

## **Jewish American Literature in the Twenty-First Century:**

### **Fresh Voices, Shifting Identities, and Unprecedented Diversity**

When we consider the world of contemporary Jewish American literature writ large, most scholars and critics harken back to the post-World War II Golden Age where the likes of Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and (shortly thereafter) Philip Roth loomed large over the literary landscape. The traditional gatekeepers of the “Western Canon” (critic Harold Bloom’s term) grudgingly came to accept that Jewish consciousness was part and parcel of the American experience, as were the voices of African Americans and, eventually, those of other minority groups and sensibilities.

As Modernism evolved in the Twentieth Century, the literary world demanded an embrace of experimental and unconventional forms of expression and dissonant, even exotic, voices that deviated from the norms of the traditional Anglo-centric white male establishment. Of course, modernism itself had reshaped the literary landscape worldwide with iconic figures such as James Joyce, William Faulkner, Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, and D.H. Lawrence redefining the shape of literature.

By the late Twentieth Century, the floodgates were opened wide, as American Literature pushed the boundaries as never before. Distinctions of who or what constituted great literature were rendered obsolete. The likes of Kurt Vonnegut, John Cheever, John Updike, Raymond Carver, William Styron (all white non-minority men) were no longer considered more reputable than minorities and women such as James Baldwin, Flannery O’Connor, Toni Morrison, Sandra Cisneros, Margaret Atwood, just to name a few.

Contemporaneously, a rich panoply of Jewish American writers emerged as forces in their own right, many of whom brought much needed gender and cultural diversity into the mainstream, while, at the same time, challenging Jews to reconsider the shape their own identities. Many of these writers have become prominent and have taken their rightful places into the new Multi-Cultural American Canon. Alongside their non-Jewish contemporaries, Jewish writers such as Joseph Heller, Grace Paley, E.L. Doctorow, Cynthia Ozick, and Chaim Potok come to mind.

Over the past number of years here at the Fromm Institute, I have had the pleasure of offering a number of courses that speak to these literary minds and milestones: a survey course on mainstream Jewish American Literature, a 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary tribute to Bellow and Malamud, a course on the parallel paths of Vonnegut and Doctorow, a course on Dystopian Literature featuring Roth ([The Plot against America](#)) and Atwood ([The Handmaid’s Tale](#)), and most recently, a course devoted exclusively to Philip Roth in the year of his passing (2019), a final segment of which suggested the “heirs to Roth.”

Now as we enter the third decade of the Twenty First Century, an era fraught with anxiety, repression, and even dark apocalyptic visions, I thought it was the proper time and place to examine the current wave of Jewish American writers, some the true heirs to Roth but also those with distinctive voices that are anything but Rothian. We are witness to a dazzling array of writers—many of whom are women—who have come into prominence and, in fact, are nearly indistinguishable from the mainstream of American literature. Yet, the Jewish themes endure—whether overtly or more subtly-- for the likes of Alice Hoffman, Dara Horn, Allegra Goodman, Molly Antopol, Jonathan Lethem, Nathan Englander, Gary Shteyngart, Michael Chabon, Nicole Krauss, Meg Wolitzer, and Jonathan Safran Foer. The list goes on and on, as does the scope of their worldviews and distinctive styles.

A few examples point to the range of these distinctive voices: Among women writers, we find Alice Hoffman in “The Marriage of Opposites” who creates an imagined historical account of the Jewish impressionist painter Camille Pizarro and his family coming of age in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the French West Indies. Dara Horn in “Eternal Life” provides a somewhat surreal account of ever-lasting life from ancient Biblical times to the cyber world of current day New York City. Allegra Goodman’s wide range of novels offer an intimate glimpse of observant Jewish life from her unlikely childhood in Hawaii to her present world of Cambridge, Mass. Molly Antopol’s stories in “The Unamericans” feature a range of outsider Jews from guerrilla fighters in World War II during the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union to those persecuted here in America during the McCarthy period, to fraught conflicts in present day Israel. Meg Wolitzer offers a decidedly contemporary and fiercely feminist take on secular Jewish American life in “The Female Persuasion.”

Then we have the diverse group of “heirs to Philip Roth” who channel and transport their mentor’s sensibilities into current day America with their scathing and often outrageous satirical takes at the intersection of Jewish life in America with the often debased mainstream culture. Just this past week in the decade’s final issue of the New York Times, literary critic Michiko Kakutani invoked Roth in her op-ed entitled “The 2010s Were the End of Normal.” She spoke to “a strain of thinking at work beneath the surface—what Philip Roth called ‘the indigenous American berserk’ and the historian Richard Hofstadter famously described as the ‘paranoid style (of) conspiratorial fantasy’ .” Echoing these sentiments, Michael Chabon’s most recent novel, “Moonglow” creates a sweeping multi-generational epic full of wit and prescient cautions about America’s descent into darkness at this pivotal historical moment.

Ex-Soviet emigree Gary Shteyngart in “Lake Success” creates an unsparing satire of American avarice in the Age of Trump in a world that erodes human dignity (including a video trailer featuring the author with comic actor, Ben Stiller). Lapsed Orthodox Jew Nathan Englander in “Kaddish.com” challenges Jewish piety in the age of social media. Jonathan Lethem’s “Dissident Gardens” takes us through several generations of Jewish and non-Jewish lefties and resisters from the 1920s Reds

period to the Occupy movement. His iconic cult novel, “Motherless Brooklyn”, whose movie version features Alec Baldwin as a Trump/Robert Moses-like mogul was recently brought to the screen in Edward Norton’s collaboration with the author that was twenty years in the making. Chabon, Lethem, and African American writer Ta’Nehisi Coates also bring their love of fantasy and comic book superheroes into the realm of literature in many iterations.

These writers and countless other creative spirits are challenging what it means to be targeted as “the other” in America as we embark into uncharted waters in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—whether it be another energetic and rebellious Roaring Twenties or a further descent into a menacing authoritarian landscape. Joining forces with their brethren and sisters representing other minority and oppressed communities -- African American writers, Latino writers, Asian American writers, Native American writers, LGBT writers---Jewish writers (as always) bear witness in this distorted age of nativism, white nationalism and anti-intellectualism. In the great tradition of social consciousness and dissent, Jewish literary writers will most certainly continue to provide counter- narratives that get at the precious commodity that is “The Truth” while seeking patterns of identity and affinity that are distinctive and recognizable in the storied tradition that is Jewish American Literature.

In this course syllabus, I have endeavored to put forward an eclectic, yet representative group of readings—two “required” mid-length novels, Molly Antopol’s short story collection (“The Unamericans”) a selection of short stories available in the public domain (mostly from The New Yorker magazine), and a final longer novel (Michael Chabon’s Moonglow). Read as much as you deem comfortable, as the reading list is consciously daunting, though it is spread out over nine weeks.

We will start the semester in our first session (January 6, 2020) with a retrospective (audio-visual) sweep of Jewish American Literature in the larger context of classic literature that set the table for these 21<sup>st</sup> Century readings. As always, these literary works and lectures will be supplemented by a generous amount of documentary video, slides, and after-hours movie presentations (generously offered by Maxine Einhorn) along with other relevant commentary and essays. I trust that this course will be entertaining and stimulating and I welcome spirited discussions throughout the semester as time permits.