

INTERVIEW KEREN DAVID

IT is a slightly worrying thing, the task of reading a colleague's book and interviewing him about it, especially as in this case the colleague is Gerald Jacobs, literary editor of this newspaper since the late 1980s, who, as a result, knows as much about books, and Jewish books in particular, as many a professor of literature.

Gerald's latest book, out this week, is his first novel, and at first glance from the title — *Nine Love Letters* — and the cover, which features a girl in a 1940s style dress, sitting reading a letter, I wondered if he'd written a conventional romance. But the book, and the letters around which it is structured, offer a far wider exploration of love, with familial love as central to the story as the ardent missives exchanged between lovers.

The range of the novel is epic, taking in generations of Jewish families in Iraq and Hungary and their descendants in England, and he does not shy away from the horrors of the concentration camps, and the *Farhud*, Baghdad's version of a pogrom, which brutally ended generations of Iraqi Jewish life in 1941. I was gripped by the story, and — even though our interview was imminent — found myself reading slowly, because I didn't want the book to end.

The writing, too, stands out. It reminded me of a memoir or, at times, reportage, with its rush of anecdotes, telling the stories of family, friends and neighbours in a few packed pages, moving back and forward in time, with an

omniscient third-person narrator. There was something about it that felt different from other novels covering similar ground.

This, it turns out, was Gerald's plan. As an acclaimed writer of non-fiction, his biggest success *Sacred Games*, the extraordinarily dramatic story of a Holocaust survivor, was, he tells me, "non-fiction written as though it was a novel. So I thought I'd write a novel as non-fiction." In fact it was his third attempt at this. First, he and his editor discussed the idea of writing a novel based on the life of the poet John Donne but, well into the research, Gerald says, "I discovered Donne had been done before — well done." Then he started writing a fictional autobiography of a London Jewish gangster, a project he may return to.

The idea of building a story around nine letters came partly as a piece of nostalgia. "In this age of email and text, it's pleasing to remember the power of a letter, written by hand. It's so much more personal." The novel returns again and again to the importance of the written word culminating in a scene at the end of the novel, and the last of the nine letters, which brought tears to my eyes.

Gerald's career as an author started thanks to his job at the JC, when publisher George Weidenfeld asked the then editor Geoffrey Paul to suggest a writer who could ghost

Above: former Jewish quarter of Baghdad. *Nine Love Letters* includes the story of the 1941 Farhud pogrom (right)

the memoirs of a businessman. Gerald was nominated, but when he arrived to discuss the project he was told it was off, and instead perhaps he could suggest writing about someone connected to the theatre? Gerald wanted to write about Judi Dench, craftily side-stepped her over-protective agent, and, with Judi's full co-operation, wrote her first authorised biography.

As literary editor of the JC, he was the person that scores of Holocaust survivors turned to, in the mid 1980s, when they were ready to tell their long-repressed stories. "People who had held in their stories for 40 years, with all of that emotion building as if in a pressure cooker, suddenly were beginning to let it out. And they

would ask me for help in getting it published. But there were a lot of problems. Some people had faulty memories, some accounts were just badly written. And publishers didn't want to know. And then, in the middle of this, in walked Nicholas Hammer, the former Miklos Hammer. And he told me an amazing story, which he wanted me to write." Hammer's story turned into *Sacred Games*, for which the film rights have been optioned.

There are echoes of *Sacred Games* in *Nine Love Letters*, especially in the sections set in Hungary and in the death camps. Gerald also read memoirs of life in Baghdad. But the stories he tells are fictional, even when set during historical events.

He says he has always been sceptical of authors who claim that the characters take on a life of their own: "But lo and behold, it came out that way. I found that, once you establish a character and they come up against a situation, you know how they would react."

It's a book which examines the Jewish experience extremely thoroughly, through the Haroun family of Baghdad and the Weiszses from Budapest. But Gerald insists that he didn't think

of it as a specifically Jewish novel: "One theme is the way in which so much in our lives is accidental, and ruled by chance. We fasten on to identity and religion, to give life some certainty and meaning. People have to have something to hang on to or else go insane."

Of all the characters in the book and their varied ways of expressing (or rejecting) their Jewishness, he says the one whose outlook is most like his is the Hungarian Dr Chaim Weisz, who imbues his daughter with a love of Jewish culture, celebrates the Sabbath with his extended family, carries out all the rituals "with an enthusiasm that was unfettered, despite his lack of religious belief," and rails against the "fanatically observant."

Chaim says: "I don't need a divine rulebook to tell me what is blessed. Here, with the children, our sisters and brothers and our two dear mamas to keep an eye on us. Family is a blessing!"

This idea of love, between parent and child, husband and wife, different generations and cultures, despite terrible violence and tragedy, shines out from the pages of *Nine Love Letters*.

'Nine Love Letters' is published by Quartet at £20

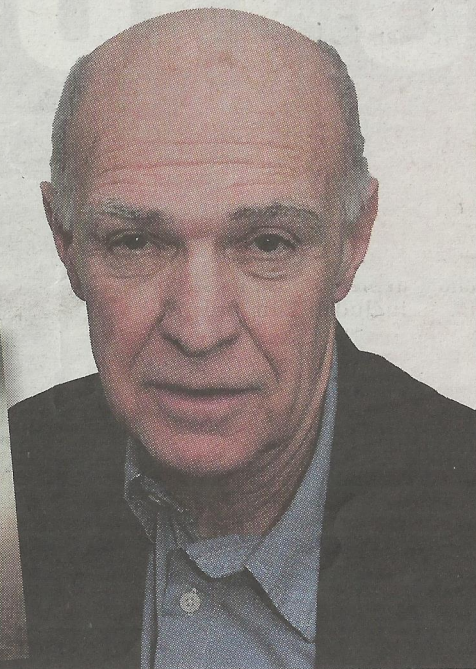


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