An unforgettable story

‘The Street Sweeper,’ Elliot Perlman’s monumental and, at times, mesmerizing novel, is a meditation on memory – and its relationship to history

A t the end of a long workday, Lamont Williams, an African-American janitor at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan, heads up to the ninth floor to resume his ongoing conversation with Henryk Mandelbrot, a terminally ill patient.

“Where were we?” the old man asks.

“ Auschwitz,” the former convict replies. “Most of the Jews got there by train but you didn’t get there by train.”

Mandelbrot is impressed: “You remember. Good. You have to remember.”

The Street Sweeper, Elliot Perlman’s monumental and, at times, mesmerizing novel, is a meditation on memory – and its relationship to history. Moving back and forth in time and teeming with dozens of compelling characters, the novel vividly recreates the experiences of black and white workers in Chicago’s meat-packing industry in the 1930s and ’40s; the horrors of Nazi concentration camps and the heroism of the Jews in them; the efforts of a psychologist at the Illinois Institute of Technology (who fled Poland with his infant daughter a few years before World War II began) to make a permanent record of the Holocaust; and the racial politics of New York City in the 21st century.

Memories, Perlman reminds us, are stored in the cells of the brain. Every neuron “holds some pixel, some datum, and even if one is lost, the sequence is interrupted” and retrieval becomes difficult or impossible. Throughout the novel, Perlman experiments with different strategies to imprint information so that it can be retained and recalled.

The Street Sweeper is, by design, long and repetitious. Perlman refers to a person again and again by his given name, his surname and some identifying characteristic (Henry Border, the psychologist; Dan Ehrlich, Head of Human Resources). Some of his characters declare and then censure their conversation partners.

To document the scale and scope of the Holocaust and remind readers that the victims of Auschwitz were individuals “with memories, affections, ambitions, relationships, opinions, values, and accomplishments” Perlman gives each of them a distinctive trait as they descend into the crematorium: “Then came another five, then another, a carpenter whose wife said he had worked too much, a tailor came, then a man with a singing voice, the carpenter, the younger of the two doctors, the engineer, the thief.”

Nonetheless, and despite the Dickensian tidiness of its plot resolutions, in The Street Sweeper Perlman burnishes his reputation as a masterful storyteller who captures the cadences of consciousness and conversation and the varieties and vagaries of cruelty, courage and compassion.

In the opening pages of the novel, he takes us inside an express bus to Manhattan with Lamont Williams, as an angry and probably deranged Hispanic man in a suit berates the Jamaican driver for making him late for work – and the passengers ponder what they might say or do to prevent a violent altercation. Lamont, Perlman reveals, knows just how the driver feels. He, too, had been in positions “in which the heated breeze from another man’s mouth had fanned his own sense of powerlessness” and the only remedy “was to strike back.” And so he hopes that he, a man on parole, will not be called upon to do something.

And Perlman’s narrative of Mandelbrot’s experiences as a Sonderkommando at Auschwitz, herding fellow Jews to their death while plotting an uprising against their captors, is a tour de force. When the revolt is crushed, Mandelbrot survives, we learn, by instinct and accident (his name is intended to direct our thoughts to Benoît Mandelbrot, the great mathematician, who explained the “dark night sky” riddle and contributed to chaos theory). In a place and time where “there was no logic but death,” those who escaped through a hole in the fence and fled to Bajsko were tracked down and killed, Mandelbrot tells Lamont, while the “coward who ran into a burning building and hid, he lived until now.”

Unless our vision of the present is clouded by national, ethnic or religious mythologies and prejudices, Perlman emphasizes, memories and the histories that draw on them can serve as moral, social and political compasses. They can demonstrate that we are surprisingly close to the men and women who preceded us – and that they mattered: “And what else is life from the time you were born but a struggle to matter, at least to someone?”

You may be able to put The Street Sweeper down, but you will, in all likelihood, find it unforgettable.

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