

# A FOOL'S KABBALAH

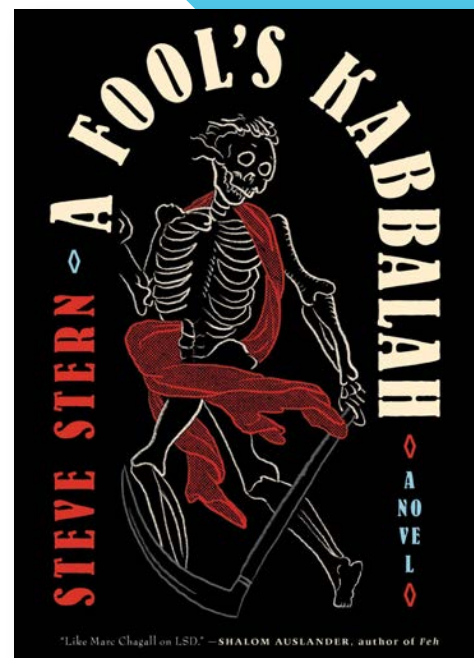
Steve Stern

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“Steve Stern writes like Marc Chagall on LSD: history and myth intertwine, the magical becomes physical, and somehow, some way, the world seems more colorful in the end.” — **Shalom Auslander, author of *Feh***

“Stern demonstrates his literary finesse with this life-affirming tale... The intellectual complexity is shrewdly leavened by the author's sardonic wit and pithy observations. — **Publishers Weekly**



## INTRODUCTION

**In the ruins of postwar Europe, the world's leading expert on the Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism goes on a hair-raising journey to recover sacred books stolen by the Nazis . . .**

At the end of WWII, Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, is dispatched from Mandatory Palestine to retrieve a lost world—to sift through the rubble of Europe in search of precious Jewish books stolen by the Nazis or hidden by the Jews themselves. The terrible irony of salvaging books that had outlasted the people for whom they'd been written leaves Gershom longing for the kind of magic that had been the merely theoretical subject of his lamplit studies.

In a parallel narrative, Menke Klepfisch, self-styled jester and incorrigible scamp, attempts to subvert, through his antic behavior, the cruelties of the Nazi occupation of his native village. As Menke's efforts collide with the monstrous reality of the Holocaust, we see—in another place and time—evidence that Dr. Scholem, in defiance of his austere reputation, has begun to develop the anarchic characteristics of a clown.

***A Fool's Kabbalah*** intertwines the stories of these two quixotic characters, who, though poles apart, complement one another in their tragicomic struggles to oppose the supreme evil of history, using only the weapons of humor and a little magic.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Gershom's story in this novel is a kind of fictional biography, but the character's life deviates quite a bit from historical fact. Why use Dr. Scholem as a character? Why not further fictionalize him and present him under a different name? How does his quasi-historicity affect your reading?
2. Meanwhile, Menke does not share a name with any real historical figure. What do you make of his and Gershom's apparently uneven statuses with respect to historical fact? Do you approach these characters differently as a result?
3. Doubles, mirrors, shadows, and halves are a prevalent motif in this novel; even the novel's structure involves doubling in more than one sense. Where do you notice this motif? What is its significance?

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4. How does Gershom view Eastern European Jews? What role does his image of them play in his concept of a unifying Jewish identity, and what is the nature of this image? On what is it based?
5. Images of theatrical performance make up another major motif here—what is their significance? What is the relationship between performance, belief, and truth in this novel?
6. How does Gershom's delivery of the "oy, am I thirsty" joke differ from Menke's, and what does this tell us about their characters? Is Gershom still, by the end, "not a very funny guy"?
7. Do you think the decision to smuggle the books is ethical? Does Gershom's claim that "the distinction between books and people was finally moot, since each depended on the other for their ultimate redemption" (131) ring true to you?
8. Nachum the book peddler and Tsippe-Itzl live on the margins of the already marginal shtetl; both are perceived as potentially inhuman by the shtetl community due to their physical differences. Does the narrative also cast them as not quite human?
9. How is appetite significant in this novel?
10. What is the aim of Gershom's "fool's errand" (224), and does he conclusively accomplish it? How is the book he carries important? What is the narrative purpose of this episode?
11. Is Menke's return to joking at the end merely a reversion to form, or does it underscore a deeper change in his character?
12. The fool who evades fate and bests the powerful with a joke is a figure in many folkloric traditions. How does Menke's character respond to this stock figure? What's the novel's verdict, if any, on the fool's capacity for *parrhesia* (speaking truth to power), and on *parrhesia*'s potency against evil?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Steve Stern's** fiction writing has won two Pushcart Prizes, an O'Henry Award, a Pushcart Writers' Choice Award and a National Jewish Book Award. For thirty years, Stern was Writer-in-Residence at Skidmore College. He has also been a Fulbright lecturer at Bar Elan University in Tel Aviv, the Moss Chair of Creative Writing at the University of Memphis, and Lecturer in Jewish Studies for the Prague Summer Seminars. Stern is the author of 13 previous books, including, most recently, *The Village Idiot*. He splits his time between Brooklyn and Ballston Spa, New York.

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