Can a person avoid guilt by opting out?

GUSTAFSON

If Paul Pry were to open him like a tin, Joseph Skwizek - the protagonist of William Gass's long-awaited novel - might find himself, referring to a mythical figure who pries into people's lives, 'the tin would be empty, not even oily; it would just a flight abroad, and light would fly from it as a fly flies from disappointment... Not a single soul or sack of the'

Well, not quite. Joseph opens up - to himself - to a checked past. In 1944, he was attending a high school, and his best friend, who was Jewish, left him behind. Rudi Skwizek remained in London as Yankel Finkel and then Raymond Scifield, before disappearing without a trace. His wife and children abandoned their identity - as well as they were - and relocated to the United States.

In Middle C, Gass - an 88-year-old emeritus professor of philosophy at Washington University in St. Louis and the author of more than a dozen books of fiction and non-fiction - uses Joseph to reflect on human identity, creating an extraordinary work that, like life itself, is dark, disturbing, inexplicable, mysterious, fascinating and funny.

The novel is often abstract and, well, philosophical. Moving back and forth in time, Gass describes the young Joseph's take on his triumphs and tribulations at Augustus College, his later perceptions as Joseph - an associate professor of music at Whittebaier College, a Lutheran institution in Ohio - and some aborted sexual encounters. Despite a brief discussion of World War II and a single reference to Vietnam, the novel provides neither political nor social context. It is often impossible to tell what decade Skwizek is in.

Skwizek spends much of his life ravaging the sentence he wants to pronounce on humanity. "First Skwizek felt mankind must perish, then he feared it might survive." He also enunciates an "arcoity collection," consisting mostly of treatises on holocausts, pogroms, extermination and racial cleansing, and articles and photographs from newspapers and magazines, which he collects in folders and pins onto his attic walls.

Like many of us, he asks what the duties, God, Jehovah and Allah, were doing when their minions were massacring so many men, women and children. He believes that the slaughter of the 'un question' and "the holocausts" are far more amusing proof that the holocausts are justified.

More interesting, though, is Skwizek's obsessive mind - inhabited, he thinks, from his father - to pass through the "reasonably clean chain of complicity in human affairs. " When the day of reckoning comes, he wants to tell his accusers - 'and accused he would be' - that, when others were destroying cities, debating principles, fashioning laws, "weapunizing life from all life like water from a sponge."

In the end, the man may or may not have decided that "a man should change his coat" - just in case he does do so, and only to conduct his business, "not for his family or for his friends to whom he is favored by being." He may or may not have stopped trying to square the circle by pretending to be the kind of middle C man who could "disappear because he is so like everybody else as not to count," when he was "not such a man."

Most of all, even if Joseph has learned that it takes a lot of digging in the dust to keep one's hands clean, he may or may not be willing or able to act on that knowledge: The shock of recognition (and self-knowledge) wears off of Joseph Skwizek. In short order, he is relieved of his role, convinced that silence is the best strategy, and ready to return to his archity collection and his "more virtuous days."