

**Auslander, Shalom. Feh: A Memoir. NYC, NY: Riverhead Books, 2024**

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Shalom Auslander tells dangerous stories about his tortured past growing up in a highly dysfunctional ultra-Orthodox home in Monsey, New York. He was beaten senseless by his alcoholic father and left to fend for himself by his self-absorbed mother. Auslander hasn't spoken to his parents or siblings for decades and has no intention of doing so. He steers clear from all forms of social media and is unaware of his birth family's whereabouts.

Auslander received tremendous acclaim for his first searing memoir, "Foreskin's Lament," which came out in 2007. In this provocative work, he attempted to come to terms with the traumas he had endured and their psychological aftermath. In his new memoir, "Feh," he speaks to us in a different and more seasoned voice; one that has survived the trials and tribulations of middle-age, marriage, and parenthood. Yet, his narrative demeanor is still saddled with rage and confusion. But Auslander has learned a new and lifesaving trick. The horrors of his experiences are now tempered with a comic voice that somehow allows us to both mourn and celebrate him simultaneously. He is a writer performing at the peak of his literary powers.

Auslander began to write at the suggestion of his beloved psychiatrist, Ike, who won his heart at their very first session when he asked Shalom to tell him what hurts most. It was the beginning of a most beautiful relationship; one the author credits with saving him from his own self-destructive impulses many times over. Ike tended to Auslander's distress even when Auslander was unable to pay him telling him gently he knew one day he would. He became a father figure to Auslander; encouraging him to take his self-loathing and put it on the page where it could start making sense. Auslander felt seen and loved by Ike; and perhaps most importantly, had found someone who believed in him.

In one of Auslander's earlier works, "Hope: A Tragedy," his protagonist moves to a quiet home in upstate New York only to find a crotchety eighty-two-year-old Anne Frank living in the attic who refuses to leave. Surrounded by stacks of fading paper, she tells him she is writing her second work and does not wish to be disturbed. He begs her to go and keeps pestering her to do so until

she screams at him one day only this: “Blow me.” He surrenders in silence. This work ruffled a lot of feathers, but Auslander has always been drawn to the outlandish, perhaps believing it allows us a liberation ultra-seriousness denies. I reviewed this work in 2012 and was disappointed by a certain artifice that infected the entire novel. It was missing the bare-boned authenticity and insightfulness of his new gut-wrenching work.

Auslander attended an Orthodox yeshiva where his religious teachers used scary Old Testament stories to keep their students in line. There was little to no empathy present, and he was bored senseless by the daily prayers and rote learning required. Even Talmudic study was a fraud, claims Auslander, who recalls that if someone was on to something, the rabbis would nervously say they would have to wait for the messiah to come for clarification. He found the entire experience traumatic writing,

I am fifty years old now and still I am blind. It is a strange blindness. It is not a darkness, not a blackness not an absence of light. Rather, I go through life as if beneath a shroud: I can see the sky, the earth, the trees, the animals, all the flora and fauna without deviation, without distortion or diversion. But mankind appears to me grotesque, vile, foul, ignominious, none more so than myself. With others I can occasionally be fair. With others there is a chance of expiation. With myself, though, I am a hanging judge. To myself I show no mercy. There is no criticism I don't believe, no compliment I accept. I avoid mirrors. Mirrors are bad. Catching a glimpse of my reflection in a store window is enough to ruin my whole day. This is what I think when I do: Feh.

Feh becomes a supercharged buzz word that penetrates his memoir. At times, he uses it as a mantra returning to it when it is obvious to him that life always screws you one way or another, no matter what you do. Or at least that's how it seems. Feh is his placeholder, and we watch him play with the word in countless variations as it increases in power and meaning for us as well. It allows him to turn tragedy into comedy while still respecting the tragedy that lay beneath it. This is not an easy trick for any author to pull off, but Auslander does it with flair. We listen to him riff on how the rabbis were Feh. So were his brothers, sisters, and maniacal parents; all Feh. So was Orthodoxy with its incessant demands and withholding nature; mind numbingly Feh. This little word takes on an explosive power we wouldn't have thought possible.

We always worry a little bit about Auslander. It's not just the jumpy interviews he gives where his face reddens, and he seems to be swallowing too hard. It's his continual infatuation with self-humiliation. And the fact that he still drinks and smokes weed too much and lies to his beloved wife Orli about it even though he knows she deserves better. He tries all these experimental new remedies for weight loss, and one eventually lands him in the hospital with his pancreas eating

itself, and he must spend weeks recovering. His beautiful green-eyed wife is not a pushover and is artistic in nature like Auslander himself. She also came from a dysfunctional Jewish family. But she is anti-Feh and it all it represents and loves to laugh uncontrollably which attracted him to her from the get-go. He rights “That laugh, that laugh.” and our heart breaks alongside him. Orli sees the silver lining and is fiercely protective of him and their precious family which includes two young sons whom they both want to grow up without the hurts they carry. But he is far darker than she. When they make love, he insists the blinds be drawn and the lights turned off so there is no chance he can catch a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He listens to her objections but insists on his way. She tells him she wishes he could see himself as she sees him and hugs him passionately. He worries she is thinking about how fat he is. Auslander never delves into his revulsion to his appearance, but it is ever present even though author photographs show a handsome man with alert eyes, rugged features, and a glorious mane of curly hair. We do not see the despised fatness he detests.

Auslander has no forgiveness for the depravity of some of the rabbis he encountered at the yeshiva school. Most of the rabbis thought nothing about pulling a student’s ears or pinching his arms or even slapping one of them across the face for some perceived slight. He had a best friend for a time named Dov who came from a less religious home and had seemingly happy parents. He recalls sleeping over at Dov’s house when his parents were away and stealing an old VCR he found lying about. He wanted to play pornography tapes on it at home while his father slept. Pornography had become another one of his obsessions but became Feh soon enough. He recalls how some of the rabbis at summer camp would do bed checks and fondle the boys they liked while pretending to tuck them in for the night. He was spared this indignity but believes it was because of his general unappealing appearance to others. We find ourselves thinking Feh.

Auslander doesn’t seem to like to write or talk much about God. He claims he believes in something, and this forces him at times to watch where he steps when walking on the sidewalk. He believes if he lands on the crack his world can split open again and he will fall tumbling downwards. At times, he says he doesn’t believe in the Hashem he was taught to believe in as a child. But perhaps he believes in something. But he doesn’t speak to this nebulous god the way he speaks to his psychiatrist Ike whom he can tell everything. Like his incessant dreams about

becoming a very famous writer. And about his desire for a beautiful home and an infinity pool in Hollywood. And most pointedly, about how much he misses his old friend Philip Seymour Hoffman who would die before the HBO series they were working on was finished. Another actor eventually took Philip Seymour Hoffman's place and *Happyish* was born, but it only lasted one season. He could tell Ike about all the insecurities that still shadowed him. It was a safe space. He never calls it Feh; therapy is the only thing that escapes that designation.

Auslander charms us even while sharing the most distressing of stories. There is a comic rhythm to his prose that seems to mimic the stand-up comedians he adored like Steve Martin and Dick Gregory. Beneath Auslander's comic persona, there is a drop-dead seriousness that makes itself present always. Like the best comedy, his prose is filled with lightness and heaviness doing battle with one another and neither achieving dominance. Something tells me an infinity pool is in this terrific author's future.