

**A Conversation with Daniel Mendelsohn**  
**author of THREE RINGS: A Tale of Exile, Narrative, and Fate**

**THREE RINGS weaves together personal narrative, literary criticism, history, and, I would suspect, fiction. How would you describe the genre of this book?**

I guess you could say I've been working in a subgenre of nonfiction of my own: one that has a powerful storytelling impulse and often reads like fiction, but incorporates other "nonfiction" genres—criticism, biography, scholarship, autobiography. I want my work to raise questions about what "fictionality" and "reality" are: particularly about how narrative, the desire to craft a good story, can corrupt truth. It's not that you need to lie, necessarily; but even just shaping a story, even just leaving out the boring parts or the repetitions, is a kind of falsification. As a writer of narrative nonfiction—that is, a narrative that, unlike novels, makes essential truth claims—I'm obsessed by that problem.

**Can you talk about the title and subtitle—what are the "three rings," and what exactly do exile, narrative, and fate have to do with one another?**

The three rings are the stories I tell about the lives and works of three authors from three eras, all exiles or refugees, whose works pondered questions about "narrative" (and who were particularly interested in digression as a literary technique). As *Three Rings* proceeds, what look at first like narrative digressions of my own turn out to reveal uncanny connections among the three writers, their exiles, lives, and books; as my narration reaches its climax, the appearance of a fourth character—a nineteenth-century Turkish translator—finally reveals how all the stories were linked in history. That finale suggests (to me at least) that history itself—let's call it fate?—sometimes operates in a literary way.

**Your new book is a work of nonfiction that has elicited very strong advance praise—from novelists. What do you think that's about?**

In part, I think it's because the book is a writer's book—it's a kind of field guide to different approaches to telling stories. It actually began as a study of digression (one of my favorite subjects) and evolved into a meditation on narrative more generally. I think writers who are interested (as I am, from the nonfiction side of things) in the sheer power of storytelling are particularly interested in that. And of course, it's full of amazing stories, too. I like the idea that novelists like it so much, because I'm always trying to break this very prevalent prejudice in the literary world that "the novel" has a monopoly on great storytelling.

**In your previous works of narrative nonfiction—*The Elusive Embrace*, *The Lost*, and *An Odyssey*—one theme that you keep before the reader's eyes is the difficulty of extracting narrative from life. For example, as you put it in *The Lost*, "how what happened becomes the story of what happened." Can you talk about that?**

In my first memoir, *The Elusive Embrace*, I wrote a lot about the “seductions of narrative” — the pleasures of a good tale, however iffy its relation to the facts may be. In my own life, those seductions were embodied by my grandfather, who was an amazing raconteur and storyteller — but whose stories, as I learned much later, were often fabricated or at least highly “massaged.” (The revelation of the truth behind one of his favorite family stories is the climax of that book.) So that got me thinking about the tension between what actually happens in life and how we have this very powerful impulse to turn that raw material into a story, a shapely narrative that — unlike most of what happens in real life — has a strong arc, a beginning and a middle and an end. This issue became far more fraught when I was researching *The Lost*, in which I was trying to piece together an account of the lives and deaths of my relatives who perished in the Holocaust, people of whom almost no traces survive — and I was once again struck by how overwhelming, really, is our impulse to “narrate” even when we barely have any facts. I put that dilemma front and center in that book — wrote about this ongoing tension between “history” and “story” — and foregrounded how uncomfortable I felt as the person turning “what happened” to my relatives into the story that is, of course, the book. The problem is this: had I put everything that I learned from my research into the book, it would have contained all of the “history” — but would have been a terrible book. You have to shape it, in order for people to feel it; so “story” always wins.

**Okay, so that theme, which in those other works serves larger themes—identity; history; fatherhood—becomes central in THREE RINGS, which at various points presents substantial histories of certain kinds of narrative techniques. Why did you think it important to put narrative as a theme front and center in the new book?**

The idea for *Three Rings* germinated during the writing of *An Odyssey*, which centers on an epic that, because its hero is a notorious teller of tall tales, is obsessed by questions about narrative, truth, and fiction. So that got me thinking that it would be interesting to devote a whole book to these questions, which have been hovering around my earlier books. In those earlier books, the concerns about storytelling emerged naturally from a strong personal or historical narrative; so this time the question for the new book was, what story could make these literary issues come alive? And then I started thinking about Auerbach, a refugee from Hitler, who began his great study of Western Literature, *Mimesis*, with an analysis of the *Odyssey*’s digressive style; and that got me thinking about the connections between political exile and narrative digression; and then I started thinking of other writers of “Odysseyan” narratives — Fénelon, who wrote a fan-fiction sequel to the *Odyssey*, and Sebald, whose novels seem to “wander” with no hope of arriving at a satisfying destination — and I realized I had the stories I wanted to tell: theirs.

**And in telling their stories with this book, you’re telling, really, the story of everything you’ve ever written about. Could we say that THREE RINGS is a culmination of all of your previous work? It is . . . Mendelsohn Unleashed? Mendelsohn distilled?**

Yes! This is the shortest book I’ve ever written, and yet in a funny way it embraces more of me and my themes than any of its predecessors: the Holocaust, the *Odyssey*, the joys of literary study, the history of classical scholarship in particular, family stories, refugee stories, French literature, Proust, Racine, Poland, Paris, America. It’s a very intense distillation and yet weirdly I don’t think any single item on the list gets shortchanged.

**Your own struggles as a writer—particularly your difficulties in finding the right narrative form for your 2017 memoir *An Odyssey*—become an important strand in the book’s larger fabric, interwoven as it is with the stories of Erich Auerbach, François Fénelon, W. G. Sebald, and Yusuf Kâmil Pasha and their struggles to interpret, refashion, translate, and reimagine the classics. Do you think it’s dangerous to reveal the failures and defeats of your process to readers?**

No, not at all—not when the revelation serves a point. In *Three Rings*, the story of how difficult it was for me to find the right form for *An Odyssey* illuminates the very questions about narrative that I’m concerned with: how should a story be told? What is the difference between “what happened” (which is to say, history, or “life”) and the way we shape that in order to create a good narrative? All of the authors I write about faced the same problem, and I thought including my own struggles in the book was actually useful.

**You are an award-winning and internationally best-selling memoirist and an award-winning critic as well—as well as a classics professor, translator of modern Greek poetry, and, more recently, editor-at-large of *The New York Review of Books* and director of the Robert B. Silvers Foundation. How do we connect all these dots?**

To my mind, what I do—writing memoir or narrative nonfiction, writing criticism, translating—are just facets of the same project: I’m a person who’s interested in many kinds of literature and my career reflects that. I do think that in popular conversation there is this irritating tendency to posit a firewall between genres, and I certainly want to break that down. Indeed in my roles at *The New York Review of Books* and the Silvers Foundation, I am ardently supporting the possibilities of nonfiction—not least, by means of the grants and prizes I’ve created at the Foundation—trying to help interesting nonfiction get the attention it deserves. It’s amazing how fiction continues to dominate the imagination of the literary world. Most of the prizes, most of the recognition the literary establishment doles out, are for novels: we still think of the novel as the most authentic form of “literature.” I think that’s preposterous—just as it’s preposterous to relegate (as we do) everything that is not the novel to one lumpy category, “nonfiction.” So that’s another connective thread here: a crusade for nonfiction as literature.

**You have been writing as an openly gay writer since you started publishing in the late 1980s. How do you think being gay has affected your writing—your style, your subjects, your outlooks—as a memoirist, critic, and scholar? For instance, exile, loss, and wandering are ongoing themes and interests: is there a link there?**

I don’t think there’s any question that being gay has shaped my writing, whether I’m writing about explicitly gay subjects or not. My first book was about trying to balance the gay life of a single man in the 1990s with a new life as a father, my second book was about the Holocaust; but the same consciousness informs both. Yes, I’m very interested in themes of loss, exile, memory: themes that have preoccupied many gay writers, at least of a certain generation, because as a gay person you’re so often forced to endure a kind of exile from yourself—you

have to separate your “real” self from the public self you show to the world. Certainly that was the case for me when I was an adolescent in the 1970s, and that wrenching experience gives you a deep feeling for stories about concealment, flight, and disguise.

And there’s no question that those same circumstances shaped me as a critic. The gay person, who knows from experience that not everyone is what they seem, is always asking, “What’s the real story, what is this person hiding, how does this narrative cover up a painful truth?” And it seems to me these are just the questions that the critic should be asking: what’s the hidden story, what’s going on here that even the artist—the author/filmmaker/playwright/choreographer/whatever—may not be aware of? I think being gay is a perfect training for being a critic.

**Is *THREE RINGS* intended to make a point about the meaning and role of great literature at our own time of global political and cultural turmoil? Your book centers on the stories of scholar-writers who turned to the classics of literature in times of political and/or personal crisis—particularly the story of Odysseus, the great wanderer. How is reading the classics relevant to our lives now?**

The great debate about the “relevance” (or lack thereof) of the classics has never ended. Some hold that they have no relevance because (basically) they’re so old; others, that we should be suspicious of “great books” because the cultures that produced them are so alien (and, often, appalling: misogyny, slavery, you name it); still others, more conservative, insist that the classics are relevant because Western civilization springs from the Greeks and Romans and for that reason alone everyone should read them. I have always tried to stake out what I see as a commonsensical middle ground: I read great books both because of and in spite of the cultures that produced them. You need to appreciate the cultural specificity—the intense patriarchy of Athenian culture, for instance—to make sense of these works (there’s a reason so many heroines of Greek tragedy flip out!); but in the end you have to throw it away and find what Erich Auerbach, one of the heroes of *Three Rings*, called the “common connectedness” of art. We are not the Greeks, but the story of someone who spends half a lifetime trying to get home to a spouse and a family cannot help but touch you, whether you’re European, Asian, Klingon, or Martian. I loathe the idea of the classics as some kind of pill you should take because it’s “good for you”—as cultural medicine. For me, these works have the same dynamic, ongoing, astonishingly immediate relevance to our lives that any good work of literature has.

I try to enact that relevance in my books by weaving various classics into the fabric of their narratives—Greek and Roman poetry in *The Elusive Embrace*, Homer’s epic in *An Odyssey*, Genesis in *The Lost*. In each of them I’m constantly holding the literary/critical element of the narrative (the history, the scholarship, the textual analysis) up to the personal narrative, as if they were two mirrors. The picture that each shows you is infinitely deepened by the reflection of the other. In doing this, all my books are implying that the classics of the past are vital tools for thinking about the great issues of the present: family, mortality, identity, history. And certainly the questions we want answered are particularly urgent—as they were for all of the authors I write about—in times of political and cultural turmoil, such as those we’re going through now.

**And times of dizzying ephemerality too, right? Attention spans are not what they once were—we’re bombarded with information and communications every minute of every day,**

**from social media and advertising and cable television. In much of your work—THREE RINGS more than most—you focus on what has lasted.**

Yes. It's too easy to dismiss this (as I think of it) "crisis of attentiveness" as a problem of the millennials, or the younger generation, or whatever—we all suffer from it, let's face it. Naturally I see it in my children and my students especially, since they've grown up in this frenzied atmosphere of endless communication and "contact" and commentary; but it's permeated everyone's life. I myself don't read with the same single-minded concentration I used to have; nobody I know can focus with the purity you were able to bring to reading or writing even twenty-five years ago. So I find the very existence of these works, their permanence, their long record of having resisted trends and fads and even attempts to destroy them, rather reassuring. And I've noticed that my students are very invested in the texts for precisely this reason. Ninety-eight percent of what's whizzing around the ether is noise; I think it's refreshing for them, who are so young, to think about things that have quiet confidence, that have manifested a demonstrable staying power—because it makes them ponder just what it is about them that has proved so resistant to time; and, by extension, just what are the things that are eternal: what allows them to participate in the "common connectedness" of human experience.