

## Book review

### AND THE RAT LAUGHED

Nava Semel

Hybrid Publishers, RRP

\$29.95

Reviewed by

Christopher Bantick



THIS rewarding novel, by Nava Semel, requires patient reading – largely because the structure may initially appear to be difficult to negotiate.

It was first published in Hebrew and translated by Professor Miriam Shlesinger of Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

The novel has five kinds of narrative. Part one – “The Story” – is the account of a woman struggling to relay to her granddaughter the memory of being a Jewish child in hiding during the war. The granddaughter then attempts to make sense of her grandmother’s difficulties with remembering in part two – “The Legend”.

The third section is made up of a series inter-related poems dealing with the grandmother’s traumatic life. Part four – “The Dream” – thrusts time forward to 2099, where the granddaughter’s notebook is found and read. Part five is a diary account of a priest who came into contact with the grandmother as a child.

The development of the five narratives weaving around one another is astutely achieved. Primary to this is the significance of memory, and how this is experienced by a post-Holocaust generation.

The grandmother, as a child, was spared the death camps. Her parents, who were both subsequently killed, arranged for their daughter to go into hiding – until “the storm lets up” – with a severe Roman Catholic Polish farming family. The grandmother survived, but was significantly damaged in the process.

This was largely because she was kept in a potato pit. Her company was a rat. But there was also another visitor, Stefan, the couple’s son. He repeatedly sexually abused the young girl.

Where this powerful and deeply arresting novel has its enduring significance is in the questions it raises about the role of memory in recounting the suffering of an individual.

The granddaughter reflects that her grandmother didn’t survive the camps. She wonders whether her grandmother’s memories “count”, as she did “not go through any of the big horrifying things we learn about in history”.

We soon see that she survived Stefan instead. This was the grandmother’s own private daily terror, and Semel uses it deftly as a metaphor of the Holocaust.

We are forcefully challenged by observations the grandmother makes: “The natural act of returning to the past and rummaging through memories brings solace only to those with very different stories to tell” is one of many bitter reflections.

The function, role and need to remember are critical to an understanding of Semel’s intentions. Whether we agree with her that “buried stories are the perfect ones”, *And the Rat Laughed* is deeply confronting. This is through the sense of lingering residual damage done to those who experienced the Holocaust and those who continue to strive to make sense of it.

As a measure of Semel’s skill, what may seem to be fragmented mirrors exactly the brokenness of the grandmother, as she endeavours to put the shards of her memories together. We are better for listening to them.

*Christopher Bantick is a Melbourne writer and social commentator.*