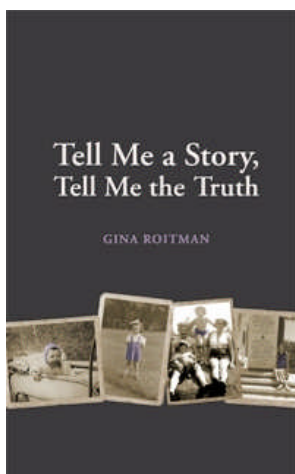


## ***Tell Me a Story, Tell Me the Truth***

by Gina Roitman



**“That’s how we lived,  
surrounded by ghosts.  
They sat at the table while  
we ate our Sunday meal.  
They lay beside us in the  
bed as we slept...”**

In *Tell Me a Story, Tell Me the Truth*, author Gina Roitman has captured her own experience as the daughter of Holocaust survivors in the character of Leah Smilovitz. Leah lives in a world trapped between two solitudes. An outsider, she belongs neither to her parents’ painful generation nor to her own, freshly minted in the freedoms and contradictions of Montréal in the 1950s and 60s.

Growing up in a community of immigrants forever bound to the past, Leah tests the boundaries of her independence. This poignant and often funny collection of linked stories takes us through her rebellions, loves found and lost, and the pain of being helpless in the face of irreparable circumstances. Coming of age in a generation looking for its own identity, Leah struggles against old world fears and taboos to move into a more hopeful future.

### **The Stories:**

#### **An Imperfect Child**

Leah Smilovitz, a determined young girl, makes her way into adolescence through the minefield of her mother’s resident ghosts.

#### **A Whole Heart**

Nine-year-old Leah confronts loneliness only to discover things could be much worse.

#### **Mr. Greene and the Studebaker**

A coming-of-age story about what happens when the effort of new beginnings, the fear of failure and the fragile state of friendship among those struggling to make a home in a new land eventually collide.

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### **Remember My Words**

On her first voyage alone, Leah discovers that freedom from what binds you cannot be attained through physical distance alone.

### **Hebrew Lessons**

Leah learns too late that, in her mother's world, the rights of maternal love supersede all the rules of fair play.

### **Tateh and the Angel of Death**

The adventures of a man who learns that there are many ways to elude but none that can outwit death.

### **Missing in Action**

Family is a maze we never master and the search for love can exhaust and eventually wear down those who seek it.

### **Pesach en Provence**

Those displaced by history and geography grapple with the concept of home and where the heart can finally come to rest.

### **Discussion Points:**

1. The title of the collection reflects the fine line between memoir and fiction: where does one begin and the other end? Do we tend to prefer the unvarnished truth or a story that feels true?
2. In this book the Holocaust is like a character in a play everyone talks about but who never makes an appearance. How does the Holocaust colour the stories?
3. Do the experiences of the second generation after the Holocaust, the children of survivors, make for compelling stories?
4. One of the main themes of the book is the immigrant experience, particularly in Montreal where a cultural divide was long established. Is the theme of displacement and alienation a valid one for a Canadian story told in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
5. What are the main struggles of the two recurring characters, two willful women, and how is their relationship forged by these exertions?

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6. Throughout many of the stories, the struggle between mother and daughter is a reflection of the gulf between a disappeared culture and one that is not yet well-established. How does this struggle of disparate worlds affect the behaviour of these characters and is this struggle unique to a certain time and place?
7. The Sufi mystic Gurdjieff said that all of us look to our parents for love, but they are looking to their parents, and their parents to theirs, and so on, thus we are always looking at our parents' back. In the stories "An Imperfect Child" and "Missing in Action", how does this theory manifest itself?
8. In the coming-of-age story "Mr. Greene and the Studebaker" what personal desires help forge the relationship between Katya and Leah, and what lessons does Leah learn from their friendship?
9. What is Katya's fatal flaw? How is this same flaw revealed in Leah in the story "Hebrew Lessons"?
10. In "Missing in Action," what is the relationship between father and son, and how does Leah cope with the deep-rooted family dynamic?
11. In "Pesach en Provence" finding a place called Home is the overarching theme. How is it resolved?

### **Praise for *Tell Me a Story, Tell Me the Truth*:**

"This is basic storytelling at its best, relying on strong writing and interesting characters to drive the action forward. Roitman's writing is evocative and poignant, capable of turning phrases that will open your emotions like a key in a lock"

#### **– The Montreal Review of Books**

"Roitman manages to avoid cliché and make her characters real. While the first story is the strongest, in all of them the mother's presence looms large."

#### **- The Gazette (Montreal)**

"Gina Roitman's stories have always been worth telling and her words showcase her narrative skills."

#### **- Wayson Choy, author of *All That Matters* and *The Jade Peony***

Reader's Guide

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Second  
Story  
Press



**Gina Roitman**, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, was born in Passau, Germany in 1948 and lived in the Pocking-Waldstadt Displaced Persons Camp before emigrating to Canada at 18 months of age. She is an award-winning writer and poet whose stories have aired on CBC Radio and appeared in numerous publications. She is currently completing a film entitled *My Mother, the Nazi Midwife, and Me* with award-winning TV & radio host Jane Hawtin, president of Amberlight Productions. It is a chilling yet hopeful documentary about Gina's discovery that the horrific stories she thought were told to terrify her as a child were actually true. Gina lives in Montreal, Canada and works as a communication consultant for the travel and tourism industry. This is her first book.