Entertainment

If Israeli Occupation Tactics Came to the Bronx

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

July 11, 2017, 12:36am



Share:

Joshua Cohen's *Moving Kings* is a swift, darkly funny, surprising—and brilliant—novel about two young Israelis, recently released from compulsory military stints, who get pressed into the service of a minor but rapacious storage-and-moving magnate in New York. There, in the outer boroughs of both the city and the mind,

the habits and skills of the two former IDF recruits, Yoav and Uri, are repurposed and slotted into the apparatus of eviction.

The book, the graphomaniacal 36-year-old Cohen's sixth, manages to bring together a treatment of 50 years of the Palestinian occupation with a story about American gentrification. As the two ex-soldiers struggle through their own encounters with what it means to be an Israeli in America, Cohen's Americans stumble across the shifting landscape of their diasporic relationship to the Jewish state. These relationships are mediated by their professional experiences—as soldiers turned movers—and one of the novel's virtues is that, in its threaded texture and slow-burn pace and painstaking quality of attention, it represents an innovation on an old form: It is, beneath all of the bigger thematic concerns, a novel about work.

VIDEOS BY VICE



The author of 2015's *Book of Numbers* (an **excerpt** from which was published on VICE.com)—who was recently named one of Granta's Best Young American Novelists—Joshua Cohen grew up in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and spent his 20s writing for the **Forward** from Eastern Europe. He and I have argued Jewishly for about ten years.

SHOP NOW

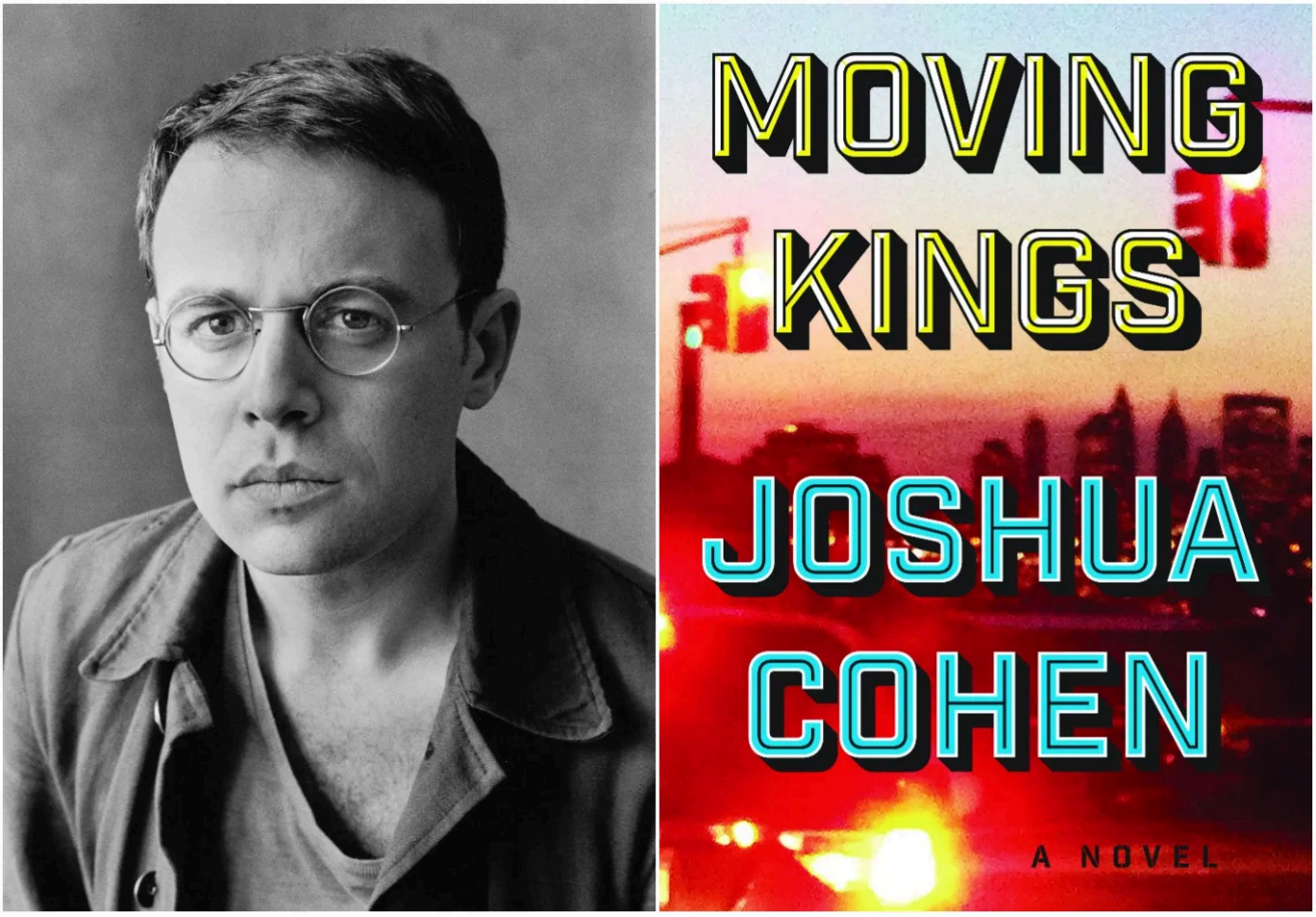


PHOTO BY MARION ETTINGER. COURTESY OF PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE

VICE: We're sitting here at our computers at a table in your apartment in Manhattan, which feels like an empty co-working space. It's hard not to keep

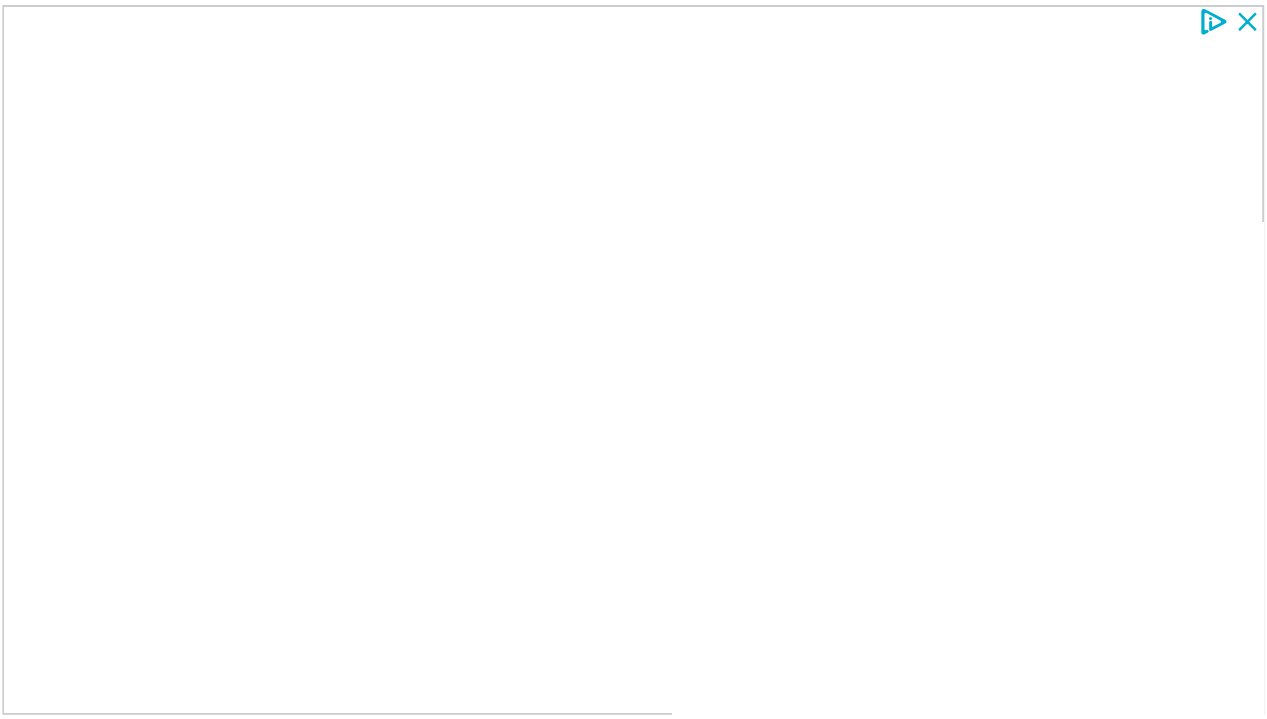
in mind that the labor of the writer, at least outwardly, has become indistinguishable from the labor of anybody else who sits at a table at his or her computer. That's not true, of course, of soldiers and movers. What interested you in those productive capacities?

Joshua Cohen: I hate the phrase "financial crisis." I hate the phrase "housing crisis." It seemed presumptuous to me when, in 2008, or just after 2008, the "Great Recession" moniker appeared—readymade, as if CAPS were compensation for lost capital. Here in New York, as I watched people lose their homes, I thought: *I've seen all this before*. Large, almost immovably large, men busting down doors and dispossessing, seizing what there was to seize, and leaving the discards out on the curb. These movers were just doing the same things, just doing the same physical things, as IDF soldiers do in Palestine, or in the Palestinian territories: not in Gaza, perhaps, where the preferred method of removal is airstrikes, but certainly in the West Bank.

Where did the initial analogy come from? How did it develop?

I didn't want to make an analogy between the two situations. Or a metaphor. Those rhetorical devices entail correspondences either too concrete (analogy) or too abstract (metaphor). Instead, I just wanted to present the two experiences—to present the lives of two IDF soldiers who experienced, who were made complicit in, both. This, to my mind, is the fundamental divide between the work of writing and "work"—by which I mean all paid physical work, including military service. What in writing can just be rhetorical, a surface flourish, in labor becomes literal—it has to be suffered through, sweated through, endured.

Watch VICE Meets Norwegian literary sensation Karl Ove Knausgaard:



One of the things, it seems to me, that makes your book function so well is that the juxtaposition between the two conditions of displacement never feels too contrived. You start with a set of observations about a formal, extrinsic similarity and then you slowly back into what might then be said

about the content: “the facts on the ground.” This development mirrors the development of the characters: We see them from the outside, as children in a family, as soldiers in a unit, as practitioners in an industry, before we know them as individuals. Was this a purposeful approach to the problems of the broad, totalizing analogy?

I’d grown impatient with—let’s call it “the novel of correspondences.” Which, in my reading, in my upbringing, came from Jewish storytelling, or folktale. Forms like allegory and parable. I wanted to follow two characters—two young guys, neither fully men nor fully boys, as they become conscious of these forms, as they become conscious of living, and even perpetrating, these forms, and to track how they react to this awareness. Do they feel trapped? Do they ever do anything to break the cycle? The choice to do so would be their triumph—it would be their maturity, or their coming of age or into political consciousness, which I hoped would be read as a type of victory over omniscience. The writer’s omniscience, but also the state’s, and God’s—all of them oppressive. Remember, these guys are at the bottom: They’re infantry, they’re grunts, but also, they’re sons. They’ve spent their lives being told what to do; they’ve spent their lives trusting their superiors and executing orders.

Was this hope also yours, as a writer?

My hope here was to write somewhat lower. To write characters who barely speak English, and who don’t even talk much in Hebrew. This was the challenge: to show their change as I changed myself, from a verbal to a body writer. Israel remade, or crusaded to remake, the Jew into an earthier creature, a man of the land. I wondered what that metamorphosis was like—for those who experienced that period—and tried to replicate it here, as if to reeducate my style.

“This, to me, is the political work of the novel: It puts all of humanity together, if not on the same page, then in the same bind.”



The famous cohort of postwar Jewish American writers, like the generation of Jewish Americans they represented, saw in the young Israeli—the original settlers, the kibbutzniks, the soldiers—an enviable figure. He (because this was always a macho character) was a man of discipline, order, and solidarity. The desert was the original empty, uncultivated, barren space, and he made it bloom, and then he went on to win two wars that otherwise might have meant the completion of the annihilative project. Of course, American Jews were writing about these figures at a moment when it was a lot easier to be sympathetic to Israel; in the 1960s and 1970s, the myth was still of the kibbutznik turned reluctant soldier. But they weren't writing about Israel at all, right? They were writing about the way their generation of assimilated Jews had become soft in America—in Bellow's phrase, when he went to Israel in 1975, how American Jews had become "lightly chloroformed" to the realities of power?

I think you're right: American Jews got behind the Israeli new Jew mythos because it seemed like such an attractive alternative to what was happening to them in America: their assimilation, their deracination, their whitening. Israel, or Zionism, became a type of standard by which American Jews were able to measure their loss: their loss of culture (through the death of the European Jewish immigrant, and refugee, generations), as much as their loss of sheer numbers (through intermarriage). The politics of the descendants of those refugees and immigrants can most profitably be understood not through a consideration of America's past

(which includes, if I have to remind anyone, genocide and slavery), but through a consideration of how they've corrupted that past through succumbing to nostalgia and sentiment. This nostalgia, this sentiment, has created a third identity here: not fully Jewish (or Irish, or Italian, or Greek), and not fully American. Rather, this third identity is "yearning." Without the rest of the world, America would have nothing to yearn for. America would have no dream.

Right.
That's what Bellow, and Philip Roth too, wrote so well about: how, despite the greatness, or the great idealism, of our pluralistic democracy, you can never truly shake the demands of blood, or the delusions of the demands of blood. They're always there, calling to you, promising both to grant purpose and significance to your capitalist life, and—as we realize every now and again—to endanger the comity of the republic.

This significance or purpose for your soldiers is rooted in their Israeliness, in their confidence in their abilities and in military fraternity—a fraternity that, for the Israelis in the novel, subsumes or obviates deep differences in intra-Israeli ethnic background and social class. But then all of that work serves the brutality of the American apparatus of class-based displacement—Israeli solidarity is put at the service of the nasty New Jersey Jew. Does that seem the right reading? Where are the soldier-movers left at the end? What, right now, is the political work of the novel?
This was of the utmost importance: not to judge these soldier-movers, but to let them judge themselves. Or to provide them with the stage on which to do so: the

Meadowlands, the New York outer boroughs. What stands in their way is precisely what you mentioned: their confidence and pride. In their mission if not in each other. In each other if not in themselves. They might be good at what they do—whether it be eviction in the Bronx, or eviction in Ramallah—but (to paraphrase my parents, and maybe yours as well) is what they do good for the Jews? And can anything be good for the Jews that's hell for Palestinians? This, to me, is the political work of the novel: It puts all of humanity together, if not on the same page, then in the same bind.



Gideon Lewis-Kraus is a writer living in New York.

Moving Kings *by Joshua Cohen is available in bookstores and online from Random House.*

Tagged:

BOOKS CULTURE FICTION GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS ISRAEL JOSHUA COHEN MOVERS MOVING KINGS NOVELS PALESTINE VICE US

Share:

ONE EMAIL. ONE STORY. EVERY WEEK. SIGN UP FOR THE VICE NEWSLETTER.

Your email address

Subscribe

By signing up, you agree to the Terms of Use and Privacy Policy & to receive electronic communications from VICE Media Group, which may include marketing promotions, advertisements and sponsored content.