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Windows Open: A Celebration of Rick Black's *The Amichai Windows*

SUBMITTED BY YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB

On Sunday, February 18, 2018, a book launch was held at the Pyramid Atlantic Art Center in Hyattsville, Maryland for *The Amichai Windows*, an artist book by artist and poet Rick Black that features poems by the late Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai (b. Ludwig Pfeuffer; 1924-2000). The event included a panel discussion featuring the artist and Judith K. Brodsky and Helen Frederick, both nationally known artists, exhibition curators, and arts advocates. Accompanied by an introduction by Robert Alter and an in-depth guide by Black, *The Amichai Windows* is a towering achievement in American arts and letters, the culmination of a decade of reflection, research, translation, and artistic imagining and a breathtaking exploration of literary and visual poetics.

Black began the project in 2007, some seven years after Amichai's death, although he'd been engaging with the poet's work since the early 1980's when he lived in Israel. Black recounted his initial meeting with Amichai in the mid 1990's. He went to pick up Amichai at 30th Street Station in Philadelphia, where Black was then working at the Israeli Consulate. When Black saw Amichai trudging up the stairs from the train platform lugging a very large suitcase, he offered to help him. Amichai responded with "Everyone has to carry their own baggage." In a kind of collaboration, Black kept Amichai in mind throughout the research, design and assembly of the poems, building his own metaphors out of Amichai's poems. Throughout the process, Black had the support of Hana Amichai, the poet's widow.

The book includes poems by Amichai in both the Hebrew original and in English translation by Rick Black. The artist consulted with Professors Gary A. Rendsburg and Azzan Yadin-Israel, both of Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., where Black was living at the time. During the panel discussion at Pyramid Atlantic, Black described how he would bring a translation to Rendsburg and Yadin-Israel and the three of them would hammer out the issues. Rendsburg tended to want to stick closer to the original text, while Yadin-Israel's approach was more free and wide-ranging. Black said

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that having both of those approaches in mind helped him when he was working out the translations that appear in the book.

The number eighteen is central to *The Amichai Windows*. The numerological value of the Hebrew word “hai” (חַי) is eighteen, and the word means “life.” There are eighteen poems in the book. And, of course, the poet’s last name ends in “hai.” Black inserted the word “hai” in all of the pages of the artist book. Additionally, Black has created a limited edition numbering eighteen copies. Initially, Black wanted to focus the project on themes of family, as Amichai has written numerous poems about parents and children. However, Hana Amichai dissuaded him from doing so. In delving ever deeper into Amichai’s work, Black came to realize that the theme of windows is prominent throughout Amichai’s oeuvre, enabling the poet to reflect on looking out and looking and connecting with figures past and present.

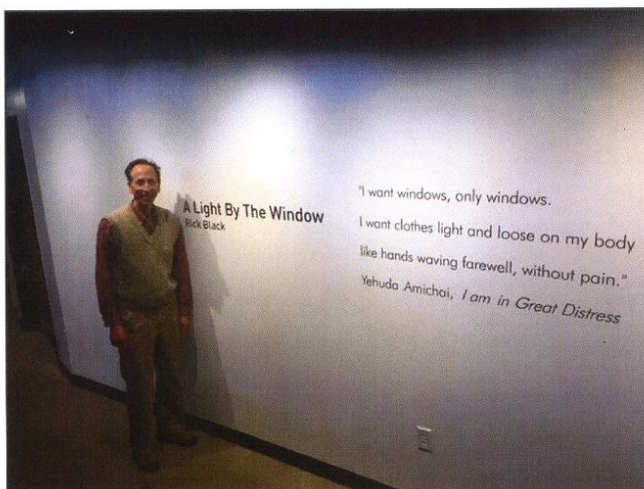
Based on years of archival and library research, *The Amichai Windows* includes multi-layered collages of images from archives from around the world. The images emanate chiefly from the collections of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTSA), Library of Congress, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, National Photo Collection of Israel, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. According to Black, the librarian at JTSA allowed him full use of images from the JTS archival collections. These included historical *ketubot* and a Hebrew calligraphic manual from Italy. Black often visited the African and Middle Eastern Division reading room of the Library of Congress, where he researched, read, and translated articles by and interviews of Amichai. Black also did research at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, where Amichai’s papers are housed.

Each page is replete with images and layers of meaning. The images in the collages are thoroughly explicated in the Guide that accompanies the artist book. For example, in the page of the opening poem, “*Halon Tamid/Eternal Window*,” the following caption is given for just one of the images: Estera Ajzen is photographed in the window of her home in Chelm, Poland, where she worked for a photography studio. After the German invasion of Poland, her family fled to the Soviet zone but was deported to a labor camp. In 1944, she married a Soviet Jewish soldier and they survived the war. The photograph is reproduced courtesy of Ester (born Estera) Ajzen Lewin and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives, Washington, D.C. (*A Guide to the Amichai Windows*, p. 17).



Another photo in this collage shows a family of Jewish refugees from Germany who fled to Albania, where they were hidden by a Muslim family. In the collage for the poem “*ha-Yehudim/The Jews*,” Black juxtaposes “*Alter Jude aus Jaffa/Old Jew from Jaffa*,” an etching by Hermann Struck, a German-Jewish immigrant to Palestine in 1922 and one of the founders of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, with an image of a vandalized Jewish store in Berlin before *Krystallnacht*. This layering process allows the viewer to experience multiple conversations: between past and present, between the literary and visual arts, and between archival images and the written word.

Attendees of the book launch enjoyed viewing the individual pages on the walls of Pyramid Atlantic as in an exhibition. However, in a telephone interview with this author, Black noted that the suspense of having to open and turn the pages and seeing the images revealed little by little and slowly unfolding was necessarily absent from the exhibition format. Black shared that he has thought about presenting the collages in another format, such as enlarged posters for a traveling exhibition or public space. However, for the time being, he is



content for the artist book to remain the sole format for the art and to give talks about it.

During the panel discussion, Judith K. Brodsky commented that Black's work reminded her of the Talmud, in that it constructed layers upon layers of meaning. She also suggested that a video incorporating the images, poems, and Black's artistic process might bring Black's work to a wider audience. Helen Frederick thanked Black for opening the world of Yehuda Amichai to viewers and readers. This sentiment was widely shared by all in attendance and surely, by all who will encounter this extraordinary work.

The Association of Jewish Libraries Announces 2018 Winners of Jewish Fiction Award

SUBMITTED BY YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB, ajljewishfictionaward@gmail.com

Rachel Kadish is the inaugural winner of the Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL) Jewish Fiction Award for her novel *The Weight of Ink*, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. The award includes a \$1,000 cash prize as well as support to attend the 53rd Annual Conference of the Association of Jewish Libraries in Boston, MA, June 18-20, 2018. Two honor books were also recognized: *Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan* by **Ruth Gilligan**, published by Tin House Books, and *A Boy in Winter* by **Rachel Seiffert**, published by Pantheon Books, part of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. The Committee received over 50 works of fiction with significant Jewish thematic content, written in English and available in the United States in 2017, and thanks all those who submitted entries for consideration. The wide array of books published this year is a testament to the vibrant state of contemporary Jewish fiction.

"Rachel Kadish has crafted an extraordinary cast of characters who speak to each other within and across the divides of centuries as well as those of age, religion, and class and come vividly to life under her empathic touch," notes Yermiyahu Ahron Taub, Chairperson of the Award Committee. "This is a book that honors learning, libraries, archivists and librarians, and the Association of Jewish Libraries Jewish Fiction Award Committee is delighted to present Kadish with the 2018 AJL Jewish Fiction Award."

Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan gives serious depth to the little-known story of Jewish life in Ireland. Weaving a complex story, Ruth Gilligan uses the specifics of Irish lore and history woven with the Jewish experience to illuminate the stories of a young girl and her family who emigrate from eastern Europe, a suddenly mute boy incarcerated in a home for the mentally disabled, and a woman who considers the implications of converting to Judaism. According to Taub, "Gilligan's expert twists of plot, exploration of historical themes, and her gift of word play and dark humor" impressed the Committee.

Rachel Seiffert's *A Boy in Winter* works on a small canvas and creates a searing emotional impact. As the Nazis invade a small Ukrainian town, variety of characters are forced to face the invasion's terrible consequences and quickly make life-altering decisions. Taub comments: "Seiffert writes with sparseness, a plain-hewn power that draws the reader on a journey of suspense in a time and place of limited possibility."

The Association of Jewish Libraries gratefully acknowledges the generous support of Dan Wyman Books for underwriting the Award. Submissions for the 2019 AJL Fiction Award are now being accepted. For more information, please visit www.jewishlibraries.org.