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07.16.2000

Schlemiels in cyberspace

Local author presents old-fashioned storytelling in a newfangled way

By JIM SEAVOR
Journal Arts Writer

If you go to 720 Hope St. in Providence on a Monday morning and notice a man having his coffee and working away on his laptop, it's probably Mark Binder.

The coffee shop is where the Providence author goes to write the latest episode of *The Brothers Schlemiel*. When he's finished, the episode is E-mailed to subscribers.

Yes, E-mailed. Binder has joined the world of writers who are taking their work directly to the public. Stephen King is among those who has tested the waters: he is currently offering *The Plant* as a serialized novel at \$1 for 5,000 words.

Binder says he thinks it's great that King is doing this, but he adds that "it could get pricey. This is a man who rewrote *The Stand* and made it longer. Once he's got you hooked, you could be paying \$1 a month for the rest of your life."

In Binder's world, you pay a flat fee and get "about 1,400 words a week for two years."

Who are the Brothers Schlemiel? (For the record, the Random House Dictionary defines a schlemiel as "An awkward and unlucky person for whom things never turn out right.")

They are Abraham and Adam, twins born to Jacob and Rebecca Schlemiel. They live in Chelm.

Binder calls Chelm "sort of a public domain location," somewhere in Eastern Europe. Residents of the town are known as "the wise people of Chelm" -- with a wink. In other words, "they're idiots."

In *The Brothers Schlemiel*, Binder describes the place this way:

A tiny settlement of Jews known far and wide as the most concentrated collection of fools in the world. When someone in Moscow did something stupid, it was blamed on Chelm ancestry. A silly accident in Warsaw begged the question, "What part of Chelm did you come from?" Chelm was celebrated far and wide in Yiddish jokes, shaggy dog stories, foolish songs, and the occasional ribald limerick.

Binder isn't the first writer to mine the site. Isaac Bashevis Singer and Sholom Aleichem are among those who've written about Chelm's special people.

"They think different than anyone around them," he explains. "Some of the things they do are stupid and foolish and some of the things they do are very smart . . . in my tales there is a girl in shul [the synagogue] because she is smarter than her brother, and her brother couldn't get bar mitzvahed without her help."

Binder is sitting in the office/guestroom on the top floor of his Morris Avenue home. The ceiling slopes sharply and there's a paper with a target drawn on it taped above the

stairway. That's the spot, according to the paper, where you should bang your head as you go downstairs.

Binder, 37, lives there with his wife, Alicia Lehrer, and sons Max, 4, and Harry, 16 months.

Binder was born in Newton, Mass., but "I never lived there. I grew up all up and down the coast."

He's a graduate of Columbia and "did New York City for a while. I was a playwright at the time." But he says he became "tired of writing plays and having nobody doing them." Binder attended Trinity Conservatory, one of the last to do so while it was offering playwrighting.

How the story began

Binder started his Chelm stories while he was editor of the Rhode Island Jewish Herald, about seven years ago. "One day we had a hole in the newspaper so I wrote a story to stick in." He did three stories while at the paper.

Binder managed to get the rights a couple of years after he left the Herald and continued to write his tales and sell them to Jewish papers around the country -- especially during the holidays, when the papers ran supplements and had added space.

He began his *The Brothers Schlemiel* series in February. He says his subscribers number in the "triple digits. More than a few, less than a lot."

Subscribers to the E-mail version get a new episode each week, a style compatible with the way Binder says his mind works. "When I write a novel, I can't hold the whole thing in my head the same way I can a short story." He laughs and adds, "I sell a lot of short stories.

"What's really cool about this is I've found a way of writing an ongoing short story. Every episode tells a very nice arc to the story.

"I'm writing this one as it goes along. I'm staying about four to six episodes ahead of the reader."

This does not mean Binder has no idea where his story is going. His story begins just before the brothers Schlemiel are born, and it will end -- when . . . ?

"I'm not committed to taking it to their death," he says. "I'm almost certain not to take it all the way through. . . . [But] the kids will separate for a long time, maybe forever. And one of them has to leave Chelm."

A common touch

In fact, at the end of June, Adam had been sent to Smyrna to pick up a brass clasp while Abraham was left in Chelm.

Adam Schlemiel, alone perhaps for the first time in his life, enjoyed his newfound sense of freedom. He ran, he jumped, he twirled in mid-air. Then, he caught his foot on a rock, and stumbled head first in the dirt. But nobody saw. When he got up and looked around, the laughing mocking face of his twin brother, Abraham, was nowhere to be seen. His mouth opened into a wide grin and he howled at the clear blue sky like a wild animal.

" Yip Yip Yip! Yoooh!! "

Back in Chelm, Abraham also shouted.

Later, after picking up the clasp, eating too much (leaving him with a stomach ache) and sleeping, Adam realized he was lost and raced through the streets of Smyrna stopping people, looking for the road home.

Every passerby on the street he asked, " Excuse me, can you tell me where the Smyrna Road is? "

But no one knew. It was as if the people of Smyrna had never heard of the Smyrna Road.

" Where are you from? " one kind woman had asked.

" I'm from Chelm, " Adam answered.

" Oh, " the woman smiled. " Y ou want the Chelm Road. "

" No, thank you, " Adam said. " There's no Chelm Road in Chelm. Only the Smyrna Road and the Great Circular Road. "

" Silly boy, " the woman began " From Chelm, the road is called the Smyrna Road, but from Smyrna it is called the Chelm Road. . . . "

Adam ran away from her, certain that she was a witch trying to trick him into her gingerbread house.

Binder's touch is gentle as he tells his story.

"I write for a lot of people who don't have books written for them these days," he says. He's referring to the constant barrage of stories of horror, violence "and depressing things happening to people. I think a lot of people don't read that.

"What's kind of nice about [*The Brothers Schlemiel*] is it *is* nice. I'm trying to keep reality in so that it's not sickly sweet. It's like how most people live their life. I don't think most people live among murderers."

He also says his story, like a TV soap opera, can be joined wherever it happens to be and enjoyed.

Find out more by checking out www.chelmtales.com, where non-subscribers can check out the first episode of the story's latest chapter . *If you'd like to subscribe, you can go directly to subscribe.chelmtales.com. The cost is \$25.*

Episodes are sent by E-mail, but there's hope for those without computers: Binder is looking into printing his stories on a quarterly basis.

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