

READING GUIDE for *THE LAMENTATIONS OF JULIUS MARANTZ* by Marc Estrin

About the Book

The Lamentations of Julius Marantz emerged from two inspirations. Back in the 80's, Marc Estrin came across a strange monument on the campus of Middlebury College erected by one Roger Babson of The Gravity Research Foundation to encourage research to "harness gravity and reduce airplane accidents." Wondering what was behind it, he "imagined a story quite similar to the one that turned out to be true – some rich anti-gravity nut offering money to the Physics Department, the department snagging the bucks, and then putting up a stone, thank you very much." More recently, "With the rise of the Christian right, its embrace by the powers that be, and the spectacular publishing phenomena of the *Left Behind* series, I thought it was time for a satire on the Rapture, the religious dystopia which might result, and the manipulation behind it." Marc Estrin describes the fruit of this dual inspiration as a comic religious dystopian novel, set in the present, although he thinks it finally to be "a serious novel with comic undertones" rather than the other way around. A meditation upon the grand theme of Rise and Fall rather than a Jeremiad. In any case, *Lamentations* is wicked funny, peppered with jokes, word play and social satire worthy of Mel Brooks or Sid Caesar, even George Carlin. For instance, Julius begins his lamentation on the death of his parents with a Borscht Belt joke about Jewish parents staying together "for the sake of the children."

Julius is a 60-something physicist with a club foot who was a child prodigy. While other neighborhood kids were poring over the pages of *Playboy*, Julius was studying *Popular Mechanics*. Like Woody Allen, Julius grows up near Coney Island, "the prime fact of his childhood." His mother, with her own fear of accidents, stokes Julius' imp of the perverse – a compulsive attraction to what can kill you, especially falling – while his father, owner of Philip's Phixit shop and amateur inventor, uses the rides at Coney Island to teach young Julius the principles of physics. And his pet Gecko, Newton, upon whom he shamelessly experiments, fires his interest in anti-gravity. Accordingly, Julius grows up to invent an anti-gravity machine he calls the Doodad, which is being put to nefarious use by GEKO, an international secret coalition composed of K Street, Earth Friends (the Sierra Club), the World Council of Churches, and the CIA, now the CIC (Central Intelligence Corporation). Everything is corporatized, trademarked and logoed, down to the stripes on the American Flag. In contrast to the arguably innocent cacophony and glitz of the Coney Island of Julius' childhood, the streets and subways of his present day Manhattan are littered with perpetually uncollected garbage and Left Behind detritus. They teem with daily parades for one religion-patriotic observance or another and Greek choruses of weirdly costumed Sacred Harp singers and street theatre troupes. Faces are white with the sunscreen one cannot venture outside without applying first. Think Times Square in the opening credits of CSI-NY, on steroids. People are sweeping themselves away in mass raptures or being dispatched as enemies of the state by mobile CIC Doodad units equipped with sound that roam the streets blasting jingles.

Amidst this nightmare chaos, Julius is on the lam because he has decided to blow GEKO's cover and written them a letter announcing his intent, making him their prime target *du jour*. In desperation, he seeks help from the love of his youth, Lydia, a Catholic Worker and documentary film producer. During the course of his day with her on the streets and inside a near-by abandoned church, they each remember and revisit the lifetime gifts they had brought one another in a relationship doomed essentially by Julius' commitment to the world of Reason and Science, and Lydia's to Faith. Indeed their relationship is a metaphor for the tension between Judaism and Christianity that Estrin uses throughout the novel to dramatize the theme of Rising and Falling. In essence, and as opposed to Christianity, there is no ascension in Judaism, only the Fall. When the Messiah comes, he will come *down* to earth. And Julius was raised Jewish. So, although Julius' greatest desire has been to Rise, he lacks "the talent of faith" essential to the conversion to Catholicism which he attempted as a boy, "raptured" by the force of Christian sacred music performed on the organ, inside a grand cathedral. Instead, he has risen through science and rationality, only to see its Fall into the "crackpot reason" of GEKO. And because this happened through his own agency – he had signed the paper proffered him by GEKO allowing their use

of the Doodad – he recognizes and accepts responsibility for his own personal Fall and takes charge of his own execution.

The Lamentations of Julius Marantz has a three part structure, and is told in three voices. The front story of Julius's flight from the government and the back story of his childhood are told in an omniscient voice. The Lamentations themselves are in Julius's voice, and the philosophical meditations upon central themes and ideas raised by the novel are in Estrin's voice.

About the Author

Marc Estrin lives in Burlington, Vermont. Born in 1939, he grew up in the Bronx, in an all Jewish part of the city. His father was a teacher of history. After a lack luster high school academic record, he graduated *summa cum laude*, valedictorian of his class, from Queens College, with a degree in chemistry. He was granted a prestigious Rockefeller Institute Fellowship but left before finishing the PhD, disenchanted with the world of pure research, and left to take a master's in Theatre Direction from UCLA. After working as director of several theatre companies and becoming adept at guerilla theatre, he joined the faculty at Goddard College, where he taught for ten years. In the meantime he was also working with the Bread and Puppet Theatre, which took him to Burlington, Vermont, where he became the first Director of their Peace and Justice Center. He had also in the meantime become certified as a Physician's Assistant, and worked in a Holistic Health Center in Montpelier, Vermont, which he had organized. In 1985, he left peace work to take a Master's of Divinity from UC Berkeley, and served two congregations as a Unitarian Minister. He was fired from both for being "too political." During the following six years, he worked as a Physicians Assistant at the University of Vermont, and began his writing career in earnest. Along with his work in the peace movement, the other common and vitally important thread in Marc Estrin's life has been music. He took up the cello in college, studied music history and theory, graduating with honors, and is an accomplished musician. He performs (and sings) regularly with the Vermont Philharmonic Orchestra and other musical groups. He also serves on the steering committee of the Vermont Green Party, and is active in Vermonters for a Just Peace in Palestine/Israel. He is married and the father of two children from his first marriage. ***The Lamentations of Julius Marantz*** is his fifth published novel. A memoir about his work with the Bread and Puppet Theatre, ***Rehearsing the Gods***, was published by Chelsea Green in 2004 and won theatre book of the year award.

Interview with the Author

Can you describe your childhood growing up in the Bronx?

I was part of a gang of Jewish kids in a Jewish neighborhood, who went to school, and then hung out on the street until dark, playing street games, and later, uniformed baseball. Like the kids in Julius, we were threatened by kids from the Italian neighborhood several blocks away, and the territory lines were carefully drawn. If you walked across the parkway, you'd be in dangerous territory, and you could see churches and a shrine. But usually you didn't go there. Though my house was crammed with books, at home, all I read were comic books.

How much – if at all -- did you borrow from it for Julius's childhood?

There are a lot of real incidents scattered throughout the various books, and some that just partake of the general ambience. ***Arnold*** [***The Education of Arnold Hitler***] is full of my early discovery of "girls", and some of my music experiences in college. ***Julius*** evokes the Bronx neighborhood in a Brooklyn way. The next one, ***The Annotated Nose***, does variations on silly amorous experiences of people I knew.

Did you go to Coney Island as a kid?

Never. I wrote all that material about Coney Island from research and photographs. I once went on a roller coaster at the Palisades Amusement Park in NJ, and had the experiences of fear, hating it, and then wanting to do it again. During the writing of ***Julius***, I made a side excursion out to a gloomy Coney

Island in the middle of winter, discovered how strangely long the train ride is, and decided to give the reader something to read [the “Infrequently Asked Questions” about the history of Coney Island on pp. 230ff in the novel] while Julius is heading out there for his apotheosis.

Do Julius’s parents resemble your own in any ways?

Pretty much. My father was a teacher and polymath, and filled the house with his books (which I didn’t read) and his classical music records (which I mostly broke as a child. Unlike Julius and Philip, we lived in different worlds. He died early from 2 packs of cigarettes and 15 cups of coffee/day. My mother was not a typical old-country Jewish mother – she was a racoon-coat flapper, played tennis, and taught ballet – but like all mothers of any generation, was always worried about me. Too worried. I should say too that I was also thinking about another great father/teacher – George Ives, the father of the composer Charles Ives.

Tell us about the importance of music in your life, and some of the ways that shows up in *Lamentations*.

Music is central to my emotional economy and to my writing. In the morning (I shouldn’t) I open my email, and read the world news from many international sources, and the political stuff that gets sent me on listservs – and I get depressed. At night I mostly go to rehearsals, and that cures me. I play cello in three different orchestras, and sing in two, sometimes three, choruses which perform major works. I also play in musicals, pickup groups, and for weddings. The inspiring music balances out the depressing politics, and leaves me some neutral space to read and write in during the day. If not for making music I’d likely be a zombie of depression.

Can you describe the three part structure of *Lamentations* for us?

There is Julius’ front-story – his flight from GEKO’s attempt to eliminate him so as to preserve the Rapture hoax. There is also his back-story – his growing up, becoming a physicist, the discovery of his anti-gravity device, the Doodad. (BTW, if you think this is a silly name, the atomic bomb was called The Gadget. See *Insect Dreams*.) Front- and back-story are both in the voice of an omniscient narrator, and are in the numbered chapters, almost chronologically.

Then there are the *Lamentations*, per se – Julius’s late reflections on what is happening, and happening to him. These are in Julius-first person.

Finally, there are the aleph-beth chapters, little essays in my own voice concerning the themes of the novel. “The Study of History” chapter adds to them as a bonus, though I supposed it could also be a Hebrew letter. The use of Hebrew letters to mark the parts of the story come from the traditional musical settings of “The *Lamentations of Jeremiah*” [a musical composition – a motet – by Bohemian Baroque composer Jan Dismas Zelenka, Estrin’s favorite].

Did the *Left Behind* books in any way “inspire” *Lamentations*?

Not directly. I was aware of them and the publishing/religious/political phenomena they were associated with, but had never read any, and still haven’t. A couple of months ago, thinking that this question might come up in *Julius* interviews or at reading event discussions, I thought I should at least see the movie so I’d know more details. I watched it with Donna one night. Not a very good movie.

Who was Roger Babson and how did he inspire *Lamentations*?

This is addressed in the book in Chapter 3, *Contra-Gravitas*, pp. 26-29. But when I first saw that monument on the campus of Middlebury College, I thought, “What the Hell is this all about?” And when I invented a story for it, I found out that the real story was quite similar, actually. Except that the money was not used on a fool’s errand, so to speak. In fact, it revived productive study in the science of gravity, which had been neglected for some time.

Is *Lamentations* a comic novel with serious undertones, or the other way around?

Like most, or even all, of my other novels except one just recently written (*The Good Doctor*), it is both. There is a wonderful cartoon by William Steinberg which shows a realistically drawn man dancing romantically in his living room with a stick-figure woman. I love that image. It jostles up “reality” in a great and comic way. Gogol’s *The Nose* does a similar thing. *Tristram Shandy*. Therefore, with the permission given me by these works, I’ve concerned myself with a six-foot, talking cockroach as part of FDR’s brain trust (*Insect Dreams*), a sweet guy named Hitler (*The Education of Arnold Hitler*), an impossibly manic wild man scholar (*Golem Song*); and in the next novel, *The Annotated Nose*, a figure beyond belief inspiring believing multitudes. I also have a novella coming out, *Tsim-Tsum*, about YHWH, who is living on the street in his ’96 Hyundai, having come back to observe His creation. So I hope that *Lamentations* is both – a comic novel with serious undertones, and the other way around -- hopefully in some kind of evocative balance.

To what extent did you intend *Lamentations* to be a “Jeremiah?”

You mean as an attack on the Christian/Religious Right, a sermon on the evils of same? Not at all, actually. I think of this novel as a meditation. But I know that the critics are going to seize on that and the first review was in fact headlined “Marc Estrin takes on the Religious Right” or words to that effect. Although of course the rise of the Religious Right is a serious issue, with respect to the ways in which it has been adopted and used by the current “powers that be.”

Tell us about a little bit about the theme of Rising and Falling in *Lamentations*. How does the tension between Judaism and Christianity that you use in the novel fit in here?

The ideas of rising and falling inhabit both Judaism and Christianity, the “fall” being a huge theme in Genesis, and the Resurrection more central to the Gospels. Still, both are concerned with both, and, interpreted metaphorically, make up for me a profound ontological dimension of human life. Julius decides to become Catholic based on very little – an inspiring organ concert, and too much smart-ass adolescent Talmudic and dialectical study – so his religious engagement is quite shallow compared to that of Lydia. He stands between the poles of the phony Rapture and her total commitment – as do many of us with some sense of the spiritual, but with no convinced and convincing home.

What do you mean when you describe yourself as a “Jewish novelist?”

If I’ve ever described myself that way, it’s only as a quote from an early review – of *Insect Dreams* of all things! I never thought of myself that way before being so-labeled. But once I began thinking about it, it brought up a lot of things concerning my cultural self-identification, and I consciously set out to explore those dimensions, both in *Arnold Hitler*, and in *Golem Song*. Learned a lot.

So in a way, I guess I am a “Jewish novelist”. I’m Jewish (though not “observant”), and I write novels. But more than that, I am particularly concerned with the great Jewish themes, both philosophically, and in their playing out in history. And I surely picked up the Jewish habits of arguing and serious study. I even have a good Jewish accent when I want to, learned from the old neighborhood, and an accompanying wry Jewish sense of humor.

To hear the Unbridled Aloud podcast about this title with Marc Estrin, please visit <http://www.unbridledbooks.com/media/EstrinLamentationsPodcast.mp3>

Questions for Discussion

1. What issues or situations in ***The Lamentations of Julius Marantz*** are relevant to your own personal experience? How would you describe the tone of the novel? The political point of view of the novel? Did your own political opinions/leanings affect your response to the novel?
2. Estrin makes great use of word play to carry the themes of the novel. In addition to Julius et al, GEKO/gecko, and the apple, how many others can you find and what do you think is their thematic significance?
3. Estrin says this is a novel about Rising and Falling. What do you think he means by that? Here are some examples he suggests: the Rise and Fall of Man/Julius, of American Culture, of the Earth, of Science. How would you explain the connection between Julius' obsession with rising, including anti-gravity, and his fear of falling?
4. Marc Estrin describes ***The Lamentations of Julius Marantz*** as a serious novel with comic undertones, versus the other way around. What is the function of the humor, as the novel progresses?
5. How would you describe the characters in the novel, especially Lydia and Julius' parents. Are they in any way symbolic? What do you make of Estrin's ideas about putting cartoon characters in realistic settings? How many things does Julius Marantz's name and the fact that Estrin gives him a club foot suggest to you, for instance? What about the contrast between Julius' parents?
6. How many ways can you identify that Marc Estrin uses music in ***The Lamentations of Julius Marantz***? What function does it play in character development, or in the movement of the plot?
7. What do you make of the setting(s) of the novel? Can you compare and contrast the Coney Island of Julius' childhood to the contemporary streets and subways of New York City, as portrayed by Estrin in this novel? How about his decision to set the novel in the present? If you are familiar with the current streets and subways of New York City or any other comparable city, how exaggerated is it, in your opinion/experience?
8. What do you conclude is the theme(s) of ***The Lamentations of Julius Marantz***? Why?

Recommended Reading

Insect Dreams: The Half Life of Gregor Samsa, by Marc Estrin

The Education of Arnold Hitler, by Marc Estrin

Golem Song, by Marc Estrin

1984, by George Orwell

Brave New World, by Aldous Huxley

Gulliver's Travels, by Jonathan Swift

The Handmaid's Tale, by Margaret Atwood

Utopia, by Thomas More

Left Behind, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins