

**Claudia Bathsheba Braude.** *Contemporary Jewish Writing in South Africa: An Anthology*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001. lxxvi + 165 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8032-1270-1.



**Reviewed by** Eve D'Aeth

**Published on** H-SAfrica (February, 2003)

*Contemporary Jewish Writing in South Africa*, a volume in the Jewish Writing in the Contemporary World series, explores issues of political, social, and personal identity in a changing and morally ambivalent environment. It does so in writing that ranges from the classic and established to the experimental and innovative; each piece has a literary, as well as historical and social value. Editor Claudia Braude's skillful and informative introduction, which yet manages not to be intrusive, points out the paradoxical difficulty of regarding Jews as a distinct community in South Africa under the apartheid regime. Maintaining the distinctness of a social group was entirely in keeping with the government policy of separate-ness--apartheid--and yet paradoxically made the group blend with the general social landscape. On the other hand, the Jewishness of writers and activists (and activist/writers) who opposed the apartheid regime was necessarily overshadowed by their anti-racism. So, it is only under the new dispensation in South Africa that offerings like this selection can be meaningfully made, in which the unrecorded, censored, or subverted past is re-

membered and reconstructed, contributing to a more hopeful and open future.

As Braude explains, Jews from their first entry into South Africa as immigrants experienced degrees of social discrimination, which they had reason to fear might become legal as well. If they had been classified as "non-European" or as other than "White" they would have been vulnerable as they had been in those states from which they had fled; indeed, in the 1930s exclusionary immigration laws came close to being enacted. At this time, too, a significant number of Afrikaner politicians, although not in power, were active Nazi sympathizers. Although Jews were recognized as white, and thereby constrained into an uncomfortable commonality with some who were anti-Semites, they still had good reason to feel insecure.

In the later years of the twentieth century the danger of being Jewish was submerged under the privileges and fears of being white in South Africa. Were they indeed "White," and mostly immune from bureaucratic and other chance brutalities, with opportunities for material and intellec-

tual development? Could they be considered "non-White," which would open up an abyss of possibilities for victimization of the kind they already knew from direct experience in other lands and from observation of how people of color were treated and legislated for (and against) in South Africa? And with whom did their sympathies lie?

The body that officially represented the Jewish community, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, chose for the benefit of those it represented to be "non-political." In a state that became so sharply polarized, however, that choice was impossible, "non-political" for practical purposes meant "aligned with the ruling party."

Finding an identity in South Africa where race was overwhelmingly important was a significant political and moral challenge that Jewish immigrants and their children and grandchildren confronted. The contributors to this volume give voice to those complex and manifold discoveries. Writing in the new South Africa, they go beyond issues of race and political orientation to explore other margins: gender and religious belief and practice.

Sarah Gertrude Millin's writings represent the view of those who found a troubled peace in precarious alignment with the apartheid government. Her short story "Esther's Daughter" reflects the unease, the fear of the stain of color and of "miscegenation," and the insecurity of relying on a favorable classification. Esther's daughter, Elizabeth, is accepted as white and thus cannot publicly acknowledge her mother, not even, or especially not, at her wedding to a member of a long and securely established white family. The narrator is the "missis" of the servant next door. The servant who is black and disadvantaged but, at least, sure of her blackness, relates the events to her mistress. The narrator is thus distant from the events at two removes. They do not touch her directly; she only listens to what her black servant tells her, and with cool pity remarks on the probable outcome, a disgraceful revelation when Eliza-

beth will bear a child whose color will declare its ancestry. The remoteness of the narrator is a statement in itself: she cannot be touched.

Barney Simon, on the other hand, in "Our War" superimposes one identity onto the other. He writes in the persona of a child reliving the days of pogroms in Lithuania, and transposes the setting to Johannesburg, naming familiar, everyday landmarks, street names, and public places. By doing so, he not only makes immediate and imaginable the historical sufferings of the Jews of Lithuania but, at the same time, makes the reader aware that at least some of the Jewish child's experiences in Lithuania would be shared by a black child in Johannesburg, in particular those that relate to hunger, the responsibility of a child for siblings scarcely younger than he, and the difficulty of breaking through bureaucratic barriers to get medical attention for a desperately sick child.

In her characteristically elegant "My Father Leaves Home," Nadine Gordimer relates, in the first person, a story which interweaves light-hearted tourists staying at an inefficiently run hunting lodge somewhere in Eastern Europe with swift images of the hunt and memories of a father from that place. The father was derided by his British born (Jewish) wife and disregarded by his children due to his language. The narrative, beautifully composed and worded, is in English, the language of the dominant mother. The father, whose lost history is only now being acknowledged ("Six leaves from my father's country"), says to the mother, "You speak to me as if I was a kaffir." He in turn speaks roughly and contemptuously to his black employee. Gordimer has always espoused the anti-apartheid cause, and has always done so from a position of strength, which comes partly from her authority as a writer and partly from an acceptance that she cannot be other than a member of the white group. In my view, she accepts the responsibility of being a beneficia-

ry of its corporate wrong-doing and refuses to make a special plea for Jews.

Going beyond race relations, some of the selections adumbrate victimization and abuse of power within families. One such disturbing story is "The Zulu and the Zeide," which deals passionately with the breaking of family bonds and the attempt to substitute lost security with material prosperity and authority. The Zeide of the story is a troublesome old man whose son hires a Zulu man--Paulus, who is new to the city and to the ways of whites--to look after him. The two bond unexpectedly well, and the loveless son, never himself loved or cared for by his father, derides both. Belittling and manipulating them through his power as employer and guardian becomes the son's mode of compensation for being neglected by his father. "The sight of Paulus's startled, puzzled and guilty face before him filled him with a lust to see this man look more startled, puzzled and guilty yet" (p. 41). The author, Dan Jacobson, echoes Lionel Abraham's quote in the introduction: "Our leaders all too often act in accord with the Nazi temper of prurient joy in power" (p. lvii).

The excerpt from Rose Zwi's *Another Year in Africa* is similarly disturbing. In it, Zwi shows the daily life of immigrant families who have moved to South Africa as a place of freedom from the place where they were oppressed and hunted down. Significantly, the scars are carried by the child Ruthie, who never directly experienced state persecution but experiences it through the narratives of her elders and, most poignantly, through the anxieties of her mother, expressed as rage against her child. Sheinka, the hypochondriac, fretful, and self-regarding mother, blames Ruthie for upsetting her and possibly causing her to miscarry. "And it will be her fault," Sheinka tells her neighbors, Berka and Yenta.

The theme of disempowerment and how it plays out in families recurs in Lilian Simon's "God Help Us," where the daughters are encouraged not to make a fuss and to give in to the mother's

unreasonable demands for the sake of peace. That mother is also a hypochondriac. The daughter narrating the story is unable to protest, able only to hold her tongue and allow gross wrongdoing to take place while she holds her peace. Although Braude does not specifically deal with the effects of disempowerment on individuals and families, the theme is palpably present. The association of disempowered men along with disregarded and undervalued women and children, who are the ultimate sufferers, should make a rewarding study.

In "Soft Vengeance of a Freedom Fighter", a revelation of a completely different kind of self-discovery, Albie Sachs rejoices in his own Jewishness and in the complementary otherness of those who surround him. His is a hard-fought and hard-won victory. Distinguishing between cultural identity and racism, he champions the one and fights the other in action, in being, and, significantly, in words.

It is not surprising that satire flourished in such fertile soil as the ironies of apartheid provided. Two works in *Contemporary Jewish Writing* are not only noteworthy and finely worked examples but deliberate expositions of techniques of satire. Both Pieter-Dirk Uys (who is also the inimitable Evita Bezuidenhout) and Dov Fedler make clear the double-edged nature of satire. The satirist, a privileged jester, stands in danger of being identified with the enemy by whom he or she is tolerated, and destroyed by friends and allies even while attacking the enemy with laughter.

Nehemiah Levinsky's "In the Shadow of Nuremberg" interprets Jewish moral responsibility in another way. Hanns, a Jew, and his non-Jewish beloved plan to emigrate from Germany to South Africa before they are caught. She is disgraced and ill-treated for associating with him. He is imprisoned, but is later freed and emigrates alone; he writes to her, only to discover that she has died. In his new country, he marries, is divorced, and then re-marries happily, until some-

one suggests that his wife is colored. He rushes home to look for betraying signs of color in their child, but his wife mentions Nuremberg and, full of remorse, he begs forgiveness for even thinking along the lines of race. "Hitler's Nuremberg Laws had made him a pariah, had outlawed him from German society" (p. 68). It is interesting that this story appeared first in Yiddish in 1959 and was not published in English until 1996, two years after the constitutional elections that made Mandela president, when the apartheid system was no longer in force.

This selection of sixteen works maps an extraordinarily varied terrain. Every contributor illuminates different declivities and heights in this remarkable landscape, from the literary precision of Gordimer and Lionel Abrahams, to the ethical questionings of Lilian Simon and Sandra Braude. Traversing fiction, non-fiction, autobiography, and satire, the anthology forms a complex whole through which the reader is guided by Claudia Braude's excellent introduction. As she points out, it is only in these latter days, with the restoration of elements of the Jewish South African point of view previously lost or neglected, that South African Jews can contribute fully to the historical memory and the future of Africa, and of Jewry world wide.

The bibliography that follows the introduction is full and useful. Since the works that make up the anthology are significant in a particular historical time frame, it would be helpful to be able to attach dates to all of them, including those hitherto unpublished. Most, however, are dated in the acknowledgments, and considering the scope of this work and the excellence of its production, the omission is a small thing.

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**Citation:** Eve D'Aeth. Review of Braude, Claudia Bathsheba. *Contemporary Jewish Writing in South Africa: An Anthology*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. February, 2003.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7245>



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