

## **Brief Description of Apikoros Sleuth**

The novel, *Apikoros Sleuth*, is a murder mystery in the form of a Talmudic inquiry. The main narrator is an ex-60s political activist turned bitter recluse. During the course of his daily perusal of the obituary column of the newspaper, he notices a string of familiar names. Someone is murdering his ex-comrades. In spite of his militant apathy and suspicion of anything resembling exegesis, he is eventually forced into the role of recalcitrant detective. The attempt to resolve the crime emulates, in a limited way, the Talmudic form and method of inquiry: the rigorous and relentless pursuit of truth and justice in the full knowledge of the impossibility of ever entirely attaining the goal. Hence the formal explorations of my own text, both at the level of visual presentation and of syntax.

Why combine murder mystery and Talmud? The murder mystery and the Talmud both operate on the terrain of ethics, issues of life, death, guilt and responsibility to the community, and they both engage in detailed argument in the quest for truth. The mystery genre, of course, in its manner of achieving profluence, offers a quintessential model for narrative. The Talmud, however, complicates the mystery by its open-ended structure and the rhizomatic progress of its argument, thus suggesting the possibility of an aesthetic responsive to the limits of representation.

The polyvocal nature of Talmudic inquiry is reflected in the physical arrangement of its pages, each of which contains a number of related commentaries and interpretive arguments by various authors arranged in columns and inserts around the original, dense and difficult text. Because the Talmud is the inscription of knowledge which was for centuries transmitted orally, the links between sections are often associative. Linear progress is further undermined by continual digressions and rhetorical shifts. Finally, the dense elliptical style of the Mishna and Gemara, in the original Hebrew and Aramaic, results in a plasticity: the "body of the text" (a Talmudic phrase) acts figurally to further open up the signifying process. In working out the prose style of this book, I have tried to reproduce something of that Mishnaic density and repetition. The reader may identify a number of recurring if decontextualised phrases commonly employed in classical Talmudic argument.

My principal reference has been the Sanhedrin Tractate, which, strangely (or not so strangely), begins by defining the various capital crimes and appropriate methods of execution, before, going on to describe the arrangement of the world in a future time of the Messiah.

### **The Plot of *Apikoros Sleuth*, a novel by Robert Majzels**

Despite the narrator's repeated claims to the contrary, there is a plot in *Apikoros Sleuth*.

A one-time radical activist turned recluse, the narrator of *Apikoros Sleuth*, whom we shall call Apikoros (though he's never named), now lives alone in a small tenement studio. Even the occasional outing to buy groceries, the confrontation with the elevators, and then the shopkeepers, is difficult for our narrator to bear. He survives by gradually selling off his collection of books to the second-hand bookstore. The building is rundown, no one pays rent, and the janitor, a Ukrainian refugee turned Jehovah's Witness, has abandoned any kind of maintenance, allowing the garbage to accumulate in the incinerator. His son, who used to go around collecting rent, seems to have been molested by one of the tenants (chapter 1).

Browsing through the obituaries of his local paper, he recognizes the name of an old comrade in arms turned dentist, Tony Pigafetta (chapter 4). What kills a dentist? Probably just a dissatisfied patient with bad teeth and a low pain threshold. And yet, Pigafetta is not the first of his old pals from the bright-eyed 60s to die an unnatural death. Other familiar names: ex-comrades Mustapha and Legrand (they had turned to exporting and importing) have recently darkened the pages of the obituary section. Still, our Apikoros has no desire to engage in sleuthing. He prefers to spend his days on his cot brooding over a second-hand copy of the Sanhedrin Tractate of the Talmud, a treatise on the World to Come describing when and how we will achieve it, and who will get in. We also learn (chapter 8) that, as a teenager, he left home and ended up homeless for a period of time.

His resolve to renounce the world is soon tested when he receives a letter from another ex-member of the movement, a Welshman named Howley. Howley suggests there may be a link between the deaths of the ex-comrades and wants a meeting with the narrator to discuss his suspicions (chapter 9). He fixes a meeting to which Apikoros chooses not to go. The day after

the scheduled meeting, an article in the newspaper announces Howley's dead body has been discovered at the place they were to meet.

Howley's death raises a number of questions. Is someone murdering ex-members of the radical group to cover up their shared radical past? Or is a diehard fanatic rubbing out those ex-revolutionaries who've sold out? We also learn it was Apikoros who recruited Howley to the radical group (chapter 11). Howley's political engagement cost him his factory job. After their movement collapsed, Howley became a gardener. Betty Boop, Apikoros's partner left him for Howley.

Returning from a bit of shopping (Chapter 13 ), the narrator finds another ghost from the past, Shtick Giltgestalt, waiting in the lobby of the tenement. In their youth, Shtick had taught him to steal cars. Later, having become a revolutionary, the narrator recruited Shtick to the movement. Shtick was eventually expelled from the movement, suspected of shady dealings with the class enemy. The task of expelling was assigned to Apikoros. Now Shtick, all decked out in an Armani suit, seems to have become a wheeler-dealer in the financial world. But he claims to be worried about the deaths; he wants to know if Apikoros had any contact with Howley before the latter's murder. Apikoros ducks the questions and leaves Shtick in the lobby. When he gets up to his room, however, he discovers it's in shambles. Someone (he suspects Shtick) has done a savagely thorough search. The door is broken on its hinges and Howley's letter is missing.

Apikoros moves what's left of his books and cot into the apartment across the hall, an identical mirror image of his initial studio room and a half.

Apikoros goes out to buy a new shower curtain (Chapter 18). Upon his return to his room, he discovers Shtick Gestalt has been beheaded, his head left in one room, and his body in the other. Despite his horror, Apikoros searches the body, looking in vain for Howley's letter, which he suspected Shtick had stolen earlier. He hears a police siren in the street, grabs the Talmudic volume and a shower curtain, and heads for the elevators. As he enters one elevator to go down, he glimpses two policemen arriving in the other (Chapter 23).

Apikoros crosses the street and clambers up the slope in the park opposite his building to watch the police searching through his old room. He goes back down and along the street to the tenement. As he arrives at the door, the coroner's men are carrying out Shtick's body (and head).

Momentarily, we are invited to imagine Apikoros switching places with the dead man, and finding himself lying in two parts on the stretcher.

He heads into the park and downtown, looking urgently for a place to relieve himself (Chapter 26), finally arriving at the downtown office building in which Pigafetta the dentist once had his office.

He goes up to the 10<sup>th</sup> floor, goes into the washroom to relieve himself at last. On his way out, he encounters Joey Cafgu, another old comrade, but manages to elude him and go back down into the street.

Homeless and penniless, he walks back through the park toward his building. The police have stretched yellow ribbons across the doorways of his two apartments. At that moment, (chapter 28), Joey Cafgu (who clearly followed him there) emerges from the elevators behind him. Cafgu takes him (forcefully) back downtown to the office building. This time they go up to the office of Booger Rooney (chapter 30-38), one of the leaders of the defunct left-wing movement, and a fast talker, who is now a bourgeois politician in the midst of an electoral campaign. (For a glimpse of Booger as a small boy, see *Hellman's Scrapbook*.) Booger, either because he and his henchman Joey Cafgu are in fact responsible for the murders, or because he simply doesn't want a murder investigation to taint his electoral run, exacts a promise from Apikoros to be quiet about the deaths of Shtick and Howley, not to mention Legrand, Mustapha and Betty Boop. In any case, Booger points out, the prime suspect in both Howley and Shtick's murders has to be Apikoros himself. As for Betty, Booger claims she's not dead at all. Apikoros now considers the possibility that Booger had his ex-comrades murdered in order to keep his youthful political indiscretions quiet. Apikoros nevertheless, chooses the better part of valour and allows himself to be led out by Joey.

On the way down in the elevator, Apikoros attempts a bit of chanting in case Joey is a golem that might be exorcised (chapter 42). Joey quickly puts an end to that with a whack to the side of Apikoros' head (chapter 43).

Joey takes Apikoros to meet Betty Boop, who isn't dead after all (chapter 44), but was in hiding. Betty tells him she has been hiding from Howley, who has become violent. Booger Rooney and Joey Cafgu have merely been helping her. Apikoros can't think Booger capable of any disinterested act, now suspects the politician has some hold over Betty. Furthermore, Booger

may have seduced Betty away from Howley, as Howley did from Apikoros. This provides further motive for Booger to kill Howley.

Apikoros takes Betty to a rooming house where he used to live in the old days when he and Shtick were street hustlers. He intends to go through the house with her and out the back door, thereby losing Joey, just as Shtick used to do when he was being pursued by some mark he'd ripped off. But, inside the house, pausing for a moment in his old room, he lies down exhausted on the bed and falls asleep.

When he wakes up (chapter 49), there's only a cat staring at him and no sign of Betty or Cafgu. The landlady feeds him breakfast and tells him Joey came to fetch Betty. Thus fortified, and fearing Booger and Joey have done harm to Betty, he decides to confront Booger.

He returns to Booger's office, where he finds Rooney sprawling dead across his desk (chapter 51). Howley's missing letter is also there. Apikoros must rethink the case. Joey Cafgu may have murdered Shtick under Booger's orders, and brought Howley's letter back to his master, so as to frame Apikoros. But then who just murdered Booger? Perhaps a rebellious Cafgu? Or Betty Boop, to get free of his hold over her? When Joey walks into the office, Apikoros demands to know what he's done with Betty (chapter 53). The two fall to blows (chapter 54).

When he comes to, Apikoros hears the police sirens again. He hurries out, stepping into the washroom to wash off the blood (his own and possibly Booger's). Joey is already there, washing Apikoros' blood off his knuckles (chapter 55).

Joey takes Apikoros to an all-night diner for a bite to eat (chapter 57). Betty is waiting for them in the diner. She confesses to Apikoros that it was she who killed Howley. It was self-defense: he was violent and would not accept her leaving him. Rooney and Joey helped her to conceal the killing. In which case, Apikoros notes, they were trying to pin it on him. Perhaps Joey Cafgu, having also fallen in love with Betty, murdered his master to free her of Rooney's grip. But this doesn't explain who killed Pigafetta, nor Mustapha and Legrand. Apikoros raises the possibility that someone is killing off the old comrades because they have all sold out in one way or another, abandoned the struggle to change the world (chapter 59). At this point a reader might begin to suspect Apikoros himself.

Meanwhile Betty and Joey get up and leave the restaurant, leaving Apikoros with the bill (chapter 61). Having no money to pay, he ends up jumping through the plate glass window into the street.

He lies down in an alley and wraps himself in a newspaper (chapter 64).

A policeman wakes him and, whacking him with his baton, tells him to move along. Joey Cafgu appears at the end of the alley. Apikoros chooses to take a good beating from the cop rather than fall into the Cafgu's clutches. (chapter 68).

The policeman takes him down to the station. He appears in a lineup (chapter 69), but is released. Leaving the station, he spots the Ukrainian janitor's boy on the steps and concludes the boy was the one who was behind the glass in the lineup (chapter 70). If so, why didn't the boy finger Apikoros as the number one suspect in Shtick's murder? Perhaps Joey Cafgu, who's waiting in the street, paid the boy not to tell the police, but to deliver Apikoros into Joey's hands instead.

Meanwhile Betty Boop returns to the rooming house where Apikoros took her, moves in with the landlady in pink curlers, and decides to swear off boys (chapter 70-79).

Apikoros decides to return to his tenement and interrogate the Ukrainian janitor, to find out what he knows about Shtick's murder. But first he must get away from Joey Cafgu, which he does by throwing himself in front of a passing car (chapter 74). His right hand is sliced off in the accident. An ambulance arrives and takes him away. Once he's sure Joey is far behind, Apikoros bails out of the ambulance, and heads for his old tenement.

Meanwhile, we learn (belatedly) the truth about Mustapha and Legrand (chapter 75-77). They were in love and, following the collapse of the revolutionary movement, lived happily together until they lost their money in one of Shtick's schemes, and Legrand contracted AIDS. In the end, they committed suicide together. So, if there is a connection between the murders of ex-activists, Mustapha and Legrand are not part of it.

Apikoros climbs the stairs of the tenement to find the janitor. The Ukrainian janitor confesses: it was he who killed Shtick, thinking he was Apikoros. The janitor had concluded it was Apikoros who was molesting his boy, and gone up to his room with a saw. Unfortunately for Shtick, he had taken advantage of the fact that Apikoros was out shopping for shower curtains to

search his room for Howley's letter, to confirm his own suspicion that Apikoros killed Howley. It was Shtick that the enraged janitor found there and mistakenly killed (chapter 78-80).

The Ukrainian janitor had been in the process of removing the severed head and body from the premises when he heard the rising elevator containing Apikoros. He quickly put the head in the room across the hall (chapter 81). He left it there and went downstairs to his own apartment to call the police, hoping to pin the murder on Apikoros. This explains how Apikoros found the Shticky head in one room and the body in the other, across the hall. Once the janitor has confessed all this, Apikoros leaves him there and goes down to the street, where, once more, he runs into a lurking Joey Cafgu.

Meanwhile, it's election day, and Betty Boop accompanies the landlady to the polling station, which has been located in a school. Betty has no interest in voting, but welcomes the opportunity to take a walk and smoke (which is not permitted in the landlady's house).

Apikoros, fleeing through the streets from Cafgu, arrives at the school and takes refuge within (chapter 82-83). Once inside, he finds himself in the voting booth (where he begins by stealing the pencil provided). Betty, looking for a place to sneak a cigarette in a school, ends up stepping into the same booth as Apikoros.

As they are about, finally, to kiss, Joey Cafgu interrupts them. The two men naturally engage in more fisticuffs inside the booth (chapter 84). Betty's cigarette lights the booth on fire. The two men tumble out fighting, but Betty is caught inside the fire and dies. Apikoros notices the Hebrew word for truth scrawled in ash on Cafgu's head. He rubs out the letter *aleph*, leaving the word for death. This, according to the Kabbalah, happens to be the method for killing a golem, and it works on Joey. Alone now, Apikoros enters the washroom of the school and, in the mirror, sees the same word for truth on his own forehead. He erases the *aleph*.

What can we conclude from these events? Apikoros would almost certainly say, "nothing." But that's not entirely true. First of all, we can conclude that the murders are not the product of a single individual mind, nor a conspiracy, either to cover up the revolutionary past or to punish those who have abandoned it. The murders are individual and specific. That's important, not just as a commentary on the univocalism of literature, but also philosophically. To summarize, there are nine deaths in *Apikoros Sleuth*:

**Mustapha and Legrand**, faced with poverty and AIDS and discrimination, killed themselves.

Betty Boop killed **Howley** because he was a batterer.

An angry patient killed **Pigafetta** the dentist.

The Ukrainian Janitor mistakenly killed **Shtick Giltgestalt**, when he found him in Apikoros' apartment, having (probably mistakenly) concluded Apikoros was molesting the janitor's son.

Joey Cafgu killed **Booger Rooney** out of love for Betty, who had fallen under Rooney's thumb.

**Betty Boop** was killed in the fire caused by Apikoros and Joey fighting in the polling booth.

**Apikoros** killed **Cafgu** and himself.

So, no conspiracy. And yet, one might conclude that these murders are manifestations of a world gone bad, an era described by the Talmud as apocalyptic, when war, greed and intolerance reign. Which raises the possibility, as Apikoros concludes, that we are all partzufim, all of us at least partly golems, soulless beings, the products of a text gone bad. The world we live in has written a bad story across the surface of our foreheads. Basing himself on the Sefer Yetzirah and the 221 gates (all the possible pairs of letters in the Hebrew alphabet), Abraham Abulafia (13<sup>th</sup> century) devised a method to achieve *unio mystico* by permuting the 221 pairs of letters of the Hebrew alphabet with the Tetragrammaton and the five vowels. This method, done backwards, will destroy a golem. *Apikoros Sleuth* is an attempt, through the permutation of letters, to undo the golem.