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## Recent Polish-American Fiction

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## Recent Polish-American Fiction

### John Merchant

There has always been a Polish-American voice in American literature, though it has not always been an *English* one and it has not been one generally heard beyond the Polish-American community. Czeslaw Milosz, a Polish-born author, who has published extensively in English and has reached a notable level of national and international fame as a Nobel laureate, is more associated with the upper strata of international intellectualism rather than with the millions of people who identify themselves as Polish-Americans. Other Polish-American writers have gone undetected or, like Nelson Algren, their Polishness is overlooked.

However, a new generation of Polish-American writers is emerging, a group of writers coming from the culturally assimilated third or fourth generations to whom their Polishness is alternately something to be explored, pondered and preserved. More experienced writers, such as Stuart Dybek (*Childhood and Other Neighborhoods*, 1986 and *The Coast of Chicago*, 1990) and Anthony Bukoski (*Twelve Below Zero*, 1986 and *Children of Strangers*, 1993), have received widespread national acclaim for their work extending over the past decade. Newer writers, like Susan Strempek-Shea (*Selling the Lite of Heaven*, 1994 and *Hoopi Shoopi Donna*, 1996), whose recent work has gotten national acclaim, and the relatively unknown Denise Dee (*Certain Comfort*, 1990 and *Gobnascale: The House of the Storyteller*, 1990), are making their presence known and adding to this emergence of a strong Polish-American voice in contemporary American fiction.

#### Stuart Dybek: the writer from 'Zone-8'

Perhaps the most widely known of all the writers mentioned above, Stuart Dybek is probably less known as a Polish-American author than as a Chicago or urban one, falling in line behind the likes of Algren, Studs Terkel, and John Dos Passos. Dybek, who was born and raised in an ethnically mixed neighborhood (largely eastern European and Hispanic) on Chicago's south side, filters his stories through the rich and diverse ethnic neighborhoods that rest anonymously in the shadow of downtown Chicago. It would be difficult to imagine Dybek stepping out of this environment and writing about, for example, Florida (as Algren did about Texas). In this regard, Thomas Gladsky is correct in asserting that

Dybek's characters 'constantly assess themselves within the context of place' (*Princes and Peasants* 256). Dybek's characters, generally young boys or young men, roam through and explore the playgrounds of their own ethnicity; leaving the neighborhood is a form of emigration and, to these characters, a cultural loss.

*What is left at the end of Dybek's work is a new kind of ethnic identity.*

One of the reasons why Dybek is not known as a Polish-American writer is the presence in his work of a variety of cultural signs and markers from the numerous ethnic groups which were wedged into Chicago's east European neighborhoods. In this sense, Gladsky is quite correct when he says that 'ethnicity is everywhere in his works.' ("From Ethnicity to Multiculturalism..." 107) In and around the 'natural' fixtures of the neighborhood (the run-down street corners, the grease slick of a river, the rusting viaducts) Dybek notes that '...there was a constant sense of flux' ("You Can't Step into the Same Street Twice" 42). The migrating tribes in his case were largely eastern European and Hispanic, '...Poles and Czechs - were migrating out; the Hispanics were migrating in' ("Can't Step" 43). Just as a glacier scrapes and molds the earth as it passes, these two cultures cross over Dybek leaving deeply embedded cultural residue in their trail. In "Nighthawks," Dybek contrasts the superstitious sleeping habits of a Ukrainian boy who sleeps with his arms forming a cross, and a Puerto Rican girl who prays at her bureau before a picture of the Virgin Mary. In "Hot Ice," the prison is full of men with names like Milo Hermanski, Billy Gomez, and Benny Bedwell. Likewise, Dybek's protagonists have friends with names like Eddie (Edek) Kapusta, Ziggy Zilinsky, and Stanley Rosado.

*A unifying element among nearly all Dybek's characters is a sense of loss or disconnection from their clumsily concealed ethnic identities....the middle stage of explanation and understanding between generations is missing.*

While every story is enmeshed in ethnicity, the 'Polishness' of Dybek's characters is less obvious. For the most part, his protagonists yield few clues, for they are either anonymous or have ethnically neutral names like David and Steve. With the exception of "Chopin in Winter," "Blood Soup," and "Sauerkraut Soup" which have more overtly Polish elements, in the rest of Dybek's stories an ethnic panorama is built up from the characters' perambulations around and adventures in the mysterious

world of the neighborhood. It is as if Dybek himself has left clues scattered throughout the landscape of the stories (which is uniform throughout), and it is up to the reader to collect and interpret them. For example, in "The Palatski Man" it is not said whether John and Mary are Polish-Americans, yet they know the Palatski Man (a *palatski* being a kind of wafer with honey sold only in that neighborhood) and other neighborhood boys with names like Leon Sisca and Denny Zmiga. The old woman in "The Cat Woman" is characterized in the opening line as an 'old *buzka*' (*Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* 21), one who, it is later made known, has a crazy son known as Swantek. This '*buzka*' is differentiated from the Russian neighbor, who shares her cabbage soup with the 'Catwoman' and sits in silence listening to the Polka Hour on the radio. At the outset of the story, the anonymous narrator in "Neighborhood Drunk" briefly mentions hanging out on street corners with his own grandfather and meeting his friend Danny's *dziadzia*.

Dybek's protagonists are third generation Polish-Americans who look upon their Polishness as either something strange or mystifying. Gladsky suggests that they see older Polish people they meet as the 'other,' and goes so far as to say that 'the more Polish the character, the more bizarre are Dybek's stories.' (*Princes and Peasants* 257). There are drunks, like Big Antek, and DPs [displaced persons] who are missing fingers from industrial accidents, strange Ragmen who mutter in foreign accents, and bizarre people like the Catwoman and Swantek who drown the excess neighborhood kittens in their washing machine. In "Blood Soup," in his search to get the duck's blood his *Buzka* needs to make *czarnina*, the narrator encounters Pan Gowumpe, a seventy-five year old DP who lives in an abandoned building and cares for pigeons, ducks, and parrots. However, it is in the more overtly 'Polish' stories mentioned earlier that the protagonists have significant experiences with their heritage. The narrator in "Blood Soup," Steven, is called *Stefush* by his grandmother and is told *usiądź* when she wants to talk with him. In thinking of his grandmother, Steven feels 'a kind of love that must have come from the Old Country - instinctive, unquestioning - like her strength, something foreign that he couldn't find in himself.' (*Childhood* 26). He also thinks of the holy pictures on the walls and of 'arriving with colored hard-boiled eggs, ham, kraut, *kielbasa*, freshly grated horseradish' for Easter ("Childhood" 27). Yet, it is not until he meets Pan Gowumpe that he learns more about his grandmother's generation and himself. In a humorous exchange in which Pan Gowumpe asks Steven if he understands the word *dupa*, Steven responds with the literal definition, to which

Pan Gowumpe responds:

-See, thirteen years and you know 'asshole.'  
 Seventy-five years and what do I know?  
 -What?  
 -More *dupa*. (*Childhood* 44)

Silly as it may seem, by the end of his visit Steven learns about Pan Gowumpe's, and other DPs', experiences in the slaughterhouses, about the beliefs of this earlier, largely peasant, generation, and the truth about his grandmother's imminent death.

Only in "Chopin in Winter" does Dybek really give what Gladsky calls a 'paradigmatic ethnic tale' about coming to grips with one's Polishness. Again, it is not so much that the young narrator learns facts and dates of Polish history, rather by listening to his *dziadzia*'s stories and to the Chopin being played by his neighbor, he learns to *feel* his Polishness. It is while practicing the dulling task of penmanship that the narrator gets his true education; namely, his grandfather's exploits in escaping the Prussian army and in working in various coal fields and, with the music of Chopin rumbling nightly overhead, the history behind Chopin and how to get a feel for the music. The grandfather, who is characterized as a shambling old ghost, helps his grandson draw connections between his American self (George Washington, Joe DiMaggio, and Walt Disney) and his Polish self (Paderewski and Chopin). Finally, when the music stops and his *dziadzia* lapses once again into silence, he leaves the boy with the ability to hear and feel the music everywhere.

*It took time for the music to fade. I kept catching wisps of it in the air shaft, behind walls and ceilings, under bathwater... Mrs. Kubiak's building seemed riddled with its secret passageways. And, when the music finally disappeared, its channels remained, conveying silence. (Coast 32)*

Catholicism plays a huge role in Dybek's work, both as physical landmarks (the numerous churches which dot the neighborhood, the bells) and as cultural/spiritual markers (rosaries, scapulars, holy pictures, people praying). Throughout both collections of stories, references to old women dressed in black and praying in churches are used as a mode of characterization and description. For example, when Mrs. Kubiak learns her daughter is having the child of a black man, she melts into the mass of women at church 'wearing *babuszkas* and dressed in black like a sodality of widows, droning

endless mournful litanies before the side altar of the Black Virgin of Czestochowa' (*Coast* 32). In "Hot Ice," Eddie Kapusta remembers old women walking up the aisle of the church on their knees and that old women 'ignoring the new liturgy, chanted a litany in Polish' (*Coast* 152). The mother of Sterndorf the drunk in "Neighborhood Drunk" is characterized merely as being from the 'Old Country' and exhibiting the same traits as the women, noted above. These religious references also display what has been lost to this younger generation. Dybek's protagonists complete the rituals out of habit and are not able to comprehend the wordless spirituality of the old people. Just as the Ragmen appear as strange, magical beings, so too do the people from the 'Old Country.' The Faith has been lost to the younger generation which is left with street-smart mysticism and cautious superstition.

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*"Chopin in Winter" is a paradigmatic ethnic tale about coming to grips with one's Polishness.*

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What is left at the end of Dybek's work is a new kind of ethnic identity. As Dybek himself has said, 'there was another tribe, one that in a way transcended nationality, a tribe of youth... a tribe intent on its own language, music, dress, food, rituals, and rules' ("You Can't Step into the Same River Twice" 43). It seems as if a unifying element among nearly all Dybek's characters is this sense of loss or disconnection. However, as the protagonist in "Blight" notes, they are not even sure about what it is that they lost. As the two cultures flow together, the common denominators match up and the unique elements slowly disappear. Eddie Kapusta observes old Hispanic and Polish women praying in mourning clothes and cannot tell them apart. Meanwhile, Big Antek tells Steven in "Blood Soup" that they no longer sell duck's blood on a regular basis at the butcher shop as the shop fills up with people speaking Spanish. Again, Eddie Kapusta is amazed at the Spanish word for 'pigeon,' while having no feel for his own first language, Polish, which he once knew. One of the biggest markers of the social and cultural changes taking place in the neighborhood, though, is the character of Stanley Rosado - known to his Polish mother as *Stash* and to others as Pepper. The close proximity of the two social groups results in new ethnicities and forms new ties. The young people, having no one to interpret the 'mystical connections between... things' (*Childhood* 138), move on and forge a new culture of their own, leaving the old and strange to linger in their mystery.

**Anthony Bukoski: A surveyor of emotions**

Both Stuart Dybek and Anthony Bukoski show

the middle stage of explanation and understanding between generations to be missing; that is, they look at each other as strangers and do not understand why the other acts as he/she does. However, while the characters in Dybek's stories tend to stumble upon remnants of their past to puzzle over, Bukoski focuses more on the actual transition that takes place between two generations. Furthermore, in Bukoski there is a much greater sense of urgency in the role he plays as the recorder of the death throes of the Polish community around the Duluth/Superior area in northern Wisconsin. While the nostalgia Dybek has for his old neighborhood is somewhat akin to the longing one would feel for a ripple of water drifting to the other side of a pool (as the various 'tribes' of people drift over Chicago), Bukoski is confronting what would amount to the draining of the pool entirely (a theme which reverberates in his essay, "Water Plains," and the story, "Mrs. Burbul").

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*In "A Chance of Snow," the introduction of a 'foreigner' from Poland changes the girl's perspective on her own ethnicity, and she begins to see herself differently.*

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Unlike Dybek, Bukoski gives voice to the older, 'strange' generation which drifts in and out of Dybek's fiction like phantoms. First of all, these people are alive and have thoughts and feelings about their past, as well as what will remain when they are gone. The title of Bukoski's second book of fiction, *Children of Strangers*, carries the bulk of his work with Polish-American themes and hints in a twofold way at the problems he intends to address. In the title story, "Children of Strangers," the older generation is left to sit and watch helplessly as 'people without a heritage who draw public assistance [overtake them]' (*Children* 83). If this sounds a bit defensive and skewed, that is because it is. The thoughts of Mrs. Josephine Slipkowski quoted above reflect the thoughts and fears of an entire generation in Superior who have seen their children grow up and move away, the town in which they toiled and sweated turn to rust, and the traces of their presence disappear from sight (churches, schools, clubs, etc.). In these stories, however, all is not yet lost; on the contrary, the older generation is alive and firmly holding on to their identities. There is still time for transfer to take place.

It is most fitting to begin with this most prototypical story, "Children of Strangers," for like "Chopin in Winter" it serves almost as a paradigm, to use Gladsky's word, for the Polish-American experience. The story chronicles the trip of an elderly couple on their way

to a social function at the local school, Szkoła Wojciecha, to honor the retirement of the oldest and last remaining of the Polish nuns in the parish, Sister Bronisław. The Sister's career as spiritual guide, teacher, and cultural institution parallels the history of the local Polish community, and her decline is their decline. Thus, beyond Sister Bronisław, there is a great sense of dread in Josephine's thoughts.

*Sister Bronisław they learned to fear and admire. The trainer of wayward Polish youth instructed them - she trained us, me, thinks Josie - to work, to honor the Polish flag, to grow up in the faith. Now the neighborhood's gone to hell with people of different faith, or of no faith. ( 83)*

Josephine worries that her children will not have the strength that the Sisters *from the Old Country* did to maintain tradition. While her husband, Ralph, spends his time looking at himself in mirrors, Josephine is 'haunted by the past' (84). However, when the solemn ceremony at Szkoła Wojciecha, in which the members of the class of '34 (people from Poznań, Łódź, Warsaw, Białystok) sing "Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła" and "Joining Poland's Sons and Daughters, We'll be Poles Forever," they are interrupted by two 'invaders' representing the children of strangers. Bukoski presents the callous intrusion by the two young boys drawn by the lights to play basketball as a historical parallel to the deeply patriotic and historic subject matter to the songs being sung. In witnessing this solemn moment, it is as if 'the invaders discovered a forest clearing from which to observe horse soldiers gearing for the last, violent, fatal charge. In their one brief moment, the two witness for the first time their neighbors' nobility' (*Children* 88). However, they quickly are bored with a thousand years of Polish history, and, in a final act of brutality, they look right through Ralph Slipkowski and do not see him. The man who has continually been reaffirming his own existence in mirrors is slapped back to reality with the sudden realization that he is invisible. Now it is *he* that fears the future.

There are several other stories in this collection which, unlike "Children of Strangers," show some positive dialogue taking place between the older and younger generations. In "Tango Bearers of the Dead," a grandmother, Roza Mizinska, attempts to explain different aspects of her dying husband's life to her grandson. Roza, once unfaithful to her husband, longs to be forgotten and is tortured by the past; yet, her grandson persists in questioning her about his life and hers.

*My grandson must see I am as frail as the past,*

*not worth visiting. I want no visitors, yet he is a troublesome one. This boy who is already in his middle thirties and has my daughter's blood, this grandson says to me that everywhere he feels the loss of the past. Why should he bother with the past? (93)*

In telling stories of his grandfather's watch, the flowers he planted in the garden, the violin he played as he wandered about the Polish countryside, and the pews and chairs he made while at the factory, Roza withholds a history of her own which she does not, or cannot, reveal to her grandson. Memories of her affair and the years of silence that fatally damaged her and her husband flow over her in a parallel history and mental dialogue with her dying husband, Antoni. However, as her grandson sits in her garden, 'hidden in shadows of the corn rows, the dreams and memories intoxicate my grandson and make him a lover of the past.' Roza longs to 'destroy them' and 'treat the garden with salt.' (96). Ultimately, her grandson is not capable of understanding Roza and times when things 'could inhabit a mirror,' and imparting only the superficial facts of her life, Roza blacks out her wardrobe mirror with paint so that '[a]ll memories will have vanished, all time will have stopped.' (103)

The most positive stories showing connection between the older and younger generations are "A Chance of Snow" and "Old Customs" in the same collection. They feature young girls learning more about their heritage and themselves. In both stories the narrators attempt to make sense out of their Polishness by consulting dictionaries, learning of customs, and discovering life in Poland. In "Old Customs," the narrator, Marta Davidowski, listens to her great aunt's stories about special forests in Poland which make music when the wind blows; she reads to her aunt from a book on interpreting dreams. Marta represents the third, or fourth, generation trying to make sense out of the clues left behind for them. Seeing her aunt approaching death, she looks up words in Polish: 'dream - (*dri'm*) rz. *sen, marzenie*; dreamer - *marzyciel, próżniak ...*' (75). She despairs, running out of time to learn more about 'the Old Country' or do something for her aunt; all that is left for her is to witness the final custom of the washing of her aunt's body.

***Like Dybek, Bukoski makes religion an important part of the cultural and spiritual world of this community....yet their protagonists are not able to comprehend the wordless spirituality of the old people.***

"A Chance of Snow" is a different story. It does

not center around the death of one generation and the beginning of another; rather, Bukoski shows the possibilities that exist for regeneration and rejuvenation in the Superior Polish community. In this case, it is the defection of a Polish sailor, in the 1980s presumably, and his brief stay with a family which changes a young girl's life. Before his visit, the girl's (Agnes') Polish identity is superficial: she looks in the Polish dictionary only to find the word *gacie* to use as an insult for her little brother; when she wants to get rid of him, she slings his (their) last name at him as if it were an insult; and she is annoyed by the 'racket' her father and his friend make when they play polka music. The introduction of the 'foreigner,' however, changes her perspective on her own ethnicity and she begins to see herself differently. It begins almost as a tautological lesson from the sailor, Mr. Cedzynski, for as he is introduced to Agnes and Stevie, he renames them and restores them to their Polish roots. 'Dad says, "This is my son." "Yes, Stefan," the sailor says. "And Agnes." "Agnieszka"' (47). The imprecise foreignness of Mr. Cedzynski makes Agnes take a closer look at herself and her classmates (more American than Polish). She looks for that foreignness in the fading faces in photographs that grace the hallways of Szkoła Wojciecha and, ultimately, wonders what it means to be foreign. In having the sailor return suddenly to Poland, after 'trying to fit in,' Bukoski succeeds in illustrating how a new seed can be planted for the next generation of Polish-Americans: 'What was in the old country that was so special he'd return to it just because of the stones in the road?' (63).

Like Dybek, Bukoski makes religion an important part of the cultural and spiritual world of this community. Gladsky suggests that the focal point, morally, and geographically, in Bukoski's fiction is St. Adalbert's, the parish church, and Szkoła Wojciecha, the parochial school. (Gladsky 265). This is correct: the Slipkowskis and their children are educated by the Polish nuns, Mrs. Burbul is placated by the new Irish priest who does not understand or share her relationship to history, Edek Patulski skips mass and eats donuts at a coffee shop nearby. St. Adalbert's is at once the embodiment of the Polish community's religiosity and cultural identity, and a sign of a 'petrified culture, frozen in time' (Gladsky 266). Although it is not included in this collection of stories, the burning down of St. Adalbert's, which Gladsky notes occurs in the story "A Concert of Minor Pieces," is certainly imminent in stories such as "Children of Strangers." When Mrs. Slipkowski worries about the imminent loss of Sister Bronislaw and the scattering of her children (no grandchildren to replenish the school/church), the future looks grim.

***What was in the old country that was so special he'd return to it just because of the stones in the road?***

However, as noted above in discussing "A Chance of Snow," Bukoski does hold out hope for positive change and growth for the Superior Polish community. Like Dybek's alliance between Hispanics and Poles, Bukoski portrays the union of Poles with Native Americans, both in marriage and in death. In "The River of the Flowering Banks" in *Children of Strangers*, a wedding takes place between a Polish-American man and a Chippewa woman. Throughout the story, the two main characters, Warren, presumably a Polish-American boy, and his Native American friend, Gerald, serving as altar boys for the summer, witness the wedding and, soon after, the desecration of a Native American burial site by some workers for the State of Wisconsin. The situation at first tests the relationship of the two boys, as the remains are not buried in the Catholic cemetery, but their unified ethnicity of 'otherness' is restored when Father Nowak blesses the remains, saying 'we're your guests' (180). Gladsky argues that, for Bukoski, such a union marks a shift toward an expanded understanding of ethnicity and 'an awareness that all minorities are bearers of something' (Gladsky 270). Perhaps it is like the holy water kept in Bukoski's ("Water Plains") and Mrs. Burbul's ("Mrs. Burbul") houses, which will someday be poured into the ancient waters that cannot drain from the wetlands around Superior because the clay is so compact; that is, the mixing of the waters will strengthen and bless the past as well as future generations.

**Susan Strempek-Shea: family history as ethnic tale**

While Stuart Dybek and Anthony Bukoski build their stories from a strong sense of place, Susan Strempek-Shea seems to craft her novels around the Polish-American family. In doing so, she does succeed in portraying life in the Polish-American community in and around Springfield, Massachusetts. Though she has written two novels, *Selling the Lite of Heaven* and *Hoopi Shoopi Donna*, only the latter will be used for the purposes of this essay. Strempek-Shea fills *Hoopi Shoopi Donna* from start to finish with ethnic references of all kinds, the most obvious being music. Of all the other cultural elements combined (language, religion, food, and family tradition), it is music which holds the most sway over the narrator, Donna.

The title refers to a polka song with the title 'Hupaj, siupaj dana', a favorite family polka song. Donna's family, the Milewskis, live right across the street from Pulaski Park, 'the place known to all as the Polka

Capitol of New England.' (*Hoopi Shoopi Donna* 29) Music is the aspect of her heritage which she embraces most ardently. Her father would 'play his polka records, mostly 78s as thick as dinnerplates and cared for as gently as Babci kept her one precious set of china' (26). Donna inherits his passion for music, just as he inherited his from his uncle, Jasiu. Strempek-Shea uses music to build the family bond with music (each family member had a song that the father, as DJ, would play upon request), as well as to characterize the patriotism and cultural activity of the Springfield Polish community. For example, in signing up for polka lessons Donna thinks that her town 'had to have more people than Poland itself' (14). During polka picnics, a deep sense of lasting Polish patriotism is tied to the music with the singing of "Boże coś Polskę."

*Knowing full well what was coming up, the crowd would begin the song ahead of the band, asking God to save the land that even those who'd never been there figured had to be wonderful - isn't that where all this great music got its start?* (32)

For Donna, polka music and her ability to play it symbolizes her ties to her ethnic heritage and her relationship with her father. In fact, it is only when her father stops listening to *her* practice her accordion and begins listening only to her sister play that she feels truly betrayed.

***The father, in addition to his passion for polka music, is associated with the hard-working generation of Polish immigrants who are willing to work two jobs, seven days a week, to feed their families.***

In addition to music, Strempek-Shea instills each member of the Milewski family with a different Polish-American cultural trait, or even, one could venture, stereotype. Babci is strongly connected with food. When Donna's adopted sister comes from Poland, 'our table overnight turned into something out of a travel brochure, all covered with vats and trays and casseroles containing strange stuff I'd never seen before, and most coming complete with an old-country legend or some trick explained by Babci.' (49) The father, in addition to his passion for polka music, is associated with the hard-working generation of Polish immigrants who are willing to work two jobs, seven days a week, and sit with his daughter at the dinner table to help her with her studies. The mother, though not an immigrant like her husband, is similarly inclined to hard work, and is characterized by her skill at sewing.

*My mother was forever running a tape measure from my shoulder to my wrist, or holding different colors of fabric against my face and hair... I did not need a Barbie doll - I was one myself...* (21)

Being slightly more 'American' than her husband, Mrs. Milewski dreams of being a fashion designer as a girl and does not speak much Polish. Donna's parents at once embody the hard-working, blue-collarism of the second generation and, yet, contain in themselves seeds of future conflict. Regardless of how well she knows her husband, she cannot understand what causes him to disown his daughter, Donna. Just as the grandson in Bukoski's "Tango Bearers of the Dead" cannot penetrate his grandmother's hidden memories, so too is Mrs. Milewski locked out.

Names play an interesting role as cultural signifiers for Strempek-Shea. For example, the big shift in direction for Donna's family begins when it becomes aligned with the Conways. Strempek-Shea uses this instance to show the complexities facing families in such ethnically close-knit communities as the one of Donna's youth. On the one hand, the financial opportunities presented by making links with people like the Conways are substantial: Mrs. Milewski designs clothes for Mrs. Conway and Representative Conway pulls a lot of strings for the family. However, there is also the risk of losing something close to the heart, an intangible fragment of one's identity:

*We knew few people with what most people might consider to be regular names, ones many families in this country have...[t]hose without a 'ski' or a 'icz,' or Ls pronounced like Ws and Ws like Vs, Js like Ys and other Js like Is.* (63)

Just as in Dybek, names are maps marking the changing face of a community. When Donna dates a boy named Sean Riley, she thinks of the Irish neighborhood near her old house and the small selection of corned beef Tenczar's Market would carry in March, which they would label with names like Kerry, Kelly, and Christy but 'that began with an O, then had an apostrophe interrupting the rest, like it was a contraction rather than somebody's last name.' (151)

What makes *Hoopi Shoopi Donna* different from most of Dybek and Bukoski's fiction is the focus on family history and conflict. While Bukoski does touch on this in "Polkaholics," a story in which the son and daughter of working class parents rebel against the constraints of their ethnicity, it is not as deeply developed as it is here. The

daughter in "Polkaholics" merely leaves the story, while in Strempek-Shea's novel the reader is given much more of the psychological and emotional development of the conflict. Unlike in Dybek and, at times, Bukoski, Strempek-Shea decides to provide her protagonist with all the missing answers at the end of the story. The secret history that is not revealed in "Tango Bearers of the Dead" and "Mrs. Burbul" is all revealed to Donna by her Polish double, Aniela, who, like Donna, has suffered from her family's secrets. Also, different from the other two writers, Strempek-Shea does not necessarily forge a new generation or expand her sense of ethnicity; rather, her protagonist, Donna, fulfills her childhood dream (to form an all-girl polka band) and attains a tangible feeling of happiness. For Donna, the problem is not so much a cultural or ethnic one as it is a personal one. Likewise, in *Hoopi Shoopi Donna*, Polish-American life is vibrant, though changing, and the key to its survival rests within the family.

#### Denise Dee: Irish-Polish-American stories

Denise Dee is probably unknown to most readers of contemporary fiction. Her two works discussed here, *A Certain Comfort* and *Gobnascale: House of the Storyteller*, were self-published and may have, at best, been distributed at alternative bookshops around the United States. What makes her work so intriguing, besides her diary style writing, is the mix of ethnicity which she herself embodies. With a father of Irish extraction and a mother coming from a Polish background, Dee's work traipses back and forth from one aspect of her ethnic makeup to another. However, there are some telling areas in which Dee's work coincides with that of the other three writers already discussed.

Like Dybek, Dee shows the need to get back to familiar territory, back to a place in which the buildings and the people are familiar. Paraphrasing Thomas Wolfe, she argues that you can go home again.

*since the earthquake i had been walking around a little lost. i was looking forward to going east for comfort to reaffirm my connections. it was a foolish thing to cling to i thought the idea of a place that would make the tension leave me that once i was walking around there i would suddenly remember who i was but there was always something about cleveland and the people there that calmed me down. (Comfort 1)*

This is reminiscent of the narrator in Dybek's "Blight," in which he feels the urge to go back to the old neighborhood 'to think.' In contrast to Dybek and Bukoski,

especially, and to Strempek-Shea less so, the *place* to which Dee wants to return is not that of her parents and her youth. All that matters is that a certain level of ethnic 'comfort' is available, a certain degree of sympathy in the landscape. It is as if the neighborhood Dybek describes in his work has been internalized by Dee and is carried around with her. Once in familiar territory she feels she has reached *someplace* and can relax.

*he lived in my favorite part of cleveland. an old slovak neighborhood under the bridge. it looked like my grandparents with houses that were dirty brick old and dark wood and banisters and baseboards and the sky and the mill and i felt better already (Comfort 5).*

The idea of loss also is a theme in Dee's work. In her native Pittsburgh, Dee regrets the destruction of the mill in which her grandfather once worked. As with Dybek and Bukoski, loss can take the form of physical structures (the mill) which act as institutions as it were, or it can take more cultural or traditional forms. Prompted by her mother making *galunki*, Dee thinks about the layers of loss that have passed from her grandmother's ability to cook Polish dishes ('her mom used to cut noodles out by hand on the kitchen table every saturday'), to her mother's ('im thinking about this as im sitting at my parents table eating the one thing my mother knows how to make that my grandmother did'), to that of her and her sister ('i don't know how to make them and im wondering if my sister does') (*Comfort 7*). However, Dee finds some consolation for her feelings of personal and cultural loss in a bowl of her grandmother's soup, as 'the nights after i ate my grandmothers soup i fell asleep with my hands crossed on my stomach and it was the one night i knew i wouldn't have any nightmares' (*Comfort 7*).

Dee's dual ethnicity, Irish and Polish, is the focal point of her other work, *Gobnascale: House of the Storyteller*. Dee appears to get conflicting messages from her parents, her practical mother and her dreamer/storyteller father. In Irish or in Polish, Dee looks for words to express the feelings she contains deep inside.

*I call my mother up and ask is there a word in Polish for happy and sad at the same time. She thinks awhile; not that I know melancholy bittersweet... I'll ask your aunt, she says in a way I know she's already forgotten and wish I would too (Storyteller 1).*

Dee feels naturally drawn toward her father and his knack



for storytelling, though this 'Irish' trait, as presented here, does not always mesh with her mother's Polishness.

*Bssch, you don't believe that do you? my mother would say after I told her some fantastic Irish story I had heard. That didn't happen she'd say... I just wanted to believe so I'd hide it away in me and dream later (Storyteller 3).*

The conflict does not seem to reside so much in the personal realm (being put down by one's mother), than it does as a comment from one ethnicity about another.

*It seemed that the only place it was acceptable to believe stories in Polish was the church. No matter how fantastic those stories were people believed them like they happened to one of their family members. If you questioned anything you'd get the same scorn they gave one of your non-religious stories... Or Jehziz gohani, my mother's favorite cry of despair (Storyteller 3).*

Ultimately, Dee follows in her father's footsteps, taking up the role of 'seanachie which means storyteller in some common uses it means saint' (*Storyteller 5*). It is this same Irish belief in the power of stories and words in which Dee searches for a cure for her father's illness, not in her mother's pragmatism or faith. Stories and fables, what her father sees in her as 'the ability to feel,' are what her father passes on to her.

### Some final thoughts

Though hardly a uniform group of writers, there are some common themes and elements to all the work of the four writers discussed above. Mystery, confusion, memory, and place are the over-arching elements evident to all four authors; all of which are triggered by associations and references to food, music, religion, language, and people. The landscape of Polish-American fiction is dotted with steaming bowls of cabbage soup, radios tuned into the local 'Polka Hour,' old women kneeling in churches, snippets of the Polish language, and people, some of whom are as old as this century, who carry around with them the deep waters of memory. Stuart Dybek, Anthony Bukoski, Susan Strempek-Shea, and Denise Dee all unfold psychological and emotional maps in writing of their ethnic identity as Polish-Americans (and, in Dee's case, as a Polish/ Irish-American). The contours and details of each differs somewhat, but most of the same points of reference are there. Of the four writers reviewed here, it is probably Denise Dee that embodies the link to the next generation of Polish-American writers. Voices

that have yet to be heard. The question remains, though, what the next generation of Polish-American writers will make, or is making now, of the clues and guides that have been left for them. Taking into consideration the trend toward super-grouping of ethnic groups, along with the growing globalization of the United States and the world, the degree of control the next generation of Polish-American writers will have over their own identity will determine to what extent they will be able to preserve a distinct voice in American literature. Δ

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