In step with memory

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A Mad Desire to Dance
By Elie Wiesel
Alfred A. Knopf
274 pages; $25

Doriel Waldman knows that "survivor" is a big word, which may say little or nothing. It may conceal, suppress or stimulate impulses, whims, curiosity and "rejection of the standards imposed by a hypocritical society, adrift and doomed to perish from its fear of boredom." Survivors may be paralyzed. They may go mad.

A European expatriate living in New York, independently wealthy, an insomniac and a loner, Doriel is the main character in a new novel by Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel. For half a century, he has been obsessed by "a madness burdened by memories." His sister and brother were killed by the Nazis. His mother, a member of the Resistance, and his father, who hid the family in a lumberjack's barn in a small village in Poland, survived World War II only to perish in an accident in 1946. Doriel suffers "from desperately trying to remember everything" - and coming up only with shattered fragments, "a path in a zigzag from one image to another," and suspicions about secrets.

Convinced that he's possessed by a dybbuk, Doriel turns to psychoanalyst Therese Goldschmidt, a child of survivors, for whom the subject of the Holocaust has been taboo. Their emotionally charged exchanges - and their subsequent interpretations of them - frame A Mad Desire to Dance.

Wiesel, who at 15 was sent to Auschwitz, uses the device to elaborate on themes he has explored before, most notably in his memoir Night. Knowledge, reason and logic, Doriel maintains, haven't helped him "find the vital answer, or genuine peace." He isn't sure if he's mad because he retains his faith in God - or because he's lost it. And he can't get rid of the feeling that the angel of death "always triumphs over the living, past and future." Doriel knows that when the war broke out, he was a small boy, unable to get his way; nonetheless, he feels guilty for leaving his parents: "I should have clung to my mother's hand, to my father's arm. I shouldn't have let them die without me."

A Mad Desire to Dance recreates the experience of hiding from the Nazis "through a stretch of time where nothing happens." And of racing to a storage room when soldiers, strangers or nosy neighbors wandered by. Stirred by an unfamiliar voice, his father, Doriel recalls, crouched for hours in the family's subterranean cubbyhole, unable to move his head. After the war, he remained slightly stooped, while Doriel was "haunted by the silence."
Wiesel makes clear, of course, that survivors must speak out "about the unspeakable." Even if - and especially when - people turn their backs or accuse truth-tellers of inventing suffering to arouse pity and earn money. Even though, as Doriel's mother claims, "they'll always outnumber us; they'll always be more virulent and powerful."

Often powerful and poignant, *A Mad Desire to Dance* is, at times, portentous and ponderous. The plot, such as it is, is creaky. Most of the characters enter, declaim and depart. And Therese Goldschmidt, alas, isn't all that interesting or insightful. "I know he's suffering," she reminds herself. "I also know he goes around with a secret inside him that may be the cause of his suffering." She keeps telling Doriel, as if he - and we - don't know it, "These memories are dreadful. I can understand perfectly well that you don't want to dwell on them. But we must delve into things more deeply."

In the deus ex machina ending, Doriel finds a miracle in the mundane. And in the capacity of a story, rendered into reality, to trump a memory. "Did you deliberately choose to shut yourself up inside your body and its solitude," the poet Yizhok Goldfeld asks Doriel. "God alone is alone. We, His creatures must build families, a community... Aren't you afraid of departing from this world without leaving descendants, heirs, traces? Is vanishing forever and ever what you want?"

These questions, which at first seem "simplistic and banal," begin to resonate. Then, his shrink stops their sessions. His illness, she concludes, is neither pathological nor necessarily linked to memory: "Persecuted by the gods, you flee from human beings. But when God is the enemy, I refuse to take part in the fight."

Suddenly, "the curtain ripped open." Accepting life in a "demented, doomed, world" where everyone is fleeing "from a past that is bound, sooner or later, to become their future," Doriel changes "an apparently fortuitous meeting" with a perfect stranger, who just might reconcile "sadness and joy, fervor and grace" into an event, born of madness, "that could perfectly well be placed, with a bit of luck, under the sign of destiny." They'll be "alone together, irredeemably alone," but they'll know it. And, now and again, Doriel will be able to dance the dark night away.

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