

# SHARP

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APRIL 2022



THE SMUTTY MYSTIC  
BY JUDITH SHULEVITZ



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**RETRACTIONS**  
Re: Issue 34, pgs 18-23. Robyn Jacob was the composer for Mike Bourscheid's performance *Ledgers* (2019), a detail which was unfortunately not included in Karina Irvine's features "Laughing at Power, Laughing as Power: On Mike Bourscheid."

**CREDITS**  
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# SHADE

## ESSAYS

- 13 *The Smutty Mystic* JUDITH SHULEVITZ
- 25 *The Digital Antiheroes of “Scam Rap”* JODY ROSEN
- 32 *The Delicious Misery of the “Sad Banger”* HANIF ABDURRAQIB
- 38 *What Lies Beneath Hip-hop’s Swagger* DANYEL SMITH
- 42 *Judge John Hodgman on the ‘Egg Meat’ Debate* JOHN HODGMAN
- 50 *Can I Sever Ties With My Selfish Sister?* KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH
- 63 *How to Toilet-Train Your Cat* BRENT KATZ
- 70 *Is There Such a Thing as Black Thought?* REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS
- 74 *How to Spot Asteroids* MALIA WOLLAN

## ARTIST FEATURES

- 05 *Labrinth Knows Adolescence is Gnarly* JAMIE LAUREN KEILES
- 10 *Crying to Beach House* ADLAN JACKSON
- 23 *Pink Siifu’s Sonic Gumbo* STEPHEN KEARSE
- 30 *The Opacity of Earl Sweatshirt* ISMAIL MUHAMMAD
- 48 *Mitski is More than TikTok* LINDSAY ZOLADZ
- 50 *Adele and ABBA’s Songs of Experience* JEREMY GORDON
- 60 *Eventually We ALL Talk About Bruno* SAM ANDERSON
- 69 *Turnstile Expands Their Circle* JENN PELLY
- 80 *Bartees Strange Undoubts Himself* WESLEY MORRIS

# ARRP

*The  
Smutty  
Mystic*

What everyone gets wrong  
about Sheila Heti's fiction

*by Judith Shulevitz*



*Reading Sheila Heti's  
breakthrough novels,  
How Should a Person Be?  
and Motherhood, I kept  
thinking that I was the  
only one who noticed how  
religious they are —*

Jewish, mostly, which is how she was raised, but Christian too, with some non-Western source material thrown in. Once I'd Googled the reviews, I realized I was right and wrong. With a few exceptions, she has not been pigeonholed as a Jewish writer or, worse, the author of works on spirituality. Instead, she's seen by mainstream critics as a feminist, which she is; as avant-garde, which I suppose she is (although I never quite know what that means); and as a writer of autofiction, which she isn't.

I don't deny that some of her work has autobiographical content. *How Should a Person Be?* hews closely to Heti's

coming-of-age as a writer in a small circle of young artists in Toronto, and the narrator of *Motherhood* is a successful writer and childless divorcée approaching 40, as Heti was when she wrote the book. Her new novel, *Pure Colour*, has one important element drawn from life, the death of her father. Heti plunders her experiences and emotions and sexuality for material, but what novelist doesn't, to a greater or lesser extent? In Heti's hands, her story is a means to an end that most so-called autofiction writers — indeed, most writers of anything perceived as metafictional — would shy away from. She is doing more than blurring the

boundary between the real and the made-up. Heti uses the details of her life to do theology.

Her novels have the digressive quality of essays, and they take on such topics as what God wants of her — that is, if there's a God to do the wanting. In *Pure Colour*, she follows her fascination with the sacred into domains so surreal that we have to abandon any notion that she's merely some sort of postmodern diarist. We have to pay Heti the courtesy of taking her question literally. She really wants to know: *How should a person be?*



In *The New Yorker*, James Wood called this “a religiously important question” that Heti answers so flippantly that she must be aiming at “a calculated desecralization.” I think he is reading her exactly backwards. Heti is calculatedly resacralizing a disenchanted world. Her novels are quests for the holy inside the profane. *How Should a Person Be?* confuses critics because people on spiritual journeys aren't supposed to say “fuck” so much, or find ecstasy while gagging on the penis of an imperious new sex partner. “I don't see why you walk down the street so easily, not noticing that you are living half a life,” thinks Sheila, the narrator of that novel, addressing all the unlucky women of the world who don't know that the only thing worth doing is “getting your brains fucked out of your skull” by her lover.

Heti distracts from her seriousness of purpose with vaudevillian quick-changes in tone. She's droll! She's earnest! She's potty-mouthed! She amuses and bemuses by oxymoron, yoking the empyrean to the smutty. “One good thing about being a woman is that we haven't too many examples yet of what a genius looks like,” Sheila reflects. “It could be me.” Her male writer friends know what they're supposed to do, and

it irks her: talk themselves up and be super oblique so “the academics will study them forever.” Her female genius may well consist of “giving blow jobs in heaven.” Why not?

Both *How Should a Person Be?* and *Motherhood* are full of biblical allusions, including Jacob wrestling with the angel, a match that ends with the patriarch being renamed Israel. So it can be no coincidence that in *How Should a Person Be?* Sheila's ever more sadistic paramour is named Israel and she sings those hosannas to the “magnificent cock of Israel.” Take that as a joke if you will, but later, in a chapter called “Destiny Is the Smashing of the Idols,” Sheila will free herself from Israel's thrall by insisting on putting her lips to his penis against his wishes — a deliberate act of humiliation meant to assert her independence, not to please him. This insubordination leads to “real happiness,” she says, “like I was floating upward to the heavens.” Even when Sheila prays, she's sacrilegious: “May the Lord have mercy on me for I am a fucking idiot.” I can't tell you how happy that made me. I go to synagogue fairly often, and there isn't a single line in the siddur that sounds to me as much like the way I talk to God.

*Motherhood* is only  
somewhat  
less



likely to nonplus the reader than *How Should a Person Be?* On one level, it's a feminist disputation over art versus maternity — whether a female writer must be a mother or whether she can get away with being just (just!) a writer. But this is also a book about life with a capital *L*: what having the God-given power to create it or to decline to create it means. What cosmic obligations do a woman's reproductive capacities impose on her? What does she owe to “the life that wants to be lived through” her? Is art sufficient compensation for the “beautiful and incredibly rare gift” of life, “whose debt I will forever be in”?

You might call *Motherhood* Talmudic, if the rabbis had been 30-something female novelists nervously eyeing their biological clocks. The 30-something female novelist in *Motherhood* turns for guidance to nothing less than the universe, as channeled by an *I Ching*-like oracle invoked by the toss of three coins. The oracle, by far the funniest character in the novel, responds with yes or no answers that simultaneously deflate the narrator's philosophizing and give sound advice on how to be more chill about her career and relationships. Once again, Heti exploits incongruity for laughs. Ovulation produces “days of sparkling joy,” while the days leading up to the narrator's period are a monthly blight. Why would God subject a woman to this hormonal roller coaster?



Or, as Heti poses the question, “what to make of God's two faces, the all-accepting and loving New Testament Ovulating God, and the vindictive and rageful Old Testament PMS God?” Given the procreative power of the Lord, endowing her with female reproductive organs and corresponding mental states seems perfectly reasonable. Moreover, maybe the menstrual cycle exists to make manifest “how a human is part of time, or is bound to time, or is time.” But you have to admit that Heti's version of *imitatio Dei* has high-quality shock value.

*Pure colour* is Heti's coming-out novel. It flaunts its biblicality. Like the Bible itself, it's a mashup of fairy tale and myth, with a Broadway musical tossed in for good measure. *Pure Colour* is unabashedly metaphysical and completely outlandish. At the same time, this is a book of mourning, specifically for a father. Heti's tone is more somber and searching than it has ever been, as she turns over and over fundamental questions of life and death, creation and extinction, with her trademark penchant for paradox. Yet neither grief nor theology can suppress Heti's oddball wit and affection for wildly inappropriate sexual metaphors, for which a reader should be grateful.

If a critic is supposed to pinpoint a genre, I'll have to take a pass. *Pure Colour* is not fantasy, nor is it science fiction, although, in

the style of Margaret Atwood and Kazuo Ishiguro, Heti defamiliarizes our present way of life by creating an alternative one with intermittent and disturbing similarities to the one we think we know. The language is childlike, with the “there was”-es, “and then”s, and “so”s of a children's story, though the content is unchildish, often seedy: “On her floor lived a lonely man,” Heti writes of her protagonist, Mira, and “in their bathroom was a dirty tub, so she never took a bath, and she rarely showered.” But really, how do you categorize a novel in which the Lord makes a sudden appearance in order to split into “three art critics in the sky” who take the form of a bird, a fish, and a bear?

Perhaps this is Heti's Torah — that is, in the literal sense of the word, her teaching, not to be confused with *the* Torah, the Five Books of Moses. A reader of the Gospels might spot the influence of parable, the kind that Jesus used to overturn the order of things. Heti begins at the

beginning, or almost the beginning, on the seventh day of Creation. Well, actually, she's describing what Creation would have looked like if God were an artist well-enough versed in Kabbalah to obey the principle of *tzimtzum*, according to which God must withdraw to allow the universe to come to fruition:

AFTER GOD CREATED THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH, HE STOOD BACK TO CONTEMPLATE CREATION, LIKE A PAINTER STANDING BACK FROM THE CANVAS.

THIS IS THE MOMENT WE ARE LIVING IN — THE MOMENT OF GOD STANDING BACK.

God's handiwork has disappointed him, however, and so “the moment we are

Part of Heti's charm is her knack for coming from as far out of left field as possible.

living in” appears to be an escalation of what happened the first time God was dissatisfied, when he wiped out nearly all people and animals in the Flood. This time the imminent catastrophe is global warming, which Heti posits as threatening not just animal life but all of Creation, including the planet: “Now the earth is heating up in advance of its destruction by God, who has decided that the first draft of existence contained too many flaws.”

As in the Book of Genesis, we move fairly quickly from the history of the world to the story of one person, the young woman named Mira. Mira attends an international branch of the prestigious American Academy of American Critics, apparently just before the advent of the internet. (“Can we say that friendships were different then?” she asks. “Everyone had their own little life, which touched the

lives of other people only at parties.”) At this vaguely Gallic institution, students drink tisanes and eat croissants and smoke pot and stand on desks to issue pronunciamientos, because they, the elect, are there “to develop a style of writing and thinking that could survive down through the ages, and at the same time penetrate their own generation so incisively.” The narrator notes drily that these young intellectuals don’t know that one day everyone will carry phones from which “people who had far more charisma than they did would let flow an endless stream of images and words. They just had no idea that the world would become so big, or the competition so stiff.”

Mira is an always interesting but haunting character; even in a group, she seems cut off and alone, and she tends to lose herself in private obsessions. Before she went to school, she worked at a lamp store, an old-fashioned place that eschewed modern lighting for Tiffany lamps and any others made of colored glass. Mira was entranced by one lamp in particular: “It had green blobs and red blobs; little polished stones of coloured glass that were held together by a network of iron. It was the most wonderful thing Mira had ever seen.” One day she stole it, not for cash but for the pure joy of watching its colors play on her white walls, which made her love “her meagre little existence,” because it was “entirely her own.” Later, when she got a job selling rings at a jewelry store, she sat and gazed at them all day, bewitched by pink amethysts, different shades of gold, “icy platinums which held within them a deep and private blueness.”

If *Motherhood* was a rumination on God’s act of Creation and the human mirroring of his generative power through art and babies, *Pure Colour* is a meditation on the beauty of Creation. “God is most proud of creation as an aesthetic thing,” Heti writes. But what does that mean, “an aesthetic thing”? In *Pure Colour*, it means color. Color expresses the character of experience,

and our experience of color is irreducibly subjective. To put it another way, color is what life feels like. “Colour is not just a representation of the world, but of the feelings in a room, and the meaningfulness of a room in time,” Mira says. She describes her relationship with her father, who raised her by himself, as “gold and green,” by which she means that her father “was always pointing out the beauty of the world to her, its greatness and its mystery, and his attention had made her feel cherished and loved.” By contrast, the room in which she watched him die had a “sort of maroonish light.” It was a color Mira had never seen before, she says, because “it was the colour of a father dying.”

Part of Heti’s charm is her knack for coming from as far out of left field as possible, and here she has amped up her unpredictability. Readers may recognize a character named Annie as Orphan Annie, the plucky heroine of the musical. Heti’s Annie did once sing and dance with her friends at an orphanage, but now she is all grown up and disdainful and lives in an apartment that smells like rat shit. Mira and the other students don’t care about that; they envy her poise and the fact that she comes from a place that is “so marvellously bleak.” Heti, as usual, casually drops in jarring metaphors. Mira and Annie develop an unspoken bond, and whenever Mira sees her, she feels a widening in her chest, “like a vagina stretching for a very large cock.” That’s sort of gross, but also a strangely arousing way to describe the painful expansion of self that comes with falling in love. Mira kisses Annie, though they never speak of it. Then Mira’s father dies. Orphanhood turns out to be less enviable than it looked.

The next thing you know, Mira’s spirit has entered a leaf. To be fair, Heti has prepared us for this eventuality by describing the transmigration of Mira’s father’s soul into her body. The moment he died, his spirit entered hers, and she felt peace and joy. And “if the spirit of a father can move into a daughter, this

must be happening all over the world, spirits entering other bodies, when a person dies.”

Unfortunately, there’s not a lot to do once you’ve relocated to a leaf. Mira’s thoughts begin to move at the unhurried pace of nature itself. She discovers that she shares the leaf with her father’s spirit, which initially doesn’t want to talk. When she succeeds in drawing him out, they endlessly debate weighty matters. Mira takes comfort from nestling close to him, but their cohabitation is claustrophobia-inducing, to the reader as well as to her. Annie happens by and Mira tries to attract her attention and get herself rescued. Leaves can’t scream, however, and Annie doesn’t hear. But at last she notices Mira. The leaf breaks open in a burst of golden light and Mira falls out.

Being a leaf has changed Mira, instilling in her an awareness of the vast span of time as well as an aversion to busyness, the human need always to fix things: “Plants have learned, over millions of years, how to be the audience of creation.” She tries to impart her plant wisdom to Annie, but Annie is having none of it. And from that point on, Mira faces a life of profound isolation.

Color is a thing you have to see to know what it’s like, and so is *Pure Colour*. To describe the plot is to run the danger of making it sound random, which it is and isn’t. There is a logic here, though it’s very strange. Yes, *Pure Colour* is mystical. Tonally, Heti sounds a lot like the great Christian philosopher-mystic (and convert from Judaism) Simone Weil, who has a similar love of paradox and whom Heti has said she looks up to. But Heti is the rare mystic with a sense of humor. She can play the clown and talk God talk at the same time.

This is a gloriously implausible book. Maybe *Pure Colour* is best labeled a cosmological farce; if so, that’s a discomfiting genre. The God of this novel is everywhere and in everything, but he is less concerned with human happiness than one might have hoped. ♦

