

Sandra Schor *The Great Letter E*

Schor (1932?-1990) was an American novelist.

The protagonist of *The Great Letter E* is Barry Glassman, a Jewish optometrist living in Bayside, New York, who rigorously studies the works of the seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. Like Glassman, Spinoza earned his living grinding and polishing lenses as he attempted to explain events as indisputable acts of God, whom he equated with nature. Spinoza also contended that God has no moral designs for the world, but that one can learn to accept the seeming randomness of life when one is aware of one's place in and unity with all of nature. Although Glassman struggles to adopt Spinoza's viewpoint, he must reassess his beliefs in the face of personal tragedies: his business is failing, the congregation of his synagogue opposes his views, and his wife Marilyn leaves him for his best friend and rival optometrist, forcing him to move to Brooklyn. There Glassman falls in love with his cousin, Enid Moscow, a physicist, who in turn falls in love with another man. When Glassman faces his thirteen-year-old son who has run away from home, he realizes that, unlike Spinoza, he must be satisfied with the few parts of life that he can understand.

Critics hailed *The Great Letter E* as a unique blend of humor and insight. Several passages in the novel consist of Glassman's philosophical musings and daydreams about Spinoza's life. Although some commentators claimed that these passages disrupted the book's generally straightforward narrative style, others judged them an effective tool for revealing the protagonist's thoughts. Joan S. Boudreaux observed: "Schor weaves Spinoza's ethics through this poetic account of a modern man's isolation, . . . unraveling as much universal truth as did Penelope. Her command of the English language along with her wisdom about human nature combine to make this an unforgettable novel, one worth reading again and again."

Stephen Stark

Baruch (Barry) Glassman, the occasionally infuriating narrator of Sandra Schor's first novel [*The Great Letter E*], is a New York optometrist with the worst kind of impaired vision, that which is self-imposed. Obsessed with the work of Baruch Spinoza, Barry allows everything he does to become so obscured by the hazy lenses of philosophy that he can't see his life disintegrating around him. His business is failing, his wife is having an affair with a



rival optometrist, and the congregation of his synagogue is ready to heave him into the street for his depredations on its religious philosophy. But it's not until his wife forces him out of his home in Queens and into a chilly apartment in Brooklyn that Barry begins to come out of himself. He begins an uneasy friendship with Bernard Messenger, the blind son of his landlady, and has an affair with his cousin, the physicist Enid Moscow. Then 40 of his colleagues are killed in a plane crash on their way to an optometry convention. His rabbi decks him. His 13-year-old son disappears in a religious and perhaps hormonal frenzy with the gentile girl from across the street. It is here, when the novel begins to draw back from its tight focus on Barry and broadens its tender, lunatic field of vision, that its power overwhelms the many narrative tricks that could undercut it. Certain situations—the painful funerals of Barry's friends and the peculiar irony that their deaths reinvigorate his business—are denied their full impact by the distance Ms. Schor puts between narrator and reader. Philosophical musings impede too much of the action and muddy otherwise superb characterizations. Yet despite its shortcomings, *The Great Letter E* gradually blossoms, and in the end it has become so affecting that one wishes for more of Barry Glassman's humane clarity of vision.

Stephen Stark, in a review of "The Great Letter E," in The New York Times Book Review, February 26, 1990. p. 24.

Jane Mendelsohn

Halfway through Sandra Schor's first novel [*The Great Letter E*], Barry Glassman, an amateur philosopher, attempts to lift himself out of an abysmal depression by huddling under the covers with a pile of Mounds bars and listening to old tapes of his favorite college professor lecturing on Spinoza. "No one can blame God," the professor paraphrases, "because he has given him or her an infirm nature or an impotent mind. For it would be just as absurd for a circle to complain that God has not given it the properties of a sphere." This insight elicits from Glassman a belated wish that he had received a higher grade on the final exam of a course taken some 20 years before. Spinoza's call to be a stoic Jew escapes him; the very idea becomes, through the lens of Glassman's comic misery, an oxymoron. Yet *The Great Letter E* attempts to make sense out of this calling; it is a novel about living the ethical life with a sense of humor. With its strange, sad comedy and lighthearted, almost giddy tempo, it charmingly depicts Glassman's gradual acceptance of his decidedly circular self.

Glassman is a man with "a gene for God." Like his hero, Baruch Spinoza, he is an optometrist by trade, yet in his heart he is a philosopher. Rather than lend his life clarity, however, philosophy obscures his vision like a fingerprint on the front of his glasses. He tucks brief messages about atheism into his son's bar mitzvah invitations, infuriating his rabbi and alienating his son. Although he admits that according to his own best reading of Spinoza's *Ethics*, his estranged wife, Marilyn, is virtuous, he finds himself unable to love her. He feels that to relinquish his philosophy in order to win her back "would be like waging nuclear war to save a front tooth." But when he loses her to another optometrist, his business to competitors, and his son to a Talmud-reading girlfriend, he exiles himself to Brooklyn in despair. It's at this point that he huddles under the covers with the Mounds bars. In an effort to shake off his loneliness by completing his life's work, he struggles over a theoretical essay concerning the effects of metropolitan pollution on rainbows. For consolation, he continues to read Spinoza, whose euclidean system of logical propositions and corollaries calms him. When his sister asks him if he's suicidal, he tells her "No. I still get my reading done. Unhappiness is a moral state. I'm looking into it."

In this self-deprecating, self-absorbed hero, Schor blends a familiar mix of lovable comedian and unbearable egotist, a combination that can seem unsympathetic, or clichéd. Although Glassman never descends to either depth, the relentlessly comic nature of his predicament does confuse the seriousness with which we are supposed to view his mid-life crisis. Schor doesn't possess the resources of a [Philip] Roth to sustain one long complaint. While not intended to read as a smoothly flowing stream of consciousness, but more as a journal jotted down in the present tense, the novel nevertheless suffers from abrupt alternations between Glassman's internal meanderings and the external world of divorce, religious ceremony, bankruptcy, and even plane crashes which so dramatically shapes the story.

At times, even the transitions among aspects of Glassman's imagination reflect this structural weakness. His visions of Spinoza, obsessive reveries concerning life in 17th-century Amsterdam, come across as too poetic in contrast to the parodied philosophizing that sets the tone for much of the book. They draw unnecessary attention to themselves; it's as if passages from Plato were inserted in a comic book. And yet despite the awkwardness of their integration, the daydreams do produce lovely writing. In one instance, Glassman imagines the cold attic in the van der Spyck home, where Spinoza rented a room; when the "servants hung wet nightgowns there to dry, ice crystals stiffened them into corpses with pleading arms." In another daydream, Glassman envisions an incident in which Spinoza's peers unleashed their hatred for him and his brilliant, heretical scholarship:

One winter night, outside a theater, two of his classmates stepped out of the shadows, one seizing him while the other plunged a knife into his shoulder. He might have been dying, and no one to come to his rescue. He felt lonely and luckless. But rather than flee to the synagogue to ask God's forgiveness and help, he pressed his cape to the wound, feeling in its depths the oozing of his fate. God does not control my fate, he thought, God is my fate, and I *will* love my fate because it is all I have.

It is thought that the thickness of the cape in fact saved his life.

Writing like this saves the book from relying too heavily on the funny and the philosophical. When Schor works simply with words she creates remarkable scenes and interesting people. Transported to a different environment, Glassman in Brooklyn takes on bright new colors as he falls in love with his cousin Enid, a sexy, insecure physicist. She, however, falls in love with Glassman's downstairs neighbor, Bernard, a handsome, blind genius who studies Pascal. This unlikely trio turns out to be surprisingly engaging. They move in a timeless, junior high school world of field trips, neighborhood intrigue, and stolen kisses in Prospect Park. Glassman's unsatisfied passion for philosophy repeats itself in his similarly sweet but adolescent obsession with Enid. At one point, dazed by her facility with the mathematical computations involved in his essay on optics, he compares himself to one of those literary girls he knew as a teenager who read Amy Lowell and worshipped the "mathletes." He doesn't understand, of course, until it's too late, that, like any pubescent boy, what he loves about Enid is that she asks nothing from him.

The crisis that jolts Glassman into this belated revelation comes when his 13-year-old son, Michael, runs away.

After years of searching for philosophical answers and months of waiting for Enid, Glassman recognizes in his son's disappearance the final impossibility of complete gratification. Having lost almost everything, he can now see through the imprisonment of living life as a logical construct. This clarity of vision is the culmination of an optical imagery sustained, almost too well, but in the end successfully, throughout the book. What begins as a novel of ideas transforms itself into a book about a father and son, about the optical illusions and distortions their relation creates. Through its many mutations, the story's theme remains the same, that of accepting a human, and therefore not necessarily consistent picture of the world, of love, and of family. The sense that life is an unfulfilled wish with no one to blame, that we are circles and not spheres, emanates from the novel's last pages so well that the work succeeds despite its flaws. This final call for mature renunciation, not a particularly delicious pill to swallow, is sweetened by the book's cheerful tone and lovely language. Even Spinoza would have to smile.

Jane Mendelsohn, in a review of "The Great Letter E" in VLS, No. 83, March, 1990, p.

9.

Janet Hadda

Poor Barry Glassman. It's bad enough that he has to contend with a struggling optometry business in a rough Manhattan neighborhood, a wife who is having an affair with his childhood friend and business rival, a pint-size son, and a sister who discards husbands the way others get rid of clothes. In addition to these hardships, the protagonist of *The Great Letter E* must carry within himself the spirit-and, to some extent, the fate-of Baruch Spinoza, the phenomenally brilliant 17th-Century Jewish philosopher.

Barry's condition corresponds to Spinoza's in certain surface ways: He shares his Hebrew name; he grinds lenses in order to make a living while remaining devoted to metaphysical concerns; his ideas are despised and maligned by some, treated with respect and acknowledgment by others.

Unlike Spinoza, however, who remained single, Barry looks to philosophical enlightenment as a guide to help him work out the mess of his marriage. He leaves his physically attractive but vestigially phobic wife, thereby suffering the loss of daily contact with his son, of whom he is immensely fond.

His mean little Brooklyn apartment is woefully far from properly brewed coffee and the Bayside garden he had cherished. He longs to rechannel his procreativity into a new sexual relationship, but his romantic forays are neither forceful nor successful.

The problem with Sandra Schor's often amusing and touching first novel is that Glassman is no Spinoza. He is neither phenomenal nor brilliant, and the author's attempt to infuse her character with the depth and conflict of the man who was excommunicated by the Amsterdam Jewish community for the provocative radicalism of his views hangs on the pages.

Barry grapples with his belief that everything comes from God; God is the universe and is therefore beyond good and evil. Yet how can he accept this thought when he feels so betrayed by his old buddy Donahue, now raking in the money with a chain of eye-wear stores and sleeping with his wife? On the surface, reading Spinoza helps buttress his conviction that he should not be consumed by loss and loneliness. "A free man thinks of nothing less than of death," he quotes to himself. It makes sense to him that, "since substance must exist, death subtracts nothing from the universe" and, therefore, that "some powerful law of compensation exists."

Yet he cannot help but feel for his dead father, lying alone in his grave, abandoned by Barry's mother, who-in a final burst of free thinking-has had herself cremated. And what is he to make of the fact that, on an ill-fated plane

that he nearly took himself, 41 optometrists, including a number of his friends, are killed-thereby expanding his business without his having to lift a finger?

The answer, the author seems to be telling us, lies in the fact that mere humans cannot know the ways of the world except in a fragmentary way. Thus, the cause of the plane crash is never discovered, and this lapse in understanding is metaphysically fitting. The theme of humankind's limited vision is brought to the fore through the characters of Bernard Messenger, Barry's blind but perspicacious Brooklyn neighbor, and Enid Moscow, his myopic, elusive and sexually irresistible cousin.

Bernard cannot see the way Barry does with his perfect eyesight, yet he is able to feel his way through life, getting what he needs; and Enid-the heart and soul of the book-bumbles her way along.

Bernard and Enid accept the unravelled mysteries of their lives: why it was Bernard's fate to be stricken blind through a bout with meningitis at age 8; why it was that Enid's brother disappeared one day in 1968 while taking a Civil Service exam, never to be heard from again. From them, Barry learns that there is existence beyond puzzling the unfathomable, and the transformation is salutary. By the book's end, he has discovered that the greatest E of all is not on the eye chart, nor is it Spinoza's *Ethics*, nor even Espinosa (Spinoza) himself. Rather, it stands for Enid and the power of love and friendship.

In the end, as many loose ends as the novel itself leaves-proving that the form of a work can illustrate its thematic-and despite some conspicuous symbolism, there is a cheer about the book that lingers.

On Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, he hears a proverb: "If you see a blind man, kick him, lest you be kinder than God." Suddenly, a bit of religious truth dawns on him: The proverb is wrong. Everyone-Bernard, he himself, his wife, even Enid-is blind in a different and separate way, and the reasons for this are unknown.

Thus, compassion is always in order. After all, why risk being meaner than God?

Janet Hadda, "Spinoza on the Half-Shell," in Los Angeles Times Book Review, March 25, 1990, p. 9.

3rd excerpt from *The Great Letter E*

Bernard Baruch made me proud to be his namesake. sharing the Hebrew name Baruch, used for Torah readings, burials, Hebrew school, and the naming of a child. Baruch College makes me proud, since I am its graduate. But Baruch Spinoza is my teacher and master: from him I learn that our knowledge is partial, we are partially free, partially in ignorance. From him I learn to exist without bitterness and pride. I am what I am, or, in Jehovah's words, I am that I am. I will not complain that I am an optometrist and not an ophthalmologist; that the pathology of that tremulous organism is too specialized for me; that I have one five-foot soprano son and not three six-foot baritones; and have been cuckolded by a lifelong friend. Quests and accommodations are my destiny, as is my unfailing study of the Infinite. But I am no Spinoza! My B+ intellect fails me at crucial moments, most recently as I work mv tail off on refraction formulas. Just yesterday morning what a rainbow that was! Walling myself into work and away from the disappointments of marriage, I stepped out into the driveway for a breath of early air, and there it was! I immediately thought of Vlarilvn and the wonders of another chance. Between the blue and the violet, a deep, sheer, diaphanous streak, a blazing indigo-and then it vanished. Which compound in our polluted city produced that soft and spiritual blue baffled me. God, what a color! But even Spinoza surrendered to the vastness of Nature and recognized that he owed his defects to the fragmentary vision of man, even he had limits to what he knew, had to live in a finite house, sleep in a bed, work in a rectangle of a room covered with glass dust, at a wooden lens-grinding machine, until his lungs failed. Amsterdam in the seventeenth century. A malodorous place at the brink of new thought. The new philosophies, after Descartes, were in the smelly air, in the cold chrome light that swept across the Waterlooplein on an October night. Ten years ago I dragged Marilyn to Holland (she wanted Spain and the Alhambra!) and we toured the sacred places where Spinoza lived, studied, died. Oh, if only life were so simple as to begin at birth!

The Antioch Review

[*The Great Letter E*] is a wonderful novel-a *first* novel at that. Barry Glassman is a West-Side optometrist with a "gene for God," the God of Spinoza (also a dealer in lenses), the God we know through *reason*. Disputing his way with his some-time wife, his about-to-be-BarLiitzvahed son, his mistress, Rabbi, neighbors, and business competitors, Glassman roils the clutter of his untidy life. Phrases from Spinoza's writings dominate our hero's reflections. Both Glassman's difficulties and Spinoza's are seen to come from their common devotion to reason as the way to know God. Like Spinoza, Glassman has a theory of the rainbow, a theory that he, and some of his supporters, hope to see published. (Some of the plot hinges on the fate of this manuscript.) Spinoza is such a central

character in the novel that it is both his life and Glassman's that are offered for our reflections. A warm, funny, intellectually nourishing book.

A review of "The Great Letter E" in The Antioch Review, Vol. 48. No. 1, Spring, 1990. p. 262.

Joan S. Boudreaux

As adept as D. H. Lawrence at portraying female characters, Sandra Schor [in *The Great Letter E*] reveals Barry Glassman's male mind in the turmoil of a marriage gone wrong. The Bayside, New York, setting in autumn lends credence to the paradox in Glassman's life. The first conflict in the novel that keeps readers engaged is the one centered on Barry's and Marilyn's son Michael, who is preparing for his bar mitzvah. The couple, already estranged emotionally (but not sexually), plan to separate soon after their frail, thirteen-year-old's ceremony; however, a great source of contention is created when Barry chooses to add Spinoza's philosophy to his part of the traditional presentation. Not only is Marilyn up in arms about the phrase "Blessed art thou God or Nature, in whose extended greatness we all dwell . . ." which Barry has added to the traditional father's part of the presentation, but also the rabbi and Marilyn's orthodox relatives "use guilt to goad" Barry into giving his speech at the bar mitzvah in the traditionally accepted way.

Family, church, and community opposition reinforce Barry's philosophy: "The philosophic life is a self-centered life that deludes itself into thinking it's not." Schor parallels Barry with Baruch Spinoza, revealing his aloofness when he moves out of his wife's bedroom and into the damp basement until after Michael's bar mitzvah, and later when he moves into an attic apartment because the attic room suits his "need for aloofness."

Barry's Spinozaic philosophy comforts him throughout his estrangement from wife, church, and community. Imitative of his idol, Barry grinds lenses and writes philosophy while the community scorns his heresy, his wife seeks refuge in another optometrist's arms, and the church literally blackens his eye (via Rabbi Mordecai Mayberg).

We sense Marilyn's motivation for adultery in the seven philosophic questions Barry lists early in the novel just after he learns his wife is sleeping with her boss and Barry's archrival, Bob Donahue, another lens grinder, who, unlike the protagonist, has gotten rich selling glasses, two pairs at a time, while the former, obsessed with Spinoza, has eked out an income giving "twelve months of evenings" to the *Spinoza Review*, and persuading poor patrons at his Eighth Avenue optical shop not to buy expensive glasses.

Schor weaves Spinoza's ethics through this poetic account of a modern man's isolation, and weaves, unraveling as much universal truth as did Penelope. Her command of the English language along with her wisdom about human nature combine to make this an unforgettable novel, one worth reading again and again. (pp. 308-09)

Joan S. Boudreaux, in a review of "The Great Letter E," in The Review of Contemporary Fiction. Vol. 10. No. 1, Spring, 1990, pp. 308-09.

Leighton Klein

"God is unimaginable! Perfect and complete as a carrot." A free thinker trapped by his own faith in reason, Barry Glassman can't understand why his rabbi bristles at such statements. When Barry's wife Marilyn takes up with his best friend, he asks himself if anything is worth losing her for. His answer takes the form of a two-page list that starts calmly with a discussion of the ethics of the situation, then leaps off into a comic vision of himself as a cripple at Lourdes, segues to reminiscences about personal ads never sent ("Redheaded violinist. Afternoons. Manhattan."), and finally ends where it started, asking a rhetorical question for which he does not have an answer.

In *The Great Letter E*, her first novel, Sandra Schor has created one of the more vivid characters in recent fiction. Optician, iconoclast, dedicated student of the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Spinoza, Barry Glassman is reckless for knowledge, mad with reason, and racked by lust and doubt. His contradictory impulses and elliptical beliefs are unerringly detailed in this funhouse ride through one man's psyche. The book begins with Barry already separated from his wife, the two of them attempting to keep up appearances until their son Michael's bar mitzvah. Simultaneously serene, confused, and demented, Barry tries to intellectually understand a world that is tying his guts up in knots. His faith in knowledge is his talisman; everything else is so much stuff, disorder jammed in a single room through which he, unseeing, tries to thread his way.

Glassman's infatuation with Spinoza and his world is a lens that distorts and transforms everyone around him. Exiled to the basement of his own home, he sees himself, Walter Mitty-like, in the court of Emanuel the First of Portugal, healing his marriage and the King's daughter with an ancient recipe for oil of mustard and with hot bricks. Bernard Messenger, the blind son of his Brooklyn landlord, becomes for a moment an acolyte of the false messiah Sabbetai Zevi, "self-possessed and handsome, but blinded by ecstasy, floating, as blind people often seem to do, from village to village in the Europe of the seventeenth century."

The other characters are just as dynamic, each one jostling and pushing, trying to elbow their way to the front of the action. Schor sketches them elegantly and swiftly, making each one breathe in the space of a single sentence: Enid Moscow, the "rumply sexy gritty take-charge take-achance Brooklyn intellectual," Barry's assistant Feliz, "the gossip and master meddler in two languages," and his long-dead mother, "Her excitement came through in the emphatic way she lectured us and in the distracted way she threw dinner together." Above all of these, Glassman's own voice soars on crooked wings; a wild, giddy creation:

They need me; I believe it, as I believe in Substance and in light bending and in eye banks. Even Marilyn deserves better, though she was always impetuous. A July night: the bus stopped on the Grand Concourse and Fordham Road; she foretold our marriage, heavy dark hair swinging, an arm thrown around the belt of my pants, fingers hooked in my belt loops as we boarded; we tossed our quarters together into the hopper, symbolizing the joint casting of our lots, she, looking out for bats all the way up the Concourse as a small piece in the newspapers had warned of an invasion of bats from Sullivan County. I was a blind risk, but she took it, bit the bullet, as they say now, said I was not like the other guys, knew instantly she could trust me with her life-so *what if you are a universalist; in my heart I believe, come fire, earthquake, or wild dogs, that you will rush in and save me first.* (Within two years I had cured Marilyn of an irrational fear of German shepherds by instilling in her a belief in the oneness of all the beings in the universe.) Fortunately, I was never put to the test.

These idiosyncratic characters trip their way through a book packed with quirky events that somehow seem perfectly reasonable. Business at Glassman's shabby office improves after a plane filled with rival opticians crashes on the way to a convention ("Making money off of one's dead buddies is like picking your teeth after eating your pet dog," he says), his son runs away with a fireman's daughter, and the Manhattan Board of Education is poisoned by chicken livers. Far from being mere comic devices, each crisis pushes Barry toward a more complete understanding of himself.

There are several small flaws in *The Great Letter E*: one of the longer interior monologues is unconvincing, and a few of the female characters are thinly rendered. Overall, however, this is an accomplished and thoroughly delightful novel, one that does not stoop to a neat ending. Barry emerges blinking and disoriented from his failed marriage, having gained just a glimpse of the potential for human happiness in this life. "Digging is better than thinking about digging," Bernard Messenger tells him, and for once Barry Glassman listens.

Leighton Klein, in a review of "The Great Letter E," in The Bloomsbury Review, Vol. 10, No. 3, May-June, 1990, p. 21.