

names are also invented; the setting is Paris Reuben but you know it's Cornwall because one character has a lovely view from his window of "St Mordechai's Mount".  
Kevern Cohen doesn't know where he came from, or how he arrived here

was adopted and knows nothing about her real parentage. Their neighbours seem to think they belong together, but why?

You won't see the word "Jew" anywhere but that's the great unspoken here — the sentence "WHAT HAPPENED,

saying sorry. That was the way. They had all been taught it at school. Always say sorry." But putting your fingers in your ears and shouting "sorry" is only another way of drowning memory.

The catastrophe here is a modern one; it began with "Twitternacht" —

each other by phone but wrote such horrid things that the practice had to be discouraged."

Typically, he's scabrously funny, but he's not joking; one nasty voice in the Twittersphere could easily whip the tweeting peasantry into another Holo-

other side of the same coin). And now here's the possible future.

But this is too simplistic; all three novels are brilliant enough to stand alone, and is a firework display of verbal invention, as entertaining as it is unsettling.

Kate Saunders is a writer and critic

# Paternity, paradox and the semantics of Semitics

## A SEMITE: A MEMOIR OF ALGERIA

By Denis Guénoun

Columbia University Press, £24

REVIEWED BY NATASHA LEHRER

Algerian-born Denis Guénoun is a man of multiple identities — Sorbonne professor, essayist, poet, philosopher, actor, theatre director. His work explores European political philosophy, ethics and language. *A Semite*, newly translated from the French by Ann and William Smock, is both a subtle investigation of the taxonomy of identity and a vivid portrait of his imposing and enigmatic father, René.

*A Semite* is Guénoun's attempt to reconstruct his father's history in a context that is both personal and historical.

His father, René Guénoun, was a man who embraced the contradictions of being French and Jewish in Algeria, and for whom the term "Semite" was freighted with contradiction and ambiguity. It means "either Jew or Arab without distinction, what Jews and

Arabs share, what they are together." As Judith Butler says, in her fine introduction, it comes to mean, "a form of resistance, alliance, and political hope," in the face of the consequences of the divisive French law of 1870 that decreed the indigenous Algerian Jews to be French citizens while their Arab neighbours were not.

René Guénoun was a man of paradox — drafted by the Vichy French Army in the Second World War to defend France's colonies in the Middle East, he was imprisoned for subordination, even as he sought to quell an insurrection in his own ranks.

Meanwhile, back home in Oran, his wife was prevented from teaching by Vichy because she was a Jew. Even so, after the war, he remained a passionate believer in the values of the Revolution and never lost his faith in the Republican ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. He brought up his sons to be immersed in French culture and literature, speaking only French at home, "which he had transmitted to us without a trace of Arabic as our most intimate legacy", all along

**Guénoun has wrought a powerful and moving testimony of filial love**

of the Revolution and never lost his faith in the Republican ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. He brought up his sons to be immersed in French culture and literature, speaking only French at home, "which he had transmitted to us without a trace of Arabic as our most intimate legacy", all along

remaining both a steadfast and unwaveringly committed member of the French Communist Party and an advocate for Algerian independence.

He was not a Zionist, and felt that Algeria was his home — his family had lived there "since time immemorial" — but he dreamed of France. His dream came true when he was forced to leave Algeria in 1962 after the French paramilitary *Organisation Armée Secrète* bombed the family home. The family eventually settled in Marseilles, where both Guénoun's parents remained until they died.

His exile, dreamed of for so many years, is indelibly marked by a quiet kind of loneliness and disappointment. "My father's last years were not joyous," observes Denis Guénoun. "The century had shattered his life — Algeria far away, Communism disfigured, Manou Camille [Guénoun's paternal grandmother] losing her bearings."

No longer a "Semite", he is unmoored. As a "French Jew" he discovers that he shares no kinship with either his fellow Frenchmen or his fellow Jews.

Guénoun pieces together his father's history from letters and documents,

"digging and turning over the earth of words to make you a grave," blending fragments of his father's story with his own memories of his youth in Oran, where he lived until he was 16. He never presumes to know what his father thought or felt, and the text is marked by his repeated insistence on the uncertainty of the facts, on the

gaps and ellipses, the "torn scraps" of memory. He has wrought a powerful and moving testimony of filial love that is also a suggestive history about this period of Algerian and French history and the complex and sometimes contradictory role of Jews in it.

Natasha Lehrer is a writer based in France



The Great Synagogue in Oran was converted into a mosque in 1975