

Book Review: "The Rise of David Levinsky" ; and 'I Killed'

by Arthur Salm - CNS

It can't be called "serendipity" when you happen across something you already know is good.

So it wasn't serendipitous that a copy of Abraham Cahan's novel "The Rise of David Levinsky" (1917) ended up in my hands. I had found myself in the public library with a few minutes to kill, and remembered that I'd been meaning for years to look up a quote from the book. I pictured it clearly as the opening line, but memory had twisted things a little - it's the first line of the second paragraph:

TALES FROM THE ROAD - There are hundreds of tales to entertain you in 'I Killed: True Stories of the Road From America's Top Comics,' compiled by Ritch Shydner and Mark Schiff. CNS Photo. "When I was young I used to think that middle-aged people recalled their youth as something seen through a haze. I know better now. Life is much shorter than I imagined it to be."

(Still, looking at it now with an editor's eye, I'd have had those lines kick off the book, transposing it with what is in fact the opener: "Sometimes, when I think of my past in a superficial, casual way, the metamorphosis I have gone through strikes me as nothing short of a miracle.")

Then, naturally, I started reading the book all over again. It's not as if I don't have way too much right-now stuff that I'm supposed to be plowing through, but by this time things were pretty much beyond my control, because "The Rise of David Levinsky" is a terrific book.

It opens in Eastern Europe, where the soon-orphaned narrator is a dirt-poor boy in a small, backwater shtetl. The book follows his journey from Talmudic scholar to New World immigrant and sweatshop toiler, through his first forays into small-time entrepreneurship and headlong into what would become known as the American Dream.

Or is it? "The Rise of David Levinsky" was a direct reference to William Dean Howells' "The Rise of Silas Lapham" a generation earlier, and like Howells, Cahan (who founded the Yiddish-language daily Forward) employed the title ironically: The novel is in a very real sense the story of the fall of David Levinsky. ("There are cases where success is a tragedy," the narrator will conclude.)

Despite its languid pacing, "David Levinsky" holds up well, in part because it seems a prologue to the bold, assertive, post-immigrant fiction to come. It would be a natural, indeed a thrilling progression to turn the last page of "The Rise of David Levinsky," put the book down, pick up Saul Bellow's "The Adventures of Augie March," and continue reading: "I am an American, Chicago born - Chicago, that somber city - and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent."

Now, this is serendipity: I somehow missed it in hardcover, but there was no way the paperback edition of "I Killed: True Stories of the Road From America's Top Comics" (Three Rivers Press, 263 pages, \$14), compiled by Ritch Shydner and Mark Schiff, was going to make it past my desk unmolested. There are hundreds of tales here, many of them to varying degrees obscene, many of them hilarious (not a one-to-one correspondence, but, OK, pretty close). I tried to relate one to a friend last week, and could not do it: kept breaking up, giggling and snorting like a fool. Most unprofessional. I'd pass it along here, but believe me, I so can't.

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