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## Editorial

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**EDITORIAL**

# New Voices in Jewish-American Literature

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An introduction to the 'New Voices in Jewish-American Literature' Special Collection, providing a summary of key themes and an overview of material contained within.

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The Irish novelist John Banville has professed himself moved by the graveyard scenes of his American counterpart Philip Roth, praising one such in the 2006 novel *Everyman*, as 'so deft [in its] mixture of lightness and somber gravity, that the narrative draws to a close in an atmosphere that is almost Shakespearean in its magical softness and mysterious simplicity' (Banville, 2006). Banville posits Roth's own advanced age as the reason behind the powerful affect of this scene. Yet Roth was fictionalizing such burials long before this. In 1981's *Zuckerman Unbound*, the protagonist, Zuckerman, attends his father's burial, where he is confronted with the radical change wrought by age on the great men of his childhood: 'the pitiful sight of those old family friends, looking down into the slot where they must be deposited, thirty, sixty, ninety days hence—the kibitzing giants out of his earliest memories, so frail now, some of them, that despite healthy suntans, you could have pushed them in with his father and they could not have crawled out' (Roth, 2007: 244). This is classic Roth, with all the inflated sentimentality of childhood nostalgia burst by the grotesque image of pushing elderly neighbors into an open grave.

At his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday and de facto retirement celebrations in 2013 Roth read out his own favorite graveyard scene, from his 1995 novel *Sabbath's Theater*, in which the eponymous Mickey Sabbath wanders through the cemetery where his parents and grandparents rest, reading the seemingly endless array of headstones, confronted on all sides with death: 'Our beloved mother Minnie. Our beloved husband and father Sidney. Beloved mother and grandmother Frieda. Beloved husband and father Jacob ... On and on and on ... Nobody beloved gets out alive' (1995: 364). It is not hard to understand why this scene so moved Roth as he closed out his half-century long career. It does not take much reimagining to read it autobiographically, with Roth wandering through a necropolis of his late Jewish-American fiction writing peers: Bernard Malamud (d.1986); Isaac Bashevis Singer (d.1991); Joseph Heller (d.1999); Saul Bellow (d.2005); Norman Mailer (d.2007); Grace Paley (d.2007); J.D. Salinger (d.2010); and E.L. Doctorow (2015). Roth is one of the last living links with this great generation of post-war Jewish-American writers, whose fiction dominated the American literary scene in the second half of the 20th Century. Yet

Jewish-American literature is in no danger of dying out with Roth and his cohort, a fate many pessimistic commentators have long prophesied. Rather, the new Jewish-American authors of the 21st Century are now emerging from the alternatively nurturing and smothering grips of these immense predecessors.

Many of these new novelists were present at Roth's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, with Jonathan Lethem, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss and Nathan Englander all coming to pay their respects to this venerable literary statesman. Along with writers such as Pearl Abraham, Lev Raphael, Boris Fishman, Sholem Auslander, Sarah Schulman, Gary Shteyngart, Allegra Goodman, Michael Chabon and Ayelet Waldman, these represent what can be termed post-Roth, or contemporary, Jewish-American fiction—though, of course, the word contemporary is a complex, subjective, and almost immediately redundant term. These writers represent the array of tributaries that have recently flooded and revived the Jewish-American literary mainstream. In the works of Shteyngart and Fishman there can be found the post-Soviet infusion of Russian Jewish blood into the New York Jewish corpus; in that of Raphael and Schulman a crossover between queer and Jewish identities in America, a double or triple Othering; all the ambivalences of dual Israeli-American citizenship mark the writing of Abraham, Krauss and Waldman; then there is the perhaps unexpected brilliance of those novelists that have emerged from the American Hasidic tradition, as seen with Englander, Auslander and Abraham; and finally, in this incomplete survey, the continuation of second and third-generation Holocaust narratives, in which the children and grandchildren of survivors come to terms with the Shoah. In fact, the Holocaust still remains one of the strongest unifying themes for American Jews, present in some form or another in the work of virtually every author mentioned. To figure out what it means to be a Jew today, one must still make recourse to Auschwitz.

Figuring out what it means to be Jewish American, and particularly a Jewish-American writer in the modern world, it helps to make recourse to Roth. And many of these authors do, particularly with Roth's exploration of a Nazi genocide that left American Jews physically unscathed but mentally scarred. His 1979 novel *The Ghost Writer* questions the bowdlerization of the Holocaust in American culture, exposing

the potential misuses to which the Jewish-American community could put emotive symbols such as the diary of Anne Frank. Through interviews and allusions, Englander acknowledges a debt to this Roth novel in his magnificent short story, 'What We Talk about When We Talk about Anne Frank'. Auslander's novel *Hope: A Tragedy* (2012) imagines Anne Frank surviving Europe and making her way to America, where, revealing herself to the American publisher of her diary, she is told that she would sell more copies dead. This book too consciously toys with *The Ghost Writer*; indeed the main protagonist's sister possibly runs into Roth himself on a trip to New York. In Fishman's 2014 novel *A Replacement Life*, which imagines a struggling Russian Jewish-American novelist making ends meet by writing false German reparations applications for fellow Jewish immigrants, the central character's girlfriend also runs into Roth in the flesh, a moment that is at once an homage and, perhaps, a bristling at the older author's ubiquity.

Then there is Joshua Cohen, author of the 2010 novel *Witz* and the 2015 *Book of Numbers*, who is in many ways the most Roth-like of the post-Roth generation. Yet conceivably for this very reason he is also the one who has wrestled most with Roth's shadow. When the Jewish-Irish publisher David Marcus asked Bellow to review a biography of the elder Singer, he declined, saying, '[I will keep my] sword sheathed until the old bugger dies' (Marcus, 2001: 201). Such etiquette is obviously no longer in vogue, as Cohen's review of a recent biography of Roth makes plain. Cohen mocks Roth's vanity in demanding that the Library of America, then collecting his work into a prestigious series, must include all of his novels, not just the undoubted masterpieces—a demand that saw some lesser volumes reprinted alongside his *magna operas*. Yet scoff at Roth though he does, Cohen cannot ignore him. Thus Roth appears in ways more and less obvious in Cohen's *Book of Numbers*. The book tells the story of a failed author named Joshua Cohen who is conscripted as a ghostwriter for the cultish leader of a Google-like corporation—also named Joshua Cohen. It takes much from Roth's own 1994 novel, *Operation Shylock*, in which an author, named Philip Roth, is confronted by an imposter (also named Philip Roth), who travels to Israel promoting Diasporism—a satiric vision of Jews returning

to anti-Semitic Europe as the only solution to the intractable Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Should any doubt remain as to the connection between the two novels, the apartment of the protagonist Joshua Cohen is filled with signed copies of 'Bellow, Roth, Bernard Malamud, I.B. Singer' (Cohen, 2015: 1.459). Cohen's novel, building on Roth, questions the centrality of the Holocaust to Jewish identity in America, while also extending this critique to query the centrality of 9/11 to current conceptions of American identity. Here—as throughout Jewish-American literature—elements of continuity coexist with those of change.

Roth fulfills a dual role for the writers who succeed him: at once a landmark to guide them, and at the same time an institution to be toppled. To move beyond Roth, today's Jewish-American writers can benefit from his embrace, but occasionally it also helps to playfully push this kibitzing giant into one of those open graves that he describes so well. David Brauner's description of Auslander and Shteyngart as 'sons of Phil' in this collection is instructive in this regard, as are discussions of Roth's counterfactual fiction and the links between his work and that of Elisa Albert.

Roth's legacy has already been a key topic in recent critical studies. For example, in his monograph *American Talmud*, Ezra Cappell argues that Roth's 2000 novel *The Human Stain* stands as a representative moment in the development of Jewish-American writing, in its exploration of 'the idea that Jewishness is seen as the ticket toward respectability' (2007: 170). Indeed, it is this notion of invisible or elided difference that many current Jewish-American writers contend with—think, for example, of the suburban environs of Safran Foer's *Here I Am* (2016), or the way in which characters negotiate familial and cultural identity in the short stories of Molly Antopol or Englander. Nonetheless, we believe that Roth's legacy is the result of a continual molding of the debate around the boundaries of Jewish-American identity that dates back to *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), his first published work. In certain ways, the stories in this early collection pre-empt the themes that will preoccupy many of the authors discussed in this collection—the role of Orthodox identity within Jewish culture, Jewish-American masculinity and assimilation into American society, to name just a few.

What unites these diverse perspectives is the notion that Roth's sudden exit from the literary stage has created a power vacuum, with different writers (intentionally or otherwise) making claims for a representative role in American writing by being the Jewish-American writer of choice. We believe that current trends within Jewish-American writing demonstrate not only the difficulty of making the kind of hierarchical judgements seen in scholarly works such as Ruth Wisse's *The Modern Jewish Canon* (2000) in the post-Roth era, but that the nature of Roth's legacy will be a core determinant of the directions taken by writers within the field in years to come. Roth's legacy remains a matter of some controversy,<sup>1</sup> but essays in this collection prove that his status as the preeminent Jewish-American writer of his era is a topic that few Jewish-American authors can avoid grappling with at some point—even in the case of those writers who do not already incorporate this dilemma into their published writing.

As Roth scholars ourselves, we are acutely aware of the lingering influence of Roth, whilst being cognizant of the need for notions of canon within Jewish-American writing to better reflect the variety of authorial voices and identities that fall under its aegis. The texts discussed in this collection challenge ideas of homogeneity not only in their frequent claiming of outsider status, but in their complex negotiations with what Jewish identity *is*, what communities it is seen to encapsulate and what communities it ignores.

Whilst we are consciously following in the footsteps of an established tradition of appraising the status of Jewish-American fiction, the ceaseless dynamism of the field necessitates regular critical re-evaluation, not to mention maintaining a pleasingly burdensome reading list. As Derek Parker Royal notes in the introduction to *Unfinalized Moments*, a collection of essays devoted to contemporary Jewish-American writing published in 2004, '[e]ven though the scholarly field is as young as the writers it canvasses, it has already received a significant amount of attention' (2004: 6). This collection faces a similar bind. The import of previous scholarly

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<sup>1</sup> One of us recalls overhearing a fellow American Studies scholar learn of Roth's retirement during an academic conference, to which they responded with a delighted cry of 'YES!'.

work—Parker Royal's collection included—weighed heavily on our minds when first envisaging this collection, and has inspired much of the writing contained within it.

This collection is also indirectly indebted to collections, essays and monographs that have probed the development of Jewish-American literature in a more circumscribed thematic or genre-bound manner. In particular, we are indebted to the continued rude health of the Jewish-American graphic novel, which has led to some of the most innovative recent critical work in the field of Jewish literary studies. Monographs such as Tahneer Oksman's *How Come Boys Get To Keep Their Noses?* and the 2016 edited collection *Visualizing Jewish Narrative* have spurred debate on this topic, and we hope these discussions continue. Outstanding work by contemporary Jewish-American comic artists such as Sarah Glidden and Miriam Libicki demands scholarly attention, and it is gratifying to see many of our peers take up the challenge.

Since Parker Royal's survey of critical work on contemporary Jewish-American writing in 2004, there have been a number of works to whom this collection is more directly indebted; collections published by *Studies in American Jewish Literature* in 2005, 2006 and 2008 have been invaluable in gauging the future directions of the field, although their broader focus has given a different perspective than that offered in this collection. We were strongly influenced by Parker Royal's decision to focus on writers emerging in the latter decades of the 20th Century and the first decades of the 21st Century, but we have encouraged our contributors to take the implicit challenge of the collection's title in whatever direction they see fit. In this collection, we are keen to initiate conversations about writers who have yet to be studied, as well as to enhance nascent conversations about writers who have already attracted a measure of critical attention.

This is not to suggest that the history of the topic of contemporary Jewish-American writing within scholarly writing has been a tale of steadily increasing interest. In their introduction to a collection of essays on the subject of the health of Jewish-American literary studies as a distinct subfield, Lori Harrison-Kahan and Josh Lambert strike a defensive tone:



Ask almost any young scholar who has worked or considered working on Jewish American literature, and he or she will tell you about discouragement received in graduate school from professors and advisors, some questioning whether the topic makes a valuable contribution to current trends in American literary scholarship ... (Harrison-Kahan and Lambert, 2012: 5)

Whilst we share Harrison-Kahan and Lambert's concerns, our own experiences have shown that the subfield is, generally speaking, in fine fettle. There remains, however, a noticeable disconnect between what Lambert himself describes in the *Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature* as 'a more concentrated emergence of [Jewish-American] writers than in any previous decade since the 1960s' and the emergence of a comparably significant rise in studies of the work of contemporary Jewish-American writers (Lambert, 2015: 623). Dubbed the 'New Yiddishists' by David Sax, these 'new voices' (including many of the writers discussed earlier) represent a challenge to literary scholarship—an insistence that the subfield change tack to account for the remarkable range of writers and the remarkably prolific rate at which they were publishing (Sax, 2009). This collection is, in some respects, an attempt to respond to this resurgence of the subfield—to complement this surge in writing by Jewish-American writers with a comparable surge in scholarly writing about them.

Whilst there are writers whom this collection has shown a collective interest in (most notably, Shteyngart and Chabon), there is little consensus on a model of canonical authors, or a clear direction of the field as a unified entity. This is not to say that the essays in this collection represent an overview of an atomized field in which each author is working independently, but see Jewish-American writing as being in a state of dialogic flux. The boundaries of Jewish identity are continually re-negotiated in many of the works discussed in this collection, enabling an expansion of the sphere of scholarly debate that takes place around them. In a notable example of this, essays in this collection on representations of Orthodox Jews represent a challenge to Wendy Shalit's polemical contention that Jewish-American writers have been unable to convincingly represent Orthodox identity, demanding a refocusing of critical attention (Shalit, 2005).

This is not to suggest that this collection is solely focused on issues relating to Jewish identity. Coterminous with the publication of books and other cultural artefacts that explore Orthodox communities in a more sympathetic light has been a renewed interest in Jewish-American writers and characters whose Jewish identity works in tandem with other external identity factors. We are pleased to include essays in this collection that continue discussions around queerness in Jewish-American writing, focusing on Chabon and Schulman. Similarly, the importance of genre fiction in the evolution of Jewish-American writing in recent decades is a factor that several articles in this collection explore in detail, continuing and expanding upon vital work on this topic being undertaken by scholars across Jewish literary studies.

This collection is not intended to be a definitive statement about the status of Jewish-American writing, but a snapshot of some of its more intriguing directions—be they internal to Jewish culture, focused on external topics, or merging the two. We have encouraged our contributors to interpret the ambiguity of this title's collection in light of their own interests, and we believe that the resultant collection showcases an appropriately diverse range of critical perspectives. Written, collated and published during a period of crisis in American identity, we hope that this collection bears witness not just to the diversity of our chosen field, but to the necessity of international collaboration—this is, after all, a collection co-edited by a Scotsman in England and an Irishman in Ecuador, and contributed to by scholars from North America, Great Britain and Israel. On the theme of 'New Voices', we are also particularly pleased to include work from junior scholars alongside that of established experts in the field.

The collection opens with Barry Beckerman's chapter 'Permutations of Ethnicity in Jewish American Literature: The New Russian Cohort', which investigates the work of writers such as Shteyngart, Lara Vapnyar and David Bezmozgis, among many others. Beckerman sees themes of alienation and ethnicity present in all of these immigrant writers, themes that link them with previous Jewish-American writers. At the same time, he argues that this group of Russian Jewish Americans form a distinct literary movement.

A focus on Shteyngart connects Beckerman's contribution and David Brauner's chapter, 'The Sons of Phil: Rothian Self-Satire and Self-Incrimination in Shalom Auslander's *Foreskin's Lament* and Gary Shteyngart's *Little Failure*'. However, while Beckerman sees Shteyngart in his Russian context, Brauner places him (along with Auslander) firmly in the Jewish-American tradition epitomized by Roth.

Brauner is followed by James Cochran's "'But Yehoshuah knew the numbers": Reading Joshua Cohen's *Book of Numbers* as Biblical Adaptation'. This chapter considers how Cohen's book sees the digital world as a modern Promised Land; yet ultimately this is not a place of freedom, but one of enslavement. This is the first extended scholarly reflection on *Book of Numbers*—indeed it is still one of the first on Cohen himself.

Michael Kalisch's 'Michael Chabon in a Queer Time and Place' examines Chabon's work in light of contemporary queer thought on temporality. New perspectives on gender in Chabon's writing become a means of discovering new perspectives on his Jewish-American identity. Kalisch's essay thus sheds further light on a vital topic in the evolution of one of the pivotal figures in contemporary Jewish-American writing.

Amy Tziporah Karp's chapter 'Sarah Schulman's *Empathy, Ties that Bind, and the Possibilities of the Stranger*' continues the study of crossover between queer and Jewish identities. There are also thematic links to Beckerman's piece, with assimilation and alienation central to this chapter as well. Schulman's work has received little critical study, a lacuna Karp's essay sets out to fill.

In 'Reenacting Exodus and the Civil War: Passover and *All Other Nights* by Dara Horn', Joshua Benjamin Leavitt explores the recuperation of Civil War Jewish role-players in Horn's fiction. Like Cohen, Horn uses biblical analogies (in this case Exodus) to explore the modern world. For Leavitt, Horn's *All Other Nights* delicately connects the history of Jewish solidarity with African-American struggles against oppression, while at the same time commenting on the complexity of contemporary American identity.

Like Brauner's chapter, Aimee Pozorski and Mirian Jaffe's 'Writing Progeny: Elisa Albert and Philip Roth' uses a familial metaphor to describe a struggle of

influence between Roth and a contemporary Jewish-American writer. However, while Auslander and Shteyngart have become almost as well-known as Roth, Albert remains a shadowy figure in scholarly terms. Pozorski and Jaffe trace out the troubled inheritance gifted to Albert by what remains an overwhelmingly male Jewish-American literary tradition.

In the penultimate chapter, 'Are Head Coverings the New Black? Sheitels and the Religious Secular Culture Wars in Twenty-first-century America and its Literature', Karen Skinazi explores the profusion of fiction emanating from beneath the veil of Orthodox American women. Just as the protagonists of these stories are often marginalized—by their religious communities, secular Jewish Americans and contemporary society in general—so too have many of the writers discussed here been passed over by literary scholarship.

The collection closes with Eva Van Loenen's 'Marriage and Sexuality in Pearl Abraham's *The Romance Reader* and Judy Brown's *Hush*'. Like Skinazi, Van Loenen looks at the remarkable fiction being produced by American Hasidic women. Such writing exposes the deeply controlled lives of such women, yet at the same time it complicates simplistic outsider perspectives. Van Loenen begins by tracing parallels in the novels of Abraham and Brown, before ending by setting out their divergence.

We are grateful to all of our contributors, who have made editing this collection an enlightening, educative and enjoyable experience. We also extend our thanks to our peer reviewers: Victoria Aarons of Trinity University, Katie Ahern, Alan Gibbs, Lee Jenkins and Eoin O'Callaghan, all of University College Cork, Devorah Baum of the University of Southampton, Josef Benson of the University of Wisconsin Parkside, Ross Griffin of Qatar University, Joshua Lambert of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Joshua Lander of the University of Glasgow, Matthew Leggatt of the University of Winchester, Catherine Morley of the University of Leicester, Irina-Maria Popescu of the University of Essex, Maren Scheurer of Goethe University Frankfurt, and P. Scott Stanfield of Nebraska Wesleyan University. The insightful and detailed feedback received from all of our reviewers was greatly appreciated by contributors and editors alike. Finally, we are particularly grateful to all those at the Open Library

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