

**Maurice Samuels.** *Inventing the Israelite: Jewish Fiction in Nineteenth-Century France.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. 336 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-6384-4.



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In this smart and elegantly written book, Maurice Samuels explores a forgotten part of the French Jewish past: the fiction written by French Jews, about French Jews, and for French Jews in the nineteenth century. Finding this literature and presenting it is important in itself. Too many scholars have argued, erroneously, that nineteenth-century French Jews were dupes who, without a second thought, happily traded in their Jewish identities in so that they could become “French.” Yet as Samuels shows in his careful presentation of this material, French Jews were anything but unthinking in how they confronted the major political, social, cultural, and economic changes initiated by their emancipation during the Revolution. Instead, they grappled with it, quite publicly; and as Samuels shows, nineteenth-century French Jewish fiction was a privileged site for this grappling. As such, reading it reveals much about how French Jews made sense of these changes, seeing both the good and the bad within them, and ultimately, finding ways to maintain

their distinctiveness as Jews even as they embraced modernity.

Yet *Inventing the Israelite* does more than just add fiction to our source base for studying French Jewish modernization. As a scholar of literature, Samuels is interested in demonstrating the special role fiction played in the modernization process, arguing that for French Jews, writing Jewish fiction was itself an act of acculturation. This, he explains, set the French Jewish experience apart from Jewish modernization elsewhere in that period (although the American Jewish experience seems to resemble it in important ways). He argues that unlike, say, Eastern European Jews writing in Yiddish, nineteenth-century French Jewish fiction writers “explicitly positioned themselves in relation to [French] literary trends and debates,” which meant that “Jewish modernity in France was imagined in the forms of the French literary tradition” (p. 25). This is a fascinating and compelling argument, for it provides a new way of un-

derstanding how French Jews retained and transformed their distinctiveness as they modernized.

Samuels adeptly develops his argument by exploring the work of six writers, showing how their work engaged French literary forms in order to theorize French Jewish modernization. His first chapter looks at the life and work of Eugénie Foa (1796-1853), who, according to Samuels, was the first Jewish fiction writer in French, and perhaps, the first Jewish woman fiction writer in any language. Forgotten by all but a few scholars today, Foa successfully made her mark on French literature by writing children's stories. Yet before financial concerns led her to turn to children's literature, her earlier writing adopted the generic conventions of the sentimental novel and then historical fiction in order to grapple with Jewish modernization. In several novels published in the 1830s, Foa used these contemporary French literary forms to dramatize the tension between the freedom of the individual Jew (or more often, Jewess) and the weight of Jewish tradition, especially when it came to romantic love. As Samuels shows, although Foa ultimately came to advocate a radical model of assimilation through intermarriage and conversion, she simultaneously "invented, more or less singlehandedly, the category of Jewish fiction in French" (p. 72).

The second and third chapters of *Inventing the Israelite* focus on two writers with competing religious views who published serial novels in the two major French Jewish newspapers of the century, which were likewise in competition with each other over the question of religious reform. Chapter 2 focuses on Ben-Lévi (1806-78), the *nom de plume* of Godchaux Baruch Weil, who was incidentally Marcel Proust's maternal great-uncle. Ben-Lévi wrote stories regularly for the reformist newspaper *Archives israélites de France*, founded in 1840. Written in the then-popular styles of realism (à la Balzac) and idealism (à la Georges Sand), Ben-Lévi's stories advocated religious reform by illustrating that Judaism, once stripped down to

its ethical, Mosaic core, was fully compatible with contemporary French life, and relevant to solving contemporary problems. What's novel in this otherwise familiar model of reform is that as Samuels convincingly shows, far from appropriating a German reform model, Ben-Lévi's reformism grew out of the French experience of modernization and was articulated in and shaped by French generic conventions.

Ben-Lévi's competitor at the self-titled "conservative" newspaper, the *Univers israélite* (founded 1844) was the fiction writer Ben Baruch, the pseudonym for communal leader Alexandre Créhange (1791-1872). A staunch and polemical advocate for the maintenance of traditional Judaism, Créhange nonetheless had much in common with his rival. He too proposed Judaism--albeit orthodox Judaism--as a solution to contemporary social and political ills. His particular concern was with the growing materialism of the Jewish leadership, their irreligiosity, and their utter lack of empathy for the poor. And traditional as he claimed to be, Ben Baruch wrote in the secular genre of Enlightenment social critique, with all its biting irony and attention to social injustice.

The following two chapters look at three writers who documented traditional Jewish life in the villages of eastern France. Chapter 4 focuses on Alexandre Weill (1811-99), the best known of all the writers discussed in *Inventing the Israelite*. Weill claimed to have "invented" the genre of the Village Tale (a claim that Samuels appears to support cautiously), which was widely adopted in France by such writers as Georges Sand who were interested in the ways in which rural life was being transformed by urbanization and industrialization. As Samuels argues, Weill's sentimental stories are far from mere nostalgia for a disappearing past; rather, they document traditional Alsatian Jews' confrontation with modernity.

Chapter 5, in this reviewer's mind, is this excellent book's most interesting and innovative chapter. It focuses on two writers, Daniel Stauben

(born August Widal, 1822-75) and David Schornstein (1826-79). Their nostalgic “ghetto fiction” of the late nineteenth century has much in common stylistically with the American play *Fiddler on the Roof* (based on Sholem Aleichem's late nineteenth-century tales about Tevye the milkman), and like *Fiddler*, appealed to non-Jews as well as Jews. Earlier scholars have explained such nostalgic fiction in purely personal psychological terms. While not rejecting such explanations, Samuels sees more to it. First, he argues that there is a political dimension to this work. Written as a new wave of anti-Semitism was beginning to emerge, this fiction “root[ed] Jews in the soil of Alsace” (p. 211) by depicting them using generic conventions familiar to readers of contemporary folklore-inspired literature about fading rural traditions in regions across France. Subtly, then, this literature was a form of self-defense against those anti-Semites who saw Jews as cosmopolitan invaders or rootless urbanites. But second, Samuels also sees an existential dimension to this literature. Following Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, he argues that such fiction represents the emergence of a form of historical consciousness that helped newly modernized Jews maintain a connection to the past after traditional forms of memory had broken down. In this sense, ghetto fiction used the rural Jewish past in order to “fill a void left by modernity both for their authors and for assimilating Jewish readers seeking to reconnect with a world they had explicitly rejected” (p. 204).

Samuels makes a compelling case for the significance of this literature which he cleverly calls “minor--or more precisely, a minority literature that knows itself as such” (p. 35). This French Jewish fiction was never part of the French or Jewish literary canon, but it was nonetheless important. On the one hand, as Samuels successfully demonstrates, this literature--which represents the first ethnic literature in the French language--helped Jews in France to make sense of their modernization. But in addition, this literature should be seen as a forebear of French ethnic literature more

generally, and, Samuels argues, it had more influence than we might assume, given its non-canonical status. To this end, he makes a case for re-reading Proust in light of this heritage. Not only was Proust the literal great-nephew of one of these writers, but perhaps he was also their literary descendent. Like them, he too used writing to make sense of a Jewish identity in transition. And more precisely, Proust too used “universal” generic forms to make sense of the “particularities” of the modern French Jewish experience. This is a compelling reading. It suggests that Jewish fiction was not only shaped by French literary forms, but also, “minor” as it was, had an impact on those forms as well.

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