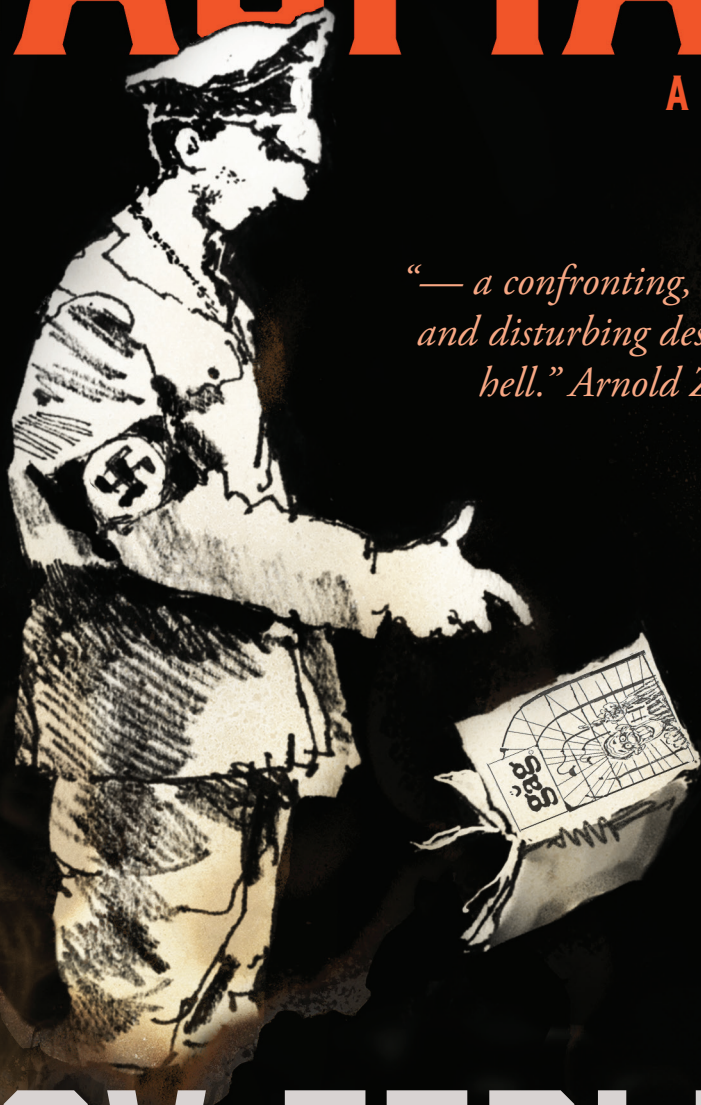


STAY FUNNY — OR DIE

GAGMAN

A NOVEL



*“— a confronting, haunting,
and disturbing descent into
hell.” Arnold Zable*

DOV FEDLER

AND JOANNE FEDLER

GAGMAN

A NOVEL

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AND JOANNE FEDLER

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BOOKS

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PART 1

The End

/ɛnd/

noun

A final part of something, especially a period of time, an activity, or a story

COMEDIAN'S NOTES I: Anything For A Laugh

You think you're a tough audience?

I've died more times than you've belched.

Sorry, that was in bad taste.

But hey, I'll try anything. Flatulence, hiccups, ablutions - the body offers such great material for a laugh. Is there anything a kid loves more than a fart joke?

Any kids in the house?

None? Just as well.

Tonight we're going to some dark places and the *kinderlach* need this *tsorres* like a *loch in kop*, a hole in the head.

There's an old Yiddish proverb, 'What soap is to the body, laughter is to the soul.'

If you'd seen what I've seen, you may not find jokes about soap funny anymore. Lighten up, nothing is sacred or immune from comedy. Everything is up for grabs.

Dov and Joanne Fedler

All I have to do is keep you laughing.

You think that's easy?

Come stand in my shoes for a moment.

What have you got to lose?

Nothing.

Every time I come out here and fail, I die.

Just like Jesus. I die for you - over and over

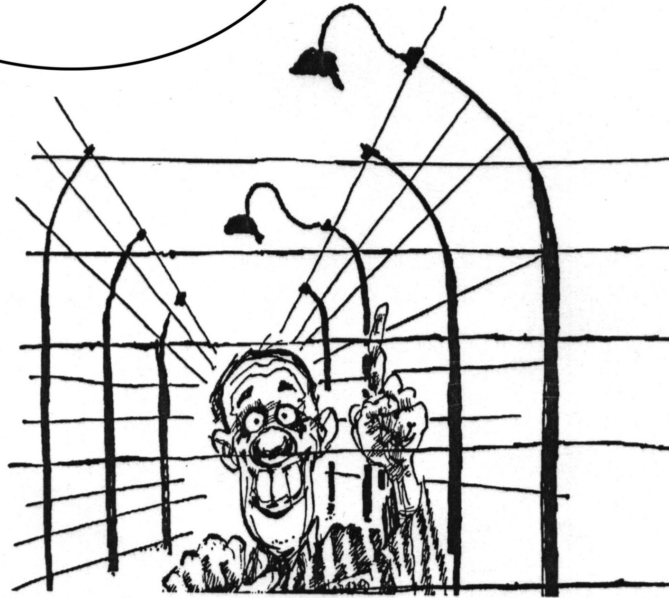
again. My trick is to turn the tables on you.

Land one that you didn't see coming.

Stop me if you've heard this one.

This one's gonna kill ya.

STOP ME
IF YOU'VE
HEARD
THIS ONE



The Original No-Name Brand

In the camp I was called ‘collaborator’ – a traitor to my own people. I didn’t have a people. This humourless bunch and I shared nothing in common except for the loss of our foreskins and our pathetic ambition to live through another day. They hated me for constantly mocking them and didn’t have enough names to call me. Now there’s a laugh. The first thing they took away from you at the first roll-call – the Appell – was your name. After we were tattooed with a number, a Kapo barked at us, ‘Forget your name! Here, all you are is a number.’

Even though it’s marked indelibly on my arm, I pretend it does not exist. It is as dead to me as my name. I avoid looking at it in the hope that it will disappear. I will wake up one morning, it will be gone, and I will find myself in the life beyond this nightmare.

But I am forever, at every awful awakening, at the morning Appell.

We have to stand stock-still wearing the thinnest rags. It is always cold. Wet. Or so it seems. We stand for hours on end as the block Kapo counts us. The tally he hands to the SS officer has to be correct otherwise he might end up standing with us. They are always so precise. The Kapo counts again. It takes hours. If the numbers don't match, they do it once more. If you drop to your knees or fall, you are taken away. You are dead. Later we will smell your scent in the smoke of the ovens as we work. The Appell is also used as a punishment. And they love to punish us. It is harder at the evening Appell. You are already exhausted at the morning roll-call and the evening Appell comes after a day of hard labour. You can barely stand. But you do. They know exactly who did what today.

'He didn't work hard enough.' Mark for punishment.

'This one resisted.' Mark for punishment.

'Here is one that actually tried to escape.' Punishment.

There is only one punishment.

We'd get the drift of you soon enough. You were done. Mostly overdone. Done and dusted. The ovens and the smoke never stopped.

'Alas, poor Yossel. I knew him well. Just this morning he shat beside me in the toilets. I'd know his stench anywhere.'

Each of us was an example to the next that it was pointless to resist.

The Kapos were our kings. They thrashed us, whipped us, killed us in an effort to ingratiate themselves with their masters.

You know how that thing worked? They appointed prisoners – a 'yellow star brigade' – to supervise the labour. They also called it

‘prisoner self-administration’. It was a neat way of turning victim on victim. And a neat way of saving costs.

Oh, they were diligent. Once a Kapo, you didn’t want to go back. To become one, you had to be a big *macher*. Every accredited shit, bully or gangster with a criminal record was pulled from the ranks and thrown in like a mangy cat among us pigeons. They watched us closely and selected those with a talent for violence, a taste for blood. Once elevated to a *Lagerpolizist*, you had perks, near decent meals, barracks, cigarettes, Schnapps. You could have a life; if you could call this living. You had to be on your toes, or on ours, to keep your gig. Kill us a little every day, but not quite. There was a lot of work to be done and you worked to the credo that *Arbeit Macht Frei*. Work liberates. The Kapos worked us harder than the SS. The SS mostly just watched our dog-eat-dog world.

But they reserved the right to kill.

Unmensch

They called us *Schweinehund*.

How they love their pork and dogs. People? Not so much.

It is impossible to record what we witnessed – the brutality, the casual taking of human life. I tell you of a soldier picking up a baby by its feet, smashing its head on a rock and tossing it onto heap of others, performing this action over and over, as nonchalantly as a builder tossing bricks. But do you really get it? Impossible. It's a you-had-to-be-there story.

Let's not go there.

There are enough stories about all that. Mine would be just another to add to the tally. The literature, the documentation, is as high as the piles of corpses. It's enough, and yet never enough. Maybe, like prayer, it needs the constant repetition to keep its memory alive. Let it live with someone else. Whoever it may be, he or she, is welcome to the gig, thank you. I pray to forget it all.

That I am a survivor is evident. All our stories converge into one litany of suffering. The arrest, the endless, awful train journey, our journeyman lessons of what was to come. The lucky ones died on the trains. We went on to greater deprivations. Write 'hunger' but you cannot imagine it. A thousand Yom Kippur days is not enough.

I am grateful that I, with others, was billeted separately from the women and children for reasons never explained. It is difficult to resist the hunger of little ones or to steal a crust from a tiny hand, endure the wails of a pleading mother. Would I have done that given the opportunity? No doubt. Here you meet parts of yourself you'd have sworn belonged to monsters, not men.

We were, I presume, part of some unexplained experiment. Was it to gauge the limits of endurance? The brave ones killed themselves. They ran to the electrified fence like a mother running towards a child who has gone missing. The guards would cheer. Less work for them. Those bastards loved to watch us do that. When it happened, as it so often did, they never tired or failed to call out, 'Stupid Jew. Can't you tell the time? Today's not *Fry-day!*'

I had done nothing remotely that cruel. Well, that's my defence. My tribe thought differently. It was me they cursed, called traitor, *Unmensch*. Now they were a hostile audience. My fellow inmates hated the way I constantly mocked the way they clung to the idea of a God. All they wanted was to forget our plight and pray for some divine intervention but I just wouldn't let that pass. I wanted to stand up close to God and spit in His face. They judged me for speaking the unspeakable. Such was the justice in that hell. In my world, everything is speakable. Everything is sayable. Words,

after all, are the fountainhead of civilisation. In the beginning was the word, right? I am descended from The People of the Book and when I last looked, books were full of words. I stand as living proof that the word is indeed mightier than the sword.

My big mouth has always landed me in trouble. It's the story of my life.

There, I could not endure the constant references to God.

'It is the will of *Hashem*.' The Name.

Even here they were too timid to mention His name in case there might rain down more awful punishment. What more, could He, or they, do to us?

'Who are we to question the will of the Master of the Universe?'

Who? Us? Who else? Who better qualified? We were all graduates of the University of Life and Life was shit.

'God gives and takes away.' Master of the Shittyverse, you should have come to the Lager – the Deutsche would have given you lessons in give and take.

That one didn't go down well.

I couldn't listen to their *kvetching*. We needed to scream out at the injustice of this world instead of gathering as a group to form a *minyan*, a quorum of ten, to pray. I would have rooted for a group that gathered to curse. I would have led them. But like everyone else, I was an abject coward, bowing to the oppressor. How magnificent it would have been to go out with a bang. Had we all just once rushed the guards and died proud. No one had the balls – including me. I had decided on suicide yet didn't have the courage to throw myself on the wire. Secretly I prayed to God knows who for death. The wire was the only promise of any glory. To my damnation I secretly cheered whoever did that.

Foreword: Reflections on Three Decades of *Gagman*

When we were little and my father would make typical ‘dad jokes’, my sisters and I would roll our eyes and tell him, ‘You’re not funny.’

‘If I wasn’t funny, you wouldn’t be eating dinner,’ was his comeback.

As a political cartoonist, he was in the serious mouths-to-feed business of humour. His day job consisted of extricating the funny, ironic and poignant into a single frame for his leader page cartoon in *The Star* newspaper, a job he held for over fifty years. ‘Funny’ was his bread and butter; his language, the lens through which he looked at the world. Unlike me, the man can tell a joke – with

accents. He has that Seinfeld/Larry David Jewish-humour gene.

A lifetime of meeting weekly deadlines gave him an almost superhuman ability to generate ideas. I remember him first speaking about a story called *Gagman* decades ago, in which an inmate in the concentration camps during World War II survives by telling jokes to his commandant. Historical accounts reveal that Jewish dancers, singers and musicians were forced to entertain their captors – such a talent could save one's life. And so, my dad conceived of a comedian forced to keep the commandant amused while he is subjected to unimaginable suffering. It was the story of a man whose life literally depends on him being funny.

It began as a short story that burst like popcorn in his head one day in a hotel room in Jerusalem when he and my mother were on vacation in 1986. My mother was confined to bed and my father had to cancel a scheduled tour of the fortress of Masada where Elazar Ben Yair led his followers to suicide against the Romans. Finding himself at a loose end with his sketchbook, he began to write instead of draw. By dusk he had written the first draft of *Gagman* – words only, no pictures. The drawings came later, and two projects began to emerge – a comic novel and a book.

Over the years I have listened to him talk about *Gagman*, the camp commandant's fool, a jester who lives on the very verge of madness, wracking his brain to amuse his master. *Gagman* lives with the knowledge that the moment he can no longer elicit a laugh will be his last. His final joke will be a death sentence. He scrambles desperately through memory seeking all the tall stories for crumbs of humour. He swaps his meagre ration of food for a good joke. He is, of course, regarded by the other inmates as a

GAGMAN

collaborator, a Kapo, and his fear of being murdered in his barracks weighs on his burdened soul.

The drawings my dad produced were haunting – a comic-book face with gaunt eyes, a fake clown-like smile. ‘Stop me if you’ve heard this one,’ and ‘This one’s gonna kill ya,’ Gagman says, lines from a comedian’s stand-up routine. From my father’s pen flowed drawings of the grotesque mirth of the commandant who dies laughing, giving Gagman his opportunity to escape.

The story and the images push humour right up against the razor wire. My father has a strong sense of the sacred. His humour has never been casual, cavalier or cruel. So this was a stretch for him – can a Jew make jokes about the Holocaust? I had the sense that even as he was writing, he was questioning the morality and ethics of using the Holocaust as the subject matter of his comic-book superhero story.

The enterprise of writing and drawing *Gagman* has spanned years, then decades. He’d come back to it every so often. The story grew – after Gagman escapes the camp, he enters the last days of the Third Reich. He has a meeting with Hermann Göring and Joseph Goebbels and then with a rabbi who speaks to him of the coming of the Messiah.

In his research on Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda minister, my father was gripped by a peculiar fact – that Goebbels had declared, ‘This Superman is a Jew.’ Goebbels had felt it imperative to denounce a fictional character – the creation of two Jewish boys from Cleveland, Ohio, Jerry Seigel and Joe Shuster – first published by DC Comics in April 1938. In my father’s head, this notion began to expand. Superman . . . Nietzsche . . . the ideal of the Aryan race. And suddenly *Gagman* made it across the sea to

the New World in which the comic was worshipped. *Gagman* in the concentration camp became the perfect backstory for a Jew who arrives in a city that is the New World. Here he searches for Superman, and the meaning of the Earth. Ultimately, *Gagman* explores how we make meaning in a post-Holocaust world.

After one of his own near-death experiences in 2018, in which he spent ten days in the drugged confines of an ICU ward, my father came back to *Gagman*. Spurred on by a meeting with Lewis Levin, the architect of the Holocaust and Genocide museum in Johannesburg, he wanted to finish what he had started. With his eightieth birthday looming, he had a sense that time was running out. Lewis and I encouraged him as it seemed a terrible waste for the treasure of all his labour and creative input not to be brought to fruition in some form. Over the years he has drawn more than 200 illustrations, filled numerous sketchbooks and written over 60,000 words. Lewis brought filmmaker Yoav Dagan on board and Yoav spent two full days interviewing and filming my dad at his home in Johannesburg.

Each week, he and I would discuss the book, its plot, its many threads. How would he pull it all together now that the idea had mellowed for so long? Was it even possible to talk about ‘finishing’?

During these conversations my father suffered from crippling self-doubt about his right to write about the Holocaust. ‘Who’m I to write about such things? I have no right, I have never experienced anything of that horror,’ he’d say.

Lewis, Yoav and I formed a cheerleading team of sorts, to remind him that the Holocaust forms part of every Jew’s inter-generational story. Never mind the fact that his life was indelibly and directly traumatised by the events in Europe, despite he and

GAGMAN

his family being safely in Africa. His mother Chaya died of a heart attack when he was thirteen. My Bobba's heart trouble began when her sister, brother-in-law and nephew were killed in the camps. She sank into a deep depression, no longer able to make sense of life. Before she died, she told my father, 'It's no good,' and this is the mantra he's carried all his life, in the shadow of grief and genocide. Three years later, his father Solomon married Fanya, a deeply traumatised Holocaust survivor who had lost her husband and only son in the camps. Fanya insisted my father call her 'mother', but he refused, not wanting to be a replacement for Fanya's lost child, a living *yahrzeit* candle.

Soon after the raw footage was shot, I stepped in as editor to piece together the dozens of versions of *Gagman* written at different times over more than three decades. It was a brilliant tangle of chaos my father was ready to forget about and leave in a box forever.

At first, I was dealing with disparate shards that couldn't coalesce in any story form that already exists – one that follows the arc of the hero's journey. The bits overlapped and encroached into my father's own story, both past, present and unfolding. It worked more like an ongoing fugue with many levels. That my father had not been able to limit *Gagman* to one form or to come close to 'finishing' perhaps speaks to the ongoing, endless confrontation of the Jewish soul with an 'unfinished' Holocaust inheritance, one that moves like an echo through the ages.

As I began to forensically shape it, working through the multiple versions, our creativity began to merge, and together, we crafted the ending which had eluded him for so long. This idea has always been too big and multi-dimensional for one mind and

heart, and it has only been through the collaboration between us – and with the help of Yoav Dagan and Lewis Levin – that we’ve ‘woven this parachute from everything broken’, to quote William Stafford.

Gagman is holographic. It moves through time and space three-dimensionally; through myth, memory and mysticism. There are comedian’s notes scattered in between the chapters that are laugh-out-loud funny as Gagman prepares his *schpiels* for the commandant, taking on the Bible stories and the Almighty too.

On 21 January 1994, for my father’s fifty-fourth birthday, I wrote him this poem:

*Somewhere in the lostness
Of Gotham’s eerie light
Dwells the Artist’s Joker
Raging with all his might.
Maybe he’s a comic
A Yiddish boy undone
Listen closely, you’ll hear him whisper
‘Stop me if you’ve heard this one.’
Trapped ’tween coincidence and fortune
Good and evil friends
He suffers to exist at last
Will he? It all depends.
A clap of laughter rings the night
Tearing through the strife
Time passes, Gagman alters
But he WILL come to life.*

GAGMAN

Sometimes we don't choose our work, it chooses us.

Perhaps I have always known that I was marked to be part of this finishing.

If you are reading this, it means the book has made it into the world. Hallelujah.

My deepest hope is that it bows in service in perpetuity to Holocaust education, intergenerational healing and the project of re-humanisation. May it continue to create ripples of laughter in the pain of our remembering.

Joanne Fedler, Sydney, 2021

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Gagman is a touching and unique tale of survival through unimaginable horror.

A prisoner in a WWII concentration camp discovers a superpower that could keep him alive – he can make the commandant laugh by telling jokes. He must stay funny – or die.

Pushed to the ends of his wit and humanity, *Gagman* is propelled into a spiralling madness in which he would sell his soul for a gag, simply to live another day.

Evoking themes from *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, Fedler weaves the story of a Faustian bargain brokered in hell, where redemption comes in the form of a punchline.

Swapping his yellow star for a tattered comic book, *Gagman* roams the new world and zeitgeist determined to find answers to the deepest questions about loss, hope and belonging.

Illuminated by Fedler's haunting cartoons, *Gagman* juxtaposes humour and pathos and explores survivor guilt, desperation and the search for meaning in the wake of the Holocaust.

Dov Fedler, a legendary political cartoonist, has been working on this story for 35 years. His earliest dream was to work for Walt Disney, but he ended up working as a cartoonist at *The Star* newspaper for half a century. *Gagman* is his fourth book. His previous titles include *If You Can Write You Can Draw*, *Starlite Memories* and his memoir, *Out of Line*.

Joanne Fedler is a speaker, publisher and the bestselling author of 14 books, including *Secret Mothers' Business*, *Things Without a Name* and *Unbecoming*. She is Dov's writing mentor, editor and middle daughter.

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