

Vicarious showman

'Shy' professor uses humor, fanciful sense in writing

By Mark Baldridge
Senior Editor

Gerald Shapiro is a shy person — just ask him and he'll tell you so.

And then he'll tell you an animated story about how shy he is, throwing in different voices and characters, until you die laughing.

"Writing is a shy person's way to show off. It's vicarious showmanship. I like vicarious everything," he said.

In his work as a writer, and as a creative writing teacher in UNL's English department, he relies heavily on humor — and a sense of the fanciful.

"I think the tradition I come from, as a writer and as a person, partakes of the fanciful," he said.

But, shy person that he is, — or claims to be — he hesitated to put himself in a context with writers he admires. Finally, he decided his tradition was the "the literary tradition of the European Jews."

"What happens is that, when you're young, if you're going to be a writer," he said, "it's as if there's a parade of writers in the street — you're reading them — you're in the stands — and one or two of them motion to you to come down and join them."

Raised as a Jew in Kansas City, Mo., which he compared to being raised Buddhist in Lincoln, Shapiro found being a Jew had a profound effect on his work.

"I had a very long 'literary apprenticeship,'" he said, "Finally, I realized what it was I wanted to write about."

"After that, everything was inevitable." His recent collection of stories, "From Hunger," illustrates his major themes: Jewishness, family and morality.

"I'm a moralist," he admitted, "All of my stories I think of as moral tales."

"They ask the question: How, in light of the world we're living in — that actively rewards the boorish and mean — can you be a good person?"

"The answer to that is, you do it by fits and starts."

Writing, too, can sometimes come in fits and starts for Shapiro.

"The longest distance in the world is the one from your brain to your (writing) hand, I think," he said.

A big part of writing is just "trying to make the words on the page mean what you meant," he added.

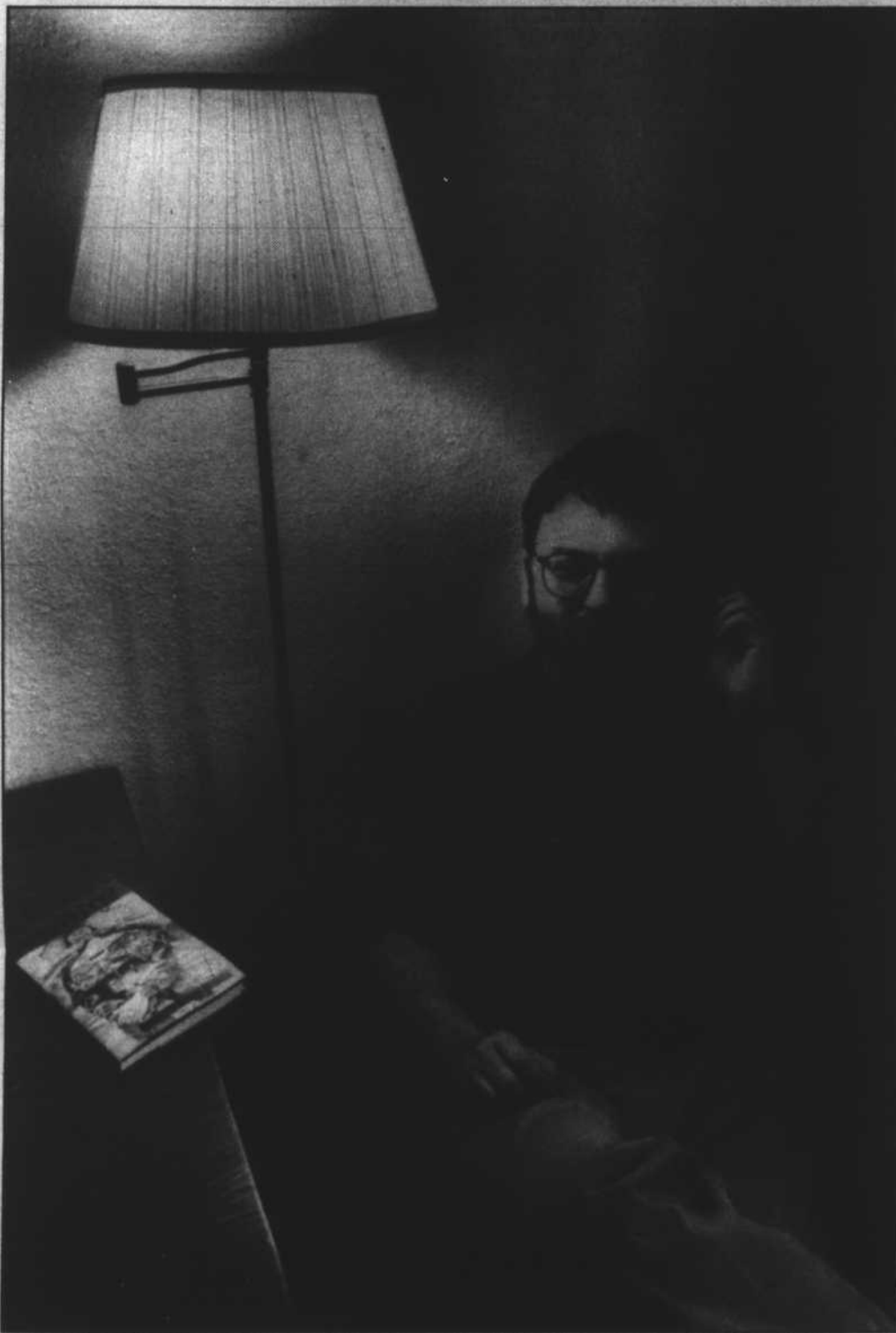
"A lot of what I do is writing a story in my head over and over — kind of putting it together," he said, "I look at it from every angle 'til I don't know what's real and what's made up."

"All my stories are autobiographical, in that they're linked to what I know about what it is to be a human being," he said, "but in the end, the reality of the story outweighs its true or made-up parts."

About the difficulties of writing, he quotes Eudora Welty: "Every story I write teaches me to write it, but not how to write the next one."

And the difficulties of teaching can be almost as great.

Shapiro has his master of fine arts-degree from the University of Massachusetts, but he



Robin Trimarchi/DN

Gerald Shapiro in his office in Andrews Hall, with his new book, "From Hunger."

suspects future writing teachers will need to go all the way for a Ph.D. before they'll look appealing to universities.

"It's the same all over," he said, "not just here. Schools are cutting back."

"I know of teachers who've taken an 8 percent salary cut in each of the last two years."

"What do I owe you for teaching here?" he

said, imitating the teacher of the future — forgetting, for a moment, to be shy.

But Shapiro seems secure at Nebraska. He's married to Judith Slater, who also teaches creative writing at the university. The two share a split appointment and just recently received notice of tenure.

This seems to suit Shapiro. He said, "I think I have the best job in the United States."

Lively writing fills professor's first collection

University of Nebraska-Lincoln English professor Gerald Shapiro's short fiction has been published in such magazines as "The Kenyon Review," "Quarterly West" and "The Gettysburg Review."

This year Shapiro's first collection of short stories, "From Hunger," was published by the University of Missouri Press.

The title story from the collection is a nice little tale of a man named Altshuler and his Uncle Phil, who is apparently trying to eat himself to death.

The story is much more than that however, and it makes the reader wonder what the characters are really hungry for after all. It's very funny in an ironic kind of way.

The second story is "The Marine Mammal Guy." It's hilarious.

The main character, Schanzer, has been making his living writing promotional material for an aquatic theme park in New Jersey. He's offered a job at the San Francisco Zoo, writing promo material for their Ape House.

Schanzer leaves New Jersey and his fiancée to accept the job. He keeps telling her she should stay in New Jersey a few more weeks before she moves out with him — because he's sleeping with a co-worker.

The co-worker dumps him, however, and when Schanzer calls his fiancée, he discovers she's fallen in love with her boss. To top it all off, he also loses his job and becomes homeless. I laughed through the entire story — I thought it was that funny.

In "Levidow," an old man has the power to heal people, but only when he has sex with them. He gives a deaf girl her hearing and an ugly woman her beauty. He travels around with a younger version of himself and talks to God. It's a good story, but a strange one.

Shapiro's stories explore a number of situations, but several themes run through them all. Loss, of both love and faith, seems to play predominately through each of his stories. The Jewish community also plays a part in almost every story, most notably in "The Community Seder."

The stories in this book, though quite serious, are written in a way that allows the humor of the situation to come through.

His crisp and lively writing makes "From Hunger" a nice collection.

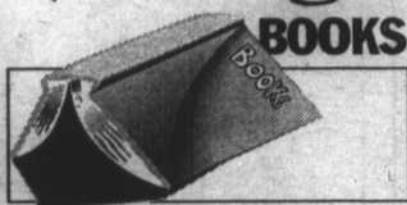
After you sell back your useless text books, go and buy this one. It's well worth it.

— William J. Harms



Courtesy of Ace Science Fiction

UNL graduate makes sci-fi debut



"Iapetus"
William S. Kirby
Ace Science Fiction

University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduate William S. Kirby makes his science fiction debut with "Iapetus," billed as "A chilling future thriller in the tradition of Neuromancer," a "cyber-shock thriller."

Jefferson Kayoto is a down-on-his-luck gumshoe in 2196. He is enlisted by a drop-dead associate of the Solar System's wealthiest man, to locate the cause of the abnormally high infant mortality rate on his private colony on Rhea, moon of Saturn.

Kayoto's employer suspects a link with a "leper" colony of telepaths on Iapetus, another moon. So, Kayoto and his companion book passage on a slow freighter to Saturn, and spend most of the voyage ducking assassins and each other.

Of course, few things in life (and novels) are quite so simple. Kayoto winds up on Iapetus, among the telepaths, and discovers the true story behind their existence and exile. The dizzying series of plot turns and twists (almost too many to keep track of) come to an end in a surprise ending.

It is perhaps unfair to call the book "cyber-" anything; in mood and tone it is comparable to a sci-fi detective story, such as Larry Niven's Gil Hamilton stories.

These days, though, dubbing anything "cyberpunk" and comparing the author to William Gibson is a marketing strategy designed to add a few thousand more copies in sales.

The author of Iapetus, William S. Kirby, is a 1986 graduate of the UNL teacher's college. He studied chemical engineering as well, and moved to Denver with his girlfriend, a physicist. Kirby spent most of his early years in Kearney, where his father taught English at Kearney State.

The idea for Iapetus came to Kirby while at work one day. "I hated my job, the idea came to me, and I started writing."

Kirby has since turned to writing full time with the sale of his first novel, and has a second, a fantasy work, in progress. But don't get the idea he's living easy.

"People assume I have it easy sitting down at a computer all day and just writing. It's not true. I don't like it," he said.

Constant effort every day, he said, is key to success as a writer.

The second major part of success is reading, he said, "You have to know your genre, and reading is the only way to pick that up."

Kirby reads science fiction extensively, and counts Kurt Vonnegut, William Gibson and Dan Simmons ("Fall of Hyperion") as his spiritual mentors. Because of his reading, Kirby never found the need to enroll in creative writing courses during his UNL days.

Finally, after one has actually completed a manuscript, Kirby advised getting an agent. Even with all this, he admits to being extraordinarily lucky in selling a first novel with relatively little effort.

Kirby will be in Lincoln, signing copies of "Iapetus," at Lee Booksellers in the East Park Mall, on Saturday, April 24, beginning at 1 p.m.

— Sam Kepfield