

Eccentric novelist speaks of faith, discipline, God

By MATTHEW BUDMAN
Of the Bulletin Staff

Returning a call from his Seattle home, short, paunchy novelist Mark Helprin impersonates a deep-voiced black man from Oakland, insisting that the *Jewish Bulletin* reporter had smashed up his car, and demanding restitution. He maintains the threatening persona for perhaps 10 minutes before revealing his real identity.

"You're young," he chuckles. "You'll get over it."

Crossing the country on a recent publicity tour, Helprin seems determined to leave each reporter with his or her own peculiar tale about the idiosyncratic writer. He turns backward somersaults for *The Jerusalem Report*, for instance, and tells *Entertainment Weekly* about sleeping on his bedroom floor.

Helprin is, by turns, delightfully playful, deliberately cryptic, maddeningly contrary — and sometimes just plain strange.

His world is one of private jokes and unusual perspectives, and his own interpretation of his

essentially a debate about the Holocaust. It's about a man who loses his family. What could be more Jewish than a book about someone who loses his family?"

Bursting with ideas, insights and the type of gorgeous, complex sentences that fill his stories and novels, Helprin — appearing a bit uncomfortable in a shirt, tie and recently grown mustache — speaks freely of belief, faith, discipline and God.

"I believe in the God of Israel, and I think that is the central defining factor in defining a Jew, more than adherence to the various commandments and edicts of the rabbis," he says. "I don't have the discipline; I didn't enter upon talmudic studies or rabbinical studies; I'm hardly observant. But I still feel a direct connection to God, the way you're supposed to."

Outside of language — "My parents spoke more Yiddish than English when I was growing up" — Helprin had little formal Jewish training.

He says Hebrew University of Jerusalem rejected his Fulbright scholarship to study Jewish history because of his "very mixed and checkered Jewish background," so he ended up living on "various kibbutzim" from 1967 through 1972, shuttling back and forth between New York and Israel before serving in the Israeli army and air force in 1972-73.

He left just before the Yom Kippur War, and his first novel, 1977's *Refiner's Fire*, ends with the protagonist nearly dying in that war — in part the writer's vicarious participation in it.

War has continued to influence his life. A contributing editor to *The Wall Street Journal* — and a political conservative — Helprin's essays on the Persian Gulf conflict won praise for their precision and coolheadedness, even in the face of Iraq's Scud attacks on Israel.

"I was not all worked up about it like many people were," he says. "There was no threat [to Israel]. I'm very emotional about



Photo by Mike Richman

Author Mark Helprin, in San Francisco on a book-tour stop, says he 'deliberately sets out to expand [his] view of things.'

everything, but in military matters, in physical danger, I become totally detached and cool."

Though Helprin's been writing professionally for more than two decades, he takes critiques seriously, dropping to his knees to proudly flip through a packet of "superb" write-ups of *A Soldier of the Great War* — what he calls "Tolstoy-is-among-us reviews" — and the next minute, overly defensive, slamming the two or three reviewers who criticized the novel.

Yet it's easy to see from where the charge derives. At 44, Helprin seems to have experienced the lives of a dozen adventurers.

"In life, I have set out to take punishment, to take risks, and to go anywhere and do anything, even if there are limits imposed by others," he says. "As a kid, if there was a fence, I would climb over it. I deliberately set out to expand my view of things."

Waving chubby hands and contriving metaphors furiously, Helprin rails against literary minimalism — using only the most critical descriptions, characters and settings. His stories and novels, in contrast with that motif, are filled with a broad vitality, tracing dozens of larger-than-life characters — from 1890s New York to 1914 Italy to 1973 Israel, from mountain-climbing to hopping railroad cars to in-the-trenches war.

Helprin — whose first collection of short stories, *A Dove of the East*, won the National Jewish Book Award — speaks, with some degree of fluency, Hebrew, French, Italian, German, Arabic and Latin, and is a wizard at affecting accents and imitating dialects, regularly dropping phrases and technical terms into conversation.

He takes his literary cues, he says, from Shakespeare, Dante and Milton rather than modern works. "I would describe [my books] as classical fiction, the kind that was abandoned from boredom or lack of understanding after the First World War."

Now "I'm working on a book which takes place in Brazil" — unlike Israel, New York or Italy, a place he has no intention of visiting. "It's about a man whose driving force in life is hatred of coffee," he says. "I'm having a wonderful time."

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works requires a leap few critics have made: His three novels, he says, were written with Jewish tradition and the Holocaust as primary influences.

"To me the Holocaust is the central defining event in the history of the Jewish people after the revelation that God made of himself to Moses," he says later during an interview in his Stanford Court hotel room in San Francisco. "I can't imagine a greater tragedy. There's just no way to express it except indirectly, and that's why whenever I've written about it it's always been with the lightest touch. It doesn't have to be direct — it's in the consciousness of every Jew."

Though the few Jews in his new bestseller, *A Soldier of the Great War*, are incidental, he says, the novel — the story of 74-year-old Italian Alessandro Giuliani's reminiscences about World War I, which destroyed everything Giuliani valued but nevertheless imparted meaning to his life — is, at the core, very much a Jewish book.

"Alessandro Giuliani has a very vivid and rich life, with all kinds of tests — somewhat like Job — and in the end, despite the fact that he's offered everything by everybody, he chooses to fight God in an adversarial relationship, while still believing in him, while thinking that God is a God of splendor and terror, that God is not a just God," Helprin says.

"A lot of people who come from a Christian background can't understand that. [Giuliani] thinks of God in a very Jewish way, and in the end, his answer is, 'I don't want to sit at the feet of God.' He wants his wife, his child. That's what he wants. That's the ultimate Jewish lesson; that's why that book is a Jewish book. Like all my books, it is es-