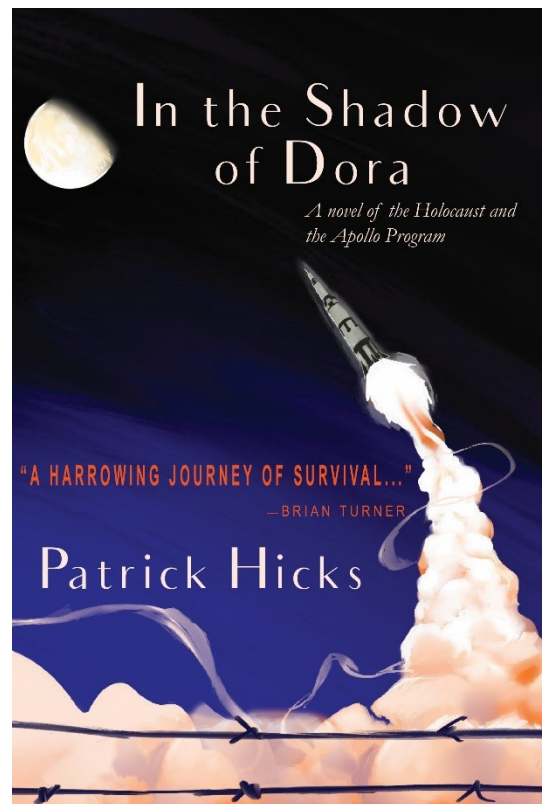


# From Death Camps to the Space Race: An Interview with Patrick Hicks

Steven Wingate

**I**n *In the Shadow of Dora*, the new novel by Patrick Hicks (Stephen F. Austin University Press, October 2020) tells a little-known and discomfiting tale: the direct connection between Nazi work camps and America's ascendancy in the space race of the 1960s. After WWII, American officials co-opted Nazi rocket technology—as well as scientists like Wernher von Braun, who became the face of America's space travel dreams—to develop the rockets that eventually brought us to the moon. The Nazi program led by von Braun took place at a secret camp called Dora-Mittelbau, where tunnels were dug out of a mountain by slave labor.

Hicks' novel centers on Eli Hessel, a (fictional) young Jew from Berlin who manages to survive a stint at Auschwitz in which the rest of his family is killed. Through luck, determination, and occasional subterfuge, he manages to survive until the end of the war and emigrates to America, where he trains as a physicist. In the 1960s he goes to work in Cape Canaveral in Florida, led by none other than his nemesis Wernher von Braun. Haunted by his memories of the camps, Eli navigates both the tunnels of his own mind and an American culture



that, a mere quarter of a century after the Holocaust, has already demoted it to footnote status in history.

*Dora* is Hicks' second Holocaust-themed novel. His first was *The Commandant of Lubizec* (Steerforth/Random House, 2014), set in a fictional death camp Hicks conjured from his research into actual camps like Belzec, Sobibór, and Treblinka. The two novels, both part of a planned trilogy, are united by a singular focus on using fictional characters to reconcile us to history. They ask us to face facts that most of us would rather not see, and in that they are not easy reads. But they aren't intended to be; they're meant to bring us face to face with what we've allowed ourselves to become and help us see how we can emerge from its grip.

Hicks is the Writer-in-Residence at Augustana University as well as a faculty member at the MFA program at Sierra Nevada University. His other books include the poetry collections



***Patrick Hicks***

*This London* and *Adoptable* and the short story collection *The Collector of Names*. He lives in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where he hosts the weekly show *Poetry from Studio 47* on South Dakota Public Broadcasting. Though we live only fifty miles apart and lunch together often, the pandemic—which closed our favorite haunts—limited us to conducting this interview via email.

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**Steven Wingate (SW):** It's clear from both *Dora* and *The Commandant* that you're a meticulous researcher. Can you describe your research process and what the roots of it are? I'm particularly curious about the balance you strike between creative research—the mundanities of everyday

human emotional life—and the kind of detailed history practiced by military historians.

**Patrick Hicks (PH):** For as long as I can remember, I've always been fascinated by World War II and what happened in Europe. While I'm not an historian in the traditional sense of that word, I *am* deeply interested in history, especially when it comes to the interior lives of the people who lived through that murderous time period. What did they think? Where did they find the courage? And so, as I read about Nazi Germany, and how fascism swallowed up Europe, I was interested in the details but I was more interested in the human reaction to what was happening. As a writer, I'm driven to get the history correct because I want readers to feel as if the past has been made present. I want readers to feel as if 1944 is happening *right now*. This means being accurate with military and social history, and it also means giving my characters a full presence of the world swirling around them. How can I make the Holocaust and Nazism feel immediate and real on the page? If I can do that, the empathy of my readers will naturally be heightened and, in doing so, maybe I've helped them to understand the past in a new way.

**SW:** Dora-Mittelbau is a slice of history that doesn't get discussed much in the U.S., as it's not one of the "marquee" concentration or extermination camps. How did you find out about it, and how difficult was it to uncover information both here and in Germany?

**PH:** After I finished *The Commandant* I really needed to unplug from the Holocaust. It was such an emotionally devastating novel to write, and when I finished it I made a conscious choice to write about something else, something uplifting. The Apollo program has always had a hold on my imagination, so I thought about writing something set in Florida during the 1960s that addressed the Saturn V and our journey to the moon. But as I researched, I kept coming back to

the V-2, which was the world's first functioning rocket. I'd heard of Dora-Mittelbau years before and found myself wanting to know more about the place. The idea for *Dora* came to me in a flash, and I could see my character being forced to build V-2s during the 1940s and then choosing to build Saturn Vs in the 1960s. Now that I'm talking about the book, people are surprised that they, too, don't know much about Dora-Mittelbau. Why is that? There are good reasons for this: 1) it was a secret camp to begin with, 2) the US military wanted to keep it secret when they discovered what was in the tunnels, and 3) it was behind the Iron Curtain after the Allies carved up Germany. The Soviets took over the camp and dynamited the entrances to the tunnels, which meant no one could get inside anymore. One of the things that surprised me about the camp is that many of the SS officers who had been at Auschwitz were transferred to Dora by March 1945. All of these men who had overseen the workings of that camp were reassigned when the Soviets liberated Auschwitz. In a very real sense, part of Auschwitz was allowed to continue on—at Dora.

**SW:** Having done considerable research on the Holocaust for *The Commandant*, what did you find different about the research process for *Dora*? Were there things you knew how to find better, things you knew would challenge you in fresh ways?

**PH:** I read everything I could get my hands on when it came to Dora-Mittelbau. When it came time to visit the place, I knew the background very well. And I really needed that high level of familiarity before I actually sat down to write. I needed to see my characters moving about the camp with absolute clarity in my imagination because if I can't see it vividly in my head, the reader won't be able to see it in their head. That's one reason I do so much historical research.

It's important for me personally to get the story right, and in doing that I also sharpen the picture for the reader. What made the research process different for *Dora*, though, was simply following a single character, Eli Hessel, throughout the entire novel and watching him grapple with the horror of the Holocaust as it's happening, and then having him bear the knee-buckling weight of memory once it was over. That latter part was something I wanted to explore. How do you live a good and productive life after experiencing something like the Holocaust? That was a new area of research for me. I learned a lot.

**SW:** To follow up on that question, I'm curious what it was like to do that level of research on your home country for *Dora*. It's one thing to research a foreign country, another to research the hidden history of America, where you grew up.

**PH:** I really love this question because you're absolutely right—it's one thing to write about Germany in the 1940s, but something else entirely to write about America in the late 1960s. When I started to flesh out the narrative I thought this would be relatively easy to do, and yet when I started to write the first draft I realized that I needed to think of Florida in 1969 as if it were a foreign country caught in a different time period. The history itself was already known to me—that part was easy—but I had to think of racism, the undertow of the Vietnam War, the music scene with The Beatles and other groups, and the casual sexism that existed at the Kennedy Space Center. It was place of high technology. It was the front line of the Cold War. But that doesn't mean it existed in a vacuum. It was a reflection of the time period. It's for this reason that I visited KSC (Kennedy Space Center), the Johnson Space Center in Houston, and the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville. While I was at these places, I imagined what it would

be like to work on Apollo, and I thought about the sociology of America at the time. For Eli, it must have been wildly disorienting. I mean, he survives the Holocaust, moves to the United States, and starts working for NASA due to his knowledge of rocketry. His view of things would be seen through the lens of surviving genocide and now living in a new country—a country that had given him a new life. And yet, his daughter’s political views, and fashion sense, and her indifference about being Jewish, all make him question things about his new home. His daughter is thoroughly American and also thoroughly foreign to him. I wanted readers to feel this sense of disorientation, which means I had to capture the good and the bad of America in the 1960s. That was an exciting challenge. I wasn’t interested in writing about flower children or other familiar clichés of that time period. Instead, I wanted to see 1969 as Eli would have seen it.

**SW:** Much Holocaust-era literature is written by people with a cultural connection to the era—children of survivors, for instance. How does an Irish-American like you get so enmeshed in the history of the Holocaust without that direct connection?

**PH:** I was exposed to the Holocaust at a young age, and the injustice of it was deeply shocking to me. That feeling has never really left, and over the decades I’ve devoted myself to studying it more, doing research at the camps, and interviewing survivors. The rise of the Third Reich and the hatred it unleashed onto Europe was also something that I was exposed to at a young age. My mother is an immigrant from Northern Ireland, and my grandparents survived the Blitz on Belfast. I was very close to my Irish grandfather, and he often talked about what it was like to be attacked by the Nazis. In fact, he nearly died in the Blitz and, if that had happened, my mother wouldn’t have been born. As a kid, this thought rattled around in my head and it made World

War II seem closer to me than perhaps other kids my age. And so, whenever I read something about the war, I'd ask my grandfather about it and he had these really vivid memories of what he had lived through, especially the smashed rubble of Belfast. All those bodies. And then of course when I moved to Germany in the 1990s, I was literally surrounded by the history of the Holocaust. In fact, just outside my flat was a ruined U-Boat bunker that had been built by Jewish slave labor. The camp of Bergen-Belsen wasn't far away. I taught English as a foreign language to older Germans who almost certainly had been in the party. One of my students was in the Hitler Youth and another was a soldier in the *Wehrmacht*—he fought in Stalingrad. Another was a German Jew who managed to hide during the Holocaust under an assumed name.

That's a long answer to your question, but I guess what I'm trying to say is simply this: I believe that authors don't choose their stories—stories choose authors. That may sound weird or odd or mystical, but the experiences I've had in life have shaped me. Would I write about the Holocaust if I didn't have these influences? Maybe. Who can say? All I know is that I feel compelled to write about the industrialized genocide of the Holocaust and the lingering danger of fascism.

**SW:** American culture right now is focused so much on cultural identity—even more so as *Dora* is published than in 2014 when *The Commandant* came out. How do you navigate the push-pull of identity politics? Does it feel any different for you to publish this novel than the previous one?

**PH:** I really appreciate this question because it's something I thought about when I was writing *The Commandant*. Before I started *In the Shadow of Dora* I thought about it again, especially in relation to Eli's post-Holocaust life. I'm sure some will say that I should only write about the

Irish-American experience, but I want to live in a world that is bigger than that. While I may not be Jewish or German, I've done research at over twelve camps, I've interviewed many survivors, and studied the Holocaust for many decades now. There aren't many scholars who are also fiction writers—that blending of research and an understanding of literary craft means that I can bring the Holocaust to readers in a way that is grounded in fact but charged with narrative energy and empathy. When I was touring *The Commandant* several years ago, there was one venue where most of the audience was Jewish. I had been told ahead of time that many of them had lost family members in Treblinka and Auschwitz. Before I got on stage—and I don't mind admitting this—I was nervous about how they might feel. I mean, I'm a goy, I'm Irish-American, and I was raised Catholic. I've never forgotten their reaction that night because everyone that came up to me was thankful that someone who *wasn't* Jewish cared so deeply about what happened between 1933-1945. There was one grandmother, this lovely bubbe, who took my hand and demanded that I come back to her house with some friends. She said, "You must have pie." We talked about my research, the lectures I give about the Holocaust, and much else. That encounter made me feel that I was doing something right and that I should keep on doing it. The pie, by the way, was delicious.

**SW:** Some stretches of the novel—usually very short ones—read like nonfiction or even history. (I'm thinking in particular about the chapter called "The Vengeance Weapon," where we are introduced to Wernher von Braun.) How would you describe the personal balance you strike between fiction and nonfiction, and under what circumstances do you feel most likely to invoke the "historical" mode?



**PH:** There are several sections where the narrative moves into something closer to nonfiction. Off the top of my head, I think there are four short sections like this—maybe five—and I added them to give the reader some background on what was swirling around Eli. The narrative perspective is almost entirely seen from his viewpoint but, in these sections, the reader is given the opportunity to pan back and see more of Dora, as well as the rocket program in general. In other words, the reader has insight into what Eli simply cannot know. He is, after all, expendable slave labor. He wouldn't have access to what was happening around him—the way the V-2 worked, what the camp looked like before his arrival, the professional lives of the Nazi scientists, Hitler's reaction to the rocket—and it seemed important that the reader *should* have access to these things even if Eli is denied knowing them. These sections offer a larger scope of the camp. They widen the landscape of the novel as a whole.

**SW:** Historical novels are naturally witnesses to history, but *Dora* feels to me about reevaluation as well. Could you talk about your goals in writing the novel and how you hope it will resonate in the world?

**PH:** You're a novelist that I admire, and you know how it goes: you set out to write one book, but you end up writing something else. That's the wonder of creativity, isn't it? When I started *In the Shadow of Dora* I was interested in examining Dora and NASA—I'm not aware of another novel that tells this story—and it's certainly true that the arc of a rocket binds these two places together. But as I got deeper into the first draft, I found myself thinking about how everything has a secret history, even technology. And what happens if those secrets are unsettling or immoral? I didn't necessarily set out to write something that will encourage readers to think

about the dark foundations of America's space program, and yet it's certainly there. Our whole country is reckoning with difficult moments of our past right now: racism, sexism, slavery. I tap into that and ask questions about our willingness to turn away from moments of history we don't want to think about. But those moments are always there, hiding in the dark. As I've said before, I think it's the job of the writer to cast light. I'm pleased with how the novel ends because I link the darkness of Dora's ruined tunnels with the perpetual sunlight that bathes the Sea of Tranquility. Darkness and light. Shadow and sunlight. It's a metaphor for what we choose to think about, and what we choose to bury.

**SW:** Dora suggests that America has a lot to come to terms with regarding its assimilation of Nazi technology—as well as actual Nazis—in the development of its space program. What would coming to terms with the phase of America's history look like, and under what circumstances might it happen?

**PH:** It would be nice if the Kennedy Space Center, the Johnson Space Center, and especially the Marshall Space Flight Center, where von Braun developed the Saturn V, did a better job acknowledging the Nazi past of some of its earliest pioneers. All of these places are NASA icons and they have grand museums devoted to educating tourists. If Dora-Mittelbau is mentioned at all in these places—and it's frequently omitted entirely—the reality of what happened in the camp isn't properly addressed. It's glossed over. And in that glossing over, we don't have to reckon with the messiness of history. In fact, we don't have to think about it at all. We can just look at the moon and think about the great adventure and how we got there. It's an intoxicating

story of American ingenuity and bravery but, like the moon itself, there is a dark side. And maybe we need to explore that dark side a little more.

**SW:** At one point, Eli muses about the cultural significance of Carl Orff's cantata *Carmina Burana*—music much beloved by Nazis at the time. It made me think of how time changes the cultural meaning of things, one of them being Nazism itself. I'm curious what you make of that change we're currently experiencing a shift in the cultural meaning of Nazism.

**PH:** There *is* this strange and deeply worrying shift in the meaning of Nazism, isn't there? The vast majority of Americans are repulsed by the hideous core of National Socialism, but it's obvious that some of my fellow citizens are mesmerized by its darkness. It's nothing new though. After all, thousands of men and women supported the American Nazi Party in the 1930s and some elements of our population are still fascinated by the spectacle of it. But, as you say, there does seem to be a new cultural meaning of Nazism in the United States. I don't think this is just a question of learning about the horrors of the concentration camps or knowing more about what German soldiers did to villagers when they attacked Russia. I think it has more to do with the racism that has always existed in our own country. We have a lot of work to do—not just with confronting neo-Nazism, but also with the KKK, the Proud Boys, The Base, Identity Evropa, and so many other hate groups spread across America. We need to confront the reality that our country was founded on white supremacy and slavery. We need to start asking hard questions about our past.

We're also losing survivors of the Holocaust and veterans who fought against the Nazis in World War II. Without living witnesses to recall the violence of Third Reich—its brutality, its

depravity, its bureaucratic approach to genocide—it's easy to think that Nazism existed somewhere deep in the past, and that we don't need to worry about it anymore. But we do need to worry about it. We need to be vigilant and recognize that the message of "blood and land" that the Nazis ranted about is seductive for many young men in our country. The internet makes it easier to find and spread such thinking too. And as white people increasingly become a minority in the United States, I worry that disaffected racists will embrace hatred all the more. As we approach the year 2033—the centennial of Hitler achieving power in Germany—will Nazism have more of an allure for these young men? Maybe.

**Steven Wingate** is the author of the novels *Of Fathers and Fire* (2019) and *The Leave-Takers* (2021), both part of the Flyover Fiction Series from the University of Nebraska Press. His short story collection *Wifeshopping* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), won the Bakeless Prize in Fiction from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. He is associate editor at *Fiction Writers Review* and associate professor at South Dakota State University.