



**EVAN FALLENBERG.** 'Who wants to read a book by someone who has only had an easy life? It isn't going to be a good book.' (Courtesy)

# Dancing between two worlds

As a teacher, translator and writer Evan Fallenberg serves as a bridge of sorts between the oft-disconnected English and Hebrew literary communities

• AKIN AJAYI

Meet with Evan Fallenberg just after his return from the PEN World Voices Festival, a major literary event in New York to celebrate international writing. He is pleased to be back home, one gathers.

"Some of the sessions were phenomenal, but others were off-putting," he confides. "Celebrity writers that are more celebrity than writer. Whenever I get too close to that, I'm only too happy to come running back to Israel."

We're talking in the kitchen of his home, a rambling but tastefully rustic affair in a small moshav half an hour up the coastal road from Tel Aviv. Given the surroundings, one can appreciate his attachment to home. But Fallenberg is thinking about the bigger picture, both literary and geographic.

"If you are an English writer in Israel, then you are removed from the mainstream. I am connected to the mainstream of Israeli writing through my translations, but as a writer..."

He is being self-deprecating, even if he doesn't quite realize it. Fallenberg is the author of two well-received novels, *Light Fell* and *When We Danced on Water*, the second published earlier this year to generous praise. But he is – as far as the Israeli literary scene is concerned – much more besides. He is one of

the leading translators of Israeli fiction into English, his authors including Ron Leshem, Batya Gur, Alon Hilu and Meir Shalev. Besides this, he has run a popular series of English-language literary evenings and writing retreats from his home for several years; and from next fall, he will head the fiction track for the MA in creative writing at the Shaindy Rudoff Center for Creative Writing at Bar-Ilan University – the first course in the world to offer a degree-awarding Jewish creative writing program.

It is an interesting position that Fallenberg – despite his protestations to the contrary – inhabits as a teacher, translator and writer, a bridge of sorts between the oft-disconnected English and Hebrew literary communities in Israel. A native Ohioan, he studied at the School of Public Diplomacy at Georgetown University and subsequently took an MFA at Vermont College. After Georgetown, he lived in Japan for a year, evaluating English language teaching programs in schools for the Education Ministry. Then he came to Israel, intending to stay for a year to study Hebrew and Jewish texts. But he never quite got around to leaving.

"I didn't come here to live, I only came here for a year," he says. "It just seemed right at the beginning, and it absolutely grew on me to the point that this absolutely and truly became my country."

Fallenberg did not start writing until his mid-30s.

"Maybe I was too much of a perfectionist, and I knew that I'd never live up to the standard of the good books I liked." His standards were high indeed; he name-checks Cynthia Ozick's *The Cannibal Galaxy*, and books by Pulitzer winner Jane Smiley as key influences of the period. But living in Israel helped him to see beyond the paralysis of perfection.

"In my early to mid-30s, I desperately needed a outlet," he explains. "I was overwhelmed by life, small children, trying to make a living in Israel, still fairly new here, my creative side wasn't developing... then at some stage, I allowed myself to write and to get beyond the stage of the [crappy] first draft and to be able to say to myself, 'I can go on from here.'"

Fallenberg speaks with an easy Midwestern drawl, a laid-back matter-of-factness that takes the sting out of what one imagines must have been a challenging period. "I guess there was a level of forgiveness that I had to get used to... I think my early years screwed me up in a way. Things went the way I needed them to, I sailed through life" – for a moment, he looks wistful – "and it wasn't until my 30s that my little life plan didn't work out."

Underpinning *When We Danced with Water* is a not entirely dissimilar motif – the struggle to open oneself to the indulgences of creativity. Both main characters, elderly ballet master Teo and Vivi, a waitress in her early 40s, face a common challenge – how to overcome emotional blocks from the past, in order to free themselves emotionally, creatively.

Fallenberg is personally wary of appending overarching themes to his fiction – "I think it should be another person's work" – but does not discount personal experience as a feed for this fiction.

"Yeah, I had years where I was doing jobs that I didn't necessarily love, or was overqualified for... and then I didn't even let myself realize how unhappy I was. But eventually I was able to accept the fact that life was messy, and once I grasped this, I was able to let myself start to create."

Character-forming in more ways than one, you could say. Fallenberg acquiesces.

"Who wants to read a book by someone who has only had an easy life?" he asks. "It isn't going to be a good book. It might be a nice life tool, but I don't think that it will be a very interesting book."

Tribulations can only add layers of meaning and complexity to his writing and to creativity in general, he argues. "It made me a more appreciative person, a person who is more able to incorporate more of the mess and the beauty [of life]."

It's not unfair to map the trajectory of Fallenberg's life in terms of an ongoing journey of discovery and engagement with the important aspects of his interior make-up. This is certainly the case with his Jewish identity. America remains an important aspect of his life – he still has family in Cleveland – but there is no question in his mind that Israel is the center of his life.

"I used to pine for an Ohioan fall, with the changing leaves and all that, but not any more," he says. "When I'm there, I pine to come back here, if anything. This is what I have chosen, where my children have grown up" – he has two sons – "and it really welds you to a place in many ways. I feel that the vistas here are my vistas."

Which is not to say that these vistas are cut and dried. We talk about the complexity of social and political life in Israel; Fallenberg observes that his pride in being Israeli – "I can get choked up when I hear 'Hatikva,' to this very day" – is not the same as ignoring the feelings of those who "don't fit into the whole narrative of the Jewish people returning after all these years," discounting or suppressing alternative voices. "I don't want to forget the difference: I don't want to be arrogant about it, because I was one of those people once."

We argue whether a creative vocation such as his can contribute to the social fabric of the country. I remark

that I find any doubt about this surprising; Fallenberg replies that he isn't so sure, given the amount of pleasure that he derives from writing and teaching about writing.

"This country is one of amazing volunteerism, people who commit themselves to such an impressive level," he notes.

Which is true, but isn't the whole picture. The creative impulse – unquantifiable as it may be – contributes immensely to national spirit and communal identity, the very things that he commented on being concerned about in contemporary Israel.

Again, he acquiesces, graciously. "I guess it's like a partnership... where I contribute to the artistic life – in my name and in the name of others – and somebody else in my name is contributing to other things."

The uniqueness of the Shaindy Rudoff Creative Writing program's connection to Jewish writing prompts that age-old question: What exactly is "Jewish writing"? It's particularly pertinent to Fallenberg, given that his fiction is often classed under this rubric, more so since he will be teaching at the program in the next academic year.

He favors an inclusive approach to the subject. "My take on it is hugely simplistic: I think it gives an opportunity for people who want to fit themselves into that particular rubric, and that's great."

That's not all, however. Fallenberg is cautious about a tendency to see this taxonomy as an end-all and be-all. "The moment we start, as writers, trying to express ourselves in a particular way, I think we are killing our

art. I hope that any of the stuff that people need to express Jewishly, if they do, will come up naturally."

He relates a funny anecdote: "I was once in a writing group, and someone, an African-American woman, asked me about my first book, 'So what's all this stuff with food? You've got so much food there!'"

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**'I didn't come here to live, I only came here for a year. It just seemed right at the beginning, and it absolutely grew on me to the point that this absolutely and truly became my country'**

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And his answer? "I'm Jewish! It's there, there is nothing I can do about it."

But beneath this is a serious point. Fallenberg had never consciously thought about the food issue before this conversation, he says. "It is true that certain things do come through." Perhaps they come through best when not thought about consciously.

Conversely, he thinks about the art of translation very consciously indeed. Translation is a complex,

multi-layered negotiation between original and recreation, capturing not only the words, but also the intent of the original author. I mention that in *When We Danced on Water*, he refers to Tel Aviv's Rehov Shaul Hamelech as King Saul Street.

"It has a regal sound to it in Hebrew, which is lost in English," the author observes. "As a translator, my job is to convey the same feeling that a reader in the native language would have had when he read the work in the original language. A native reader of Hebrew will not [only] think of the particular street in Tel Aviv, but may also think of the whole reference to King Saul. If I had used the Hebrew, I've robbed the English reader of any chance to relate to the street on that level."

There is sometimes an element of advocacy attached to translations as well; Fallenberg mentions that a high-profile translator can give books – especially those by unknown authors – a useful public boost. "I'd look at it, and say, 'Well if X is doing the translation, then it must be good.'"

But this doesn't seem a point that he has internalized about himself.

He mentions a workshop in which he participated at the PEN festival, about translation rights and wrongs. "A prominent translator said, 'I will not do a book if my name is not on the cover, and I also insist on having a say about the cover design.'"

Then the same question was posed to Fallenberg. "I didn't want to be rude, but I wanted to say... 'It's never crossed my mind.' What I didn't add was, 'Frankly, I couldn't care less.'"

## A tale of one city – and two residents

In the pages of this unusual love story, the reader journeys into Tel Aviv as well as into the lives of the characters, in effect including the city as a third, silent protagonist

• ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

The female half of the human pair at the center of Evan Fallenberg's new novel, *When We Danced on Water*, is a middle-aged waitress called Vivi, her name itself evocative of the city whose streets she walks for hours after her shifts at a coffee bar near the Tel Aviv Ballet.

We follow along as Vivi "walks eastward down Kaplan Street past the peaked-roof houses with flowerboxes built by the Templars, toward Azrieli Center, where she bends her head backward to stare at the edge of the triangular tower as it spikes the sky," and then "walks north to the open emptiness of Rabin Square," west "to the shade of the Royal Poincianas at Masaryk Square" and "south, where Tel Aviv really happens."

Vivi wanders both literally and figuratively, in search of a self she has long been afraid to claim as her own. Damaged by a youthful failed romance, she's gone from one meaningless job to another, dabbled in a variety of artistic pursuits and left the pieces of her broken

heart where they fell years earlier. Keeping house with a man who hides his homosexuality from his religious family, she feels safe yet unsatisfied with a roommate who will never be more than a friend.

Then along comes Israel Prize winner Teo, an 85-year-old former Royal Danish Ballet dancer and head of the Tel Aviv Ballet. He becomes a regular customer at the coffee bar, and as he gets to know his waitress Vivi, he challenges her to stop dabbling in different disciplines because "with that kind of breadth you can never really be sublimely good at anything."

As their relationship deepens, Teo's life story – what little she knows of it – serves as the inspiration for Vivi to identify at last her personal path to artistic expression. Her highly successful installation, however, unwittingly pries off the stopper that has kept Teo's tortured war-years experience bottled up for decades.

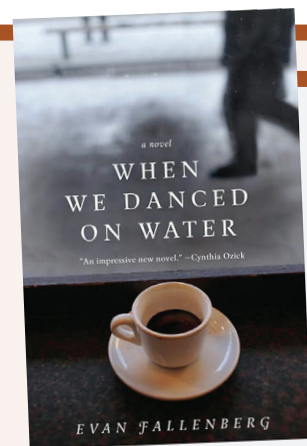
The story that emerges is not about ghettos and concentration camps, but about a Nazi official who is sexually obsessed with a young Jewish dancer.

This obsession at once saves Teo's life and destroys it. As the details pour out, one might think there is not much Vivi can do but listen sympathetically. However, she makes a bold move designed to stoke the final embers of a long-suppressed flame that will soon be extinguished.

Fallenberg, an Ohio native and long-time Tel Aviv resident, won an American Library Association award for his debut novel, *Light Fell* (Soho Press, 2008). I did not read this book, but I did read Meir Shalev's *A Pigeon and A Boy*, for which Fallenberg won a National Jewish Book Award for his magnificent Hebrew-to-English translation, and I also read his excellent translation of Ron Leshem's *Beaufort*. Perhaps it is this background that has so sensitively attuned Fallenberg to the power of individual words. His fluid prose is carefully composed, deliberately chosen for a desired effect.

In describing Teo's half-century of correspondence with his sister, the author writes that Teo in his old age is drawn increasingly "to their ability, so lost in the world now, to suggest so much, to tuck meanings into words, to crouch emotions behind mellifluous phrasing, to crunch a mountain of feelings into a mound of pure gold, without ever using an explicit, naked word."

Some of the best passages depict Teo in motion, or recalling himself in motion. He relates to Vivi that he sees music in his mind's eye "in colors and varying degrees of hot and cold." Later, he confesses: "I wish I could go back to a time before language, when I was one with my surroundings. That business about color and heat ... when my body could absorb everything around me and turn it into something beautiful. When



**WHEN WE DANCED ON WATER**

By Evan Fallenberg

Harper Perennial

240 pages; \$14.99

I could feel the bright pink of a falling leaf or the flow of the Vistula or the hiss of a radiator and I could express them through movement. When I could dance water, or heat, or even love."

The novel's lyrical quality keeps it from veering into sappiness at some points, and makes it an enjoyable read. Fallenberg's love of language is evident, as is his appreciation for Tel Aviv: the "diamond-shaped fountain" outside the Suzanne Dellal Center, "the junkies and pimps near the Old Central Bus Station," "old men selling skullcaps on overturned orange crates."

His novel demonstrates that the Shoah is a shadowy character in that city as well, part and parcel of some of its residents but able to be transformed into a positive life force in the White City that never sleeps.