

“The past is always fictional”

Crypto-Jews and the Search for Identity in El Iluminado

By Daniel Taub

A review of *El Iluminado: A Graphic Novel* by Ilan Stavans and Steve Sheinkin (Basic Books, 2012)

“**W**hat interests me in all this is the way people create stories to survive, to affirm who they are, to make a stand,” Professor Ilan Stavans tells a police officer in *El Iluminado: A Graphic Novel*. “We’re constantly reshaping our own narratives.” Stavans is speaking of people in general of course—all of humanity—but also of a specific group of people: the crypto-Jews of Santa Fe, New Mexico, who are the book’s focus. Crypto-Jews are the descendants of *conversos*—Jews forced to convert to Christianity starting in 1492, during the Spanish Inquisition.



Many of them continued to practice Judaism in the secrecy of their own homes. Stavans is both the protagonist in the fictional *El Iluminado*, an ersatz detective investigating the death of a modern-day crypto-Jew, and a real person—the Lewis-Sebring Professor of Latin American and Latino Culture and Five-College Fortieth Anniversary Professor at Amherst College, who created the book with Steve Sheinkin, who writes and draws the *Rabbi Harvey* series of graphic novels.

It seems appropriate that the story of the crypto-Jews is told in the form of a novel—and not just any novel, but a graphic one. After all, little is known about crypto-Jews—their history is largely a secret one—and the evidence of their existence in Santa Fe and other parts of the New World, to which they fled from Spain during the Inquisition, is found more in images than in texts.

For example, the Tetragrammaton, an ancient Jewish name for God, is inscribed in Hebrew above an entrance at the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi in Santa Fe, built in the latter half



of the 1800s. At cemeteries in the area, Christian crosses are carved into grave markers alongside menorahs and six-sided Stars of David. Why a novel though? Because modern-day crypto-Jews—those whose families continue to practice, often without knowing why, such Jewish traditions as lighting candles before dinner on Friday nights, avoiding pork, and resting on Saturdays—are forced to fill the gaps in their family histories with conjecture. They develop a fictionalized version of their lives, much in the way Stavans and Sheinkin weave a fictional mystery around the actual mystery of New Mexico’s crypto-Jews. “That’s why crypto-Jews are so fascinating. They are extraordinary story tellers, telling stories about themselves,” Stavans says to *El Iluminado*’s police officer. “Fictional stories?” the officer asks. “Perhaps,” Stavans replies. “The past is always fictional.”

That is not to say that nothing concrete is known about the history of crypto-Jews in the New World. *El Iluminado*’s back story is a well-documented one. It is the biography of Luis de Carvajal the Younger, the New World descendant of *conversos*. After discovering his Jewish past, Carvajal became convinced that he had messianic attributes and refashioned himself as *El Iluminado*—the enlightened one—to spread the word to other crypto-Jews. The story of Carvajal, burned at the stake in Mexico City in 1596 as part of the Inquisition, is known because documents including an autobiography and prison correspondence were preserved. More of a mystery is how many other *conversos* continued to practice Judaism behind closed doors in the New World. Stavans

and Sheinkin graft onto this real history the story of the fictional Rolando Perez, who sees himself a modern-day successor to Carvajal and who dies—perhaps at the hands of a murderer, or by his own hand, or by accident—while searching for his Jewish roots. Stavans and Sheinkin undercut the novel’s hokier aspects with their own self-awareness. “Crypto-Jews in the Southwest?” a rival professor—something of a Moriarty to Stavans’s Sherlock Holmes—asks the fictionalized Stavans. “I suppose you’ll turn the whole murky mystery into some preposterous page-turner. *The Da Vinci Code*, with matzo and salsa picante.” Indeed, the book is filled with familiar tropes from detective novels and mystery films: the beautiful *femme fatale* who asks the sleuth for help but may be a criminal herself; the hotel room trashed in a search for documents; the world-weary policeman who warns the shamus to drop the case and go home. *El Iluminado* also is the latest in a long line of novels featuring Jewish detectives— including the Rabbi David Small



mysteries that Harry Kemelman began writing in the 1960s, Kinky Friedman’s comedic detective series, and Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, from 2007. It recalls, too, another lineage: of professors-turned-detectives, such as Gervase Fen in Edmund Crispin’s 1946 classic *The Moving Toyshop*, which, like *El Iluminado*, acknowledged its clichés. *El Iluminado* also is not the first graphic novel to explore oppression of the Jewish people, of course, though it would be highly unfair to compare it with Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* or its sequel.

While it is unlikely to find a spot in the top tier of literary graphic novels, *El Iluminado* nonetheless makes for compelling reading—more so for its recounting of a little-known chapter from the history of American Jewry than for its fictional mystery, which treads upon well-trod ground. With its straightforward storyline, real-world subject matter and relative brevity, it also can serve as a painless introduction to graphic novels for those new to the genre. It is not hard to imagine a neophyte reading *El Iluminado*, realizing that serious stories can be told in a format once relegated to comic books and the newspaper funny pages, and moving on to such contemporary classics as *Maus* or Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth*.

One of *El Iluminado*'s recurring themes is identity—Jewish identity, in particular—and who is allowed to determine it. Both Stavans and the members of a fictional crypto-Jewish support group are troubled by the fact that many Jews of Eastern European lineage dismiss the claims of New Mexico's crypto-Jews, believing their rediscovery of a long-dormant Jewish heritage does not, in fact, make them real Jews—a blow that comes on top of the disapproval faced within crypto-Jews' own Catholic families, who value having blood as pure as the Pope's. "I hate that distinction, 'real' Jews," the fictional Stavans thinks to himself while traveling back to Amherst from Santa Fe. "No, I didn't fly across the country to play who's the Jew." Stavans himself has faced the challenges of self-identity, he says, having grown up in Mexico as a Jew of Polish heritage. "In the States I don't look Mexican," says Stavans, who immigrated to the U.S. when he was 25 years old. "And in Mexico I don't look Jewish." It took leaving Mexico, a place where he did not feel a sense of belonging, to finally feel Mexican, he says. As far as a person's Jewish identity, it should not be up to the rabbinate to determine who a Jew is, but rather to individuals, Stavans implies. This idea fits with the Jewish religion, which has no Pope-like central authority and stresses questioning, scholarship and a personal connection to God. Alluding to the millennia of anti-Semitism found in Spain and elsewhere, Stavans cites the Israeli writer Amos Oz's answer to the question, "Who is a Jew?" Whoever is mad enough to call himself a Jew.

Ultimately, as *El Iluminado* suggests, a growing number of people in the United States are the inheritors of multiple cultures, whether as a result of oppression, immigration, mixed marriage, personal choice or some combination thereof. The novel, written in a mix of English, Spanish, Spanglish and Yiddish, embraces this reality. Furthermore, those who find their way back to a suppressed heritage are worthy of admiration, Stavans believes, especially given this country's values. "Crypto-Jewish families remained loyal to their faith in an age of oppression, they are rebels with a loyalty to tradition, underdogs with an incredible story to tell," he says. "And, needless to say, Americans love underdogs. They love people who remain truthful to themselves against all odds. They love freedom-fighters. Secret heroes."

*Daniel Taub, who in 2011 received an M.A. in humanities from California State University, Northridge, is an editor at Bloomberg News. Readers may also be interested in his exploration of growing up in America as the descendant of Jewish immigrants, in **For Love of Portnoy**, Zeteo, Fall 2012.*