INTRODUCTION:
MODERN JEWISH FICTION

David Brauner and Axel Stähler

This collection of essays represents a new departure for, and a potentially (re)defining moment in, literary Jewish Studies. It is the first volume to bring together essays on American, British, South African, Canadian and Australian Jewish fiction with such a wide range of reference. Moreover, it complicates all these terms, emphasising the porosity between different national traditions and moving beyond traditional definitions of Jewishness. For the sake of structural clarity, the volume is divided into three parts – ‘American Jewish Fiction’, ‘British Jewish Fiction’ and ‘International and Transnational Anglophone Jewish Fiction’ – but many of the essays cross over these boundaries and speak to each other implicitly, as well as, on occasion, explicitly. All of the contributors, in very different ways, interrogate and redefine the parameters of modern Anglophone Jewish fiction. Before any key terms are problematised, however, they need to be established and so this introduction will begin by providing a rationale for, and a provisional working definition of, the key terms contained in the title of the volume, before offering an overview of the essays that make up the main body of the book.

Modern

What do we mean by ‘modern’? It is a helpfully ambiguous term that gives some indication of the period of history covered by the volume – from the start of the twentieth century to the present day – and avoids the theoretical and ideological implications of related terms, such as ‘modernism’, ‘modernity’, ‘postmodernism’ and ‘postmodernity’, while at the same time potentially encompassing all of them. All of these terms have been associated, and used in conjunction with, Jewishness in ways that have inevitably influenced many of the contributors to this volume, but it would have been tendentious to privilege any one of them in the title of a collection that covers such a wide range of periods, genres and methodologies.

Modernity, Culture and the ‘Jew’ (1998) – there emerged a subtle, nuanced account of modernity that placed at its centre the figure of ‘the Jew’ (almost invariably placed within quotation marks, to indicate an awareness of the problematic, contested nature of the term and its racialised history). On the other side of the Atlantic, too, the Mexican American Jewish author Ilan Stavans claimed that ‘transculturalism . . . and especially the need to use literature as a mirror of modernity, are the vertebrae of contemporary Jewish literary tradition’ (1998: xii) and the American Jewish critic Marilyn Reizbaum suggested that the ‘combination of affiliation and apostasy’ exhibited by Leopold Bloom in James Joyce’s Ulysses (1922) ‘signifies modernity’ (1999: 4), while more recently Jonathan Freedman has revived this association of Jewishness and modernity in Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity (2008). Meanwhile, a number of French theorists – both non-Jews such as Jean-François Lyotard and Maurice Blanchot and Jews such as Jacques Derrida – were aligning, or arguably eliding, postmodernity with Jewishness (see Silverman 1999), a trend echoed in the subtitle of Alan Berger and Gloria Cronin’s collection of essays, Jewish American and Holocaust Literature: Representation in the Postmodern World (2004). In his seminal book, Constructions of ‘the Jew’ in English Literature and Society (1993), Bryan Cheyette analysed the ways in which ‘the Jew’ had been implicated in the discourses of both modernism and postmodernism, arguing that ‘within a modernist aesthetic’ (267) the ‘slipperiness and indeterminacy of “the Jew”’ (11) became an ‘ideal objective correlate’ (267) for the ‘impossibility of “knowing” anything’ (9) and that in ‘a postmodern context, “semitic confusion” is . . . a prototype for the lack of fixity in language as a whole’ (274).

All of these ideas fall within the remit of the ‘modern’ as it is constituted in the essays of this volume but none of them is pre-eminent, and arguably terms such as modernity and postmodernity have paradoxically become rather old-fashioned. Given that we are, according to some accounts, now in a post-postmodernist era, or alternatively have arrived at the belated conclusion that distinctions between modernism and postmodernism may be dubious or even spurious, ‘modern’ also has the virtue of remaining beyond the vagaries of literary-critical fashions. Finally, ‘modern’ can also be a synonym for ‘new’ and this is also relevant here because in this sense it is not just the fiction that is examined here that is modern, but our approach to it. In other words, this volume breaks new ground both by extending the canon of modern Jewish fiction and by analysing that fiction in fresh, often radically innovative, ways.

Jewish

‘Two Jews, three opinions,’ goes the old Jewish joke. When it comes to definitions of the word ‘Jewish’, there are as many opinions (or perhaps more) as there are Jews. According to orthodox Judaism, Jewishness is determined straightforwardly by genetics: a Jew is anyone whose mother is Jewish, although of course this raises the question at each stage of how that particular mother’s Jewishness might be verified.

The American Jewish critic Leslie Fiedler once marvelled at ‘the fact that I can still call myself by that once tribal, sectarian name, though I have abandoned the traditional religion, almost completely lost the traditional culture and no longer speak the languages traditionally associated with Jewishness’ (1992: xvii). Fiedler speaks for many modern secular Jews who continue to self-identify as Jewish in spite of the fact that they have no affiliation to Judaism, no knowledge of Hebrew or Yiddish and no concrete ties to the culture and traditions of their ancestors. Most of the authors discussed in this volume
fall into this category, though their particular circumstances vary considerably. However, the collection also covers writing by religiously observant Jews, by ‘Jews who aren’t’, as Debra Shostak puts it (see Chapter 12), by ‘Jew-ish’ and indeed ‘Jew-ish-ish’ authors, in Ruth Gilbert’s formulation (see Chapter 16), and by authors whose writing is Jewish by virtue of elective affinity rather than historical affiliation, cultural inheritance, theological conviction or biological ties. Instead of employing a specific set of criteria for eligibility to this volume, we have defined ‘Jewish’ inclusively and flexibly, to accommodate canonical Jewish, marginally Jewish and non-Jewish Jewish writing. In so doing, we have deliberately sought to extend and redefine the canon of modern Jewish fiction.

**Fiction**

We have interpreted fiction widely, to include not just novels, novellas, short stories and graphic novels but other kinds of prose writing that employ fictional strategies but traditionally have been designated as non-fiction: memoirs, biographies, autobiographies and other kinds of ‘life writing’. On the other hand, we have generally excluded detailed consideration of the two other major modes of literature – drama and poetry – except insofar as they are, at times, juxtaposed with fiction by individual contributors.

The other criterion for inclusion in the volume is that the fiction be written in English. The essays collected here cover most of the major English-speaking nations across three continents – the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Australia – and also take in Africa (with two essays on South African Jewish fiction; see Chapters 23 and 24) and Asia (in Shaul Bassi’s essay, which discusses the representation of Jewishness in two Indian-born writers; see Chapter 28). There are other important national presences here as well. Sasha Senderovich’s essay focuses on the ways in which a new generation of Russian Jewish émigrés to the United States is exploiting the cultural capital that their origins give them. Irish literature features, in Catherine Morley’s discussion of James Joyce’s influence on Isaac Rosenfeld, Delmore Schwartz and Saul Bellow (see Chapter 2) and in Axel Stähler’s analysis of the Irish Jewish novelist David Marcus’s *To Next Year in Jerusalem* (1954; see Chapter 18). And of course, as the title of Marcus’s novel demonstrates, Israel is a recurring presence in Anglophone Jewish fiction, as much as a symbolic imaginary space as a contemporary political reality.

There are references to Jewish literature written in other languages, notably the discussion of authors writing in Yiddish in David Herman’s essay on ‘Jewish Emigré and Refugee Writers in Britain’ (Chapter 14), in Serge Liberman’s essay ‘Australian Jewish Fiction: A Bibliographical Survey’ (Chapter 25) and in Claudia Braude’s essay ‘Repairing Cracked Heirlooms: South African Jewish Literary Memory of Lithuania and Latvia’ (Chapter 24), which concludes by pointing out that ‘critical comparison between South African Yiddish and English writing would add a new and significant dimension to South African literary history and post-apartheid literary criticism, as well as to representations of the destruction and the posthumous legacy in South Africa of Lithuanian and Latvian Jewry’.

Some of these writers were of course bi- or multilingual and many of the authors featured in the volume have lived in more than one country across the course of their writing careers. Many more were born in one country and moved to another before they began writing. Some, such as Rose Zwi (born in Mexico, moved to South Africa, then to Israel and now lives in Australia), Ruth Prawer Jhabvala (born in Germany, moved to England, then divided her time between India and the United States) and Jonathan Wilson (born
and educated in England, spent time in Israel, now lives in the United States), might be said to belong to several different national canons. This is partly a consequence of the particular circumstances of Jewish history in the twentieth century, in which the historically diasporic condition of world Jewry was exacerbated by the flight of Jews from pogroms in eastern Europe in the early part of the century and from Germany and occupied Europe during the Second World War, before being complicated by the foundation of the state of Israel. Towards the latter end of the century, the collapse of Soviet communism and the establishment of a fundamentalist Islamic state in Iran led to further migrations of Jewish populations from those countries, while Ethiopian Jews were resettled in Israel. In more recent years, however, the movements of Jews (among them Jewish writers) have as often as not been part of the larger phenomenon of globalisation, which has seen an unprecedented circulation of populations.

It is partly in response to these new geopolitical realities that literary studies has taken a decidedly transnational turn in the twenty-first century, a trend that has also been reflected in Jewish Studies. In *Post-War Jewish Fiction: Ambivalence, Self-Explanation and Transatlantic Connections* (2001), David Brauner argues for the existence of an ‘insistent transnational . . . sense of Jewishness’ (186) that manifests itself in a common discursive construction of identity, a cross-cultural tendency to ‘constitute Jewishness as a literary phenomenon’ (187). Pointing out that ‘classifications such as “English”, “American” and “Jewish” are neither fixed nor finite’, Brauner goes on to suggest that ‘the border between British- and American-Jewish fiction is becoming increasingly difficult to locate’ (186) and that ‘the old paralyzing polarization of the identities on either side of the hyphen’ (187) in such terms was being disrupted. Ulrike Behlau and Bernhard Reitz’s edited collection of essays, *Jewish Women’s Writing of the 1990s and Beyond in Great Britain and the United States* (2004), concludes with a panel discussion that drops the hyphen – ‘British and American Jewish Women’s Writing Today’ – in which the British Jewish playwright and short story writer Michelene Wandor identifies a movement towards a Jewish literature that is ‘cross-cultural within the field but also across it; from the Jewish experience as it’s written in very many ways to whatever other experiences’ (306).

In his edited collection of essays *Anglophone Jewish Literature* (2007), Axel Stähler makes the case for thinking of Jewish literature in such linguistic terms by pointing out that ‘English has become the major language of contemporary Jewish literary production’ (3). As such it has evolved as

a tool of identity formation, community building, and the creation of culture in this linguistically defined space. Yet, significantly, it is also a shared language and an archive of the memory and culture of several ‘others’. As a shared language it not only admits into Jewish cultural creativity the experiences and patterns of cultural engagement of others, but makes Jewish history, contemporary culture, and experience in turn accessible to those others. English is a vehicle, and, indeed, a process, of ‘border-crossings’ between the particular and the universal. (Stähler forthcoming)

Stähler accordingly argues that ‘the Anglophone segment of Jewish literature constitutes . . . a discrete, if widely diverse, body of literary achievement’ (2007: 3), not simply by virtue of ‘the use of English as . . . a language of literary expression in the Anglophone diaspora’ but also because of the ‘cultural affinities between the English-speaking countries’ and ‘between the Jewish communities living in these countries’ (3). Such an approach reflects a shift in perception which, as Stähler has argued more recently, finds articulation
in ‘[t]he conceptualization of an Anglophone Jewish diaspora’ which is a recent develop-
m ent in Jewish Studies that ‘suggests a transnational and transcultural coherence specific
to Anglophone Jewry’ (Stähler forthcoming). In the wake of such a conceptualisation of an
Anglophone Jewish diaspora, which emerged in the mid-nineteenth century,

[t]he current pre-eminence of narratives of hyphenated Jewish literatures in English,
such as Jewish-American or British-Jewish, may have to be re-thought. Moreover, the
re-mapping of what may then appear to be the permeable boundaries of ‘national’ Jewish
cultural production may equally entail shifting notions of center and periphery. (Stähler
forthcoming)

Stähler also suggests that there is an analogy between Anglophone Jewish literature and
postcolonial literature which ‘indicates the useful interchangeability of the respective tools

This suggestion has been taken up in two recent books: Efraim Sicher and Linda
Weinhouse’s Under Postcolonial Eyes: Figuring the ‘jew’ in Contemporary British Writing
(2013) and Bryan Cheyette’s Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the
Nightmare of History (2013). In their preface, Sicher and Weinhouse claim that ‘the “jew”
has become an emblem of the quintessential postcolonial migrant, at home everywhere
and nowhere, a product of the postmodern condition, an exemplary figure of the repressed
and humiliated of the Third World for South Asian and Caribbean writers seeking an
identity in early twenty-first-century Britain’ (2013: x); while Cheyette argues for ‘a new
comparative approach across Jewish and postcolonial histories and literatures’ (2013: xii),
based on an understanding of diaspora as not simply ‘a timeless exile from an autochtho-
nous “homeland”’ but ‘a state of creatively disruptive impurity which imagines emergent
transnational and postethnic identities and cultures’ (xiii).

While this volume has no overarching thesis or programme, taken as a whole the
diverse subjects and methodologies of the essays collected here consolidate, and extend,
this movement away from the consideration of Jewish fiction in terms of homogeneous,
discrete national literary traditions and towards a cross-cultural, cosmopolitan, transna-
tional, diasporic, heterogeneous range of coexisting conceptions. Our editorial decision to
dispense with the hyphen that has often joined but also separated hybridised identities, in
terms such as ‘Jewish-American’ or ‘British-Jewish’, reflects and reinforces this scepticism
of conventional categories and represents our own attempt to ‘deghettoise’ Jewish fiction,
to borrow Lori Harrison-Kahan’s term (see Chapter 1).

Similarly, we have decided to place national labels in front of ‘Jewish’ rather than the
other way around so that the qualifying term in a category such as ‘American Jewish’ is
the first, rather than the second word, in order to avoid the problem identified by the
editors of the Norton anthology of Jewish American Literature (2001), who argue that ‘[t]he
term “Jewish” in “Jewish American literature” matters because it distinguishes this litera-
ture from all other American literatures’ but go on to concede that ‘because it [“Jewish”]
is an adjective, [it] is also subordinate to – merely modifies – “American literature”’
(Chametzsky et al. 2001: 1). We were also concerned to avoid perpetuating the de facto
hegemony that American Jewish literature has enjoyed within Jewish Studies, a hegemony
that has been implicitly reinforced by the use at times of the term ‘Jewish American’
to signify Jewish literature in toto. In the title of their introduction to The Cambridge
Companion to Jewish American Literature (2003), Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael Kramer
refer to ‘Jewish American literatures’ to signify a pluralistic approach to the project of
canon-formation to which companions of this sort must always contribute, however provisionally and sceptically:

We have grown more sensitive to the web of transnational filiations that pervade Jewish American texts and have learned to question parochial formulations of a literature that has itself always been the fruit of a culture of exile, diaspora, homecoming; of a literary world in which Jewish authors from one country read and interact with Jewish authors from other countries; of a community in which Jews from America are intimately concerned with the European Holocaust and with the fate of the State of Israel. (Kramer and Wirth-Nesher 2003b: 7)

In the essays that comprise their volume, however, there is only limited consideration of ‘the web of transnational filiations’ to which the editors refer. Instead, the assumption of the pre-eminence of American Jewish literature generally prevails, an assumption reflected in the fact that in a number of critical works on, and anthologies of, American Jewish literature the term ‘American’ has been omitted altogether and ‘Jewish’ treated as though it were synonymous with ‘American Jewish’.3 In contrast, this collection seeks to do justice to the rich diversity of modern Jewish fiction in English, giving due weight to both the distinctive contexts and common cultures in which this fiction has been produced.

The Essays

The essays in this volume cover a wide range of authors, from the canonical to the potentially canonical to the largely forgotten, the neglected and the overlooked. All make valuable contributions to their fields; some also redefine them or establish new ones.

Lori Harrison-Kahan’s essay (see Chapter 1) on first-generation immigrant writing radically reconfigures the traditional narrative of early American Jewish writing, which has focused on ‘the immigrant experience’ as represented by poor, Yiddish-speaking Jews living in urban ghettos. She focuses instead on a group of genteel, West Coast writers – Emma Wolf, Bettie Lowenberg, Miriam Michelson and Edna Ferber – whose work was set ‘in the cities and small towns of the Western frontier’ and whose ‘unconventional female protagonists’ were modern women who ‘spoke in unaccented English’, in ‘marked contrast to the Yiddish-inflected immigrant dialect that had become the hallmark of Jewish urban realism’. Through her discussion of this alternative ‘tradition of pioneering women writers’, Harrison-Kahan ‘broaden[s] our current understanding of early Jewish literary production in the United States in terms of region, class and gender’ and demonstrates how the work of this group of writers ‘complicates accepted narratives about immigration and assimilation and challeng[es] national and ethno-racial demarcations between “Jewish” and “American” as well as religious ones between Judaism and Christianity’.

Whereas Harrison-Kahan rewrites the canon of first-generation American Jewish literature, Emily Robins Sharpe identifies a pocket of Anglophone Jewish literature that has largely gone unnoticed (see Chapter 27). Her essay on Spanish Civil War novels demonstrates how ‘depictions of Jewish involvement’ in the conflict ‘use the trope of diasporic identity and transnational volunteerism to reconfigure the markers of national belonging, imagining a broadened conception of national community in which Jews played a foundational, rather than marginal role’. Exploring the ‘contradictory motivations at the core of Jewish representations of the Spanish Civil War’ and acknowledging that ‘[i]n their political investments and historical commentaries, Jewish writings about the Spanish Civil
Introduction: Modern Jewish Fiction

War vary greatly’, Sharpe argues that the novels she discusses ‘bring a marginalised, non-
national perspective to bear on these global and national events, insistently confronting
the conceptual borders of national affiliation so central to the discourse of war’.

Sasha Senderovich also breaks new ground in his essay, but rather than excavating a
long-buried body of literature, Senderovich examines an emergent field – contemporary
fiction by Russian Jewish immigrants to the US – that was evolving quickly even as he was
working on his essay (see Chapter 7). He argues that their work ‘is characterised by their
reflection on’ a phenomenon that he calls ‘self-orientalisation’ (through which émigré
Soviet Jews exploit the cultural capital that their history gives them, shaping the ways in
which they are ‘imagined . . . by Jews in the West’). According to Senderovich, the work
of these authors ‘make[s] us question pat assumptions about Soviet Jews and offer[s] a dis-
tinctive perspective on the way that Soviet Jews construct narratives attractive to their
American Jewish counterparts and how, in turn, they are constructed by those narratives’.

One of the writers Senderovich discusses, David Bezmozgis, also crops up in Ira
Nadel’s overview of Canadian Jewish literature (see Chapter 22). Indeed, Bezmozgis’s
transnational status, as a Russian-born Jewish writer with Canadian citizenship who
has also spent time in the US, makes him an exemplary figure in Nadel’s account, since
‘transnationalism . . . characterises the writing of Canadian Jewish authors, writers who
maintain the challenging duality outlined by Mordecai Richler in Joshua Then and Now
(1980) where the hero’s awkward moral and physical posture defines the posture of the
Canadian Jew’:

Canadian-born, he sometimes felt as if he were condemned to lope slant-shouldered
through this world that confused him. One shoulder sloping downward groaning under
the weight of his Jewish heritage . . . the other thrust heavenwards, yearning for an
inheritance, any inheritance weightier than the construction of a transcontinental
railway, a reputation for honest trading, good skiing conditions. (Richler 1980a: 190–1)

Richler himself only made it as a writer when he moved to London, and spent much of his
later career, after he had returned to Montreal, engaging in polemical debates with Quebec
separatists. Nadel ends his essay by anticipating a potential future in which ‘the next phase’
of Canadian Jewish fiction might involve exploring the ‘mythic possibilities’ of ‘a planet
of the Jews’, although he points out with self-aware irony that to do so would itself involve
looking across the border, to ‘American examples [such] as Cynthia Ozick’s The Messiah of
Stockholm (1987) or Michael Chabon’s The Yiddish Policemen’s Union (2007)’.

An independent Jewish homeland not unlike that envisaged in Chabon’s alternative
history was projected in the 1930s and 1940s with the Kimberley Plan in Australia. The
scheme was rejected inter alia for its anti-assimilationist potential, which ran counter to
inclusive Australian government policy. Yet Jews have been in Australia ever since its
white settlement in the eighteenth century and, although a small minority, Jews have
nevertheless contributed significantly to its cultural creativity. In his essay on ‘Australian
Jewish Fiction: A Bibliographical Survey’ (see Chapter 25), the Australian Jewish writer
Serge Liberman, ‘a non-academic aficionado of books who has become a bibliogra-
pher of Australasian Judaica by chance’, decided, ‘instead of adopting any analytical or
interpretive approach to the subject . . . to present a kaleidoscopic survey and guide to
the Jewish prose writers of Australia, while focusing particularly upon those who deal with
Jewish themes’. True to his word, Liberman provides a panoramic overview of Australian
Jewish fiction, which demonstrates the diversity and scope of a field that is crying out for
a detailed academic study. Such a study would undoubtedly be indebted to Liberman’s compendious survey.

David Gooblar undertakes a different kind of recuperative project, examining the work of four second-generation American Jewish authors – Bruce Jay Friedman, Joseph Heller, Stanley Elkin and Wallace Markfield – whose greatest successes coincided with, and arguably contributed to, the vogue in American letters during the 1960s for black humour, which Gooblar defines as ‘a kind of joking that aims to provoke nervous laughter, comedy that is tense with the possibility of revealing very serious truths, a desperate lashing out by writers cornered by a world gone mad’ (see Chapter 4). Emphasising their differences as much as their similarities, Gooblar argues that these authors ‘nonetheless all made significant contributions to American literature through their use of dark comedy’ and that they ‘each explore the power of humour to reveal, to surprise, to shock and to destroy’. As well as offering sensitive readings of key works by each author, Gooblar’s essay invigorates a recent period of US literary history that has fallen into obscurity (with the exception of Heller’s 1961 novel *Catch-22* these authors are little read and less discussed today, but were, for a few years, considered by many to represent the future of American fiction).

Catherine Morley also revisits two writers – Delmore Schwartz and Isaac Rosenfeld – who enjoyed some prominence in the immediate postwar era but whose careers were curtailed by early death and whose reputations have since declined, alongside Saul Bellow, a close friend and associate of theirs who became a giant of postwar American letters and a Nobel laureate (see Chapter 2). Rather than aligning Bellow with the other great novelists with whom he is usually bracketed (principally Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth), Morley considers his short fiction alongside that of Schwartz (who is better known for his poetry) and Rosenfeld, whose mastery of the form remains largely unrecognised, in spite of the best efforts of Mark Shechner and Steven Zipperstein.4 Relocating Bellow with Schwartz and Rosenfeld in the context from which he originally emerged – the world of the New York Intellectuals, *Partisan Review* and an ambivalent engagement with modernism – Morley identifies the ‘literary inheritance’ that these three writers and their contemporaries shared:

- the isolated, scholarly, discontented and lonely man; the emphasis on city space as both a determinant and reflector of a consciousness in transition or approaching awakening;
- the fascination with the possibility of a plane of existence beyond the immediate; and
- an overriding sense of ambiguity or failure to somehow achieve the fulfilment seemingly promised by the intellectual life.

Bellow is also a central figure in Victoria Aarons’ essay (see Chapter 3) but again he is examined in a context from which he has often been divorced: as one of a group of American Jewish authors, including not just Roth and Malamud but Norman Mailer, Arthur Miller, J. D. Salinger, Herman Wouk, Joseph Heller, Cynthia Ozick, Chaim Potok, Herbert Gold, Grace Paley and Edward Lewis Wallant, who all ‘made their literary debuts in the two decades following the Second World War . . . and would come to define a rich and creative cultural and intellectual era in America’. In her discussion of Wallant’s *The Pawnbroker* (1961), Aarons claims that the novel’s ‘intersection of Harlem’s poverty-ridden, violent street life and the vivid, harrowing sequence of flashbacks of the concentration camps show the ineradicable effects of the Holocaust to have no geographical or temporal boundaries’. Aarons goes on to credit Wallant with creating ‘an opening for the literary representation of the Holocaust in American letters, breaking the fraught silence
surrounding the enormity of events wrought by the Nazi attempt to eradicate European Jewry' and thereby initiating 'an enduring legacy of American Holocaust literature, a legacy taken up by subsequent generations of American writers well into the twenty-first century'. This legacy and the question of the (lack of) geographical and temporal boundaries are the subjects of essays by Monica Osborne and Jennifer Lemberg.

While they cover some of the same ground, Osborne and Lemberg take very different approaches to their material. Whereas Lemberg (see Chapter 10) takes an overview of American Jewish Holocaust fiction, drawing particular attention to the ways in which, while older works in this field often '[s]elf-referentially [question] their place among other Holocaust narratives', more 'recent works of fiction invite us to consider not only the Holocaust but the genre of its representation', Osborne pursues a more polemical line (see Chapter 11), seeing a crucial distinction between the ways in which the work of the second generation has 'in some cases [led to] the virtual displacement of survivors by the second generation’s appropriation of their stories and experiences', thereby 'complicat[ing] questions concerning the ethics of representation in the context of Holocaust writing', while '[t]he third generation is more tentative about occupying such a role', abandoning the 'narcissism' of their immediate predecessors 'in favour of something less self-involved'. Both authors seem to agree, however, that contemporary American Jewish novelists are responding to the ethical and aesthetic challenges posed by Holocaust fiction in innovative ways. For Lemberg, while 'the “end” of the Holocaust may be in view', entailing 'a new phase of representation that might offer only facsimile or nostalgia', contemporary American Jewish authors are 'experimenting with new forms and genres to keep the Holocaust before our eyes, acknowledging the complexity, even impossibility, of such a task, and persevering in this necessary endeavour'. Osborne in turn notes that 'third-generation Holocaust writing has emerged not simply as a genre of writing generated by the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, but also as a literary mode utilised by a number of contemporary Jewish writers, whether or not they are direct inheritors of the legacy of the Holocaust'.

In her essay on British Jewish Holocaust fiction (see Chapter 20), Sue Vice concedes that (unlike American Jewish Holocaust fiction) this 'is not usually acknowledged as a category in its own right', 'partly because much British Jewish Holocaust fiction adheres to the reality of Britain's relation to the events of the Holocaust, “on the edges of history”, rather than placing its narratives in Nazi-occupied Europe, as some recent American Jewish fiction has done, or imagining the occupation of Britain itself'. Through detailed analysis of three recent novels – Jeremy Dyson’s *What Happens Now* (2006), Howard Jacobson’s *Kalooki Nights* (2006) and David Baddiel’s *The Secret Purposes* (2004) – that 'bring the narratives of British and Jewish wartime history together, either in the form of historical reconstruction, or as a strand of self-definition', however, Vice begins to construct an alternative kind of canon. Each of these novels ‘adopts what could be called a postmemorial perspective on the events of the Holocaust’ and they are ‘at least as much about Britishness and British Jewishness as they are about the Holocaust itself’; yet they also suggest that ‘the events of the Holocaust haunt British Jewish subjects even in the twenty-first century’, even if ‘such unforgettability is [accompanied by] the threat that such present-day preoccupation may turn into banality or self-pity’. Ultimately, these novels ‘guard against such a degradation’ by ‘turn[ing] to the documentary record to shore up their narratives, incorporating the imagery of life in hiding, in ghettos and camps into their British plots’.

While this admission of the Holocaust into British Jewish fiction indicates a new confidence on the part of these writers in engaging with Britishness and with their British
Jewishness, Efraim Sicher demonstrates in his essay on ‘The Postwar “New Wave” of British Jewish Writing’ (see Chapter 13) that these issues, albeit in a very different way, also had an impact on British Jewish writing of the 1950s and 1960s. Among these writers in postwar Britain were Jews who had little connection with the Jewish community and rejected it as materialistic and bourgeois. The children of immigrants became Anglicised and suburbanised when they made the journey from the East End to the prosperous suburbs in the north-west of the metropolis. The East End was nevertheless the subject of bitter-sweet nostalgia for those who were children at the outbreak of war. The label ‘Golders Green novel’ has been applied, retrospectively and sometimes derisively, to a number of works by Anglo-Jewry’s ‘Angry Young Men’, who rebelled against the centrally heated, carpeted comfort of bourgeois Jewish homes between Hampstead and Hendon, but also elsewhere. However, echoing George Steiner’s sense of his postwar identity as a ‘kind of survivor’, British Jews of the ‘new wave’ felt guilt at having comfortable, privileged homes when the six million perished, but also expressed anguish over the abandonment of European Jewry during the Holocaust. The postwar Anglo-Jewish novel continued a long-standing tradition of the Jewish family saga which is generally critical of the community and Judaism, but it increasingly turned back to the persistence of antisemitism and saw survival as the raison d’être of the diaspora.

Another sub-genre of Jewish literature that is explored in essays dealing with Jewish literature on either side of the pond is life writing. Both Aimee Pozorski and Devorah Baum adopt unorthodox approaches to their subjects. Pozorski (see Chapter 5) discusses four texts – Philip Roth’s *Patrimony* (1991), Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1992; 1994) and Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989) – that ostensibly have little in common with each other and that are not obviously accommodated (with the possible exception of the Roth) in the category of life writing. However, Pozorski argues that these texts all deploy illness ‘as a metaphor for human strength in the face of adversity – or, conversely, adversity in the face of human strength’ and ‘as a means not only to depict a life story, but also to speak back to an antisemitic tradition that aligns illness with human weakness and degradation’. Moreover, ‘[r]eading these texts as formal experiments in life writing rather than in terms of the generic categories they have been conventionally assigned allows us to see . . . an emergent tradition that values formal innovation in life writing as an ethical response to rigid conventions associated not only with literary genre, but with identity and politics as well’.

Baum’s self-reflexive essay on ‘Life Writing and the East End’ (see Chapter 17) skilfully weaves together autobiography, biography, memoir, history and psychoanalysis. It is both about acts of (auto)biographical retrieval and is itself such an act of retrieval. It is full of striking insights – for example, that ‘the prolific state of Jewish life writing’ is partly a consequence of the fact that ‘diasporic lives, because of their mobility, are particularly prone to get lost (often deliberately) from the record books’; that ‘many of these memoirs [of the East End] are both critiques and continuations of the original East End dreams and dreamers’; and that ‘it is against the larger backdrop of the European genocide that each disappearing feature or vanishing sign of Jewish life in the East End has been more and more zealously mourned’ – but it is, like these memoirs, difficult to summarise or categorise.

Sarah Lightman’s essay (see Chapter 9) similarly incorporates details from her own life (or rather, her representation of it in her autobiographical graphic novel in progress) in her essay on American Jewish graphic novels. Discussing how Will Eisner and Melissa Lasko-Gross ‘explore their complex relationships with God and Judaism through their
Introduction: Modern Jewish Fiction

Semi-autobiographical comics', Lightman demonstrates, through a series of careful detailed close readings of particular pages and panels from Eisner’s seminal work ‘A Contract with God’ and Lasko-Gross’s less well-known ‘The Gruswerk’s Sabbath’, ‘how both comics proffer disaffected Jewish experiences while exploiting the unique possibilities of the medium’. In spite of the fact that these comics were ‘created by artists from different generations, genders and stages in their careers’, they ‘share numerous formal similarities, from their re-interpretation of Hebrew texts through to their use of splash title pages and limited palettes to consolidate their atmospheric narratives’. Lightman’s essay concludes with a consideration of the uneasy relationship in her work between orthodox Jewish tradition and modern feminism, a tension that is also at the heart of Rachel Harris’s essay on orthodoxy and modernity in American Jewish women’s writing.

Harris’s wide-ranging essay posits an opposition between the ‘third generation’ of American Jewish women writers and a ‘fourth generation’ (see Chapter 6). The fiction of the former is typically located in a ‘peripatetic modern (New York-centric) Jewish world’, ‘wrestles with the traditions of their family, Jewish rituals, and the weight of the Holocaust’ and is characterised by a view of ‘orthodox Judaism as inherently oppressive to women’ and of ‘the modern secular world as a liberation for the intelligent and rebellious Jewish female’. The fiction of the latter, in contrast, exhibits a ‘tension between the longing for and the rejection of a traditional and religiously observant world’ and attempts to preserve a delicate balance ‘between religion and a competing secular modern experience’. Focusing on four kinds of fiction – mystery, memoirs, historical novels and romance – and thereby challenging ‘the marginalisation of genre fiction within literary-critical discourse’, Harris argues that what these disparate novels share is ‘an attempt to penetrate into the private, typically domestic, life of a traditional Jewish woman, most frequently one who has come from a religiously observant background, has converted into the religious Jewish world, or who has “returned” to orthodoxy in the Jewish equivalent of “born again” as a ba’alat tshuva’.

David Brauner’s essay (see Chapter 8) is also interested in the ways in which a number of postwar American Jewish women authors – in this case secular authors who have specialised in the short story form – explore the private, domestic dramas of ordinary women while at the same time highlighting some of the ways in which they embed into their ostensibly unassuming, fragmentary, elliptical tales a profound consideration of some of the most important political events of the second half of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first centuries. Brauner sets out to challenge ‘two widely held assumptions: firstly, that the most important postwar American Jewish writers are male novelists and secondly, that the short story is a minor form, largely devoted to the representation of private revelations and domestic dramas’. Through detailed readings of four stories – ‘Zagrowsky Tells’ (1985) by Grace Paley, ‘Hair’ (1992) by Myra Goldberg, ‘Purim Night’ (2011) by Edith Pearlman and ‘Twilight of the Superheroes’ (2006) by Deborah Eisenberg – Brauner demonstrates that these authors ‘dissolve the distinctions between the personal and the political, the private and public, the quotidian and the extraordinary’. In the work of these modern mistresses of the short story, Brauner concludes, ‘daily pleasures and domestic dramas become microcosms of the large historical debates of the last fifty years and the investigation of the personal politics of gender, class and ethnicity serves to deconstruct and complicate the grand political narratives of the postwar period’.

Phyllis Lassner’s essay on Eva Tucker and Natasha Solomons is similarly concerned with the relationship between gender and ethnicity and personal and public politics (see
Chapter 15). Lassner argues that British Jewish women writers ‘share the ongoing concerns of Jewish male writers, but with a gendered difference’ and that ‘[a]lthough the multicultural study of women writers has been a growth industry since the rise of feminist studies in the 1970s, and British Jewish Studies is now a firmly established field, British Jewish women writers have remained on the margins of both’. Lassner aims to redress this neglect, emphasising the ways in which British Jewish women’s fiction in general ‘is invariably and indelibly marked by Jewish history, memory and consciousness’, and in which the fiction of Tucker and Solomons in particular ‘claim[s] a place for the Jewish refugee in British literary history by joining the haunting memories of lost European homes and families to the ghosts of Britain’s cultural past’.

David Herman documents the literary journeys of some of these refugees, detailing the ways in which, from a history of ‘dislocation and loss, a tremendous body of work emerged’ that constitutes ‘one of the enduring achievements of twentieth-century Anglo-Jewish literature’ (see Chapter 14). At one point in his essay, Herman discusses how the image of standing at the threshold of a half-open door (‘a doorway where the door is never fully closed but one is never entirely inside the room’) becomes a potent metaphor for the experiences of this group of British Jewish émigrés, ‘trying desperately to make sense of experiences of loss and devastation, sometimes overtly, other times through silences and absences’. This image recurs in Ruth Gilbert’s essay (see Chapter 16), in which she uses it (borrowing from Jonathan Leaman) to symbolise what she calls ‘half-Jewish identities’.

Gilbert goes on to argue that ‘Leaman’s “not-Jewishness” is the flip-side to other more emotionally charged journeys of self-discovery’, journeys that are reflected in the ways that ‘concepts such as “Jewishness” and “half-Jewishness” are explored as sources of tension’ in contemporary British Jewish fiction. Gilbert concludes:

In twenty-first-century Britain, Jewishness is one difference among many. Contemporary British Jewish writers highlight the desire to identify the particularity of their difference, while acknowledging that such difference is neither fixed nor final, but always open to change, re-signification and reinterpretation. In this context, Jewishness is an evolving term.

Debra Shostak’s essay is also concerned with writers who are ‘Jew-ish’ (in Gilbert’s formulation), but in a different context (see Chapter 12). She begins her essay on American Jewish writers ‘who aren’t’ by acknowledging that such a topic entails the need ‘to embrace contradiction, to define a negative space – to explore, that is, what Leslie Fiedler calls the “Jewishness degree zero of . . . vestigially Jewish-American novelists” (1991: 77), among whom Fiedler names West and Salinger’, to whom Shostak adds Tillie Olsen, Paul Auster and Emily Prager. Pointing out that none of these authors ‘has expressly taken Jewishness or Jewish experience as a subject, but all have alluded to, drawn on or taken for granted one or both, in diverse ways, allowing for a “Jewish” interpretation’, Shostak nonetheless avoids the temptation ‘to construct a grand narrative of what it means to write as a marginal Jew’ in favour of examining ‘traces of the “Jew”’ in, and drawing some connections between, their work. Shostak finishes by positing the possibility ‘that the writers on the margins have not-been American Jewish writers by writing their witness of the social, psychological, spiritual and metaphysical traumas of their century’.

Beate Neumeier tackles the same subject as Shostak with reference to two British Jewish writers – Muriel Spark and Anita Brookner – whose Jewishness has generally been regarded as tangential to their work (see Chapter 21). Neumeier argues that ‘[w]hile the
apparent differences between Brookner and Spark prevent reductive classifications, their common concerns allow us to draw connections and to read their work as contributing to a diversified British Jewish culture. Through detailed readings of a number of their novels, Neumeier acknowledges the important differences, both thematic and contextual, in their work but concludes that

... both writers continuously interrogate the reasons, implications and consequences of the difficulty of embracing difference. The history of critical reception and evaluation of both writers illustrates the preference for unilateral readings and categorisations and thus ironically reflects this shared concern with notions of difference and identity, diversity and normativity. It is precisely through this insistence on difference as a source of alienation and celebration that both writers have contributed important texts to British Jewish culture.

Muriel Spark also features in the essays written by Axel Stähler on the representation of Israel in British Jewish fiction (see Chapters 18 and 19). Covering a wide range of fiction and contextualising it thoroughly in historical and cultural terms, Stähler argues that in the writing of the ‘new wave’ of British Jewish authors who emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, ‘the literary response to Israel was still determined by what appears to be a split between the author persona and their literary engagement on one side and their personal view on Israel on the other’ and that ‘[n]one of these early novels entirely escapes the reiteration of Zionist tropes’. In contrast, Stähler attributes the reluctance of contemporary British Jewish novelists to engage with Israel to either a ‘search for detachment, the desire to remain aloof from the political and ethical dilemma in which Israel has become embroiled and to reject moral liability by association’, particularly ‘at a time when Israel has become increasingly entrenched in the wake of global criticism of its policies’, or ‘a process of normalisation, the overcoming of the compulsion to feel culpable and, instead, to view the Middle East conflict as one among many, as an Israeli concern and not a Jewish one’.

This relationship between literature and politics is also at the heart of Claudia Braude’s essay on the legacy of Lithuanian and Latvian history in postwar South African fiction (see Chapter 24). For Braude, the ways in which ‘a generation of Eastern European, predominantly Lithuanian as well as Latvian and Russian Jewish immigrants, transmitted [this history] to their South African-born offspring is crucial’, as is ‘how this transmission, including its absence, is represented in South African Jewish fiction written in English’. Braude points out that ‘[s]ince the simultaneous collapse of the Soviet Union and apartheid, reimagining and remembering historical connections between the geographically removed countries, and most particularly between South Africa and Lithuania, has significantly increased, rendering visible the absences and silences’, the exemplary figure in this context being Denis Hirson, who ‘helps to delineate the central literary absences formed in reaction to the destruction of Lithuanian and Latvian Jewry, and to map the literary contours of silence and articulation in the fictional landscape written in English by South African Jewish writers’.

Linda Weinhouse is similarly concerned with the relationship between politics, history and memory in her essay on South African fiction (see Chapter 23). She begins her essay by emphasising ‘the ambiguous status of the Jew [in South Africa], who is situated not only between Afrikaners and Englishmen, but between all the rigidly defined racial divisions in South African society, including the most significant one of all, between all whites and all blacks’ and concludes that ‘the significance of memory to the new South Africa and the
ramifications of what its citizens choose to remember is a major theme for many of these post-apartheid South African [Jewish] writers’, many of whose ‘memories of their past in the old South Africa are inextricably linked to the legacy of the Jewish immigrant experience, the Holocaust, and their own experiences growing up Jewish in an environment that was often hostile to Jews’.

This sense of dislocation and displacement is present also in Sandra Singer’s essay on ‘migrant’ Anglophone Jewish writers (see Chapter 26). Singer identifies ‘the exiled figure’ who exemplifies ‘contingencies of long histories of displacements and genealogies of dispossession’ (Cho 2007: 14) as a recurring trope of cosmopolitan twentieth-century fiction, Jewish and otherwise. In the fiction of the writers she discusses, Singer argues that ‘multidirectional memory is deployed that is as rich and varied as the characters’ subjectivities and their contexts’ and that the work of these writers is part of a larger redefinition of the notion of diaspora, in which ‘postcolonial and cosmopolitan authors [have] extended the biblical notion of diasporic scattering to include dislocation based on various, widely divergent conditions, from being a survivor of genocide to actively participating as a global postmodern business consumer’.

This matrix of postmodernism, postcolonialism and diasporism is also explored, in a different context, in Shaul Bassi’s essay (see Chapter 28). Bassi begins by pointing out that ‘in the main arenas of postcolonial reflection, Jews are perceived (and often perceive themselves) as too Western, too white, too middle class to be still considered a subaltern minority in need of a voice’, before challenging this consensus through a discussion of the ways in which ‘in many postcolonial texts the voyage towards the Indian self takes a detour through the Jewish other, often blurring or at least complicating the intimately Western distinction between self and other’. Bassi concludes that by ‘staging liminal Jewish identities in a trans-civilisational perspective’, Indian novelists such as Rushdie and Ghosh invite us to consider Jewish diasporas in their lesser known ramifications, in their negotiations with other diasporas and other cultures, challenging the East/West and the Jewish/Muslim divides, decentring, expanding, perhaps contributing to the process of ‘provincialization’ and decolonisation of the Western (and Jewish) literary imagination, complicating traditional perceptions of ‘race’ and colour in relation to Jews.

Conclusion

This volume does not constitute the last word on modern Jewish fiction but rather the start of a new conversation with which we hope other scholars will engage. No work of this sort can be comprehensive and inevitably we have not covered everything we would have liked to. At one point we hoped to include essays on Anglophone fiction written in Israel, in New Zealand and in Ireland. Within the American Jewish section it would have been nice to have had essays on LGBT Jewish authors (such as Gertrude Stein, Jo Sinclair, Leslie Feinberg, Leslea Newman, Edith Konecky, Kathy Acker, Judith Katz, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, Andrea Freud Loewenstein, Sarah Schulman, Paul Goodman, Stanford Friedman, Lev Raphael, David Leavitt and Richard Zimler), black Jewish writers (Jamaica Kincaid, James McBride, Walter Moseley and Rebecca Walker) and Sephardi Anglophone writers (Lucette Lagnado, Gina Nahai, Ruth Knafo Setton and Dalia Sofer). There are also authors who continue to slip through the cracks even of the open-ended categories with which our contributors have worked, among them eminent novelists such as Norman
Mailer, E. L. Doctorow, Will Self and Marge Piercy, as well as a younger generation of emerging talent, such as Benjamin Markovits, Ned Beauman, Charlotte Mendelson and Jami Attenberg. Indeed, such is the vibrancy of contemporary Jewish fiction that it is likely that new names will have emerged in the interim between the completion of this manuscript and its publication. So there is plenty of work still to be done in this field. However, it is our hope that this volume will make a lasting impression, both on the basis of the scholarship that it contains and by identifying and delineating many of the directions that future scholars may take.

Notes

1. This book was in fact a transatlantic collaboration, with one British and one American editor and with a roster of contributors from both sides of the Atlantic.
2. Zwi is mentioned in both Claudia Braude’s essay on South African Jewish fiction and Serge Liberman’s bibliographical survey of Australian Jewish authors in this volume. In 1994 Wilson had a story anthologised in *Best American Stories* and the British counterpart, *Best Stories*.