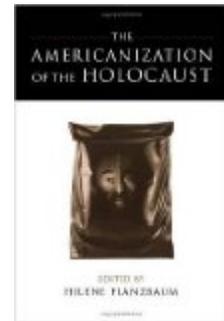


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Hilene Flanzbaum, ed. *The Americanization of the Holocaust*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. 261 pp. \$21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-6022-5; \$57.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6021-8.

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Published on H-Holocaust (July, 1999)



How We've Come to Know

During “forty years in the wilderness” after World War II, even while it was a non-topic in our homes, schools, and houses of worship, the Holocaust was making a laborious entrance into American consciousness at both the academic and popular levels. This entry was abetted by a reduction of the events and data to terms and concepts both comprehensible and acceptable to the American public, even as Jews were gaining popular acceptance as true Americans. Historians, sociologists, students of religions and theologians, psychologists, and other academicians began to develop data pertinent to their respective fields, while artists and politicians transformed “pure” facts into the useful.

Evolving from a panel at the 1996 Modern Language Association Convention, editor Hilene Flanzbaum has gathered twelve essays which review the means by which the arts have enabled the Holocaust to enter the American consciousness, gain accepted by the general public, and be transformed by the experience.

The volume opens with Flanzbaum’s own study (“The American Jew and the imaginary Poet”) of the use of Holocaust imagery and victim identification by non-Jewish poets such as Robert Lowell and John Berryman, in sharp distinction to the early works of Karl Shapiro, a Jewish poet who emphasized the American nature of his identity and experiences in *V-Letter*, a collection which received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

The popular media are represented by several essays. Jeffrey Shandler (“Aliens in the Wasteland”) of-

fers a study of the Holocaust in 1960s science fiction television, a lively essay, although one which offers no surprises for those familiar with his 1998 volume, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust*. Joyce Antler (“Three Thousand Miles Away”) reviews recent Holocaust-related drama, while Sara R. Horowitz (“The Cinematic triangulation of Jewish American Identity”) offers an insightful look at the way the Holocaust is portrayed in both American and Israeli films. Horowitz observes the tremendous range of focus, from “Gentleman’s Agreement” in which “the Nazi genocide becomes a metaphor for social injustice of all kinds” (p. 153) to “Exodus,” which treats the Holocaust as “the quintessential Jewish event” (p. 155).

The world of prose is represented by three essays. Henry Greenspan (“Imagining Survivors”) reviews the ways in which survivors have been regarded by the American public and the growth of popular interest in their stories. Greenspan observes that survivors have come to be viewed as both “heroes” and “wrecks,” while noting that these contradictory attitudes have become self-sufficient, detached from one another and “from remembering the Holocaust itself” (p. 59).

Andrew Furman (“Inheriting the Holocaust”) offers a review of Jewish-American fiction and the means by which second generation authors take on the legacy of Holocaust suffering. Furman examines works by Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Cynthia Ozick and other, lesser known, authors, but his focus is upon the work

of Thane Rosenbaum's collection of stories, *Elijah Visible*, which he presents in a manner which made this reviewer seek out the volume.

Art Spiegelman's controversial comic books *Maus* and *Maus II* are the focus for Amy Hungerford ("Surviving Rego Park"). Hungerford makes the point that literature can transcend literal data to find literal truth. Hungerford is identified as a graduate student; in spots, her prose reflects the didacticism of graduate writing but her insights offer promise of future scholarly endeavors.

James Young ("America's Holocaust") is well known for his writings on Holocaust memorials. He offers a thorough look at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as this country's primary institutionalized memory, but warns that "memory cannot be divorced from the actions taken in its behalf" (p. 82). Alan Steinweis ("Reflections on the Holocaust from Nebraska") localizes public memory of the Holocaust within that most "white bread" of states. Noting the means by which some groups have appropriated Holocaust language and imagery for their own, unrelated, causes, Steinweis observes "the extent to which the holocaust has been absorbed into the American consciousness as a paradigmatic evil" (p. 173).

The volume's final essays move in different directions. Walter Benn Michaels ("You Who Never Was There") examines the transmission of knowledge and the deconstruction of Holocaust understanding into feelings

and experience. As one who has long urged just such acts as the beginning of Holocaust study, I found myself fascinated—if not always in agreement—with his findings and conclusions. Michaels considers these efforts to represent "the notion of culture" as "the defining characteristic of persons" (p. 196), with personhood transformed into an identity. Laurence Mordekhai Thomas ("Suffering As A Moral Beacon") reviews the strained relations between Blacks and Jews, each group asserting the primacy of *its* suffering and thereby understanding the *other* group's experience. Finally, Andrew Levy ("Play Will Make You Free") notes how one corporate giant—Nike—has used images and language reminiscent of the Third Reich to sell its wares. While interesting, I found this to be the weakest essay within the volume.

Any collection runs the risk of uneven quality but, as a whole, the essays in *The Americanization of the Holocaust* are thoughtful, well researched and helpful. The authors demonstrate the growth of the Holocaust as subject matter far beyond standard historic investigations and texts. The volume could be used in courses on the college level as well as adult study. Its very existence is a cogent reminder of the extent to which American perceptions of the Holocaust have changed in fifty years.

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Citation: Richard Libowitz. Review of Flanzbaum, Hilene, ed., *The Americanization of the Holocaust*. H-Holocaust, H-Net Reviews. July, 1999.

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