Luchterhand, translated by Barbara Linner): *Mond im Sonderangebot. 33 Short Stories* (2003), *Der Busfahrer, der Gott sein wollte. Erzählungen* (2001), *Pizzeria Kamikaze. Roman* (2000), and *Gaza Blues. Erzählungen* (1996).

OLIVER LUBRICH, born in 1970, teaches Comparative Literature at the *Freie Universität Berlin*.