

MARC  
CHAGALL

JONATHAN WILSON



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Novelist and critic Jonathan Wilson clears away the sentimental mists surrounding an artist whose career spanned two world wars, the Russian Revolution, the Holocaust, and the birth of the State of Israel. Marc Chagall's work addresses these transforming events, but his ambivalence about his role as a Jewish artist adds an intriguing wrinkle to common assumptions about his life. Drawn to sacred subject matter, Chagall remains defiantly secular in outlook; determined to "narrate" the miraculous and tragic events of the Jewish past, he frequently chooses Jesus as a symbol of martyrdom and sacrifice.

Wilson brilliantly demonstrates how Marc Chagall's life constitutes a grand canvas on which much of twentieth-century Jewish history is vividly portrayed. Chagall left Belorussia for Paris in 1910, at the dawn of modernism, looking back dreamily on the world he abandoned. After his marriage to Bella Rosenfeld in 1915, he moved to Petrograd, but eventually returned to Paris after a stint as a Soviet commissar for art. Fleeing Paris steps ahead of the Nazis, Chagall arrived in New York in 1941. Drawn to Israel, but not enough to live there, Chagall grappled endlessly with both a nostalgic attachment to a vanished past and the magnetic pull of an uninhibited secular present.

Wilson's portrait of Chagall is altogether more historical, more political, and edgier than conventional wisdom would have us believe—showing us how Chagall is the emblematic Jewish artist of the twentieth century.

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JONATHAN WILSON is the author of *A Palestine Affair*, *The Hiding Room*, *Schoom*, and *An Ambulance Is on the Way: Stories of Men in Trouble*; and of two critical studies of the fiction of Saul Bellow. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *Best American Short Stories*, among other publications. A professor of English at Tufts University, he lives with his family in Newton, Massachusetts.

Visit [nextbook.org/chagall](http://nextbook.org/chagall) for a virtual museum of Chagall images.

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Jewish Encounters: Marc Chagall

A brilliant new perspective on one of the most beloved—and most misunderstood—artists of the twentieth century.

Novelist and critic Jonathan Wilson clears away the sentimental mists surrounding an artist whose career spanned two World Wars, the Russian Revolution, the Holocaust, and the birth of the State of Israel. Marc Chagall's work addresses these transforming events, but his ambivalence about his role as a Jewish artist adds an intriguing wrinkle to common assumptions about his life. Drawn to sacred subject matter, he remains defiantly secular in outlook; determined to "narrate" the miraculous and tragic events of the Jewish past, he chooses Jesus as a symbol of martyrdom and sacrifice.

Wilson demonstrates how Chagall's life constitutes a grand canvas on which much of twentieth-century Jewish history is vividly portrayed. Chagall left the shtetl for Paris at the dawn of modernism, looking back dreamily on the world he abandoned. After a stint as a Soviet Commissar for art, he returned to Paris but was forced to flee to the United States steps ahead of the Nazis. Drawn to Israel but not enough to live there, Chagall grappled endlessly with a nostalgic attachment to the vanished past and the magnetic pull of an uninhibited secular present.

Wilson's portrait of Chagall is altogether more historical, more political, and edgier than conventional wisdom would have us believe—showing us how

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### *Marc Chagall*

an even tinier domed church between them. Chagall was deeply attached to this piece, and after he left Russia he reconstituted the lost image as *The Green Violinist* (1923–24). The set designer for the original Broadway production of *Fiddler on the Roof* was Boris Aronson, a Russian Jewish artist who, like Chagall, had once studied in Berlin with the graphic artist Hermann Struck, and who was the author of a short monograph on Chagall written in Yiddish in 1923 that was apparently too intimate for the taste of its subject and caused offense. More importantly, Aronson had begun his career in theater work at the Moscow state Yiddish theater in 1920 at a time when Chagall was its principal artist. Aronson had seen *Music*.

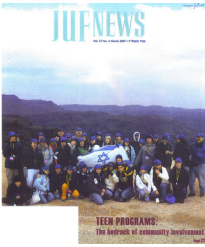
As the theater critic Jan Lisa Huttner has perceptively noted, Aronson's backdrop surrounds Tevye's family with neighbors in little houses that "echo the borders" of Chagall's *I and the Village*. In addition, Aronson seems to have taken Chagall's pallet and dipped into it for his color-drenched set. Aronson offered an *hommage* to Chagall in his work for *Fiddler on the Roof*, and there can be no doubt that in the American imagination Chagall, like it or not, and for better or worse, has been inextricably linked with the sentimental musical ever since.

In the 1950s and 1960s, when Broadway or Hollywood focused on Jewish themes, in the interests of pursuing the larger market it attempted to bridge Jewish and Gentile culture by effectively de-Judaizing the content of musicals, plays, and screenplays. The most egregious case is Frances

**For Huttner review referenced on page 200 above, visit:**

**[http://www.films42.com/columns/columns\\_fiddler.asp](http://www.films42.com/columns/columns_fiddler.asp)**





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**March  
2007**

## TZIVI'S CULTURE BEAT \* MARCH SPOTLIGHT

By JAN LISA HUTTNER

**NEXTBOOK IS BRINGING** novelist Jonathan Wilson to the WomEn's Club of Evanston on March 20 to read from his new biography, *Marc Chagall*. I called the Tufts University professor at home to ask him what he most wants his readers to know about history's most famous Jewish painter.

"Chagall, who died at age 97, had a long, complex, fascinating life, which spanned World War I, the Russian Revolution, the Second World War, the Holocaust and beyond," he said. "In some ways, Chagall's life is representative of an entire shift in Jewish life in the 20th Century and all the conflicts between the old world and modernity that that involves. Chagall's work as a painter? He's far more edgy, far more experimental and original than contemporary stereotypes allow.

"One of the Jewish fantasies about Chagall," Wilson continued, "is that he is sort of nostalgically, sentimentally attached to the lost world of the *shtetl* whereas in fact he both is and isn't. There's one very revealing moment in his memoir where he talks about how utterly bored he is to be back in Vitebsk. He feels the electric tug of the secular world: Paris!

"In that sense he's very emblematic of an entire movement of Jews coming out of Europe and embracing the modern secular life of the west. But beyond that, he becomes a vitally important trailblazer in that world. Chagall arrived in Paris struggling with his artistic, his political and his sexual ambivalence, and this is something I don't think much attention has been paid to. But what intrigues me is that I think that it's there in the paintings."

Nextbook is also sponsoring a lecture by Sara Paretsky at the Newberry Library in Chicago on March 14. Best known for her detective fiction, Paretsky is about to publish a new book of essays called *Writing in an Age of Silence*, in which she talks candidly about growing up in one of the only Jewish families in her hometown (Lawrence, Kansas). Paretsky and I met last month near her current home in

Hyde Park, and I will provide more details in May, once her essays are on the shelf and available to all.

For more information about both events (including how to order tickets), visit [www.nextbook.org/chicago](http://www.nextbook.org/chicago).

### CURTAIN CALL

Michael J. Oren, author of the award-winning book *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, was in Chicago on February 8 to promote his new book *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East (1776 to the Present)*. The event, sponsored by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, was so packed that Hilton staff had to scurry around for extra chairs.

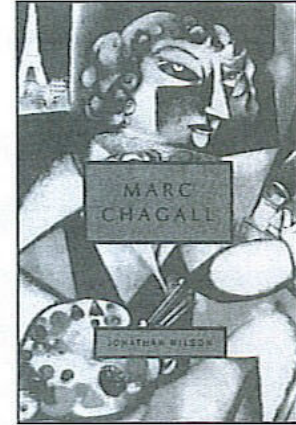
*Power, Faith, and Fantasy* is huge and scholarly with over 600 pages of text followed by rich footnotes and a comprehensive bibliography. Nevertheless, Oren did a masterful job of explaining his three themes and illustrating them with anecdotes from the eighteen and nineteenth centuries. For example, when contemplating our current options in Iraq, Gaza, etc, Oren wants us to remember that the well-known line in the Marine Corps anthem "... to the shores of Tripoli..." refers to America's war against the Barbary Pirates (1783 to 1815). Then as now, according to Oren, when dealing with terrorists, the basic choice is the same: to fight or to bribe?

Oren's presentation is available on C-SPAN's BOOK-TV. To watch, visit: [www.booktv.org](http://www.booktv.org).

### TZIVI'S DVD COLLECTION

Comfortably nestled between *South Park* and *The Daily Show*, comedian Sarah Silverman now has her own television show every Thursday night on the Comedy Central channel. In the opening moments of the first broadcast on February 1, Silverman promised us that her show would contain "full frontal Judy," and indeed, her Jewish identity has always been an essential component of Silverman's shtick.

I have to admit that I didn't quite get it at first, but a friend



advised me to watch *The Aristocrats* and that really does help. *The Aristocrats* is a 90-minute documentary about the dirtiest joke ever told. The set-up is simple; it's nothing more than pitching a lewd new act to a jaded talent agent. That said, *The Aristocrats'* first half hour was rough going for me, with comedian after comedian peddling the most disgusting stories imaginable. But gradually, the light began to dawn: in this case the devil is not in the details, the whole point here is simply in the telling.

Where is the line separating what can and cannot be said? Does the word "transgressive" have any meaning anymore? Like Sasha Baron Cohen, Silverman consciously bases her routine on centuries of anti-Semitic stereotypes. The results are definitely not for the squeamish, but the goal is a noble one: to shake today's viewers up the way Lenny Bruce once did.

To zero in on Sarah Silverman's contribution to *The Aristocrats* DVD, start at chapter 12 (so you have some context for what she actually says in chapter 13).

For more details about *The Sarah Silverman Program*, visit: [www.comedycentral.com/shows/the\\_sarah\\_silverman\\_program/index.jhtml](http://www.comedycentral.com/shows/the_sarah_silverman_program/index.jhtml). ■

Jan Lisa Huttner (Tzivi) is the managing editor of *Films for Two: The Online Guide for Busy Couples* ([www.films42.com](http://www.films42.com)).

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