

Uncrossable Borders: A Review of Patrick Hicks's New Novel, 'In the Shadow of Dora'

As Patrick Hicks's novel *In the Shadow of Dora* opens, it is July 1969 in bright-and-sunny Cape Canaveral, Florida. In just a few days the United States will send astronauts to the moon for the first time, hopefully with success, and, because of this, Dr. Wernher Von Braun is all over American television. Dr. Von Braun has been a familiar face, to some extent, for years – on a popular Walt Disney space series, for example, in which he held up model rockets and enthusiastically explained them to children between lively cartoon segments; and, now, on an evening talk show, filling in the fawning host on the big upcoming event. Von Braun is all winning smile, salt-and-pepper hair, double-breasted suit. He has become a celebrity, the “Columbus of Space”: explorer, educator, friendly tour guide to the majestic world of the stars.

At least one viewer, however, is not buying it. Watching from his couch after a day of work is NASA engineer Eli Hessel, nursing a beer and a sore back and considering the man on the screen. He has known this man, or known of him, for decades, longer than have most Americans. Von Braun was not always an American science celebrity. In Germany he had been chief developer of the V-2 rockets – precursors of the ones powering Apollo 11 – built secretly underground, using concentration-camp labor, at the site called Dora-Mittelbau.

Von Braun's V-2 design was a last-ditch attempt at victory for an already slowing Third Reich, but its development injected the Nazis with new, if short-lived, energy. If it did turn out to be the game changer they hoped, V-2s might soon rain down on New York, Chicago, and more.

Eli knows all of this very well because, long before his NASA engineering career, he survived Auschwitz and later the tunnels of Dora-Mittelbau, where he was forced to work on Von Braun's V-2 rockets. When he could, he sabotaged them. Most of the time he just tried to stay alive. And now here's Von Braun himself, all over the television; the next day he and some of his former cohort will show up at Eli's workplace where he will be forced to see them, like startling visions from the past, made Technicolor.

The very sight of them makes Eli's blood run cold. But, of course, they'd never remember Eli.

Why hasn't someone shot one of them? One of us survivors? he wonders, thinking of his own gun in the hallway closet, which he has purchased – when? Why? Perhaps he owns it out of some persistent inner fear. He is not a violent man, but suddenly he can hardly believe the simple fact that no one has tried it. Those criminals are out in the open, just walking around! If someone were to assassinate a big name like Von Braun, Americans would have to wonder *why*, and the media might investigate, and then maybe the truth about him would finally wash out from beneath this absurd scrubbed-clean façade. Some former prisoner like me, he thinks – why haven't they just *done* it already? It seems, suddenly, like a question that requires an answer.



"Whoever was tortured, stays tortured," writes Jean Améry in his superb essay collection, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*. Améry examines what happens when the human intellect is placed against such unthinkable entities as death camps, de-humanization, torture. "The intellect nullified itself," he writes, of his time in Auschwitz, "when at every step it ran into uncrossable borders. The axes of its traditional frames of reference then shattered." What do we do when our former

frames of reference no longer work? How can we make sense of the fact that the Third Reich lasted twelve years, that millions of people were active participants or quiet bystanders in mass extermination?

And on a smaller scale, how can we transmit, or translate, unthinkable personal experiences to a listener, even a sympathetic one? An experience like Auschwitz, like torture, can be described, Améry says, but never clarified: "All the attempts at clarification, most of which stressed a single cause, failed ridiculously." Eli has a similar thought when he recalls being asked by an American what "lessons" he might have learned from surviving Auschwitz and Dora. Lessons? he thinks, blankly. How could there have been lessons? How does one take a lesson from sadism?

For that's what it was, according to Jean Améry: sadism. "National Socialism in its totality," he writes, "was stamped less with the seal of a hardly definable 'totalitarianism' than with that of sadism...[which is, according to Georges Bataille] the radical negation of the other." He goes on:

A world in which torture, destruction and death triumph obviously cannot exist. But the sadist does not care about the continued existence of the world. On the contrary: he wants to nullify this world, and by negating his fellow man, who also in an entirely specific sense is 'hell' for him, he wants to realize his own total sovereignty.

The act of being tortured, Améry says, is to have the human social contract breached in every way, so that the victim feels themselves negated by the other. Améry calls it an "astonishment" – "astonishment at the existence of the other, as he boundlessly asserts himself through torture...That one's fellow man was experienced as the anti-man remains in the tortured person as an accumulated horror..

Torture becomes the total inversion of the social world, in

which we [normally] can live only if we grant our fellow man life, ease his suffering, bridle the desire of our ego to expand. But in the world of torture man exists only by ruining the other person who stands before him. A slight pressure by the tool-wielding hand is enough to turn the other – along with his head, in which are perhaps stored Kant and Hegel, and all nine symphonies, and The World as Will and Representation – into a shrill piglet squealing at slaughter.

This “horrible and perverted togetherness” between torturer and tortured is what follows Eli in the decades after his “liberation,” all the way to Kennedy Space Center when he sees his former tormentors strutting along metal walkways. Hicks takes the psychological links described in Améry and, in a smart novelistic twist, makes them physical.

“It is impossible for me to accept,” Améry writes, “a parallelism that would have my path run beside that of the fellows who flogged me with a horsewhip.” But, when Von Braun and his cohorts show up in Eli’s very place of work, that is exactly what is happening to him.

Would we expect Eli not to think about his past? The people around him seem to either suggest that he ruminate on “lessons,” or forget his torment entirely. In fact, he has done very well for himself, considering. He has a wife, a grown daughter at Berkeley, a job to be proud of. In the evenings he assembles jigsaw puzzles of classic paintings (he’s on Vermeer now). All is well, he tells himself. All is well. Still, when he looks in the mirror, he is startled by how quickly he’s aged. “One ages badly in exile,” Jean Améry notes.

Améry might say that Eli is suffering from resentment – suffering *in* resentment, perhaps, because he describes it as a state, one which he both apologizes for and defends. Resentment is “an unnatural but also a logically inconsistent condition. It nails every one of us onto the cross of his

ruined past. Absurdly, it demands that the irreversible be turned around, that the event be undone. Resentment blocks the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future.”

The burden of resentment seems, in this way, nearly as cruel as the original harm itself. Like torture, Eli did not choose it, but here it is. How could he *not* want “the event” to be undone? Eli Hessel endured the complete negation of his own humanity as the price of enlarging another’s, and here those others are now, still, somehow, enlarging themselves. (Hicks painfully, but effectively, re-creates this complete negation, often through the SS guards’ dialogue at Dora, where the novel opens. “You pieces of SHIT!” one guard screams – in fact, the prisoners are called “pieces of shit” at least three times in the opening pages – while another refers to them as “my assholes.” An unnamed guard beats a prisoner with a pipe – possibly to death – for dropping one of the materials, all the while bellowing at him, “Be gentle with that! Gentle! Gentle! Gentle!” The bodies of the dead prisoners are referred to as “rags.”)

The Second World War is all around Eli in commemorative magazines and TV shows – *Hogan’s Heroes*, *The Great Escape* – but represented in a triumphant manner he can hardly recognize. After all, we won! The Third Reich lasted “just” twelve years (Eli would not have had Wikipedia, but that’s what today’s entry says). The cultural amnesia that both Améry and Hicks point out in modern society can feel staggeringly glib (for Hicks’s writing definitely points fingers, subtly, at disturbing current trends). Are we collectively glad that a despot was allowed to rise to power, slaughter millions, incite a world war, and continue to inspire copycats with perhaps rising influence even today, because Hitler was killed after “just” twelve years?

(When I look at my son, I think: twelve years has been his whole lifetime.)

In any case, Eli is the one with the conscience, not his tormentors. Their actions occurred out of the context of any morality, turning them into (Améry): “facts within a physical system, not deeds within a moral system.” “The monster...who is not chained by conscience to his deed sees it from his viewpoint only as an objectification of his will, not as a moral event.”

It is a deep unfairness that Eli's conscience, his role as victim in a massive cultural and personal crime, continues to mark him with guilt throughout his life. When CIA agents descend on Kennedy Space Center in a Communist witch-hunt (how the Soviets would love to sabotage Apollo!, they think), they single Eli out immediately. Was he with political prisoners at Auschwitz and Dora? Communists? Maybe they gave him ideas? What happened to him there, anyway? Maybe he's not trustworthy. He makes some other people uncomfortable. He is not “clear”; he is an insoluble dilemma. Eli is thrown into a surreal second tunnel where the victim has become the blamed. “He embodied something...dangerous,” he realizes, with a new, dawning grief, “something that needed to be buried.”

“I am burdened with collective guilt,” Jean Améry writes. “The world, which forgives and forgets, has sentenced me, not those who murdered or allowed the murder to occur.”

The question, for Hicks as a novelist, is now what Eli will do with his resentment.

It's true that much of Hicks's *In the Shadow of Dora* is a literary account of crimes against body and memory, and that they are hard to read. They are things that happened. They are not the only things. Hicks is very careful to hold Eli apart from the sort of feel-good, “wow-this-guy-really-overcame!” narrative that lines bookshelves, probably because you can tell that he cares so much about the character he's created. The morality of Hicks's novel is a carefully considered one: realistic, fundamentally opposed to cruelty and to use of

force, and dedicated to exposing these but not letting them block out all light.

As far as the book itself, it manages admirably to balance the dark and the light. His use of language is cinematic and rich. Hicks's description throughout – perhaps keeping in mind that when something is beyond the intellect, all we can do is describe – keeps the reading riveting: the SS guards hold their rifles “lazily at their sides, like baguettes.” An air raid is “blossoms of fire” and “a steeple [sinking] sideways into the ground.” Then there's this apocalyptic image: “An SS guard stood on top of a truck and fired a machine gun at the approaching bombs. Huge orange asterisks erupted from the end of his weapon.”

The novel is exquisitely researched; Hicks has visited ten concentration camps including the tunnels at Dora, which he [detailed in an earlier Wrath-Bearing Tree interview](#). Those who are fascinated by WWII and Cold War history will find much to learn. As for period details, Hicks could probably tell you the ratio of metals in the rocket pipe, and the brand of TV dinner Eli's eating in 1969. Television shows (and only three TV channels!), clothing, even smells (of course the work area smells like hairspray and pomade – all the ladies were wearing beehives!) add texture without showing off or overwhelming the heart of the book, which is its story: Eli's life.

Initially, when he arrives at Dora, any scrap of mental energy Eli may have left is devoted to food: imagining the look, the smell, the taste of lamb chops, green beans, bread. Later, small snippets of his family show through. These are too hurtful to dwell on, but he can't keep them all away. They are wedded inexplicably to his sense of self, of potential. (He is only twenty-one years old: sometimes that is hard to remember.) In one brief, pleasant memory, Eli recalls doing calculus at his parents' table. “He thought about his hand unspooling an equation of stars. Yes. His little life did have meaning.”

Somehow, amazingly, in 1949 his daughter is born. He will hold her, and later his granddaughter, so that they cover the blue tattoo on his forearm. "We are who we love," he whispers into his daughter's newborn ear. "Do you hear me, little one? We are who we love."

And, last, the moon. In "Secrets," one of the most unique chapters in Hicks' novel (or partial-chapters, more accurately), the author decides to tell the history of the moon. I have never in my life read a book that included a chapter on the history of the moon, and I found the notion delightful and the chapter itself charming. It opens in 1969, and Eli is out looking at the night sky, as he often does. The moon is perhaps the one thing that's been with him throughout all of his trials – in Dora, it often seemed to reflect his state of mind – and now here he is, part of the engineering team that's sending the first astronaut to walk it.

Five billion years ago, Eli muses, we didn't have a moon at all. Then, it was created when a planetoid the size of Mars hit Earth.

The cores of these two planets were wrenched apart and the molten debris twisted around each other, caught in an unbalanced dance of gravity. Over millions of years, the cooling matter created a larger and a smaller orb. We may not think of the moon as a companion planet, but it is one. It came from us, and we came from it.

The moon is our closest neighbor at 240,000 miles away, and reaching it, Eli believes, is "the biggest adventure mankind has ever undertaken." He plays with words, thinking about honeymoon, lunacy, moonstruck. This brief, sweet flight of fancy is a fun inroad into Eli's mind. He is a quiet, self-protective man out of necessity, but he still has his beautiful mind. And what could be more self-contained, more silent than the moon? Lonelier than the moon? "The experience of persecution," Améry has written, "was, at the very bottom,

that of an extreme loneliness.”

As a reader, it’s odd to think of the moon having a “history” – or maybe I’m just a typical human who simply can’t imagine history without or before us – but the moon has one, or at least it has a past, if there is a difference. And this past, still, in 1969, untouched by man, must be appealing to Eli, though the moon has obviously been a touched thing. It’s full of craters and dry pools, it’s been bombarded – but not by humans. It’s been touched only by blameless things. Perhaps there is no “lesson” in that, either, but there is also no lasting pain.

And in a few days, men will land there. Eli is in awe, but not exactly jealous. Surely, though, it’s not lost on him the immense effort that’s going toward getting these three men to his favorite satellite and back again in eight quick days. The whole world is watching. Over 25 billion dollars (about 152 billion, by today’s standards) were dedicated to ensure that, no matter what, these men – the bravest men in the entire world – come home safe.

In the camp, Eli often wondered if anyone was coming to save them. Six million dead. Would anyone come for them? Here is Améry:

In almost all situations in life where there is bodily injury there is also the expectation of help; the former is compensated by the latter. But with the first blow...against which there can be no defense and which no helping hand will ward off, a part of our life ends and it can never again be revived.

The men headed out on Apollo 11 can rest assured that mountains will be moved to get them back again. No obstacle is too physical, no amount of care is too much. Hell, America knows their *vital signs*. Should one man’s heart rate drop, the highest-level experts in the world will scramble. These

astronauts have an expectation of help unmatched in history.

Eli doesn't begrudge them. He wants, deeply, for the mission to be a success.

Later, in 1972, Eli's one regret will be that the American moon program ended so soon. Only six manned visits? How much can we know, from that? And this may be our clue into what memory is, for Eli, as well as love: they are knowledge. Eli is a man of the mind and his knowledge is his own. Perhaps the men who hurt him thought they knew him, or knew something of him, but they didn't know anything at all. No Nazi thug who put a boot in his back will ever get to see the curl of his newborn daughter's ear. They will never have his particular view of the moon. They cannot know what his father and mother said to him as they sat around that kitchen table, joking, and while he did his homework. Love is an incalculable knowledge. And so that is why he feels just a little indignant about the idea, in 1969, that one moon landing could tell us so much.

How much can we learn from such brief contact?, he wonders. We put our boots on it once, and we think we know a thing.

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Hicks, Patrick. [*In the Shadow of Dora: A Novel of the Holocaust and the Apollo Program*](#), (Steven F. Austin State University Press, 2020).

Amery, Jean. *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (Indiana University Press, 1966).