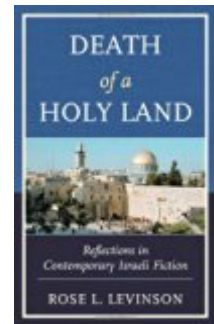


Rose L. Levinson. *Death of a Holy Land: Reflections in Contemporary Israeli Fiction*. Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2013. xviii + 117 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-7772-3.

Reviewed by Naomi Sokoloff (Near Eastern Languages and Civilization)

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Israel in Fiction: The Demise of the Zionist Dream?

Many scholarly books downplay or obscure the personal circumstances and motivations of their authors. Rose L. Levinson's *Death of a Holy Land* follows a different model. It spells out explicitly where the writer is coming from, both personally and politically. Stating forthrightly, "I am a Jew; I am a woman; I am an American" (p. 99), Levinson explains that this book stems from her long-standing attachments to Israel and her growing disillusionment with both Israeli government policies and the ascendance of right-wing religious views in Israeli society. Disavowing idealized notions of the Jewish state as homeland and as holy land, she turns to literature to seek insight into everyday life in Israel. Her central premise is that creative writing uncovers a troubling dimension of contemporary Israeli experience "that normally lies unexposed or suppressed" (p. xiv). Operating on the assumption that many American Jews retain a starry-eyed, uncritical belief that Israel can do no wrong, she invites readers to reconsider such "ingrained perspectives" (p. xiii) as they "look beyond religious or political rhetoric to a place where contemporary people deal with existential issues and quotidian miseries" (p. xiv). With that purpose in mind, Levinson discusses fiction by four authors: Yoram Kaniuk, Orly Castel-Bloom, Michal Govrin, and Zeruya Shalev.

This book contributes to English-language discussion of Hebrew literature through its clear presentation of plot summaries and its discerning attention to thematic elements of individual novels. Far too little commentary on Israeli fiction exists in English. Levinson usefully de-

tails Kaniuk's condemnations of militarism and Castel-Bloom's satirical depictions of nationalism run amok. Interpreting the tales of Zeruya Shalev, Levinson persuasively connects domestic unhappiness with collective dilemmas. So, for instance, she points out how the novel *Love Life* (Hebrew, 1997) presents a botched love affair as "a metaphor for a lofty national purpose perverted into an empty dead-end between warring participants" (p. 80). Similarly, when discussing *Husband and Wife* (Hebrew, 2000), she identifies how marital woes and a man's failing strength imply the decline of heroic masculinity and an undoing of macho ideals long celebrated by Zionist discourse. Most compelling are Levinson's accounts of the quandaries faced by women characters. Her reading of Govrin's *The Name* (Hebrew, 1995) emphasizes the ways in which a young woman's spiritual yearnings are exploited ruthlessly in the corrupt, narrow-minded, patriarchal milieu of an ultra-Orthodox community. Levinson's outline of central tensions in *The Name* provides useful information for people who have not read this novel, as well as welcome guidance for people who have struggled with Govrin's rewarding, but dense prose and challenging narrative structures.

Problematic, however, is the general framework within which Levinson presents her analyses of particular texts. She insists that the authors chosen for examination here are "marginal" (p. 81) and therefore endowed with a distinctively subversive quality that can overturn conventional wisdom. In truth, these writers are hardly peripheral. Titles by Yoram Kaniuk and Zeruya

Shalev have appeared repeatedly on best-seller lists in Israel. Orly Castel-Bloom's fiction has achieved down-right canonical status. It is taught in high schools, included on university matriculation exams, and analyzed extensively in academic courses and at scholarly conferences. Not to acknowledge the centrality of these authors gives a skewed impression of Israeli values. Specifically, this approach underestimates Israelis' capacity for self-scrutiny and self-excoriation. Furthermore, it is not news that modern Hebrew literature voices dissent. Indeed, ever since the founding of the state, imaginative literature has drawn attention to gaps between the Zionist dream and the realities of daily living. To be sure, oppositional, self-critical, and post-Zionist trends have taken on momentum since the late 1980s and the 1990s, but the seeds of those phenomena existed much earlier—as is reflected in the very fact that Levinson's book itself includes commentary on a novel from 1971 (Kaniuk's *Adam Resurrected*).

Altogether, *Death of a Holy Land* lacks perspective in terms of literary history. Symptomatically, the word "contemporary" in the subtitle of the book remains undefined and elastic. This study would have benefited greatly from more systematic assessment of changes that have taken place in Israeli society over time and from a more nuanced account of the evolution of Hebrew writing since 1948. Similarly, *Death of a Holy Land* would have been strengthened by greater attention to the critical reception of the fiction under discussion. The bibliography includes no sources in Hebrew, and it cites very little of the available English-language scholarship in the field of Israeli literature. Levinson acknowledges that she has read everything in translation (a justifiable choice in a survey intended for a general, nonspecialist audience), but the failure to engage adequately with debate in the field of literary studies leads to disappointing overgeneralization. For example, in her chapter on Kaniuk, Levinson concludes that aftereffects of the Holocaust warp the abilities of Jews to think clearly. Then she asserts, "Israel is endangering its very soul by using the Holocaust to justify acts of violence and repression" (p. 2). This patently polemical stance sidesteps the multifaceted, extensive, and heated debates about Holocaust

memory that have taken place in Israel. Voices on both the left and the right, holding opposite convictions and denouncing one another, have all decried distorted references to the Shoah and, nonetheless, both right and left have used such imagery for political ends. Levinson expresses an opinion, but she does not illuminate these controversies, nor does she enter into dialogue with literary scholars who have explored these matters in relation to Kaniuk and other novelists.

At pains to position herself as someone who can explain Israel to Americans, Levinson could have delved deeper into the cultural contexts that shape Hebrew narrative. And what about American cultural contexts and the American audience for Israeli fiction? Is it accurate to say that American Jews naively adhere to a glorified image of Israel and cling to outmoded Zionist dreams of moral purity? Debate on that issue is thriving. Sociologist Theodore Sasson, for one, argues that the relationship of American Jews to Israel is not monolithic and is no longer centralized. Neither is it on the wane, as some have claimed. Rather, it has entered a new period of pluralism. Multiple kinds of engagement with Israel have emerged since the 1990s, producing opinions that are sometimes polarized and sometimes splintered.[1] Apparently, there are no simple truths anymore regarding American Jewish views of Israel. What is certainly true is that Americans lag behind when it comes to reading Israeli fiction. Few read in Hebrew, and only a small portion of this literature is translated into English. Furthermore, Americans read less than Europeans, who familiarize themselves with Israeli authors through frequent translations of Hebrew literature into German, Italian, Polish, and other languages. Accordingly, literary studies that might mediate between Israel and America carry special value and potential. After all, the United States and Israel constitute the two major centers of Jewish population and culture in the world today. The challenge is to build up scholarship that acknowledges, grapples with, and does justice to the complexities of both communities.

Note

[1]. Theodore Sasson, *The New American Zionism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

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