HARPER

A Conversation with Elizabeth Poliner, author of *Spinning at the Edges*

***Spinning at the Edges* moves between Nazi-occupied Amsterdam in 1941 and the United States during the contested 2000 presidential election. What inspired you to place these two historical moments in conversation with each other?**

At first it was an accident. Stephanie Pearl was the first character to arrive in my imagination, in the year 2000, and she came with two clear attributes: an emotional ache tied to her mother, and the fact that when she was growing up, they occasionally ice skated together—the most joyful part of her childhood. As I developed Stephanie, and as *Bush v. Gore* unfolded, I saw her as obsessed with the case. For various reasons, I didn't take the story much further and never figured out who her mother was. But years later, while working on a different novel, *As Close to Us as Breathing*, I realized that Stephanie's mother was a Holocaust survivor, which brought these two time periods together.

Once I got working on the novel, it quickly emerged that a theme of law shaped both timelines: *Bush v. Gore* in 2000-2001 (which ultimately became Ruth Pearl's concern rather than Stephanie's), and the anti-Jewish Nazi laws in Amsterdam. I sensed some energy there even before I understood the connection. With time it became clear that in both periods law was being manipulated and misused to gain power, the extreme example of that being the Nazi laws, but *Bush v. Gore,* with the U.S. Supreme Court deciding along partisan lines (by way of questionable reasoning) the results of a presidential election, seemed, more subtly, to be about that too. With even more time, I realized that this thread was really about how, as shown through law (and its misuses), different kinds of governments impact people's lives. Arthur Cantrell articulates this toward the novel's end when he worries that *Bush v. Gore* marks a shift in America—that the judicial branch of our democracy, by weakening democracy, has taken a step closer toward democracy's "edge," and that falling over that edge—into autocracy, say, or dictatorship—could be devastating. The tragic Amsterdam backstory is one example of what it could mean to fall over that treacherous edge.

The novel traces how trauma reverberates across generations—from the murder of Ruth's sister during the German occupation in the Netherlands to the anxieties of the present-day characters. What interested you in exploring how historical trauma is inherited and lived with decades later?

In the months prior to writing this novel, I was moved by an article I read about how, in scientific studies, the DNA of children of Holocaust survivors was shown to be impacted by the trauma of the parent(s) who lived through the experience. These studies matched, or proved, something I already noticed in human nature: that trauma trickles down the generations in its mysterious way. As it happened, I was already interested in that process of transference, which the studies confirmed, and the dynamic between Ruth Pearl and her daughter, Stephanie, presents one of many possibilities of how that can happen interpersonally. In their case, the traumatized parent is emotionally absent, and the child ends up parenting the parent—living, in a sense, an orphan's existence, which itself is

traumatizing. Stephanie's aching loneliness, and her tendency to disassociate during the worst of it, is all of that. The analysis can even be taken back a generation, starting with Tessa's "silence" after Sophia's death and its impact on Ruth.

I extended the concept to other kinds of trauma, such as Arthur Cantrell's experience of his father's violence. Arthur doesn't know why his father behaved that way, but he finally senses its connection to the imperfect family his father was born into, which makes his father, like Arthur, an inheritor of ancestral pain. As I see it, these experiences of coping with what the generations before have experienced, be it trauma or some other unresolved problem, are universal, or nearly so. And, thus, there's really not a character in the 2000-2001 time period of the novel who escapes that dilemma just as there are very few in life who escape it.

Throughout the novel, characters grapple with the idea that "it's happening again"—that past political and personal ruptures might be repeating themselves. What drew you to explore how historical memory shapes the way people interpret the present?

For my characters, it's more that traumatic memory shapes their lives rather than historic memory. Or the memory, lived in their bodies, as well as in their minds, of past traumas. Ruth Peal, for example, lived through the Holocaust. That event is not history but rather her childhood, experienced firsthand, the biggest trauma of which was the death of her sister in the context of the Nazis' destruction of the Jewish community. When *Bush v. Gore* comes down, Ruth recognizes the loss of a recount, which she understands as a silencing of voters' voices, as similar to what the Nazis did in stripping people of their rights. To her, "it's happening again."

For Missy Lima, her big trauma is the unexpected loss of her husband and finding herself a single mother, and then almost losing Ian when a social worker comes to investigate whether she's a neglectful mother. Years later, she re-lives all that upon learning that Ian tried to drown himself. For Arthur Cantrell, he senses "it's happening again" when his love-interest, Willa Fletcher, files her ethics complaint, which he perceives as an over-the-top reaction to his behavior, and aimed toward destroying him. This feels to him exactly like his father is chasing him to his death again.

I think that projecting the past onto the present is deeply human, and quite protective. It happens fast, without thinking. You feel it in your bones, in your body, because a present experience is stirring things up internally just as they were stirred up, unpleasantly, in the past. But thinking that the worst is happening again and again—which often isn't the case despite it feeling true—can become a kind of emotional cage. My characters in the 2000-2001 time period are stuck in a variety of cages and, at least at the novel's start, can't find the keys to free themselves. The story takes them each on a journey that ultimately offers some freedom from those old trauma-induced emotional cages where the one constant is the sense that "it's happening again."

A pivotal moment in the novel occurs when Ruth Pearl and Judge Arthur Cantrell rescue a teenage boy who intentionally falls through the ice of Lake Topaqua. Why did you choose this dramatic event as the point where several lives begin to intersect?

When I conceived of the novel, I saw Ian's suicide attempt as bringing Ian, Arthur, and Ruth into relationship with each other, and through that beginning a process of inadvertent healing. For both Ruth and Arthur, helping to save Ian is a kind of second chance. In her childhood Ruth could do nothing to stop her sister, Sophia, from throwing her life away in a kind of de facto suicide. But now Ruth can do something to help Ian, sixteen like Sophia, and suffering from love like Sophia was.

And Ian's sharing his pain with Ruth helps to open her up emotionally, which ultimately impacts her relationship with her daughter, Stephanie.

Arthur, too, experienced helplessness in his youth, unable to protect himself, his mother, and his sister from his father's violence. But he does help Ian, and that feels very meaningful to him. Indeed, he can't stay away from the kid once that happens. Eventually, because he's at Ruth's so often, visiting her and Ian there, Arthur also helps Ruth with her lake view problem, which has been intractable for her before his intervention. For Ian, the fall into the icy waters is a kind of second chance too; he tells his mother he went into the waters one way and came out another, meaning in the event's aftermath he accepts the futility of his unrequited love—for both Jase and his father—and begins to let them go.

Suicide itself is a theme in the novel, arising when helplessness is overwhelming. For example, a number of waves of suicide among the Jews of Amsterdam occur in response to the Nazi regime. Sophia is suicidal in the wake of losing her beloved Aaron, which drives her to risk skating in Oosterpark, knowing Nazi police are there. Fran Cousins is suicidal, wanting to "freeze" as she despairs about her husband's stroke. Willa Fletcher is tempted to drive off a bridge when her despair hits its peak. And, ultimately, Stephanie Pearl is tempted by a suicidal impulse when she can't move forward in her life and can't emotionally connect with her mother, no matter how hard she tries. So the pivotal moment of Ian's suicide, which the reader hears about in Chapter 1, ripples throughout the book and resonates with other characters' despair and helplessness.

Ruth Pearl keeps a file labeled "Good" filled with legal decisions she finds morally meaningful. What does this detail reveal about her relationship to justice, and why did you want law to be such an intimate part of her character?

Law is a huge part of Ruth Pearl's character because it was through various Nazi laws—orders, decrees, and directives—that the Nazi regime was successful in destroying the Dutch Jewish community that she was born into. Law—or, really, a weaponization of law—was a primary means by which the Nazi regime achieved its destructive goal. In America, through Ruth's work as a legal assistant, a job she stumbles into after her husband leaves her, she learns that law can actually be a force for good, and she goes so far as to collect legal decisions that she happens to read and finds protective. She loves these decisions because they make her feel safe. Indeed, she clings to "good" law almost the way a child clings to a teddy bear, for comfort. She even goes to sleep beside one of these protective cases, *Horton v. Meskill,* at the end of Chapter 1, just like a child might sleep with a comforting stuffed animal. But with *Bush v. Gore* she learns that legal decisions in the U.S. can limit rights too, and she sees *Bush v. Gore* as evidence that what she experienced in Amsterdam is "happening again" in the U.S.

Ruth's complicated views about law are further dramatized when her neighbor, Bill Cousins, raises the first wall in his home renovation and it partially blocks Ruth's lake view, and she is certain only a law can stop him from going further. This notion comes from her childhood too, a sense that law is all-powerful and she is not. Her helplessness, relative to the events of her childhood, blocks her from seeing any reason to even try to talk to Bill. In the end, when Bill offers her a variety of ways to fix the problem of his obstructing her view—something he does because Arthur Cantrell has finally brought them together and they are at last talking—she is amazed to discover the possibility of Bill being a "good" man rather than a nemesis, and her assumptions about her helplessness, his power, possibly his malevolence, etc., are turned upside down. They were all but projections of her past, anyway.

There's a recurring circular imagery in the novel—spinning and other ways of going "round and round" like skaters do on an ice rink. How did the imagery of spinning and circular movement in general become central to the story's themes?

Images in the novel—such as circles, edges, walls, and diamonds—appeared first in their literal sense. In the opening chapter, Stephanie and her friend Rona go round and round at the skating rink, talking as they take laps. But soon enough, the figurative implications of going round emerged, most often as a metaphor for being stuck. Stephanie is stuck in her longing for her mother, and later in her grief for both Rona and Freddy. She can't move forward in her life but rather circles in place.

Spinning is a kind of heightened going round and round: doing it so fast it's almost out of control. At the start of their courtship, Sophia spins on the ice for Aaron, flirting with him, and quickly loses her balance. Later, after losing Arron, she again spins on the ice, and does a circular figure eight, as she performs, defiantly and crazily, for the Nazi policemen who are watching her. She becomes their "spinning girl" and ultimately loses her life spinning for them and putting herself at risk in so doing. In the front story, I see all the characters spinning out of control in their way: Willa when she's triggered by seeing Arthur at the Y and subsequently files an ethics complaint against him, Arthur when he feels he's being "chased" by Willa in the form of her complaint, Ian when he is rejected by Jase, Missy when she learns about Ian's suicide attempt, and on and on. Behind all this are two historical time periods, and they are spinning too: the earlier time period of heightened fascism clearly showing a government already out of control, the latter time period of *Bush v. Gore* showing a government that might spin out of control someday if democratic norms and practices are weakened.

The points of view in the novel are spinning too, something I didn't think about until near the end of the writing process. But it made me—craft nerd that I am—happy to see this confluence of form and content.

To me, the most poignant example of going round and round in the novel is the journey the Portuguese Jews made in the 1600s to Amsterdam, fleeing Jewish persecution from the Inquisitions, only for the Jews of Amsterdam in the 1930s and '40s, upon suffering Jewish persecution from the Nazis, fleeing right back to Portugal—those who could flee and who could make it. I see this slow-forming circle as capturing the endlessness of the story of Jewish persecution.

Each chapter opens with actual Nazi decrees issued in the Netherlands, which creates a mounting pressure in the narrative. What was your research process like in uncovering these laws, and how did they shape the emotional landscape of the novel?

In researching the history for this novel, I quickly noticed the anti-Jewish laws were central to how the Nazi regime destroyed the Dutch Jewish community. They weren't laws so much as weapons, and weapons of mass destruction at that (to use a phrase that gained popularity with the Bush administration relative to Iraq). I quickly realized, too, that I needed a good grasp of the timeline of the anti-Jewish laws in the interest of accuracy. I didn't want one of my characters riding a bike, say, after the law banning Jewish people from owning bicycles came out. From this original concern with accuracy, the laws quickly made their way into my imagination, and the very first scene I wrote that was set in Amsterdam contained a mention of the laws. That's when I realized they would actually become part of the story and not simply part of the research.

As the novel developed, the Nazi laws became more integrated into it, and they were working in an interesting juxtaposition with American law. At one point in the writing process, I clumped a lot of the Nazi laws together as a list, which was Jozef Jacobsen's way of explaining to his wife, Tessa, his choices on the day of Sophia's murder. After decades, he still had no words to explain what happened, except by way of those laws. And, indeed, they really do tell the story of what happened to the Jewish community; you can see the growing oppression, and then destruction, of the Jewish community in the progression of laws. But the clumping was confusing, and it occurred to me to spread them out instead, and to use them as chapter openers, regardless of whether the chapter started with a scene in Amsterdam or not.

I see the Nazi laws shaping the emotional landscape of the novel in multiple ways. Law by law, they dramatize the way that the Nazi regime did its awful work. They tell a significant part of the story, and I worked to include when I could descriptions of who authorized various laws and from which department of the occupying regime such laws emerged because even the names of those office titles and departments show the contemptuous authority over Jews that the Nazis held.

More generally, the Nazi laws shape the emotional landscape by suggesting that the past can trail us a long time, something all the characters in the 2000-2001 time period feel in their own way, even those not directly connected with the Holocaust. The Nazi laws also serve as a reminder that when a government spins out of control, the results can be deadly. In the year 2000-2001, the United States is not yet out of control (as it can seem to be edging towards now), but the *Bush v. Gore* decision hints at the possibility of a weakening democracy. It's a toe in the water to the deeper waters we're in now, including the deepening partisanship of the U.S. Supreme Court and its effects.

Also, the Holocaust—such a singular, huge, and ever-astonishing historic disaster—has a way of hanging over our contemporary collective life, whether we're conscious of it or not, whether we're Jewish or not. A recent example of this can be seen in Governor Walz of Minnesota invoking the memory of the Holocaust, mentioning Anne Frank's hiding, as the ICE protests in Minneapolis ensued. As this moment shows, the Holocaust has become a near-universal reference, a way to understand events that are happening now and where they might lead, and the Nazi laws hanging over more contemporary times in my novel works this way too, especially with regard to the implications for democracy of *Bush v. Gore*.

You write about Amsterdam in 1941 with striking immediacy. What sources—archival, personal accounts, historical scholarship—most shaped your understanding of the Dutch Jewish experience during the occupation?

A variety of sources shaped my understanding. For starters, I read *a lot*. Noteworthy among the books is a seminal work about this time period, the first Dutch history of it, called *Ashes in the Wind: The Destruction of Dutch Jewry,* written by Dr. Jacob Presser, a Jewish historian who survived that time period in hiding. A long and detailed account, I read most of this work while at a cottage on the coast of Maine, where I found relief from the content of Presser's account in observing the natural beauty of the coast, much like my character, Holocaust survivor Ruth Pearl, finds relief in her consoling view of her lake. I read many more books about the history of this time period, and I read many articles that focused on any number of specific topics—including the women's orchestra at Auschwitz, the terrible Nazi raid in Amsterdam of February 1941, and even the use of hair dye among Jewish women attempting to escape or pass as non-Jews.

Beyond reading, I went to Amsterdam twice on research trips, and they were invaluable and even transformative for me. I went to all the museums related to the Holocaust: the Anne Frank House, the Jewish Historical Museum (now known as the Jewish Museum), the Diamond Museum, and the Holocaust Museum, which was then in development. My research also included interviewing people in Amsterdam, most notably a lovely older Dutch-Jewish woman who shared her harrowing story of surviving the Holocaust as a child and her poignant lifelong battle with crippling PTSD. I also visited the Auschwitz memorial a few times—it was just a moving place to be—and often I simply walked the streets, especially around Oosterpark, where I finally decided my fictional family lived. One day, a new Dutch friend took me to see the Apollohal, a sports arena that back in the day was a popular place to ice skate, and which subsequently made its way into the novel's first scene. More regularly, I spent time in the old Jewish quarter of Amsterdam, visiting and revisiting the Portuguese synagogue, and in that quarter I also visited a diamond factory where a polisher there gave me detailed instructions in what diamond polishing is all about. He told me that it's knowing what to do with the inevitable flaw in every diamond that makes polishing so difficult a craft to master, a detail I put in the novel and one I feel some affinity with as a writer.

Did any aspects of writing the book surprise you? In your research, were there particular moments or discoveries that altered the direction of the novel as you were writing it?

Many aspects of writing the novel surprised me. I was surprised when I first realized there was law in both the backstory and front story. I truly didn't see that coming until I wrote the first scene of the front story (not the first in the book, but the first I wrote), which was Stephanie and her mother visiting the Bishop's Garden in Washington, D.C. and discussing Florida's too-close-to-call post-presidential election predicament, dangling chads and all. And then, right after that, I wrote the first Amsterdam scene which involved the two sisters, Ruttie and Sophia, sneaking into Oosterpark and skating there at night, in violation of the ban that Jews do not enter the park. The scene closes with a mention of the "terrible new laws" and lists a few of them, and when I finished writing it I sat there, with my hand over my mouth, astonished to discover law playing a role in both time periods of the story. That moment of astonishment began a long journey for me of exploring law, and how it functioned, more deeply in both time periods.

Another wonderful surprise was learning that the seventeenth century philosopher Spinoza was born and raised in Amsterdam, and I instantly knew he'd find his way into the novel. Learning about Spinoza's work—which took time; he's quite difficult—was so enriching for me, and his presence and beautiful philosophy of peace turned out to resonate so well thematically with the novel.

Your novel explores how democratic systems can erode gradually through laws, court rulings, and public rhetoric. Did you see parallels between the historical events in the book and the political climate we're living in today?

It's hard for me not to see the parallels between the historical events in the book and what's happening in the U.S. today, with its remarkable erosion of democratic norms and practices, and an executive branch that consistently undermines and even violates the Constitution, and in so many ways, relevant to so many areas of public life. These are treacherous times in the U.S., testing democracy to its limits, which impacts those of us living here while also impacting countries globally, given our interconnected world. That's a thematic drum I beat in my last novel and in this one—that we're in this together, we're connected, whether we realize it or not. This sense seems to be part of the reason why I'm drawn to write novels less about a single protagonist than about a group of primary characters, a collective that is being impacted by a core event. In this novel there are actually

two parallel core events: a suicidally despairing sixteen-year-old in Amsterdam who ultimately gets murdered, and a suicidally despairing sixteen-year-old in Connecticut who gets saved.

I never set out to intentionally write about the current political moment—which I never could have predicted—but during the writing process, as events and elections in the U.S. unfolded, the parallels became clearer. In the end I wrote about Europe during the Nazi era, the United States during the *Bush v. Gore* era, and, by implication, the present time in the U.S. Thus, there are really three time periods in the novel, the two directly drawn and the third, our present time period, invoked, and even palpably so, by implication.

At its heart, *Spinning at the Edges* **explores how people carry grief and uncertainty while still seeking connection and meaning. After spending so much time with these characters and their histories, what stayed with you most deeply?**

Many things have stayed with me, but perhaps most of all is the poignant need for all of the characters in the 2000-2001 time period to break free of the isolation of their pain—and how healing it is when they find community. They all find it in different ways, most clearly with Ian, Ruth, and Arthur coming together. But this happens even for Willa, whose heart is transformed, physically and emotionally, in cardiac rehab where she connects with a cohort of other vulnerable, scared people, just like herself.

I'm also moved to recall the moment, near the novel's end, where Ruth Pearl lists everyone she'll be seeing soon at Ian's dance performance—Ian, Missy, Roy Kirk, Maddie, and Arthur Cantrell—and she thinks of them as family just as she puts on her mother's old wedding ring. The ring, which has survived the long, hard journey from Nazi-occupied Amsterdam to present, comes to represent not marriage but connection and even belonging. That's a big moment for her and I really felt her journey as I wrote those lines. Stephanie Pearl's desperate need to connect to Ruth stays with me too, and finally hearing her mother's childhood story brings Stephanie that sense of connection—and deeper understanding—she has so longed for.

A particular line that has stayed with me is one by Ruth's father, Jozef, close to his death, when he can't physically speak but feels he has so much to say to his wife, Tessa, about his "modest but still unfolding understanding of love." I'm so glad that he's thinking about love at this moment, and not loss, not bitterness. I think the whole book, really, is about love. How absences of love have impacted the characters, hurting them in different ways, and how community, even community among the broken, can offer just enough love to nudge people forward in life toward more loving futures.