Unfinalized Moments in Jewish American Narrative

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In contemporary Jewish American fiction studies, it has become common practice to reference Irving Howe’s pronouncement on what he saw as the waning influence of this literature. So much so, in fact, that the constant citation of it (present essay included) begins to take on the cadence of an ironic mantra, one chanted to invoke the spirit of literary authenticity. One is even tempted, given our sound bite-laden culture, to encapsulate his views with the pithy phrase, “the Howe Doctrine” (these introductory comments, however, will resist the temptation). It all began in the introduction to his 1977 collection of Jewish American stories, where Howe broods over his belief that “American Jewish fiction has probably moved past its high point. Insofar as this body of writing draws heavily from the immigrant experience, it must suffer a depletion of resources, a thinning-out of materials and memories. Other than in books and sentiment, there just isn’t enough left of that experience.”1 To a certain degree, such an outlook is understandable, coming from the author of World of Our Fathers, a text whose foundation is the Jewish immigrant experience. Yet what makes this literary forecast ironically poignant is that it introduces a first-of-its-kind manuscript, the collection of “contemporary” Jewish American narrative. In one fell—yet curious—swoop, Howe celebrates the centrality of Jewish American literature at the same time that he mourns its passing. It is as if a distinguished collector had displayed, for all his guests to see, a grand exhibition of significance. Yet in the process of doing so, he “kills off” the very subject of his admiration, much as a butterfly collector must place his specimens in ethyl acetate before they can be properly mounted and showcased. The very act of finalizing the literary moment secures its place in history, creating in the process an inert yet brilliant museum piece.

While such a simile may appear excessive on first reading, one should keep in mind that Howe was not alone in ringing the death knell, or perhaps reciting the Kaddish. In a 1976 article Ruth Wisse, a critic that Howe himself cited to confirm his suppositions, uses rhetoric that is strikingly similar to Howe’s. “The career of American Jewish

literature would seem to have reached a turning point," she provocatively asserts, eventually concluding that "[f]or those who take Judaism seriously as a cultural alternative, and wish to weave new brilliant cloth from its ancient threads, the sociological reality of the present-day American Jewish community would seem to present an almost insurmountable obstacle."\(^2\) Perhaps even more dour, although not nearly as referenced as Howe’s or Wisse’s, is Leslie Fiedler’s unequivocal assertion roughly ten years later that “the Jewish-American novel is over and done with, a part of history rather than a living literature.”\(^3\) These grim predictions serve as a backdrop, ironically enough, for what has become over the past few years an emergent body of scholarship on the most contemporary generation of Jewish American writers. The present special issue of Shofar is just the latest in this ongoing recognition. With a variety of forms and focusing on a diversely rich selection of writers, the contributors to this volume assert the ongoing vitality of Jewish American fiction. They find in authors such as Allegra Goodman, Michael Chabon, Rebecca Goldstein, Pearl Abraham, Jonathan Rosen, Nathan Englander, Melvin Jules Bukiet, Tova Reich, and Jonathan Safran Foer an argument against the kind of finality reported by Howe, Wisse, and Fiedler. Or, to paraphrase another famous literary dictum, each of the seven essays in this collection underscores the fact that reports of the death of Jewish American fiction are greatly exaggerated.

During the past ten years, and especially since the late 1990s, there has been a growing critical awareness of what many have seen as a Jewish American literary revival. In 1992 Ted Solotaroff and Nessa Rapoport published Writing Our Way Home, a collection of short stories that emphasizes the post-immigrant as well as the post-assimilation experience. This thematic focus, they argued, resulted in a new direction for Jewish American writing that promised to be fruitful. This energy, as the editors saw it, was fueled largely by a renewed interest in Jewish religion and culture. The centrifugal

\(^2\)Ruth Wisse, “American Jewish Writing, Act II,” Commentary (June 1976), pp. 40, 45, hereafter cited parenthetically. It is interesting to note that almost fifteen years later, in The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey Through Language and Culture (New York: Free Press-Simon, 2000), the “youngest” or most recent Jewish American authors Wisse discusses are Philip Roth and Cynthia Ozick. At no point does she mention, even in passing, the more prominent writers born after 1933. Even the older “young” writers at that time—e.g., Max Apple, Mark Helprin, Nessa Rapoport—fall short of citation. This is a curious omission, given the fact that by 2000 many of these writers, including the younger Allegra Goodman and Michael Chabon, had already been collected, anthologized, and seriously critiqued for quite some time. Wisse would not necessarily have to place these writers within her Jewish “canon” (and of course, the issue of canonicity is problematic in and of itself). However, it would have been useful for her to note the growing presence, however minimal in her eyes, of a generation of writers coming after, yet highly influenced by, Roth and Ozick. The closest she comes is to state in a postscript that her book “is only a signpost on an unfinished road” (p. 347).

spin of assimilation gives way to a more centripetal pull toward ethnic definition. As Rapoport so succinctly puts it, “Having won our place in American culture, we are beginning to be confident enough to reclaim Jewish culture.” Although many of the writers that they pulled together represented an earlier generation whose publishing history had been established well before 1980—e.g., Saul Bellow, E. L. Doctorow, Grace Paley, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Cynthia Ozick, and Isaac Bashevis Singer—Solotaroff and Rapoport nonetheless included a variety of younger authors whose work seemed to exemplify what the editors saw as the new direction. The editors point out that current fictionists such as Allegra Goodman, Allen Hoffman, and Daphne Merkin embrace Jewish culture and enthusiastically engage in dialogues with its history and orthodoxy.

Another significant critical moment in the exploration of this Jewish American “new wave” took place in the pages of Tikun in 1997. In it, Thane Rosenbaum, the literary editor of that publication, collected a series of essays under the title, “The Jewish Literary Revival.” In his introduction to this literary symposium, he asks if Jewish American fiction is experiencing a new beginning, specifically in regard to that community of writers who inherited an ambiguous ethnic past. What burdens of culture and memory, he inquires, contribute to the writings of this newer generation of Jewish American writers, and how might these writers—who were never particularly observant or who never experienced the horrors of the Holocaust—re-enact those memories in ways that would represent the larger Jewish American experience? The various participants in the symposium looked at such issues as the influential shadows cast by the previous generation of Jewish American writers, the shifting mores of late-twentieth-century culture, the influences of faith, and, of course, the legacy of the Holocaust. The contributor line-up is impressive, a mix of artists and literary critics—Morris Dickstein, Nessa Rapaport, Mark Shechner, Rebecca Goldstein, Melvin Jules Bukiet, Steve Stern, and Sanford Pinsker—each of whom weighs in with an interpretation of the phenomenon. In his survey of the contemporary literary landscape, Dickstein argues that the identity politics of the 1960s helped set the stage for this revival, bringing a new vitality that people like Irving Howe had not foreseen: “The new emphasis on identity, the revival of interest in Jewish history, Jewish festivals, and sacred Jewish texts could not help but lead to a new Jewish writing that would confound the predictions of the


5Thane Rosenbaum, “The Jewish Literary Revival,” Tikun (Nov./Dec., 1997), p. 33. According to Janet Handler Burstein (“Recalling Home: American Jewish Women Writers of the New Wave,” Contemporary Literature [2001], vol. 42, pp. 802–3), Rosenbaum was the first to apply the term “new wave” to Jewish American writing of the 1980s and 1990s. However, such an easily applicable term is many times applied to a new creative phenomenon.
critics." Bukiet conducts a similar survey, but in his sweep of the contemporary scene he loosely groups Jewish American writers into two separate categories: mourners and machers. The former (e.g., Steve Stern, Thane Rosenbaum, Myra Goldberg, and Rebecca Goldstein—at least in Mazel) approach Jewish history through narratives of lamentation, longing for, or at least recreating, a past that exists only on the written page. Machers, on the other hand, use history to assert themselves, often with both engraving and comedic results. The in-your-face brashness of such authors as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Erica Jong helped to pave the way for more recent machers such as Mark Helprin, Michael Chabon, and Francine Prose. What both camps of writers share is a spellbinding ability to chronicle their historical moments. Bukiet concludes, rather sardonically, that "[i]f the critics are correct in believing that this literature will wither and die under the universal blending force of modernity . . . at least that death—sometimes lamented, sometimes defied—will go extraordinarily well-recorded."7

Equally sarcastic is Stern's contribution to the Tikkun symposium. Using his own background and literary subject matter as a "case in point" of Irving Howe's 1977 pronouncement, he prefaces his discussion of the contemporary scene by declaring, "It's certainly not my intention to question the authority of Irving Howe (who was an honorable man), for the evidence still remains more in favor of burying Jewish American fiction than praising it."8 Stern acknowledges the shifting Jewish landscape in the past thirty years, but like most other symposium participants, he does not see the passing of the post-immigrant generation as the end of (Jewish American literary) history. Sanford Pinsker agrees, but in his piece he specifically focuses on writings that "creat[e] a new genre I call post-Holocaust fiction."9 The thrust of this newer wave of Jewish American writing, he argues, comes from those narratives written not by Holocaust survivors (or their more fortunate brethren who escaped the camps) but by the children of that generation, younger writers who have become, in effect, the psychological and spiritual inheritors of the Holocaust. Pinsker sees what the others in the Tikkun symposium see,

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the ongoing presence of causal forces giving new (or sustained) life to Jewish American fiction.\textsuperscript{10}

Other notable studies of this generation followed. Alan L. Berger, for instance, explored the burgeoning field of post-Holocaust writers in \textit{Children of Job}. Here he focused on what he called the second-generation witnesses to the Holocaust, the sons and daughters of survivors whose writings highlight the relationship between the Holocaust and contemporary Jewish American identity. Similar to Pinsker, but in a much more sustained manner, Berger explores the ways in which authors such as Barbara Finkelstein, Art Spiegelman, Thane Rosenbaum, J. J. Steinfeld, and Melvin Jules Bukiet point toward a new direction in Jewish American narrative by directly confronting the psychic legacy of the Shoah.\textsuperscript{11} Other recent critics, such as Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi and Janet Handler Burstein, have noticed a new emphasis in Jewish women’s writing on the re-creation of cultural origins through discourses on homecoming and home-space. Such observations help to explain why many, if not most, of the younger Jewish-American writers gaining notoriety are women, quite a shift from the previous generation dominated by the likes of Bellow, Malamud, and Roth.\textsuperscript{12} But perhaps the most significant study of the most contemporary generation of Jewish American writers, both male and female alike, is Andrew Furman’s \textit{Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma}.\textsuperscript{13} (A review of Furman’s book appears in this issue on page 182.) In attempting to assess the place of Jewish American literature within the larger body of contemporary multiethnic studies (an all too uncertain place, unfortunately), he focuses almost exclusively on fiction writers whose publishing career began in the 1980s. His is the first fully developed critical examination of this group of writers—including discussions on Melvin Jules Bukiet, Thane Rosenbaum, Rebecca

\textsuperscript{10}The one possible exception to this is Mark Shechner. While acknowledging renewed emphases in contemporary Jewish American writing, he notes ambivalently that “the present situation . . . can be read as a diaspora Babel and a token of deterioration, or as a sign that in the long progression from tribe to culture to civilization the Jews have at last attained the diversity, the complexity, and the inner dynamism of a full civilization. The corollary is that we are not likely to again see anything like a unified vision of culture from our writers or even a ‘Jewish’ school of writing” (Mark Shechner, “Is This Picasso, or Is It the Jews?: A Family Portrait at the End of History,” \textit{Tikkun} [Nov./Dec., 1997], p. 41. Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text).


Goldstein, Robert Cohen, Allegra Goodman, Steve Stern, and Gerald Shapiro—and one
that attempts to bridge the gap between multicultural studies in general and Jewish
American literary studies in particular. The value of Furman’s work is undeniable: he
has helped to give critical form to an emerging body of writing whose significance
should no longer be in question.

While the critics have been noticing and signifying this “new wave” of writing,
editors have been active in collecting and anthologizing it, and with impressive results.
There have been at least seven significant collections of Jewish American literature since
the publication of Solotaroff’s and Rapoport’s Writing Our Way Home, all of it in some
way focusing on the recent generation of writers. In 1997 Prairie Schooner put out a
special issue on Jewish American authors, later published in book form. Although
including both poems and essays, much of the collection is made up of short fiction by
writers such as Faye Moskowitz, Rebecca Goldstein, Janet Sternburg, and Steve Stern.
The following year saw the publication of two other collections. Ilan’s Stavans’s Oxford
Book of Jewish Stories is notable for its scope—providing a diverse body of short
fiction from North American, Israeli, and European Jewish writers from the nineteenth
century to the present—but especially, in light of this present study, for the inclusion
of the most contemporary group of American Jewish fictionists. Standing alongside such
towering figures as Saul Bellow and Philip Roth are Stern, Goldstein, Melvin Jules
Bukiet, Janice Eidus, and Allegra Goodman. Although limiting his focus to American
Jewish fiction, Gerald Shapiro (a short story writer himself) gathers a similar collection,
beginning with the works of Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yezierska and wrapping up with
Stern, Bukiet, Goodman, Lev Raphael, Robin Hemley, and Helen Schulman.

14 And this number does not even reflect recent collections that are strictly genre-based. See, for
instance, mystery fiction collections by Lawrence W. Raphael, ed., Mystery Midrash: An Anthology
of Jewish Mystery & Detective Fiction (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1999) and Lawrence W.
Raphael and Laurie King, eds., Criminal Kabbalah: An Intriguing Anthology of Jewish Mystery &
Detective Fiction (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2001); Jack Dann’s edited collections of science
fiction/fantasy, Wandering Stars: An Anthology of Jewish Fantasy and Science Fiction (Woodstock,
VT: Jewish Lights, 1998), and More Wandering Stars: An Anthology of Outstanding Stories of Jewish
Fantasy and Science Fiction (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1999); and even the adolescent fiction
found in Sandy Asher, ed., With All My Heart, With All My Mind: Thirteen Stories About Growing Up
Jewish (New York: Simon, 1999). In his Tikkan piece Mark Shechner mentions the prominence of
Jewish romance fiction, so perhaps this is another genre in which we may soon see a compilation.

15 Hilda Raz, ed., The Prairie Schooner Anthology of Contemporary Jewish American Writing
(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).


17 Gerald Shapiro, ed., American Jewish Fiction: A Century of Stories (Lincoln: University of
Nebraska Press, 1998).
Perhaps the most curious recent compilation of fiction is Bukiet’s *Neurotica: Jewish Writers on Sex*. At least half of the selections are written by the younger wave, including Nathan Englander, Binnie Kirshenbaum, Cheryl Pear Sucher, Benjamin Taylor, and S. L. Wisenberg, as well as many already mentioned. Bukiet contributes still another collection, this one with a much less facetious tone. Springing from the editor’s blunt assertion, “In the beginning was Auschwitz,” *Nothing Makes You Free* brings together international writings from Alan Berger’s “children of Job,” including selections from Thane Rosenbaum, Art Spiegelman, Barbara Finkelstein, Eva Hoffman, and Joseph Skibell. W. W. Norton also weighs in with their first-ever anthology of Jewish American literature. Jules Chametzky et al. attempt to cover the entire history of the Jewish American literary experience—from 1654 to the present—and even in this death-defying scholarly sweep they still find it necessary, in their section significantly titled “Wandering and Return,” to include writings from Stern, Bukiet, Goodman, and Spiegelman. Most recently, Paul Zakrzewski, editor of *Heeb* magazine, adds to the growing “new wave” with his collection of even younger writers. Only four of the twenty-five contributing authors published their first book before 1998, and sixteen of the collection’s stories were copyrighted 2001 or later. This makes Zakrzewski’s *Lost Tribe*—with pieces by first-time novelists and short story writers Myla Goldberg, Nathan Englander, Tova Mirvis, and Jonathan Safran Foer—the “greenest” compilation of Jewish American writers to date.

All of this creative and critical work, impressing in its scope, establishes an imposing context. Even though the scholarly field is as young as the writers it canvasses, it has already received a significant amount of attention. However, there is certainly room for fresh analytical voices, and the seven essays in this current volume of *Shofar*

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21 Paul Zakrzewski, ed., *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge* (New York: Harper, 2003). One of the collection’s main marketing strategies is apparently the Lower East Side-flavored “raw, dark, sometimes outrageous” content of its stories (back cover). True or not, this attitude reflects the feel of *Heeb* magazine, which calls itself “The New Jew Review.” As its Web site describes it, the magazine is “an ambitious antitrust investigation into the monopoly on God. It is a sweaty prizefight between hip-hop and sushi in this corner and klezmer and kugel in the other. It is the bastard love child of Emma Goldman and Lenny Bruce. It is a plague on modern day pharaohs replete with miraculous jailbreaks and a nice little riot or two. It is a Carnival cruise to the Garden of Eden with all-you-can-eat cheesecake and Parliament as the house band. Hallelujah.” Or, put more succinctly, as the editors say of themselves, “We’re the kids your rabbis warned you about” (“What Is?” *Heeb* Magazine, 10 Nov. 2003, <http://www.heebmagazine.com/whatis.php>).
provide a necessary and unique contribution. Unlike earlier anthologies and critical works, these essays focus solely on the community of writers who published their first book after 1988 (even Furman’s study begins with an analysis of Philip Roth). What is more, it is the first substantial collection of critical essays on this subject matter, the most recent generation of Jewish American authors, written by a variety of scholars in the field. As such, the volume does not attempt to foreground any one, and only one, critical agenda—such as post-Holocaust writing, engagements with Zionism, feminist studies, or multiculturalism—other than its intended focus: the presence of a robust and ever-evolving body of Jewish American fiction. As the essays in this volume of Shofar so clearly demonstrate, this literature has taken a variety of forms with its negotiations of orthodoxy, its representations of a post-Holocaust world, its reassertion of folkloric tradition, its engagements with postmodernism, its reevaluations of Jewishness, and its alternative delineations of ethnic identity.

The title of the volume, “Unfinalized Moments,” bears out this multifaceted quality of contemporary Jewish American fiction. It is a reference to one of Mikhail Bakhtin’s central critical concepts, “unfinalizability,” the idea that characters (in real life as well as in fiction) are constantly in the process of making themselves, thereby resistant to any “finalizing” definition or end point of understanding. As he writes in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, “Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.”22 The ability, or the sheer necessity, of characters to surprise readers through confounding expectation is central to Bakhtin’s poetics. No matter what the determining factors—psychological, sociological, economic—texts and the characters they contain, much like real individuals, can never be ultimately pigeonholed. There is always something left over, what Bakhtin aptly calls a “surplus of humanness.”23 Such a concept pertains directly to the state of Jewish American fiction, especially when previous critics have lamented that its characters have become nothing more than “stock literary fixture[s]” (Wisse 40). The fictional creations had never really become stock fixtures, and neither have their authors. As Howe, Wisse, and Fiedler have unwittingly demonstrated, some past scholars of Jewish American fiction were too quick in ringing a finalizing death knell. What is more, and perhaps more significant, the sheer diversity within this literary field exemplifies its always/already process of (re)definition. This can be seen in the subject matters of the various essays that comprise this collection, which range from emphases on orthodox communities to studies of eating disorders; from journeys into Holocaust-marked


Eastern Europe to meanderings through the post-assimilated streets of lower Manhattan; from studies on more traditional and realistic forms of narrative to explorations on the uses of fantasy and the graphic novel; and from discussions on authors whose fictions are steeped in *Yiddishkeit* to new readings of those writers who have previously chosen not to reference their Jewishness.

It is appropriate that the collection in this volume begin with two essays on Allegra Goodman. She, perhaps more than any other writer of her generation (with the possible exception of Art Spiegelman), has garnered both popular and critical success, making her writing on Judaic issues particularly significant. As Mark Shechner puts it, in the assemblage of contemporary Jewish writing, Allegra Goodman is “the homegirl and everyone’s sweetheart” (39). Victoria Aarons demonstrates why this is so in her essay. What makes Goodman’s writing resonate, she argues, is its engagement with the postmodern media-driven world of image and immediate gratification, especially in its relation to Jewish heritage and community. The stories of *The Family Markowitz* show how, in Aarons’s words, “the seductions of American life and the language of contemporary cultural icons eclipse the past, obscure identity, erase the ‘memory, real or imagined,’ historic or mythic.” Many of Goodman’s characters approach their identity with ambivalence, fearing the loss of their Jewishness while at the same time suspicious of donning it wholeheartedly. Concentrating on Goodman’s early short fiction, Aarons shows how the author reinvents Jewish subjectivity through the negotiation of competing contemporary forces. In a similar manner, Maya Socolovsky explores the different ways in which Jewish orthodoxy functions in Goodman’s narratives—an emphasis that would have been unheard of, with one or two exceptions, in fiction of the 1960s and 1970s. She focuses on Goodman’s first novel and the ways in which the American promise of self-definition plays out within the orthodox community. Structuring her ideas around issues of geographic space and subject interiority, Socolovsky demonstrates the ways in which *Kaaterskill Falls* serves as one kind of response to “finalizing” criticism. She argues that just as the author’s characters use Judaic heritage to inform their own contemporary identities, Goodman uses her “inheritance” of the Jewish American literary past to craft her own notions of a post-assimilative Jewish identity. By doing so, Goodman essentially maps out one possible direction for contemporary Jewish American writing.

As Alan Berger and Sanford Pinsker have argued, much of contemporary literature reflects post-Holocaust concerns. In their contributions to this collection, both Michael Martin and Lee Behlman deftly illustrate the reality of this thesis. First, Martin approaches the Holocaust through his discussion of Melvin Jules Bukiet’s novel *After* and his essay on “crackpot realism.” He looks for the links between Bukiet’s post-Holocaust writings and current postmodern theory, finding in the former an attempt to move beyond the ineffability of the Shoah by developing a renewed sense of ethics. The deconstruction of ideology, as Martin reads Bukiet’s fiction, should not end with radical indeterminacy but instead encourage a narrative commitment to “look at and recognize the past, present, and future and while seeing repetition, maintain a desire to remain
critically active and participatory in an effort to create a world where we will one day get it right.” Lee Behlman surveys the ways in which writers such as Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Michael Chabon have appropriated folklore and fantasy—a rich tradition indeed—in ways that help signify the legacy of the Holocaust. Each author employs this narrative strategy in entertaining ways, but Behlman is specifically interested in how fantasy serves as a therapeutic escape from history. What contemporary Jewish authors have inherited is not only the aftereffects of the Shoah, but the overwhelming task of representing that horror in a rightful manner. Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* stands as an illustrative product of this burden. In his close reading of the novel, Behlman shows how Chabon uses a non-realistic and particularly American art form, the comic book, to meet head-on the problems of representation.

The next two essays in the volume examine the place of contemporary women as inheritors of Judaic traditions. Susan Jacobowitz writes on the ways in which Rebecca Goldstein, Pearl Abraham, and Tova Reich narrate a feminine response to Jewish Orthodoxy. Using Goldstein’s model of the “mind-body problem,” Jacobowitz shows how the women in each narrative are signifies through either intellect or looks, but not through both. This problem arises not so much out of secular pressures as from the constricting views of traditional, and male-dominated, Judaism and Orthodox Jewish religious observance. And in an interesting contrast to Jacobowitz’s argument that uncritical adherence to rabbinic teachings can confine female identity, Adam Sol demonstrates how the denial of such teachings can have the same effect. He reads Jonathan Rosen’s *Eve’s Apple* though the lens of the *yetzer hara*, loosely defined as the evil impulse. In his close reading of the novel, Sol argues that those who reject outright this impulse are not so much resisting evil as they are precluding any chance for ethical balance. The *yetzer hara* is associated with those human desires and pleasures that perpetuate the world, and, as rabbinic commentators have pointed out, one needs to harness those desires in order to live a life of goodness. As Sol concludes, Rosen’s subtle engagement with Judaic teachings “may not reexamine the familiar conflicts between tradition and modernity that still seem to dominate Jewish fiction in North America, [but] his insight into how the tradition sheds light on modernity is a welcome addition to Jewish letters.”

Given the issues involved in current Jewish American writing, perhaps it is appropriate that the final essay in the volume deals with narrative return. As Adam Meyer points out, when Irving Howe made his (in)famous literary prediction, he neglected to anticipate three important shifts affecting Jewish American consciousness: the evolving significance of the Holocaust, the continued political rise of the Israeli state, and the return (or redevelopment) of religious observance. The latter, Meyer believes, is what most accounts for the recent literary resurgence. From the context of Marcus Lee Hansen’s theory of third-generation return, he explores the writings of Allegra Goodman, Rebecca Goldstein, and Michael Chabon, but Meyer specifically
singles out for his analysis Nathan Englander's "The Gilgul of Park Avenue." This short story, he argues, can be read as an allegory to the twentieth-century migration of Jewish American writing, especially as it underscores Hansen's belief that the grandchildren will want to remember what their parents willed to forget.

And discussions of return and the immigrant past bring us once more to Irving Howe. At the end of his introduction, he speculates on the resistance that many younger writers of his time might have toward his grim predictions. "They would argue," he adds,

that there is a post-immigrant Jewish experience in America which can be located in its own milieu, usually suburbs or middle-class urban neighborhoods; that it has virtues and vices distinctly its own; and that it offers a body of experience which a serious writer can draw upon in creating fictions. Is not their phase of Jewish life in America as authentic and interesting as that of the earlier immigrants? Do they not have a right, also, to make of their involvements and confusions with Jewishness the foundation for stories and novels?" (17)

To those of us reading in the early twenty-first century, the answer to these questions is, but of course! The essays composing this volume demonstrate how right Howe's imagined writers would have been, how the historical moment in Jewish American writing is all but finalized. And each serves as an illustrative example of the current trends in literary studies. Their subject matters concern many of the major issues that have come to define this brand of writing, from an interest in its late-nineteenth-century immigrant roots to its most recent expressions in the new millennium. Readers interested in theories of ethnicity—Jewish or otherwise—and its relation to postmodernism/contemporary critical studies will find in this volume a useful case study in the ways in which the two interact. What is more, many authors that are discussed here are some of today’s most significant American writers of fiction. Allegra Goodman’s reputation continues to grow, and Michael Chabon has won the Pulitzer Prize. In a recent interview, Cynthia Ozick (one of the more formidable writers from the previous generation) comments on Howe’s belief that Jewish American material was disappearing: "I always thought that the subject matter would always be there, because the issue is existential, not sociological. Now along comes this next generation of Jewish writers, and sure enough, they are interested in the existential questions of Judaism. It’s very unexpected; if Howe were alive I think he would be amazed."²⁴

An unfinalized moment indeed.
