

Transcription code: RJ201317A

Interviewer: Surat Knan

Interviewee: Shaun Levin

Transcriber: Simon Mayers

Shaun Levin – Short Biography from <http://shaunlevin.com/about/>

Shaun Levin's collection of short stories, *A Year of Two Summers*, was published in 2005. A novella, *Seven Sweet Things*, was published in 2003 (it's out of print, but is now available on Kindle). More recently, his work on Isaac Rosenberg has appeared in *Desperate Remedies* and in the monograph, *Isaac Rosenberg's Journey to Arras: A Meditation*. He is the author of *Snapshots of The Boy*, and his short story about Mark Gertler, "Trees at a Sanatorium", was published as a book by Sylph Editions. Shaun's stories appear in anthologies as diverse as *Between Men*, *Modern South African Stories*, *Boyfriends from Hell*, *The Poetry of Men's Lives*, and *The Slow Mirror: New Fiction by Jewish Writers*.

Shaun has taught writing for twenty years in colleges, schools, adult education and other settings, and run workshops in art galleries, bookshops, cafés, parks, a cemetery, and a zoo. He is the founding editor of the literary journal *Chroma* and the director of Treehouse Press.

Shaun Levin - Interview

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Cite of interview: Montague Centre for the Rainbow Jews Project

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[00:00:00 - 00:01:08] Introduction

[00:00:00] Interviewer asks Shaun for some basic details about himself. Shaun informs the interviewer that he lives in London, and has lived in Islington since about 1995. Shaun grew up in South Africa. He and his family left South Africa when he was aged about 15 and moved to Israel. Shaun stayed in Israel for about 15 years. [00:00:55] Asked for his occupation, Shaun explains that he is a writer and that he teaches creative writing. [00:01:08]

[00:01:08 – 00:08:00] South Africa

[00:01:08] The interviewer asks Shaun to think back in time to when he was in South Africa with his family, and to talk about his upbringing, family background, and what was going on in these early years. [00:01:27] Shaun expresses surprise as he wasn't expecting to be asked that. He then goes to explain that he grew up in "a very tight nit Jewish community in Port Elizabeth in South Africa," though he also clarifies that he "didn't meet a lot of Jews" until he was "in High School." According to Shaun he has a younger sister, a younger brother and an older sister. His older sister is the daughter of his father with his first wife. Shaun explains that he grew up very close to his cousins and his grand parents, "growing up in a community where you could walk almost everywhere, and where we did walk everywhere. You walked to Shul, you walked to the shops, you walked to your friends, ..." According to Shaun he also walked to nursery school, although when he went to "big school, and a Jewish school" he then had to either get a lift to school or take a bus. [00:03:07]

[00:03:05] Shaun explains that "everyone was very close," in proximity but also in the sense of growing up "in a big family." When asked if he had a very Jewish upbringing and whether Shul was part of his daily routine, Shaun replied that: "God was never a part of the family. There was never kind of any praying. Well there was kind of praying on Shabbat and we went to Shul on the holidays, but it was almost like it wasn't a religious thing. But we were very

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clearly Jewish. We felt like we had a strong Jewish identity and it was always kind of spoken about. And there were the Jews and the non-Jews. And we kind of didn't really mix with the Goyim." Shaun explains that his folks had some [non-Jewish] friends but that they never came to the house. As the family was so large and close knit, when they got together with other people it was always with other family members (cousins, aunts and uncles). [00:04:38]

[00:04:38] When asked about his early / teenage years and what his first memories or notions of sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity were, Shaun explained that he "always liked boys, when he was a boy," and he remembered as far back as nursery school being "in love" with a boy who he remained in love with for many years. He also explained that he "fooled around a bit" with cousins. According to Shaun, he "was one of those kids that wanted to fool around with everyone." [00:05:48]

[00:05:48] When asked if he remembers any specific anecdote or story about this early playing around, where and when it was and how it made him feel, Shaun explained that it was in South Africa, where it was "summer all the time." According to Shaun, South Africa and Israel were both like being in summer all the time; he stated that he "grew up in summer for the first thirty years of my life." Shaun went on to discuss one specific memory of playing around with a cousin, "playing with our own penises," and that at one point the subject of "blow jobs came up," and he had wanted to experiment but his cousin did not want to. His cousin told him that he was not gay. It was at this point that Shaun came to think that he must be gay. According to Shaun, he was "quite girly" and "meek" when he was growing up, and was bullied and was not good at team sports. He stated that he was typically the last to be chosen, and this was the "typical homo stuff that you grew up with." [00:07:55]

[00:08:00 – 00:10:05] Jewish faith and shul

[00:08:00] When asked whether around that sort of time he felt that Jewish faith, teachings or belief were influencing his sexuality and sexual orientation at all, Shaun replied that he did not think so. However, he explained that he always felt "very comfortable" in synagogues, and never felt that religion could judge him or shame him, though he was aware that other people did feel that way: "Part of their queerness was having to fight against religion." Shaun points out that he did not grow up in a religious environment. There was "Judaism but it wasn't necessarily about religion," even though they did go to shul and pray. Shaun explained that he does like praying and does feel comfortable in shul, and that this is something that he does seek out. [00:09:40]

[00:09:42] When asked whether he goes to shul much, he replied "no, not very much," but that if he is near a shul he likes to go in. As synagogues unlike churches do not tend to be open most of the week, Shaun likes "going into churches, and just pretending it's a shul." [00:10:05]

[00:10:05 – 00:12:16] Coming out

[00:10:05] Asked at what point he came out "officially" to the world and his family, and how it was, Shaun explained that he came out to his parents and to his sister on his 21st birthday, in 1984, when he was in the army in Israel. Shaun mentions that he had already come out to some people, including an older "gay cousin," and he had a boyfriend at the time. Shaun explains that he had returned home on his birthday and that he came downstairs and his folks and his sister were talking about his gay cousin, and he asked them what they would say if he told them he was gay, and his father said, "kind of jokingly," that "there is nothing like that in this family." They were then going out to the cinema, and whilst the others were outside waiting for a lift, and he and his mum were still inside alone, his mum asked him if he wanted to talk. The others came back inside and Shaun came out to them all on his 21st birthday,

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after they had just given him a hand made card saying that he was just the son they wanted and that he had grown up to be a special boy there were so proud of. According to Shaun his mother found it hard to accept for a long time, whilst his dad was “quite accepting from the start.” [00:12:16]

[00:12:16 - 00:16:10] Israel

[00:12:16] When asked how he ended up in Israel from South Africa, Shaun explained that his father, “being a Zionist,” always wanted to move to Israel. They moved to Israel when Shaun was 14-15 years of age. Shaun recollects that things were very bad in South Africa at that time, and his dad wanted to get out. They left and went to live in Ashkelon, which Shaun described as “some bumfuck town in the south of Israel. Awful. But it was great. We just want completely wild, I think all of us.” According to Shaun, at school you called teachers by their first name, there was no school uniform, and they lived only three minutes from the beach. It was also hot all the time. According to Shaun, “we just went wild. Smoking, drinking, fornicating.” [00:13:40]

[00:13:40] When asked whether he had many gay experiences in Israel, Shaun talked about a nudist beach just north of where they lived which he started going to when he was 16 years of age, and where he had sex with men. He stated that he “loved it.” According to Shaun it was “also kind of disturbing.” He explained that at the beach he had sex with older men without any kind of intimacy or conversation; “it was just sex.” According to Shaun, this was his introduction to “homo sex.” [00:14:59]

[00:14:59] Asked whether this went on in the army, Shaun explained that it did not. According to Shaun, he met a couple of boyfriends in the army, but he never had sex in the army with someone on the base. Shaun explained that when he was in the army he was in a predominantly non-Jewish unit, mainly Druze and Bedouin. According to Shaun, he started going to bars in Israel, and to meet people through demonstrations during the time of the war in Lebanon. [00:16:10]

[00:16:10 - 00:22:17] England

[00:16:10] When asked how he ended up in the UK, Shaun explained that there were a combination of factors: he wanted to get out of Israel and he had just started publishing his writings in English and wanted to live somewhere where he could “live in the language” and be a part of the “literary landscape.”

[00:17:00] When asked what year he moved to the UK, Shaun answered that he thinks it was 1995. When asked how his life as a writer and as a gay Jewish person evolved in the UK, Shaun replied that he did not meet many gay Jews when he first moved to the UK. Shaun explained that for a long time he wanted to get away from “the Jews” when he first arrived. However, after a while he started missing something and had his first Jewish boyfriend in the UK, which he remembered was kind of nice, and then he had another Jewish boyfriend, with whom he used to sing Chanukah songs. According to Shaun this may have led to a “softening” to his “whole relationship to Israel and the Jews.” [00:19:32]

[00:19:32] When asked whether he felt there was a difference between British Jewry and Jews in Israel and South Africa, Shaun replied that they are “completely different.” According to Shaun, “what shocked” him and “still shocks” him, and what he had not encountered in South Africa or Israel, was “the way English Jews or British Jews, ... were always trying to hide who they are.” According to Shaun, this was either by changing their names or becoming more anglicized. He observed that whenever you meet English Jews “one of the first things they’ll tell you is that they are not religious. Like, ‘we’re not real Jews. We’re kind of

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harmless Jews. We're just culturally Jews.” According to Shaun, this apologetic persona of English Jews was “completely alien” to him and was not found in Israel or South Africa. [00:21:15]

[00:21:15] Asked whether he feels the same way about LGBT Jews in the UK, Shaun paused for quite a while, explaining that he was trying to think of any English LGBT Jews that he knows. After a while he stated that: “I don't think I can say.” Shaun explained that he doesn't know a lot of English people except through work: “I don't know a lot of English people. I mean obviously I know a lot of English people through work. But most of my friends aren't English.” [00:22:17]

[00:22:17 - 00:27:47] *Chroma*

[00:22:17] When asked about his experiences with Jews and Jewish community centres in connection to his LGBTQ projects and workshops, Shaun explained that he used to be much more involved than he is now. Shaun referred to *Chroma*, which was a “queer literary and arts magazine” (see <http://www.chromajournal.co.uk>) that he set up in 2004. According to Shaun, when he started the magazine, he felt much more a part of a (LGBT) community, and through that he started to meet some queer Jews as well. [00:22:30]

[00:22:35] Asked what led him to set up *Chroma*, Shaun explained that he set up the magazine after running workshops for quite a long time and realizing “what amazing queer voices there were in this country that weren't mainstream voices and weren't the kind of middle class privately educated voices that were being heard.” According to Shaun, there were a number of “edgy,” “sexually fluid,” and “provocative” voices and narratives out there that he was interested in, and there was no where for these voices to be heard or read. These were the kind of voices that Shaun was used to reading in American literature. According to Shaun there is a much stronger queer literary scene in America. And so Shaun decided to set up a magazine to address this gap. According to Shaun, the Arts Council were very supportive. Shaun observed that a large community developed around the magazine and around 200-250 people used to come to launch events and there was a “nice buzz around it.” [00:25:45]

[00:25:45] Asked whether the magazine is still running, Shaun explained that the magazine is no longer running. He closed it down a few years ago (the last issue was July 2010) because he lost his enthusiasm for the project. Shaun explained that the magazine was dependent on him, and whilst he tried to hand it over to someone else, it did not work. Despite this, Shaun described it as “a fantastic time. It was a very satisfying innings.” There were 11 issues from 2004 to 2010 (for more on *Chroma*, see www.chromajournal.co.uk). [00:27:03]

[00:27:03] Asked whether any of the issues of *Chroma* had any “Jewish queer content,” Shaun explained that there was probably at least one queer Jew in each issue, though not necessarily British queer Jews. According to Shaun, he was “quite proactive in looking for those voices,” and it was very important to him to capture a diverse range of voices and images, such as “queers of colour voices” and “trans voices” and photography and art that reflected those worlds. [00:27:47]

[00:27:47 - 00:32:40] Living in the Diaspora and being a Diaspora Jew

[00:27:47] Asked how he now sees his creative and personal life as a gay Jewish person in the UK, Shaun explained that in his work as a writer and in his personal life he likes “living in the Diaspora” and “being a Diaspora Jew.” The sense of always longing and always being restless and unsettled was something that resonates for Shaun. According to Shaun, Israel feels a little bit artificial in comparison to this Diaspora experience. Shaun went on to explain that in his

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own work he has been writing about British Jewish artists for almost ten years. According to Shaun, these British Jewish artists were not “queer necessarily, but I’ve kind of queered them.” This provided Shaun with a way to explore his “own story through their stories.” Through these stories he has explored what it means to be an outsider artist looking in. According to Shaun, there is something about Englishness that means you can never really be English if you’re not English. Shaun clarified that he could never think of himself as being English even though he holds a British passport. He stated that “I feel like I can find refuge here, but I don’t feel like I belong here in any way. [00:30:56]

[00:30:56] Asked whether he thinks he will always remain a Diaspora Jew, Shaun answered that he can now imagine spending more time in Israel, but that he could not live with the politics there, which he finds “physically painful.” He described the politics in Israel as being “too reminiscent for me of South Africa,” and he stated that part of the reason why he left was that he gave up hope, though he also observed that he misses parts of Israel and being among “noisy pushy loud Jews.” [00:32:40]

[00:32:40 – 00:33:34] English Jews

[00:32:40] Asked whether he goes to any particular Jewish organisations in the UK in order to be among “noisy pushy Jews,” Shaun replied that he does not really, though whenever he does he enjoys himself. He stated that “it’s a bit like going to Shul. I feel like these are my people. Even though they are kind of English Jews, I recognise them. I recognise something in the intonation, something in the way they are with each other. I think when Jews are together they kind of relax a bit more. They don’t have to behave all English.” [00:33:34]

[00:33:34 – 00:35:33] Going on the record

[00:33:34] When asked what inspired him to have this interview with the Rainbow Jews project, Shaun explained that he feels he has left something in this country which has meant something, and which has got something to do with being an outsider and a Jew, and not feeling “the burden of English literature and English history and English institutions.” However, he clarified that his magazine, *Chroma*, was never widely embraced. The people who embraced it were more “grassroots,” a little bit “radical,” “the loud pushy queers really rather than the well-behaved homosexuals.” Shaun concluded that he “wanted to go on record that *Chroma* existed and meant something.” [00:35:33]