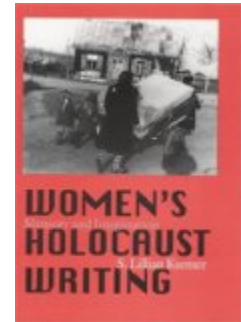


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

S. Lillian Kremer. *Women's Holocaust Writing: Memory and Imagination*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. xvi + 278 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-2743-9.

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## Engendering Holocaust Literary Criticism

S. Lillian Kremer takes as her point of departure in *Women's Holocaust Writing* that gender pervades both Holocaust experiences and their literary expressions. Her subtitle "Memory and Imagination" draws together writing by two groups of women with very different relationships to the Holocaust: Europeans who experienced its violence first-hand and whose survival has led to writing out of insistent memory, and American-born women whose interests or obsessions have led to vicarious or imaginative participation and fictional recreation. Kremer's interest is "in the commonalities and distinctions of writing by women who experienced it directly and by others who learned about it after the fact" (x).

The interplay of memory and imagination in writing on both sides of the experiential line complicates such a seemingly simple division, however. Kremer discusses five books written by female survivors, but none is a memoir per se; these women have all imaginatively reinterpreted their memories in novelistic efforts whose settings are often far removed from the ghettos and camps that inspired them. Much as such imagination is shown to be an important part of memorializing, the non-survivor novelists Kremer discusses rely heavily on fact – interviews with survivors and meticulous historical research – in order to craft their fictions. In each case memory work and the effort of the imagination are intertwined in subtle and important ways. Historical attention to fact, as Kremer argues, only goes so far – it is the imaginative use of narrative that lends facts and figures affect and mental reality for we readers in the present. Thus, imagination and fictionalization are

always of paradoxical importance to fact and history, and perhaps ultimately indivisible from them. As Kremer argues, "Historic study and creative writing enhance the other's capacity to inform readers. . . . The arts will help keep Holocaust memory alive" (p. 30).

Kremer's introduction lays out the feminist framework that has guided her selection of texts and her approach to reading them. She notes that the canon of central Holocaust writing is all but exclusively populated by male authors, and that Holocaust literary criticism has tended to turn a blind eye to issues of gender. This has had a falsely homogenizing impact on literary and historical engagements with the Holocaust because, simply, "Jewish men and women were persecuted in ways unique to their sex" (p. 3). She cites and stands with Joan Ringelheim in insisting that failing to recognize the gendered nature of women's suffering consigns them to silence and a second unmourned death. Not the least important aspect of this gendered suffering was the fact that Nazi racial doctrines made the destruction of Jewish mothers a specific objective in the extermination of the Jewish race. Mothers and children were thus, unlike in all previous wars, made specific targets for brutal elimination: "Jewish women discovered that bearing children was a crime against the Reich, that their children were to be denied life" (p. 11).

Women's reproductive capacity was thus specifically targeted, as was their sexuality more generally. Sexual assault was frequent, and took forms that are surprising when seen only in the light of canonical male expe-

riences. Being stripped and shaved, for example, is all but inevitably presented in men's writing as a general, psychological experience of dehumanization, but is felt more personally by women as a material, sexual assault on their selves as women—a "dewomanization." It should be pointed out that Kremer, following Elaine Showalter, explicitly resists essentializing the feminine, and pursues relational gendered readings and issues rather than a separate and falsely coherent definition of womanhood and women's experience.

The introduction also presents a survey of Kremer's general conclusions about the characteristics of women's writings on the Holocaust. The sexual segregation of the camp system and the Nazi collocation of women and children contributed to a more familial sense of suffering on the part of women, and a detailed focus on familial relations and the minutiae of daily life is one feature Kremer identifies as characterizing women's writing. She also foregrounds "the ways female sexuality and motherhood added burdens to the normative Holocaust ordeal, the cooperative networks women prisoners developed, and the manner in which female cooperation and interdependence contributed to survival" (p. 4).

Although my own reading of women's memoirs leads me to be suspicious of some of Kremer's generalizations about women's experiences and writing, she supports her conclusions well and follows them up throughout the text with respect to the authors at hand. One of the most notable features of the writing of these women is the prominence of female characters. The canon of Holocaust writing by men tends to include women as helpless victims or as emblematic of the lost world before the Nazi darkness fell (perhaps, as Kremer points out, because of their literal "loss" of the women in the segregated world of labour and concentration camps). In women's writing, on the other hand, "female characters are fully defined protagonists, experiencing the Shoah in all its evil manifestations" (p. 5). And they respond, resist, struggle, die, or survive in "densely patterned works locating the individual woman's struggle to survive within the larger conflagration of European Jewry's trial" (p. 5).

Kremer addresses the writing of one woman in each of the seven chapters following her introduction. Three of these women—Ilona Karmel, Elzbieta Ettinger, and Hana Demetz—lived through the violence of the Nazi genocide; the remaining four—Susan Fromberg Shaeffer, Cynthia Ozick, Marge Piercy, and Norma Rosen—were born and raised in the relative safety of the United States but have turned their imaginative efforts to the sufferings

of those who experienced the Holocaust. Each chapter consists of detailed exegetical readings of the texts rather than a detailed argument about them.

This is both effective and frustrating; Kremer presents a well-reasoned and insightful discussion, but it is one without a more specific goal than presenting these writers as exemplary women who have written about the Holocaust. For those seeking an introduction to Holocaust literature or women's writing this approach will be welcome. Those interested in a more theoretically oriented or narrowly argued effort will, I suppose, have to take on the burden of researching and writing such books themselves. There are very few—in fact appallingly few—book-length studies of gender and the Holocaust; *Women's Holocaust Writing* is exactly the sort of intelligent and detailed overview that is needed to help found an important area of scholarly study. It provides excellent historical context, presents insightful exegesis of women's texts, and demonstrates the importance of gender and literature to the ongoing historical project of Holocaust memorialization.

I cannot adequately summarize the detailed and interesting readings of the many authors and books that Kremer presents. In short, the authors and texts addressed are Ilona Karmel (*Stephania* and *An Estate of Memory*), Elzbieta Ettinger (*Kindergarten* and *Quicksand*), Hana Demetz (*The House on Prague Street*), Susan Fromberg Shaeffer (*Anyia*), Cynthia Ozick (*The Shawl*), Marge Piercy (*Gone to Soldiers*), and Norma Rosen (*Touching Evil*). Kremer interviewed all the authors, and makes extensive use of these interviews as she proceeds. This fact alone makes *Women's Holocaust Writing* a fascinating tome; the material from the interviews provides interesting commentary on each author's sense of intention in writing that would be otherwise unavailable to us. Kremer's discussions are thus well-informed about the personal history of each woman, grounded in relevant historical contexts, and grow increasingly detailed and strongly interconnected as each writer is frequently compared to the others, making the discussion particularly cohesive and rewarding.

Its excellence as a survey of a sadly under-researched field makes for concomitant features that are perhaps unfair to characterise as weaknesses. Nevertheless I will register my own sense, as an admittedly idiosyncratic reader, of some of the book's shortcomings. Kremer's reading strategy is a largely commonsensical thematic and formal analysis. When she raises more nuanced or philosophical theoretical issues, she does so only briefly

(i.e., the passing references to Zygmunt Bauman (p. 103) and Susan Suleiman (p 139)). Along similar lines, Kremer often makes unsatisfying one-off comparisons between the central author at hand and similar or contrasting authors such as Ida Fink and Tadeusz Borowski. In each case the comparison tends to be ineffective or reductive, in part because the readings Kremer offers of her central subjects are so rich in context that the comparison-texts offer rather anaemic foils for them.

I plan to keep *Women's Holocaust Writing* close at hand for my own research and teaching, both for Kre-

mer's readings of the authors she champions and for her economical and forceful argument in favour of gendered approaches to studying Holocaust experience and writing. Readers interested in Holocaust history, Holocaust literary criticism, or women's life writing would be well advised not to miss this excellent overview.

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