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Dean Ruzicka, review of *New Directions in Jewish American and Holocaust Literatures: Reading and Teaching*

Published in 2019, *New Directions in Jewish American and Holocaust Literatures* examines historical and contemporary literature with an eye toward the present-day scholar and educator. We are increasingly distant from the events of the Holocaust, yet engagement with and publication of Holocaust-related texts remain robust. As I write this review, *Zone of Interest* (2023) is nominated for five Oscars, including best picture. *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014) spent ninety-one weeks on the *New York Times Bestseller List*, and *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* (2018) spent eighty-five weeks on the list. The popularity of the events we call the Holocaust as pop culture subject matter is essential to this collection, as Jessica Lang notes in chapter 11, “Narrating the Past in a Different Language: Teaching the Holocaust Through Third-Generation Fiction.” In this chapter, which explores one of the primary goals of the collection—third-generation representations of the Holocaust

—Lang notes: “because contemporary Holocaust literature has acquired such a large and diverse audience, many of whom treat these books as entertainment more than anything else, teaching readers to think more deeply and carefully about them serves to develop and extend crucial ideas around memory and history that are integral to survivor literature and the genre of Holocaust literature more broadly” (p. 228). Long’s quote is an excellent one to summarize the need for a book like Aarons and Levitsky’s. The essays in the edited collection task readers to “think more deeply and carefully” about our consumption and teaching of Jewish American and Holocaust literatures.

The collection comprises fifteen essays, divided into two sections: “Reading” and “Teaching.” The editors’ stated goal is “to produce a conversation among scholars of Jewish studies on how to approach the challenges inherent in reading and teaching Jewish American and Holocaust literat-
ures in the twenty-first century classroom” (p. 17). Overall, the collection succeeds at meeting this goal. The essays cover a wide breadth of literary texts and topics and offer engaging interpretations and pedagogical opportunities for readers. All of the included essays have merit and I found none of them disappointing. My knowledge of current approaches to Jewish American and Holocaust literatures is certainly expanded after reading the collection. Naturally interest may vary, as a modernist will likely get more out of chapter 2, Phyllis Lassner’s “The American Voices of Hidden Child Survivors: Coming of Age Out of Time and Place,” than one less familiar with the comparative modernist texts she references. Similarly, the final chapter, Judie Newman’s “‘A novel that dare not speak its name’: Biographical Approaches to Saul Bellow,” has particular interest for those who study biography and archive.

Many of the articles reference midrashic reading of texts that may be very useful to explore in classroom discussion. Chapter 5, “Reading the Shema: Jewish Literature as World Literature”; Chapter 6, “The ‘Story Without an Ending:’ Art, Midrash, and History in Dara Horn’s World to Come”; Chapter 7, “Midrash and Social Justice”; and Chapter 8, “The Midrashic Legacy” all build their arguments explicitly along this concept of close midrashic reading. I particularly appreciated Naomi B. Sokoloff’s exploration of translations in chapter 5, where she not only thinks of verbal and written translation but also examines the relationship of translating Hebrew to American Sign Language. Sol Neeley’s more personal reflection on his role as a student and teacher in chapter 7 was a welcome addition to a discussion of reading and ethics. As a reader I would have liked to see some of these essays included earlier in the collection, perhaps even beginning with Neeley’s ideas about social justice. The questions they raise about reading and teaching texts seem germane to all fifteen essays, perhaps summed up best in chapter 8 where Monica Osborne notes, “midrashic thinking resists products, answers, and final outcomes, privileging instead the ongoing nature of continual questioning and response” (p. 171). Because all the essays essentially ask readers to question and respond to Jewish American and Holocaust literatures, placing these essays earlier would have foregrounded a particular reading of the collection as a whole.

The collection instead begins with Eric J. Sundquist’s “Black Milk: A Holocaust Metaphor.” This is a truly excellent examination of the metaphor of “black milk” across a variety of Holocaust texts. It is an incredibly difficult read, however. Certainly we do not need trigger warnings on Holocaust collections, as the exploration of trauma is implicit in the title. However, I worry that readers may decide to abandon the collection after Sundquist’s historical accounting of child deaths at the hands of Nazis. In addition to the chapters mentioned above, part 1 also includes Victoria Aarons’s “Reimagining History: Joe Kubert’s Graphic Novel of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising” and Andrew M. Gordon’s “Alternate Jewish History: Philip Roth’s The Plot Against America and Michael Chabon’s The Yiddish Policemen’s Union.” These two articles are a nice addition to the largely realist fiction that we find discussed in the collection. Graphic novels are incredibly important additions to the canon of literature of atrocity, and Aarons’s piece explores a less-discussed example of the genre. While I appreciated the direct discussion of images in the text (something strangely often left out of graphic novel criticism), I do wish the collection included a few images from the novel itself to give readers a sense of Kubert’s style.

Anne Frank looms large in the half of the collection devoted to education, understandably, as she is an ongoing presence in both her own Diary and as a character in others’ work. Chapter 9, Aimee Pozorski’s “Anne Frank, Figuration, and the Ethical Imperative,” and chapter 10, Hilene Flanzbaum’s “Nathan Englander’s ‘Anne Frank’ and the Future of Jewish America,” both explore read-
ings and uses of Frank and her work. Each chapter’s examination of Englander’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank” is a strong reading of the short story. I can easily see incorporating Flanzbaum’s chapter as an accompaniment in a class that has assigned Englander’s piece. Still, I would have appreciated another essay examining other texts for children and young adults in depth, as they are such important sites for early educational exposure to Holocaust history and Jewish individuals. In the chapters that reference Frank, they also largely examine canonical Jewish writers who incorporate her visage, such as Philip Roth and Nathan Englander.

Chapters 12, 13, and 14 each explore teaching Holocaust texts in different pedagogical contexts. Jeffrey Scott Demsky and N. Ann Rider’s “A Complicated Curriculum: Teaching Holocaust Empathy and Distance to Nontraditional Students,” Gustavo Sánchez Canales’s “Teaching Jewish American Literature in a Spanish Context,” and Zygmunt Mazur’s “Teaching William Styron’s Sophie’s Choice: Understanding the Holocaust” each speak to specific student populations. Chapter 12 makes some very valid points about why instructors should not assume the literature does the work of crafting empathy without guidance or pedagogical aid. I do wish they had spent a bit more time discussing their particular nontraditional student population, perhaps approaching the task with more of the personal voice readers find in chapter 7. The points they make are excellent; I was just never able to get a handle on what their student population looks like on a daily basis. In contrast, chapter 13 discusses European educational standards, the breadth of nationalities Canales finds in his Universidad Complutense de Madrid English literature classes, and the logic for teaching Jewish American literature: “students of literature within a Spanish context are exposed not only to Jewish-American writing but also other writers [such as Blake and Yeats] about whom they had read little or nothing during their university studies” (p. 277). Mazur’s exploration of Sophie’s Choice is particularly focused on graduate students in English in the United States and Poland. The combination of the two demographics makes Mazur’s argument a successful defense of a novel that is often be maligned by critics. He notes, “The novel allows for contextualization of anti-Semitism by providing literary representation of various types of anti-Semitic belief” (p. 297). Rather than criticizing the choice of main character, he looks to how even problematic depictions of the Holocaust can work to engage students with those ethical questions raised above, the “the ongoing nature of continual questioning and response” (p. 171) that seems to be at the core of New Directions in Jewish American and Holocaust Studies: Reading and Teaching.

Overall this is a valuable addition to the critical and pedagogical materials of scholars and teachers in Judaism and the Holocaust. It raises important questions about ethics, responses, and readings in a breadth of literary texts.

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