

BOOK REVIEW

Stern, Steve. *A Fool's Kabbalah*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2025. Pp. 299.

Peter Chave¹

Stern's novel *A Fool's Kabbalah* has two narrative threads. It follows Gershom Scholem, the great modern scholar of Jewish mysticism, on his mission at the end of World War II to rescue Jewish books from the ruins of Eastern Europe and transport them to the Land of Israel. It also centers on Zyldzce, a village near the Polish-Byelorussian border, and relates the horrors of the German occupation, especially for its Jewish inhabitants.

In Zyldzce, Menke is a born jester. His verbal and practical jokes annoy—and frighten—his neighbors. Yet they also make the Germans stop in their tracks and appoint him their resident comedian. Can he keep the humor coming until liberation? Can he resist pranks that bring retribution upon his fellow Jews?

Scholem and his friend Walter Benjamin had various theories about humor, particularly Jewish humor, and the novel alludes to them. Without disclosing too many details, it is worth noting that both Scholem and Benjamin regarded Kafka as a hero and a great comic writer. In “Max Brod's Book on Kafka,” Benjamin writes: “This much Kafka was absolutely sure of: first, that someone must be a fool if he is to help; second, that only a fool's help is real help. The only uncertain thing is whether such help can still do a human being any good” (Benjamin 1999, 142).

In his earlier novel, *The Frozen Rabbi* (2020), Stern described the saga of Jewish emigration from Europe to America, beginning in 1890 and extending to the founding of the State of Israel. The story is well told, and the characters are largely endearing, despite episodes of violence in gangland America and war-torn Israel. Those episodes raised for me the question of the historical novel's status when entertainment confronts horrifying reality.

This problem—the treatment of historical horror through humor—is even more pressing in *A Fool's Kabbalah*, which concerns the harrowing unfolding of the Holocaust. Stern creates vivid characters to whom we grow close, even as, in the background, Jews are murdered for actions that have merely irritated the Nazis. As these baleful events unfold, readers may wonder whether dreadful history is being diminished by its treatment as comic entertainment. Eighty

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years after the event, however, the Shoah must be made actual for us, and I believe Stern succeeds. Menke's comedy does not soften or neutralize the terror surrounding him; rather, it reveals humor as a precarious strategy of survival under conditions in which even laughter can provoke lethal consequences. The novel's acknowledgment of Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin's *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry* (first published 1983) as a source further suggests that the suffering represented by its characters is grounded in the experiences of real people.