



Not Me Reader's Guide

BY MICHAEL LAVIGNE

Category: Historical Fiction | Military Fiction

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READERS GUIDE

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. How does the nature of memory play an important part in this story? What traps and opportunities does memory create for Michael and for the people around him?
2. Discuss the role of place setting in this novel and in fiction in general. How, and why, are places "characters," and how does place affect you personally?
3. What kind of person is Heinrich? Do you know any people like him? Could you be such a person?
4. What feelings are aroused in you by the descriptions of the concentration camps and by Heinrich/Heshel's role in the murder of thousands?
5. Why do you think the author opted to make Heinrich a bookkeeper as opposed to a Nazi soldier?
6. Hannah Arendt created the phrase "the banality of evil," referring to Adolph Eichmann, the architect of the Nazi death camp system, and those like Eichmann who commit unspeakable acts under the guise of "just doing their job." Does Heinrich fit that description?
7. Do you think it plausible for a person to change as dramatically as Heinrich/Heshel did? Is it plausible that someone like Heinrich could find salvation by embodying the nature of his enemy?
8. What is the role of God in this novel?
9. Everyone tells lies. Why do we lie to ourselves and others? What secret knowledge do we all carry with us? Consider a time in your life when you have been unsure whether to reveal or to conceal an important truth, and had to choose between "the truth shall set you free" and "what they don't know won't hurt them." How did you resolve it?





10. Every family has secrets. What are the effects of family secrets and how do they affect Michael's life? How have they affected yours? What happens when they are uncovered?

 11. Part of the plot structure of this novel is in the form of a mystery or detective story. Is it successful in sustaining an aura of suspense until the novel's conclusion? Do you feel the mystery of Heshel's identity has been solved? Why or why not?

 12. Is guilt what drives Heshel Rosenheim? If so, what is the true nature of that guilt? If not, what is it that drives him? Do you think guilt itself can be a conduit to redemption?

 13. If Heshel Rosenheim is indeed Heinrich Mueller, do you think his son should be able to forgive him? Could you forgive him? Can the good that Heshel/Heinrich has done in his life make up for the bad? What is the role of good works in the balance sheet of redemption?

 14. Michael's relationship with his sister is unique within the novel for its purity and wholesomeness—yet it is this relationship that pushes Michael to commit a terrible crime, and become, in essence, like the man in the journals. What are the moral implications for Michael, for causing destruction in the name of love?

 15. The relationships between fathers and sons in this novel are ambiguous and complex. In what ways do they disagree on how to live their lives? Which of the generational disagreements would you attribute to historical change, and which to individual character differences?

 16. April Love is a mysterious woman who keeps popping up in the oddest places, including in bed with a man ten years her junior. What does she represent to you? Why did the author bring her into the story?
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Not Me

Michael Lavigne

Review by Judy Lewis

There are many stories of Jews who survived Hitler's Germany by assuming the identity of a non-Jew. The premise of this debut novel by Michael Lavigne is the reverse: a Nazi impersonates a Jew.

The narrator is Michael Rosenheim, a 40-ish stand-up comic from Los Angeles whose stage name is Mickey Rose. He has come to a Palm Beach nursing home to attend to his dying father. His narrative voice is humorous, accessible, and draws us in with references to the heat and monotony of the Florida landscape. Michael, who is divorced from his wife and a remote father to his young son, is thrown into further emotional limbo when he is given a mildewed box of his father's journals.

The father, now afflicted by Alzheimer's, was, in his prime, a paradigm of the committed Jew, a tireless contributor to an endless list of Jewish causes. But the journals suggest that he was born German and was once a part of the Nazi machine. As the son slowly reads the journals, he learns of his father's strange life as a young kibbutznik, at the same time caught up in the struggle for Israel's independence and filled with a longing to return to Germany. Vicariously reliving the events that gradually altered his father's perspective and loyalty, he develops an insight into his personal conflicts with his father and his own ambivalence about Judaism.



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From the Rohr Judges

What happens when you find out that your family isn't who you think they are – which, in turn, means that you aren't who you think you are? Lavigne, who worked in advertising for many years before turning to fiction, knows how to craft a narrative that calls attention to itself from the first pages. When Michael Rosenheim gets his hands on his father Heshel's journals and begins to read them, he discovers that his father's personal story is far, far more complex – and potentially much, much darker – than he had ever imagined. Lavigne's prose is clean, and his sense of voice is gripping – or, perhaps more accurately, voices, as the novel alternates between Michael's story and Heshel's account. Saying too much more would give away the plot, and *Not Me* depends on a sense of mystery: suffice it to say that as a gripping, page-turning narrative that moves easily between America, Israel, and Eastern Europe, between the present day, the Holocaust, and the Israeli War of Independence, *Not Me* is not an easy novel to put down – or to forget.

Michael Lavigne On...

How He Writes

My writing practice is simple. I write at least three pages a day, five days a week. I am a very undisciplined person, so it's important for me to create an obligation for myself. However, I never know what I am going to write before I put down the words: I come to the page with only a vague premise, a sense of where I'd like to go. Then I try to get there. I confess I often end up elsewhere. Each surprise forces me to rethink, re-feel, and let go. My work is never autobiographical. The idea of writing about myself or anyone I know is much too limiting, and essentially very dull. My life is not even interesting to me. Facts are nothing but facts. But the world of the imagination is endlessly possible. In that space I am free and extremely happy. I am not saying writing is without pain or boredom, nothing could be farther from the truth. All your emotions come into focus, and this can be very unsettling. When you inhabit the life of the radical other -- in the case of *Not Me* I was trying to be inside a Nazi officer — you must allow yourself to be that, embrace those hatreds, ugliness, cruelty. What one cannot avoid, and what hopefully is always the outcome, is a real sense of empathy for people you cannot rationally understand. By expressing impulses you cannot embrace in real life, you develop compassion, not just as a writer, but as a person. There's no changing the world. There's only changing how it looks.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the nature of memory play an important part in this story? What traps and opportunities does memory create for Michael and for the people around him?
2. Why do you think the author opted to make Heinrich a bookkeeper as opposed to a Nazi soldier?
3. What is the role of G-d in this novel?
4. Michael's relationship with his sister is unique within the novel for its purity and wholesomeness—yet it is this relationship that pushes Michael to commit a terrible crime, and become, in essence, like the man in the journals. What are the moral implications for Michael, for causing destruction in the name of love?
5. April Love is a mysterious woman who keeps popping up in the oddest places, including in bed with a man ten years her junior. What does she represent to you? Why did the author bring her into the story?

AUTHOR Q&A

A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL LAVIGNE

Michael Lavigne discusses *Not Me* with Binnie Kirshenbaum, author of *An Almost Perfect Moment* and *Hester Among the Ruins*. (Editor's note: The emotional and philosophical depth of this discussion reflects the poignant, cerebral, and often controversial elements found in *Not Me*, a novel that thoroughly explores the essence of humanity and is embedded in an authentic, and often disturbing, Holocaust history.)

Binnie Kirshenbaum: Is there such a thing as true redemption? And if so, what of forgiveness? To forgive, to forgive entirely without reservation, is that a kind of redemption, too?

Michael Lavigne: I do not know if redemption is possible. I do know that we must live as if it were. That means not only within ourselves but also in our relationships with those who have tormented us. I suppose the essence of the redemptive stance is empathy—this is the origin of ethical behavior in general. If we live with empathy, we also live with hope. Forgiveness is another matter. Is it possible to forgive without reservation? I suppose that depends on the offense. Frequently in myself I have found that a shadow of distrust seems to lurk beneath the surface of forgiveness.

BK: No doubt there are others, but *The Great Gatsby* and *The Human Stain* come to mind as novels with protagonists who reinvent themselves. How do you see Heshel Rosenheim's reinvention of himself in light of the lies lived by Fitzgerald's and Roth's characters?

ML: You've put Heshel in much too fine a company. But I do see, in both *Gatsby* and *Colman Silk*, American types—for all their individuality, they have archetypal qualities that speak to American racism and classism, a critique of American values. Both are stories of America's reinvention of self. And while Heshel certainly reinvents himself, his is a more existential voyage, an accidental one that sends him on a long and reluctant journey. On the other hand, I think of Gunter Grass, who after all these years finally admits his Nazi past—Waffen SS, by the way—so perhaps Heshel is an archetype after all.

BK: It is my own contention that comedy is tragedy taken to its conclusion. To make Michael Rosenheim a comic by profession was, I think, exactly the right choice, but an unexpected one. Why a comic and not a carpenter or lawyer or salesman?

ML: It just happened. I actually tried to change it. I tried to write him as a psychologist, and also as a rabbi; it didn't work. But a comic does seem emblematic. When I was in graduate school it was common to say that the contemporary novel could be only comic. This reflected how ill-at-ease we felt, and still feel, in speaking of ourselves as if we really had a right to a point of view, as if meaning was not merely self-imposed. Seriousness was seen as sentimentality (the worst of all possible crimes!). I never quite got that. I don't see what's wrong with sentiment, as long as you are not just whitewashing the truth. Perhaps I chose "comedian" precisely because a comedian is the least sentimental of creatures, and yet the most covetous of simple things, like love, family, and home. One of my very best friends was a comedian, quite a good one. He died of cancer. I guess I wanted to write something for him. For a time, in college, I was his straight man. What I learned was, as a comedian, you see everything around you very clearly—actually, you see way too much—but then the trick is to avoid engaging with it. As my friend used to say, "You have to see the funny." And that's Michael's MO.

BK: When Heinrich Mueller refers to himself as a "pencil pusher," Adolf Eichmann is echoed. And later in the novel, Michael notes seeing Eichmann's eyes in Heshel's eyes. How deliberate is this parallel, and does it further the conversation on the banality of evil?

ML: It is deliberate, of course. We are all insiders when it comes to evil, all part of the machine that causes human suffering. It becomes clear to us only if our field of vision is pierced from the outside, when some object that has been out of range, or vaguely in the periphery, forces itself into focus. In *Not Me*, Heshel's line of sight is interrupted by Moskowitz, but also (perhaps not unusually) by his own sense of superiority, which forces him to engage in various acts of kindness that ultimately explode his illusions. In a general sense, the banality of evil does not describe a merely personal moral blindness: it is societal. In this sense, the Nazism of *Not Me* and Heshel Rosenheim is a marker not only for fanatical movements in our own time, but for our failure as ordinary, decent people in the West to come to terms with even the most basic issues of human welfare: health, poverty, race. For me personally, writing this book required a willingness at least to try to explore my own blindness, and examine how my own illusions of moral certainty have hurt those around me. By the way, I was also thinking of Milton. For him, the source of evil is injured pride. This sense of injury as a source of identity is at the heart of *Not Me*, and also, it would seem, of so many of the world's woes.

BK: If we live a lie, do we at some point come to believe it to be true, or to be a greater truth than the facts may show?

ML: The lie is the greater truth. The identities we construct to fool everyone but ourselves in fact fool us the most. Mythology is much stronger than fact. Ask any Israeli or Palestinian.

BK: Early on, before he has any idea what those journals contain, Michael wants no part of them. Does he harbor a suspicion that something is not as it seems with his family? Is it foreboding or is he simply not very interested in his father's life and history?

ML: Two things here. First, I think children fear certain kinds of knowledge about their parents, just as parents fear certain kinds of knowledge about their children. Braving that frontier is one of the tasks I assign Michael. As for secrets, there are none. They roam about the house and everyone knows they are there—it is merely the specifics that elude us. My wife, Gayle, grew up in such a house. All throughout her childhood she was riddled with doubt about her mother—like the kids in *Not Me*, she imagined all kinds of scenarios—her mother was a secret communist, her mother was a spy, her mother was . . . on and on. So many things seemed somehow out of whack. Naturally, this raised great doubts in Gayle's mind about who she herself was, about what she could trust to be real. It was only when she was seventeen that she learned the truth. This, by the way, was one of my starting points in writing *Not Me*.

BK: Is it love that awakens the humanity in Heinrich Mueller? Is love his salvation? Or was it not love at all, but a redirection of hatred? And what role does love play in his newfound compassion?

ML: It is actually conversation—his ability to have one. Love comes at the end of that conversation, not at the beginning. What emerges first is empathy—and this only slowly. Empathy arises from contiguity, I suppose; from rubbing shoulders, but not in the same old way. Heinrich had plenty of contact with Jews in the camps, yet he never saw them as anything but Other. That's the issue of blindness coming up again. The Jews were always right there, he just couldn't see them. Somehow, as Heshel, he allows them to enter his field of vision. I don't think I can explain it more than that. It's a mystery. And like everything mysterious, it is always present, just invisible. Call it the string theory of the soul. There are all these dimensions, alternative universes, all around us, all the time. Then suddenly, for no reason, two of these collide and bang! A new universe is born. For Heshel, it is not about love or hate, but about reconfiguring his universe of perception so that he actually can love and hate; then there is this wholeness in him that transcends categories.

BK: A disturbing effect is created with the details of uniforms. Heinrich/Heshel is so pointedly unimpressed with his lack of a uniform as a soldier in Israel (such a lovely note is hit with his being pleased with the Eisenhower jacket he gets). Later Moskovitz tells him he looks good in his uniform. This reflects the intent of SS uniforms, the elegance of them, and how attractive the men looked in uniform. Is there something inherently fascist and/or sexually exciting about all uniforms? Or were you getting at something else with these parallels?

ML: No one else has mentioned this business of the Eisenhower jacket, which seemed so important to me when I wrote it. It does completely encapsulate Heinrich and at the same time point to the Heshel he is one day to become. However, I myself never drew the connection with Moskovitz's remark—I was merely thinking about her feelings—her love and anger and her inability or refusal to express them at that moment. The uniform is both distancing and intimate. It romanticizes. The object recedes, and the space is filled up with feeling; all men look good in uniform. Heinrich's vanity separates him from those around him, but in the end he becomes the uniform, doesn't he? It is while wearing it, finally embracing what it seems to stand for, that he kills the two people he most cherishes.

BK: How does Michael's distance from his own son mirror his relationship with his father? Is the distance between both sets of fathers and sons the by-product of secrets kept for too long?

ML: Michael's distance from Josh is a reflection of his distance from himself. Memory and love are connected, just as are memory and ethics. In this regard I always think of E. M. Forster's "only connect." Michael lives in a world of entropy—nothing holds together. Michael actually has no secrets, only holes. Perhaps these are caused by Heshel's secrets, but I rather think it is his horror at his own past that torments him. If his love for his sister destroyed her, even with the kindest of intentions, what might it do to his son? Certainly he had to ask himself that question. Beyond this, though, I think I was asking myself—how do we hold our lives together when we truly have no clear sense of identity? How can we love if we are disconnected from ourselves? It's not just Michael's problem. It's the condition of our lives.

BK: There are moments when there seems to be something of Raskolnikov in Heshel, when it seems to be guilt and guilt alone that is driving him. Or on some level does Heshel continue to believe that as Heinrich, he never did anything very wrong?

ML: I think on every level he thinks he did something wrong. But he pities himself enough not to punish himself or turn himself in. Even though he spends the rest of his life atoning for, and even absorbing the identity of, his victims, he does it in secret. What does that say about him? Like Raskolnikov, it is not merely guilt that drives him, but a sense of inherent superiority. This is also what he has to break through. Does he succeed? The reader can judge. In general our problem is not that we don't see that we've done wrong, but what we do with that information. How do we repress it, transform it? How does it debilitate us, innervate us?

BK: I know a woman who, as an adult, learned that her adored and beloved grandfather had been an SS officer and served time in prison for war crimes. How does someone—can someone—reconcile these opposing forces of revulsion and hatred with filial love?

ML: I am curious to know how she dealt with it. I think filial love is very complex, as it is wrapped up in one's own identity to such a great extent. It is rarely without its compliment of resentments and anger, yet its pull can be irresistible, even when parents and children no longer speak to one another, or speak only in generalities. But I do think that a child, however grown, cannot be whole unless he or she reconciles with his or her parents, regardless of their crimes. In Michael's case, love wins. It is important, not only for his own well-being, but for that of his son. But even greater than that is the role of love in holding off the strong forces of chaos and cruelty that wish to, and often do, rule the world. The power of family love is to bind us together against these forces. The more we extend that family, the safer we will be.

BK: During his time in Israel, Heinrich's anti-Semitism periodically revealed itself in his thoughts and to the reader. This struck me as absolutely true. Does he really never again harbor these thoughts? Is it possible to entirely eradicate our own prejudices and bigotry? Or must a bit of it always linger?

ML: I don't know. I really don't. To what extent do we ever fully slough off the prejudices of our youth? To what extent does immersion in the other eradicate the old self? Years ago, I lived with a non-Jewish woman. Everything was fine until one day when we got into a huge fight about something, I can't remember what, and she called me a dirty Jew. She immediately retracted it, of course, but there it was. I have many residual prejudices of my own. They don't guide my life, or my behavior, but they lurk, and every so often come into consciousness. By the way, the woman I spoke of—long after we broke up, she converted to Judaism. Strange, but I hadn't remembered that until just now. In that way, I am like my character, Michael. So many things are repressed; you never know what is really driving you.

BK: If we are to assume that Heinrich the Terrible indeed transformed into Heshel the Good, hope is offered. Why is such a transformation so slow in coming to our collective human nature? Why after it is proclaimed "never again" has genocide happened not only again and again, but the world has consistently turned a blind eye? Have we not learned anything from history?

ML: The only way for the world to change is for people to actually listen to each other's stories. This is not so easy. At heart, I don't believe human nature can change. However, I have seen, and I know it to be true, that individual people can change in quite astounding ways. But to do so, one must constantly struggle against one's own instinct and will. It requires a very high level of self-awareness and motivation. But let's face it, people enjoy conflict; we cannot learn from history because we are always rewriting it. It's fine and good to say "Hey, you guys, stop shooting at each other." But when somebody crosses our own turf, it's a different matter. So much of conflict is in the realm of imagination. You get a Muslim and a Hindi in the same room. They sit down to dinner, share jokes, and have a nice time. But you take the idea of Islam, and the idea of Hinduism—and then all the sudden you have Kashmir, and everyone is killing each other. How is that possible? As it happens, that seems to be the subject of my next book—not Kashmir, but the tragedy that while conflict is largely imaginary, it is at the same time absolutely inescapable.

BK: What elements of *Not Me*, if any, are autobiographical?

ML: When I wrote *Not Me*, I was convinced nothing in it was autobiographical. And indeed, there are no Nazis in my family, and no Holocaust survivors, either. No terrible family secrets, no journals, no horrible parenting. My real father was born in Newark, New Jersey. I don't think fiction should be autobiographical—it's so much more interesting and pleasant to make things up. But of course, much of me did intrude into the story on slippered feet, so to speak. At first it was the use of familiar locations, which helped in creating a sense of reality for my characters. The father's apartment is my parent's apartment, much exaggerated. Kibbutz Naor looks very much like the one I lived on for a short time when I was seventeen. But then I noticed that little events, memories of which I was only partially conscious, crept into the story. The violin in the closet (I had forgotten entirely that my real sister did play the violin as a child), the business with the magic act for show-and-tell (in real life, it was playing the saxophone—I stood up to play and realized I had forgotten how—but I got so many laughs, everyone thought I was being awful on purpose: a great life lesson)—things like that. And of course, I must have been dealing with my own father's death, though I was only vaguely aware of it as I was writing. But no, the novel itself is not autobiographical!

BK: Please tell us a little about your writing process and perhaps you can use that to segue into a brief mention about the contents of your next project.

ML: I don't like to talk about what I'm working on, because, who knows, I may just tear the whole thing up and start on something else. But mainly, if I talk about it, it loses some of its energy, and becomes harder to write. My process, though, is to begin with a premise—a "what if"—and go from there. I don't know who will inhabit the book, and certainly I don't know what will happen except in the vaguest outline. I do write notes from time to time, but they are also in the form of "what ifs." I like to set up road blocks for myself, allow things to happen for reasons I have not yet understood. I sometimes create histories of characters, timelines, relationship schematics, things like that. I also do an enormous amount of research, mostly as I'm writing. But basically, I just sit down and write at least three pages a day, five days a week, and see what happens. In *Not Me*, the premise was "What if my father were a Nazi?" In the new book the premise is something like: "What if someone frees himself from tyranny, only to become the victim of something even worse?" I'm trying to be unclear. I hope I've succeeded.