



The Memory Monster

Yishai Sarid

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In Yishai Sarid's dark, thoughtful novel *The Memory Monster*, a Holocaust historian struggles with the weight of his profession.

The story takes the form of a letter written by the anonymous narrator to explain an unspecified event. He prefers ancient history, but the only opportunity he has to work as a historian is to study the Holocaust and give tours of concentration camps. At first, he is confident that he can handle the burden of memory and achieves great success in his field. But the work takes its toll, pushing him ever closer to a physical and emotional reckoning.

His monologue is frank and brutal, including descriptions of the camps as they were during their busiest, most horrifying days, and as the reverent museums they are now. He recounts overhearing students wish death on groups they disagree with and challenging them with the unanswerable question: what would you have done? He swings between professional interest and impotent fury that breaks free at inopportune moments. Most of all, he is alone, separated from his family and all of humanity by what he has learned.

Despite years of devoted study, the narrator is often surprised, even confused, by how and what people choose to remember. Everyone, it seems, has their own personal version of the Holocaust, of how it happened and who should take the blame, and of the proper way to honor the dead. In the end, although he has staked his reputation on objectivity and emotional distance, the narrator finds he cannot be the detached professional his superiors require. He must let emotion consume him, because it is all he can do.

The Memory Monster is a novel that pulls no punches in its exploration of the responsibility—and the cost—of holding vigil over the past.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (September / October 2020)

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