

Matt Cohen

The Spanish Doctor



a novel

The Spanish Doctor
 Matt Cohen
 McClelland and Stewart

review and interview by Geoff Jackson

Last Wednesday Matt Cohen came to the Humanities Centre to give a public reading from his new work, *The Spanish Doctor*. This is Mr. Cohen's ninth novel to date, and marks a considerable departure from his previous work.

Up to now, Mr. Cohen has been best noted for his Salem novels, a series of four books dealing with a rural community in southern Ontario. *The Spanish Doctor* leaves that world behind and takes as its setting the tumultuous world of fourteenth century Europe.

The book centers on the life of Avram Halevi, a Jew born in Toledo, Spain. At a young age, Avram is forced to convert to Christianity. He becomes therefore a Marrano, a Jew forced into the Church, a man lost between two creeds.

Avram studies medicine and becomes a man of some science and skill. He does well in Toledo, but then the Church, in a religious fervour, incites an attack on the Jewish quarter of Toledo, destroying Avram's family and forcing him to flee.

The book relates Avram's adventures and trials as he travels across Europe trying to secure for himself a new home. He is constantly harried by his past.

The book is a traditional work, relating Avram's life from his birth to his death. Mr. Cohen kindly agreed to talk to us, both about *The Spanish Doctor* and about broader issues concerning Canadian literature.

The Spanish Doctor is published by McClelland and Stewart, and retails for \$19.95.

Q: Mr. Cohen, your new book, *The Spanish Doctor*, is a considerable departure from much of your previous work. I really feel I should ask you why you decided to write about a Jewish doctor in fourteenth century Spain.

Mr. Cohen: Well, all doctors were Jewish at that time in Spain, except for Moslem doctors. Priests were the only educated Chris-

tians, and they were prohibited to be doctors. But I was interested in the times.

Q: One thing that struck me immediately was the knowledge the character, Avram Halevi, had of medicine. Just to what degree were his abilities based on history?

Mr. Cohen: It was pretty much a mixed bag. I mean some were bad, but there was this Arab physician who knew about the circulation of the blood. Don't forget that Avram died in 1445, and only a few years later Leonardo is doing complete dissections. What I mean to say is that Leonardo was way ahead of where Avram was. Where Avram was was kind of a base. There were many centres of anatomy, many doctors at that time, so I think they had a level of competence.

Of course for the purposes of the novel you didn't want him botching up too many operations either. But they confined themselves to very simple kinds of surgery, and that's why they were fairly competent. On the other hand the patients did die.

Q: You once said that you tried to follow the adage to "write about what you know", but in fact the only time you've been able to write realistically is when you've written about what you didn't know; you "prefer telling lies to doing research." Yet obviously research is a considerable element in *The Spanish Doctor*. Have you changed your attitude since you made that statement?

Mr. Cohen: Well, I guess this book is the exception that proves the rule. I did do a lot of research for this book. I went to Toledo and to Bologne and to Montpellier. And I studied in the library at Montpellier — they have a municipal library with a lot of medieval material. And then in Canada I found a lot of material about medieval medicine.

Q: *The Spanish Doctor* seems to be a very traditional book in terms of its form. Your earlier works are not considered especially traditional in structure. How do you feel *The Spanish Doctor* fits in relation to your earlier work; is it indeed just an exception or is it a signal to a new direction you wish to pursue?

Mr. Cohen: Well, of course, that's up to external observers to say. As I said at the beginning of the reading; *The Spanish Doctor* could be viewed as a sequel to *Too Bad Galahad*, which is a story I wrote a long time

Cohen: pages

ago set in the Middle Ages.

In other words, I've always had these different interests. This happens to be the first time it's turned into a full novel. This is a novel that really demands a traditional structure because of the kind of material it has. And in a novel about the Latin and Romantic countries, it almost demands to be a romance or, at least in a certain way, a parody on actual forms.

So you've got *Don Quixote* or *Tom Jones*. It has to take the form of a man, in a certain heroic way, going through a series of episodes because that's the form that story is told in.

Q: In general do you think that modern writers are getting away from 'experimental writing' and are turning back to more traditional forms?

Mr. Cohen: There are always going to be writers writing in experimental ways and I don't think that's going to end. I do think that what has been the avant-garde fiction in the twentieth century has, to a certain extent, dried up because it never really gained a readership.

And fiction is a medium that really demands a readership. The readership post-modern fiction has gained is a readership that is interested in books written about books, rather than books written about people. The biggest thing that traditional fiction has to offer is really some sort of contact between the reader and the characters or the narrator behind the characters. The emotional impact of that contact is the most important thing fiction does. That is what experimental fiction deprives itself of most of the time. Now there are exceptions, but the exceptions have never added together to make a school people could build on. So the exceptions just remain exceptions, which are really terrific books, but they haven't wiped out traditional fiction.

For example, I was writer-in-residence at this particular university, and I have taught fiction from time to time. But I never wanted to be a full-time professor.

There were really two reasons. One is that I feel it would be very hard for me to teach full-time and to write. And secondly I am very suspicious of the whole idea of teaching creative writing. It is a very uncomfortable relationship to my mind. And I'm very unsure what good it does students. I am just very ambivalent about it so I would never be able to become a professor of creative writing on a full-time basis.

I do feel that most students get very little from it. Although I feel it's their fault, I don't like being a party to that whole masquerade. I'm not even sure what the masquerade is. I feel that of all the students I've ever taught very few have a small chance of becoming a writer. It is unfair to them but it's also unfair to the teacher.

Q: Then the next question I might ask is a very general one. This country is a very hard one for a writer to make a living in, because of the relatively small number of people buying books. Do you have any ideas yourself what could be done to make it easier for a writer in Canada?

Mr. Cohen: First of all, I think that one of the reasons the whole thing of teaching creative writing is so uncomfortable is that there are so few, if any, social slots for writers. I didn't mean to imply that students are incredibly lazy. I don't think they're any more or less lazy than professors or anyone else. But what I mean is there's not much of a chance of students becoming writers because there are so few opportunities. It's such a long arduous struggle of which studying is such a small part. That makes it very difficult.

I think that one of the reasons is obviously that there aren't that many readers, so there can't be that many writers present, but it's a

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Q: I'd like to turn back again to *The Spanish Doctor*. In this book there is a strong focus on the persecutions that the Jews suffered in the Middle Ages. It seemed impossible to read without making some sort of mental connection with the Nazi Holocaust. Were there any sorts of parallels you felt should be drawn between the two tragedies?

Mr. Cohen: I think there are all sorts of peoples who've been persecuted and the story of the destruction of Spanish Jewry is, in a way, the apocalyptic story of the destruction of all sorts of different races. Maybe it's good to remember how brief are the lifespans of most cultures.

Q: The character, Juan Velaquez, is constantly pointing out throughout the book that the Jews were bringing down disaster upon their heads by insisting on remaining Jews. Do you think that the character had a point?

Mr. Cohen: Well, everyone who is different from the mainstream brings down disaster on their heads by refusing to integrate. You could say that Nicaragua is bringing disaster on its head by failing to turn itself into a right-wing pseudo-democracy that sends all its money to Reagan.

That's what the oppressors always say to you, that it would be a lot easier if you went quietly. It always seems reasonable when you say it to one person about one thing, but when you think of the consequences it would be ridiculous.

Q: To go on to a different subject, I've heard that you endeavor to live exclusively from the proceeds of your writing. Why have you chosen not to supplement your literary earnings with the sorts of jobs that writers in Canada normally engage in?

Mr. Cohen: That's not strictly speaking true.

lot more complicated than that. The book industry is in terrible condition.

But also society does not put very much value on the individual as an artist or creator. Writing is not considered a legitimate occupation. If writing were considered a legitimate job, then if people had books out they would get a legitimate wage. You'd say, "Well, so and so is writing, he's a hard worker, he's published books, so we should pay him a wage."

Now if that wage is just supposed to be the royalties from the book, that's only going to add up to three hundred dollars a year. I mean no one else in this society lives on three hundred dollars; there's no reason why writers should.

And everyone says writers should get royalties, but really when you think about it every aspect of the publishing industry is professional except for the writers. Book publishers themselves, they have plans, they're professionals, they get paid a wage, their printers get paid a wage. Booksellers, in a bookstore, they get paid to come to work everyday. People in libraries, they get paid to come to work everyday. Teachers of English get paid to come to work every day. The only people in the whole thing who don't get paid to come to work every day are the writers. This reflects society's evaluation of the creative artist.

Certainly some people might say: "Why should writers get government grants? They're parasites on society." But really you could look at it the other way around and say they entire publishing and book industries are being parasites on the writers, because the writers are subsidizing everyone else. They're providing, practically free, the material that all these people make their living from.