

Interview with James Goldberg

BY NICOLE WILKES



What inspired you to write a piece like “Tales of Teancum Singh Rosenberg”?

The immediate inspiration came from a fiction-writing class I was in. Our first assignment was to write a story that was 300 words or less. I wrote one called “Snow” about an African immigrant to the United States during his first winter. I felt really connected to that story and started writing more, but with a twist: each story was connected to a Jewish holiday. The story where he leaves his homeland is Passover, a story about a wedding of Punjabi immigrants had to do with Rosh Hashanah, and so on.

Because the stories I was writing were so short, I didn’t have time to explain all the culture in them: the Jewish holidays that were thematically connected, the immigrant groups in each story. I figured in the age of Google, smart people could look up the stuff they didn’t get and discover the extra layers in the story, like mining for gems. Understandably, many of my class members didn’t take the time to look stuff up. What surprised me, though, was that the same people who hadn’t invested their time in the story were telling me to simplify it, to explain it more in terms they could understand. Some said they felt like I wasn’t including them because I wasn’t writing in their culture and explaining anything that came from anywhere else. And I thought, these stories wouldn’t be as beautiful if I explained them. And the best readers would get less out of them.

I also thought, I have unique stories to tell because of my own life heritage. Why should I only tell stories you can already fully understand? Isn’t one purpose of fiction to expand the reader? So I decided to write something next that did even more with mixing cultural traditions. I think when

you gets suggestion, you should try to respond to them, but responding doesn’t always mean doing what a suggestion says; sometimes you work against it instead, just to see if you can write that direction too.

The narrative format of this piece is unique, particularly in fiction. Why did you decide to create a fictional folk hero? And what purpose does using one of Rosenberg’s followers as a narrator fulfill?

I guess the idea came from the name itself. When I decided to write a story in which I was free to use the stories I came from, I came up with the name “Teancum Singh Rosenberg.” It was almost a joke at first: I’m going to create this guy with a first name so Book of Mormon I’ve never actually met anyone with it, the middle name all Sikh men take, and a sort of stereotypical Eastern European Jewish last name.

It’s not enough for the guy to exist, though. The complaint about the previous piece had been that some people wanted me to do the work of interpreting any culture that was not their own for them. So for this piece, the narrator was from the same culture as Teancum Singh Rosenberg, not at all from modern American culture. You couldn’t ask him to make things clearer to a modern American audience because he’s so clearly not one of us.

And then the stories he tells: they’re not really the story of Teancum Singh; he’s not laying out his own entire culture. This unnamed narrator is telling us the fragmentary kinds of stories that matter deeply to him, and I’m asking you to look at those stories and let them mean something for you. You can do that by taking them as you understand them now, or you can do that by looking up some

of the extra Jewish/Sikh/Mormon/Indian mythological references that inform the stories.

Drona is a historical figure in India. He is known as a great teacher, but you present him as Rosenberg's adversary. What inspired that choice?

Drona is from the Mahabharata, one of India's great national epics. He had a military academy where he taught all the best students, including the Pandavas, the "good guys" of the Mahabharat, and the Kauravas, their evil and ambitious cousins. He rejected anyone from the lower castes, no matter how skilled. That includes both Eklavya and Karna, two of my favorite characters.

Eklavya was from the forest and was a great self-taught archer. When he was rejected from the academy, he decided to make himself a statue of Drona and revered it as his teacher—teachers are a big deal in ancient Indian culture. One morning, Eklavya was sitting before his Drona idol meditating, and a dog barking in the distance distracted him. Without even looking, just by sound, Eklavya shot the mouth of the dog shut.

Arjuna, one of the Pandavas, saw it and complained to Drona—hadn't Drona promised to make him, Arjuna, the best archer in the world? Drona went and found Eklavya, who was ecstatic for a visit from the man he literally idolized. When Drona saw the statue, he asked Eklavya if he truly considered himself one of Drona's disciples. Eklavya said

yes, and Drona asked if he would be willing to pay him a teacher's fee. Instead of money or service, he insisted that Eklavya cut off his own thumb and pay it as "tuition." Eklavya did, making Arjuna, by default, the greatest archer in the world.

I never got over that story. When I was a kid, I used to hide my thumb behind my hand and stare, thinking about what it would be like to cut off my own thumb like that. I admired Eklavya, and I resented the sacrifice he made. In some ways, Teancum Singh Rosenberg was a way for me to revisit that old, old story and tell it with some resistance.

As an LDS writer, what do you feel is your greatest responsibility to the stories of Latter-day Saints?

To help keep them alive. Always. We say we are a true and living church, and that's a commission as much as a fact. Every generation has to keep the gospel living, and part of the way we do that is by caring for our sacred stories. We meet three hours a week just to think about what they mean! Part of "Teancum Singh Rosenberg," I think, is about trying to help people get a sense of our urgent human need for stories. Stories bind families, embody truth, give us space for thinking. We can't ignore that. The Lord doesn't want us to.

Whether it's in family history, scripture study, or our relationships with each other, I hope we all take stories seriously. They're not just for writers and artists. ■