

Wired Words

Electric prose

BY KATE O'SULLIVAN AND IAN DONNIS

On weekday mornings, Mark Binder can usually be found at 729 Hope, a cafe near his home on Providence's East Side, drinking coffee and tapping out the latest chapter of his novel on a laptop. Describing the foibles of the Schlemiel family, Binder writes about a mythical 19th-century Polish village that has been a subject for Isaac Bashevis Singer and other Jewish authors for more than a century. But in contrast to the old-world setting of his novel, Binder's finished chapters are distributed to readers in the most contemporary of ways: via e-mail on the Internet....

Like a lot of writers, Mark Binder enjoys weaving a good yarn that transports himself and his readers to a different place. Referring to the 19th century setting of his serialized e-novel, he says, "one of the interesting things about the people who've subscribed, they've reported it actually takes them out of their office. They're working or eating, but they're not in the 20th century."

The Brothers Schlemiel is named for two of its main characters, identical twins born in the first chapter of the novel. The Schlemiel (Yiddish for "bumbler") family lives in Chelm, a fictional village of simple folk who have a knack for doing foolish things. The town really exists, but the Chelm myths of a funny, backward people

are truly myths, and may not have any basis in the actual place....

Binder began writing fiction as a student at Columbia University and he's maintained this interest while writing for newspapers, including the *Phoenix*. In 1993, he began writing tales about Chelm, the mythical Polish village, while working at the weekly *Rhode Island Jewish Herald*.



"There was a hole in the paper one day because someone hadn't turned in a story on time, so I sat down and wrote a short story to fill the space." Binder recalls

He continued to write the stories and sell them to other Jewish newspapers.

Later, while working at the Chelmsford Independent in Chelmsford, Massachusetts (no relation to Chelm), Binder wrote a column that was sent to subscribers via e-mail. The column, which was pegged to the arrival of the new century, has since ended, but the idea of distributing a serial by e-mail stayed with Binder. He decided to focus on the Chelm tales in earnest, writing them in serial format and distributing chapters by e-mail. Using word-of-mouth, he started selling the complete novel by subscription (\$10 for two years of installments) at his Web site, www.markbinder.com, after Houston's weekly *Jewish Herald-Voice* agreed to carry the serial story.

Weekly installments of *The Brothers Schlemiel* are short enough to read easily on the screen and they carry readers into an ongoing story. Modern readers unfamiliar with such classic serial writers as Dickens and Dostoyevsky may liken the experience to watching a TV sitcom or drama, since television producers use similar techniques to entice viewers to tune in each week. "It's like a performance," Binder says. "I'm performing this novel... I have to hook people right away at the beginning, and I have to hook them again at the end for the following week."

Our Story So Far...

Abraham and Adam Schlemiel are identical twins born twelve hours apart. One is Russian, the other is Polish — but they're both trouble makers, who think there's something wrong with the new school teacher...

"We can't kill him, right?"

"Huh? Kill who?"

"The school teacher." Adam reasoned,

"He's a demon. You can't kill demons."

"That's true, but they say he's only half a demon. We could kill half."

"No," Adam shook his head. "Chickens run around after their heads have been cut off. I don't want to think about what a demon might do."

"So," Abraham said, wiping rain from his eyes, "when school begins, he'll eat us one by one and eventually Chelm will become a village with no children."

"But I know what we can do!" Adam said. "What do demons fear most of all?"

"The master of the universe," answered Abraham with certainty.

"Yes, that's true," Adam agreed. "But I was thinking more of humiliation. Think about it. In every story I've heard about demons, the only way that the people win is by making a fool of the demon. So, that is what we have to do."

"Is that all?" Abraham asked.

"Yes."

"Can I go to sleep?"

"No! We have to make plans. School starts next week. We have to drive the demon out of Chelm, or else we'll all be doomed!"

"Uh huh."

"Doomed!"

Abraham rolled over. Even his blankets were sopping. "I heard you the first time. But, in all the stories with demons, they are fighting with grown-ups. We're just kids. How can we possibly outwit a demon?"

"You forget that we live in Chelm, the center of wisdom in all of Poland."

"In all of Russia," Abraham countered.

"If the demon was from Chelm, we'd be in trouble, but isn't it said that the youngest baby in Chelm is as wise as the oldest sage in Warsaw. And we are going to be eight years old next spring. Surely we can outsmart one feeble demon."

"Yes!" Abraham agreed. He was beginning to feel excited by the prospect. "I think you're right. So, what shall we do?"

"What is the most humiliating thing you can think of?" Adam asked.

"Playing tag with Rachel Cohen when she wins."

"Good one," Adam said. "More humiliat-

ing."

Abraham thought for a moment. "The time I had an accident in my pants in synagogue and had to stand there for two hours knowing that everybody was watching."

"Yes," Adam said. "Closer. Now, think of something that would be even worse."

"That was pretty bad," Abraham shuddered. "I can't think of anything worse."

"It's when people laugh at you. When everybody laughs at you."

"Sure," Abraham nodded.

"Naked."

"Naked?"

"No clothes. Not a stitch. Maybe a yarmulke."

"Wait a moment," Abraham said. "You're suggesting that we get the entire village of Chelm to laugh at the demonic school teacher naked?"

"Not the villagers," Adam said. "The school teacher would be naked."

"Oh. Ok." Abraham nodded. "How are we going to do that?"

"I don't know," Adam shrugged and then shivered. Even though he knew his night shirt was dry, it still felt wet...

"Wait," both brothers said it together "I know!"

To be continued...