What does it mean to be Jewish? What does it mean to be American? And what sense of identity results from the negotiations between the two? These are the central questions that have guided, or goaded, Jewish American novelists since the mid-nineteenth century, when central European Jewish immigrants, or the offspring of such, first began writing in the genre. The many themes that have largely defined their narratives – the relationship between church and state, the effects of the immigrant experience, the costs of cultural or religious alienation, the pressures of assimilation, the responsibility of the artist, the connections between Jews and other ethnic minorities, the illusion (or the reality) of the American Dream, the role of language in acculturation, the impact of anti-Semitism, and the place of Israel and Zionism in defining identity – have all stemmed, in one way or another, from these very questions.

Similar to issues of personal and tribal identity is the question of genre identity: what defines the Jewish American novel, or, put another way, what makes a novel “Jewish”? Is the only criterion that the novel be written by a Jew, or does the subject matter of the text need to betray specifically Jewish concerns – religious, cultural, or however else those may be defined? Scholar Jules Chametzky argues that a defining characteristic of Jewish American writing is its pluralist focus or its concerns with liberal egalitarianism. This tendency toward tolerance of other people, beliefs, and traditions can be read as sympathy, and even solidarity, that stems from the many bouts of prejudice Jews themselves have had to suffer. Others define the “Jewish” quality of literature differently. For Leslie Fielder, it is the distinctively ironic voice.

characteristic of its ethnic culture. According to the poet Jacob Glatstein, it is a matter of language: if works are composed in Yiddish, then the writing should be considered Jewish. On the other hand, writer Cynthia Ozick defines Jewish literature more as covenantal literature, a constant engagement and reviewing of sacred Judaic texts. Ruth R. Wisse looks to post-Enlightenment Ashkenazi writers (e.g., central and eastern European authors such as Sholom Aleichem, I. L. Perez, and Isaac Babel) and their tough and affirmative characters as a guide to defining Jewish literature. Harold Bloom, by contrast, views Jewishness as living through the text, where the very act of writing itself becomes an ongoing repositioning of the self – and the community – within the tradition. All of these approaches may help in qualifying the adjectival part of the term, “Jewish American literature,” but even taken collectively they are by no means definitive. There are a number of novelists who grew up within a vibrant Jewish milieu, religious and/or cultural, but who nonetheless betray none of that history through their writings. It is easy to make the case that Anzia Yezierska, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Philip Roth, and Allegra Goodman are Jewish novelists, but what do we make of such writers as Nathanael West, J. D. Salinger, Stanley Elkin, Paul Auster, Francine Prose, and Amy Bloom, authors whose novels reveal little, if any, ethnic content? In terms of defining a Jewish American literary canon, and in particular the Jewish American novel, there is no critical consensus on this issue.

The Jews who arrived in the New World beginning in the mid-seventeenth century – approximately two generations after the first English settlers – certainly wrote as Jews, but they did so in ways that would more securely integrate them into the political and civil tapestry of colonial life. Their letters, sermons, journals, poetry, and dramatic works betrayed secular concerns over such issues as equal rights, free speech, and democratic pluralism, producing a body of writing that was largely idealistic and goal-oriented in nature. The religious part of their identities stood alongside the civic-oriented project of characterizing Americanness. In fact, early Jewish American authors, those writing before the great tides of immigration in the late nineteenth century, tended to define their Jewishness religiously, not as a function of cultural ethnicity.

This can be said for many of the novels that grew out of this early period. When mapping out Jewish American literary history, most critics begin with the immigrant narratives of writers such as Abraham Cahan, Mary Antin, and Anzia Yezierska. However, the Jewish American novel has its roots in the decades immediately preceding this literary triumvirate. One of its first practitioners was Nathan Mayer, a German immigrant who later became a physician as well as a soldier in the United States Army during the Civil War. In much of his writing he emphasized links between country and Jewish identity, how national history helps to determine Jews’ views of themselves. One of his first novels, *The Count and the Jewess* (1856), was based on the legends surrounding Rabbi Loew of Prague. It was serialized in the *Israelite* (later the *American Israelite*), an English-language weekly newspaper, as was another of Mayer’s novels, *The Fatal Secret! or, Plots and Counterplots: A Novel of the Sixteenth Century* (1858).
The latter is an elaborate melodrama set in sixteenth-century Portugal during the time of the Inquisition, and its story follows the passage of Portuguese Jews, fleeing forced conversion, from their native land to Amsterdam and then into the New World, in effect becoming our first Jewish Americans forebears. Mayer also focused specifically on his adopted homeland, as can be seen in Differences (1867), a novel about the experiences and problems faced by Jews in the South during the Civil War. Another writer from roughly the same period is Isaac Mayer Wise, a rabbi and journalist – he was the founder of the newspaper Israelite – and one whose reformist ideas helped to define a distinctively American version of Judaism. He authored 27 novels (many pseudonymously) that were largely didactic and historical in nature. Works such as The Last Struggle of the Nation; or, Rabbi Akiha and His Time (1856), The Combat of the People: or, Hillel and Herod: An Historical Romance of the Time of Herod I (1858), and The First of the Maccabees (1860), served a double purpose in that they became, in the words of their author, a “way of arousing patriotism and a desire for Jewish learning” (1901: 337).

However, it was not until the massive immigrant influx that began in the 1880s that the Jewish American novel began to take on the form by which it has come to be known. Before this time, most of the Jews immigrating to the United States had been from western and central European regions, and before that it had been Sephardic Jews (i.e., those with Spanish or Portuguese ancestry) making up much of the Jewish American population. By the mid-nineteenth century many of these had worked their way up into the middle and even upper classes, some becoming successful shopkeepers and factory owners, others entering the legal and medical professions, a few making their marks in journalism, and still others accumulating vast fortunes through various commodities. The Jews arriving after 1880, by contrast, were largely peasants from Poland, Russia, and the Balkan regions. According to Irving Howe in his oft-cited work, World of Our Fathers (1976), between 1881 and 1914, approximately one third of all Eastern European Jews left their native lands due to violence and widespread anti-Semitism. In terms of social acceptance, economic livelihood, and even language – Yiddish (mameloshn or the mother tongue) was their vernacular – the experiences of Eastern European Jews were vastly different from the German and Sephardic Jews preceding them, and their literary output reflected this.

Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yezierska perhaps best reflect the Jewish American novel of this time. They, along with Mary Antin, are transitional figures who had their roots in the Yiddish-speaking immigrant culture but targeted their writings to an English-speaking audience. Although Cahan conducted his journalistic work in Yiddish – he was one of the founders and the first editor of the Forverts (the Jewish Daily Forward) – his best-known literary efforts were written in English. His first novel, Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto (1896), is the story of a young immigrant who longs to rid himself of his Old World ways, and the young wife who seems to represent them, by embracing many of the superficial, and ultimately unsettling, aspects of his new American life. The idea of emotional and spiritual loss, counterbalanced by the gains brought about through assimilation and acculturation, is a common theme in Cahan’s
fiction, and nowhere does this become more prominent than in his magnum opus, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917). Considered by many to be one of the best American immigrant novels, it is a Jewish American Horatio Alger story, one concerning a highly successful garment manufacturer as he narrates his rise from greenhorn impoverishment to unprecedented wealth. Yet despite his financial successes, he nonetheless feels spiritually unfulfilled and personally divided. As Levinsky concludes in his retrospective narrative, “I cannot escape from my old self. My past and my present do not comport well” (Cahan, 1917: 530). Cahan’s ironic American success story stands in stark contrast to the sheer optimism found in Mary Antin’s 1912 autobiography, *The Promised Land*, where the author describes the metamorphosis she undergoes through American education and cultural assimilation.

Like those of Cahan, Yezierska’s works demonstrate how early twentieth-century immigrants negotiated the traditions of the Old World *shtetl* and the demands of New World capitalism. Novels such as *Salome of the Tenements* (1923) and *Arrogant Beggar* (1927) are not only chronicles of American acculturation, but literary attacks on class and gender inequities. Yet while many Marxist and feminist critics rightly point out the radical power behind such novels, it is her less radical novel, *Bread Givers* (1925), that has garnered the most attention. It is the story of Sara, a young immigrant living in the Lower East Side who rebels against her domineering father, a rabbi and the embodiment of Old World Jewish patriarchy, and eventually leaves home to further her education. In many ways the trials of Sara closely parallel the experiences of Yezierska, providing a feminist counterbalance to the largely male-dominated terrain of the immigrant *bildungsroman*.

Being produced at around the same time, the writings of American-born Fannie Hurst, Sidney L. Nyburg, and Edna Ferber stood in stark contrast to the immigrant novels of Cahan and Yezierska. These authors were thoroughly Americanized – Nyburg was a lifelong resident of Baltimore and both Ferber and Hurst grew up in the Midwest – and, for the most part, dramatically underplayed their Jewishness. Hurst gained notoriety for novels like *Stardust: The Story of an American Girl* (1921) and *Lummox* (1923), but she is perhaps best known for the 1934 and 1959 film adaptations of *Imitation of Life*, her 1933 novel exploring issues of race, class, and passing – themes that could easily define both Jewish and African American fiction. Of the five novels that Nyburg produced, only *The Chosen People* (1917) dealt overtly with Jewish issues, specifically the labor-capital division reflecting the relationship between Eastern European Jews and those of German descent. Ferber’s novel *Fanny Herself* (1917) is a somewhat autobiographical portrait of a young woman growing up in a small Midwestern town and then finding an artistic direction in Chicago. Unlike her other novels, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *So Big* (1924), *Fanny Herself* deals directly with Jewishness in that its protagonist, because of her Midwestern surroundings and her creative aspirations, feels ambivalent about her ethnic roots. Yet despite the fact that Ferber’s novel focuses on many of the same themes as does Nyburg’s *The Chosen People* and Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky*, and despite the coincidence that all three novels were published during the same year, these writers lived disparate lives, sug-
gesting that, at least in terms of works written in English, there was not yet a dis-
cernible Jewish American movement or novelistic lineage.

This was certainly not the case for those defining their work through the *mameloshn*. The first decades of the twentieth century witnessed a thriving Yiddish literary community with a well-established tradition reaching back to the influences of I. L. Pérez and Sholom Aleichem. And although poetry, drama, and short fiction made up the vast majority of the Yiddishists’ output, a few of these writers – for example, Sholem Asch (*Mattke the Thief*, 1916, *Uncle Moses*, 1918, *Sanctification of the Name*, 1919) and Joseph Opatoshu (*From the New York Ghetto*, 1914, *In Polish Woods*, 1921) – produced novels in that language. Fradl Shtok, primarily a Yiddish poet and short-story writer, nonetheless chose to write her 1927 novel, *Musicians Only*, in English. While many Yiddish writers focused their energies on American politics, such as the ever-growing labor disputes, some, like Opatoshu and Shtok, were directly associated with the Y unge, a group of young poets and writers who eschewed political overtures and instead emphasized a purer aestheticism. Regardless of the diverse approaches within this literary community, the Yiddish writers in the United States, at least until the mid-1920s, could boast of a well-established lineage in terms of both content and form. Yet as a younger generation of Jews grew more Americanized, Yiddish became less of an artistic vehicle and more of an ethnic artifact. Along with this were the growing anti-immigration (and anti-Semitic) trends of the 1920s, culminating in the Johnson Act of 1924 that drastically reduced emigration from southern and eastern Europe – and as a result all but ended the continuing influx of Yiddish-speaking Jews.

As the 1920s wore on, the Yiddish writings and immigration narratives were becoming infused with a more modernist sensibility, bearing the stylistic influences of such writers as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce. One of the most significant arbiters of modern aesthetics was herself a Jew, although in many critical assessments she is given scant treatment as such. Gertrude Stein is remembered more for her influence on other writers than for her own work, but she nonetheless produced several texts that deserve serious attention. Of her many experimental works, both participating in and challenging generic forms, are two notable novels: *Three Lives* (1909) and *The Making of Americans* (1925). The first, a series of three character portraits, has usually been read as a collection of separate stories, but the book shares more in common with the composite novel – or short-story cycle, a series of separate yet interconnected narratives that function best within the context of the grouping, thus giving it “novelistic” cohesion – than it does a traditional short story collection. Influenced by her studies with William James and her interests in psychology, both *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans* are attempts to narrate consciousness and express what could be called a psychological vernacular. The latter, in fact, begins as a more conventional development of her family over three generations – reminiscent of the kind of lineage narrative found in many immigrant novels – but soon becomes a perambulation of consciousness, characterized by nonlinear sentence structures and linguistic abstractions.
Another novelist affected by the development of psychological studies, especially as they concerned psychosexual growth, was Ludwig Lewison. His first novel, *The Broken Snare* (1908), focuses on a young woman’s gradual acceptance of her sexual desires, and his 1926 work, *The Case of Mr. Crump*, received high praise from Sigmund Freud for its treatment of sexual repression within marriage. Among his other 10 novels is *The Island Within* (1928), a narrative that deals explicitly with Jewish American identity as a need to return to and embrace the larger Jewish community. It stands, along with *The Rise of David Levinsky*, as one of the most resonant novelistic commentaries on the uncertain terrain defining early twentieth-century Jewish identity.

Perhaps no novelist better marshaled the force of modernist aesthetics for the purposes of representing Jewish American subjectivity than did Henry Roth. *Call It Sleep*, his first novel—and only novel for 60 years—is a masterpiece of Jewish, modernist, and proletarian fiction, and it can rightly be called America’s “portrait of the artist as a young Jewish man.” The novel revolves around the life of David Scharl, a young boy who immigrates to the United States with his family in 1907. The narrative is sustained not only by the drama underlying David’s family, but perhaps more profoundly by the ways in which the protagonist confronts and makes sense of life in New York’s immigrant ghettos. When it was first published in 1934 it received much critical acclaim, but then quickly dropped out of sight and out of publication. It was not until the early 1960s that the novel was brought back into print, an event prompted by a surge in attention from such prominent critics as Alfred Kazin, Leslie Fielder, and Irving Howe. The book quickly garnered new praise, and in 1964 when Howe reviewed the newly published paperback edition for the *New York Times Book Review* it received front-page attention, thereby becoming the first paperback to achieve such status in that publication. Almost as legendary as the critical success of *Call It Sleep* is its author’s long bout of “writer’s block.” There is much speculation as to the causes of Henry Roth’s literary dry spell—for example, the initial intimidating success of his first book, Roth’s membership in the Communist Party and his inability to commit to a proletarian aesthetic, his psychological guilt over an incestuous relationship with his sister—but he was able to come out of it late in his life with the ambitious four-volume novel, *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. Roth lived to see the first two books, *A Star Shines over Mt. Morris Park* (1994) and *A Diving Rock on the Hudson* (1995), appear in print, but the last two volumes, *From Bondage* (1996) and *Requiem for Harlem* (1998), were published posthumously. His final novel, *An American Type* (2010), was culled from a series of unfinished manuscripts that were originally part of the *Mercy of a Rude Stream* series, but was published separately, and picks up from where the final novel in the tetralogy leaves off.

Yet if the demands of socialist realism proved a tourniquet to Henry Roth’s artistic flow following his first novel, it was a wellspring for other Jewish American novelists of the period. The global crises of the time, the Great Depression and the rise of fascism worldwide, spawned a strong impulse to build upon a solidly democratic America, thereby forging in many American Jews a more solid sense of themselves as Jews and as Americans. Realism became the dominant literary style of the
1930s, with writers eschewing the allusive experimentations of high modernism, and along with this came a commitment to use the novel to present an accurate account of what was really happening. For writers such as Michael Gold, Edward Dahlberg, Kenneth Fearing, and (to a lesser degree) Nathanael West, the means to achieving a democratic brotherhood could be found in leftist politics. In early works such as Bottom Dogs (1929), From Flushing to Calvary (1932), and Those Who Perish (1934), Dahlberg produced a characteristically bleak and hardened naturalist style that would become the prototype for the proletarian novels of the 1930s. Fearing used his poetry to explore many of the same social upheavals during this time, but beginning in the late 1930s he produced a series of novels – The Hospital (1939), Clark Gifford's Body (1942), The Big Clock (1946), and Loneliest Girl in the World (1951) – that betrayed a film noir quality. Indeed, his most famous novel, the Faulkneresque The Big Clock, became the basis of two successful Hollywood films: John Farrow's The Big Clock in 1947, and Rodger Donaldson's more recent version, No Way Out, in 1987. By the mid-1930s, Nathanael West (born Nathan Weinstein) became a man of the Left, and in his novels he savagely satirized the many facets of the American Dream. After his scatologically absurd The Dream Life of Balso Snell in 1931, he wrote a mordant novel on the apparent futility of modern compassion in Miss Lonelyhearts (1933), and in A Cool Million (1934) exposed the Horatio Alger myth as nothing more than a dangerous farce. However, West is perhaps best known for his last novel, The Day of the Locusts (1939), a scathing account of 1930s Hollywood culture whose violent and apocalyptic ending cannot help but bring to mind the cataclysmic war that was on the horizon.

But perhaps the most notable leftist novel of this period is Michael Gold's Jews without Money (1930). Gold, born Itzok Granich, was a committed Communist Party activist, channeling his political ideas into regular columns for the Daily Worker and People's World, as well as his editorship of the Communist Party organ, New Masses. Yet it is his only novel, Jews without Money, that has endured as an ideological statement. The very title alone not only sets the stage for the novel's economic setting, but it also serves as a poignant rejoinder to the perennial anti-Semitic conviction that Jews control world finances. It is the fictionalized, and even idealized, account of Gold's family while growing up on New York's Lower East Side: the hard-working father, frustrated with the country's failure to make good on the American Dream; the strong and selfless mother who seems to be the only thing holding the family together; and the young son, growing to manhood amidst extreme poverty and demeaning labor. The novel's ultimate message comes in the form of an apostrophe, as the young narrator finally realizes his life's purpose: "O workers' Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely, suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah. . . . O Revolution, that forced me to think, to struggle and to live. O great Beginning!" (Gold, 1984: 309).

Other novels of the interwar years displayed an ever-growing diversity of Jewish American subject matter. Tess Slesinger's only novel, The Unpossessed (1934), is a roman à clef of the elite intellectual circle at the Menorah Journal, the predecessor of Commentary. While not a proletarian novelist, Daniel Fuchs's Williamsburg trilogy (Summer
in Williamsburg, 1934, Homage to Blenholt, 1936, and Low Company, 1937), captures the economic struggles found in the works of Gold and Dahlberg, without the socialist imperative, by portraying the struggles of immigrant and second-generation Jews in Brooklyn. Chicago-born Meyer Levin, who was later instrumental in helping to bring Anne Frank’s diary to America’s attention, stands out from this period of writers in two ways. While most of the early twentieth-century Jewish novels were set in New York, many of Levin’s novels – such as The Reporter (1929), The Old Bunch (1937), Citizens (1940), and later Compulsion (1956), a psychological novel based on the infamous Leopold and Loeb case – gave voice to his vibrant native city, years before the appearance of Saul Bellow’s Augie March. Levin is also notable for his growing support of Zionism, an anomaly for Jewish American writers of the time, and displays this sentiment in novels such as Yehuda (1931) and My Father’s House (1947).

The Jewish American novel continued to flourish and find new forms of expression in the years immediately following World War II. The overt anti-Semitism of Henry Ford, Gerald L. K. Smith, Father Coughlin, and the America First Committee – historian Gerald Sorin called the 1930s “the worst decade of anti-Semitism in American history” (1997: 218) – gave way in the immediate postwar years to subtler means of discrimination, as demonstrated by Arthur Miller’s Focus (1945) and Laura Z. Hobson’s Gentlemen’s Agreement (1947). Both novels illustrate the obstacles Jews continued to face in the workplace, in education, and in the general public sphere. The war itself became the focus of Irwin Shaw (born Irwin Gilbert Shamforoff) in The Young Lions (1948), a novel about a young Jewish American soldier facing anti-Semitism in his own ranks and the junior German officer he ultimately confronts. Like Shaw, both Leon Uris and Herman Wouk were highly popular postwar writers, tapping into the literary marketplace in ways that eluded the previous generation. Wouk’s The Caine Mutiny (1951) and Marjorie Morningstar (1955) and Uris’s Exodus (1958) and Trinity (1976) were all best sellers. The same year as Shaw’s successful war novel, Norman Mailer published The Naked and the Dead, a largely naturalistic work about the fate of 13 men who survive the invasion of a Japanese-held island. But perhaps the most memorable war novel written by a Jewish American is Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 (1961), a grotesquely comic and highly absurd tale of a bombardier, Captain John Joseph Yossarian, and his futile attempts to be discharged from the army air corps. Yossarian’s “catch-22” predicament, the impossibility of a desired outcome due to the illogical conditions established in that outcome’s request, quickly became a part of common rhetorical usage and has since worked its way into English dictionaries. Both Mailer (with works such as The Deer Park, 1955, An American Dream, 1965, the true-life novel The Executioner’s Song, 1977, and Harlot’s Ghost, 1991) and Heller (e.g., Something Happened, 1974, Good as Gold, 1979, God Knows, 1984, and the sequel to Catch-22, Closing Time, 1994) would go on to write a number of other novels, with varying degrees of success, some of which highlight the existential dilemmas faced by their earlier protagonists.

It is interesting to note that it took several years for Jewish American novelists to confront the shocking revelations of the Holocaust – partly due to the fact that
Americans did not have to directly experience the horrors, and perhaps also due to an inability to absorb the sheer magnitude of the horrors. The work of Elie Wiesel, himself a survivor, suggests that when confronted by such an unspeakable event, silence is perhaps the only meaningful response. The very title of his memoir/novel Night (first written in Yiddish and later translated into English in 1960) underscores the nightmarish, numbing, and even futile attempts to make sense of the Shoah. Other novelists, albeit belatedly, felt compelled to respond to the Holocaust, but did so indirectly. Edward Lewis Wallant’s The Pawnbroker (1961) concerns a survivor of the camps now living in New York’s Harlem, plagued by horrendous flashbacks and consumed by survivor’s guilt. In The Fixer (1966) Bernard Malamud focuses on the story of Yakov, a Jewish Russian handyman, or “fixer,” who in 1911 is accused of killing a local Christian boy – based on the infamous Mendel Beilis blood libel trial that occurred near the end of Czar Nicholas II’s reign – as a way of indirectly addressing what would happen to European Jews approximately 30 years later. Although he is innocent of any crime, Yakov comes to the painful realization that “there’s no such thing as an unpolitical man, especially a Jew. You can’t be one without the other. . . . You can’t sit still and see yourself destroyed” (Malamud, 1966: 335). In Touching Evil (1969), Norma Rosen uses the televised trial of Adolph Eichmann and the observations of non-Jews to understand the meaning of the Holocaust, not within the context of Jewish history, but as a signifier of the larger human condition. Saul Bellow indirectly touched upon the Holocaust by using a survivor as his protagonist in Mr. Sammler’s Planet (1970), but the novel is more of a critique of 1960s culture than it is commentary on the Shoah. Similarly, Philip Roth in The Ghost Writer (1979) makes circuitous use of the Holocaust through the figure of Anne Frank, here miraculously resurrected through the imagination of the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, but only for the purposes of securing Zuckerman’s own place as a good Jewish son. And much like Wallant, Isaac Bashevis Singer uses the memories of survivors, not the horrific events themselves, to illustrate the Holocaust’s irreparable ruptures in Enemies, A Love Story (1972). American Jewish novelists are still uncertain in their representation of the Holocaust, but perhaps such uncertainty is warranted given the unfathomable and volatile nature of the subject.

From the mid-1940s and into the 1960s, the literary world experienced what many critics have called a Jewish American renaissance. There appeared to be a sudden outpouring of Jewish literature during this period, and many of the most prominent American writers getting all of the attention happened to be Jewish. What is more, Jewish novelists seemed to be receiving a disproportionate share of the literary honors. The National Book Award was given to Saul Bellow in 1954 and 1965, Bernard Malamud in 1959 and 1967, Philip Roth in 1960, and both Norman Mailer and Jerzy Kozinski in 1969. And in the 25 years following World War II, the Pulitzer Prize was awarded to Karl Shapiro, Arthur Miller, Stanley Kunitz, Bernard Malamud, and Norman Mailer. In a time when exile became “home” and existential alienation placed its emblematic stamp on the American psyche, Jewish American novelists found a receptive audience. In Passage from Home (1946), his only novel
before his untimely death in 1956, Isaac Rosenfeld, once considered a “golden boy” of the New York intelligentsia, uses the age-old generational conflict between father and son to foreground the twin Jewish experiences of loss and estrangement. And perhaps no novel better captures the postwar zeitgeist as does J. D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye (1951). Holden Caulfield, betraying no outwardly Jewish characteristics or sensibilities, becomes a mid-twentieth-century “everyman,” adrift in a hostile world he is ill-equipped to comprehend. It is no wonder that critic Leslie Fiedler would use the phrase “Zion as Main Street” in referring to this period in American literary history. Jewish authors had become representative Americans, and conversely, American were becoming honorary Jews. In the oft-quoted words of Malamud, “Every man is a Jew though he may not know it” (1991: 30).

Indeed, Malamud was one of three Jewish American writers who for many readers best represented this renaissance. Even though their styles and sensibilities were vastly different, Malamud, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth were nonetheless lumped together as the three lions of Jewish American letters. Much of this association had to do with the authors’ ethnicity and the critics’ need to “place” the work they were reading. Bellow resented being read only for his ethnic origins and once quipped in a New York Times interview (Whitman, 1975) that it was “fashionable to describe Roth, Malamud and me as the Hart, Schaffner and Marx [famous Jewish clothiers] of writing.” What is more, the categorization was a way of limiting their scope and qualifying the reach of their works: “The Protestant majority thought it had lost its grip, so the ghetto walls went up around us.” Still, it is difficult now to approach one of these authors without the others leaping to mind. Each respected and has commented admirably on the others’ works and artistry.

Malamud, perhaps more respected for his short fiction than for his novels, has attempted to find in the “Jewish condition” a general state of being that can be applied to all humans. “I try to see the Jew as universal man,” he once said in an interview. “The Jewish drama is prototype, a symbol of the fight for existence in the highest possible human terms” (1991: 30). The major themes of his novels – the need for self-transcendence, the quest for moral guidance, and a desire for empathic understanding in a hostile world – bear this out. His first novel, The Natural (1952), a baseball novel fashioned as a romance on the American Dream, is atypical of his work in that it contains no Jewish characters and relies heavily, at times almost comical in its overabundance, on myths and historical legends. With the exception of The Fixer (1966), which is set in Czarist Russia, and God’s Grace (1982), a postnuclear parable, most of his other novels – The Assistant (1963), A New Life (1961), Pictures of Fidelman (1969), The Tenants (1971), Dublin’s Lives (1979) – are realistic narratives concerning contemporary Jewish figures attempting to make moral sense out of their cultural time and space.

Winner of the 1976 Nobel Prize in literature, Saul Bellow has secured his reputation as one of the most important American novelists of the twentieth century. Philip Roth called Bellow, along with William Faulkner, “the backbone of twentieth-century American literature” (Roth, 2001). His novels are often comic, and his protagonists
are usually street-smart philosophers with a vernacular flair for juggling the ideas of, among others, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Spinoza. Bellow’s first two works, Dangling Man (1944) and The Victim (1947), are Kafka-like meditations exploring modern day existential malaise. In his 1953 bildungsroman, The Adventures of Augie March, he breaks out into a brash picaresque looseness, a style that has come to define his most memorable fiction. This attitude can be seen in the comically quixotic Henderson the Rain King (1959) as well as in his dark philosophical masterpiece, Herzog (1964). Many critics read the opening line of Augie March — “I am an American, Chicago born . . . and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way” — as a literary shot across the bow, freeing up American writing in the postwar years. Bellow has certainly made his own way, “free-style,” over the past 60 years, delivering a series of novels (e.g., Mr. Sammler’s Planet, 1970, Humboldt’s Gift, 1975, The Dean’s December, 1982, More Die of Heartbreak, 1987, and Ravelstein, 2000) that have at times stood in direct opposition to the literary styles or the political zeitgeist of the moment.

Philip Roth’s novels are significant for a variety of reasons. First, they stand as a testament to the cultural transitions many Jews were undergoing during the postwar decades, passing from ethnic marginalization into a more assimilated middle class. Goodbye, Columbus (1959), for instance, concerns a young man’s uneasy negotiation of his working-class Newark roots and the temptations of his girlfriend’s privileged suburban existence. Second, they employ comedy, at times manic and outrageous, to broach the normally taboo subjects of Jewish tribalism and sexuality. Portnoy’s Complaint, which according to the New York Times was the biggest best seller of the entire year of 1969, is a psychoanalytically tinged monologue written in a confessional mode that angered many readers, especially Jews, for its frank discussion of eroticism and its potentially stereotypical treatment of Jews and women, specifically Jewish mothers. (The novel is often called an extended Jewish mother joke.) But perhaps even more significant are the ways in which Roth’s novels illustrate a stylistic transition from mid-century realism – found in such works as Goodbye, Columbus, Letting Go (1962), and When She Was Good (1967) – to a postmodern awareness of the fragmented self, linguistic indeterminacy, and historical contingency. Novels such as My Life as a Man (1974), The Counterlife (1986), the Zuckerman trilogy (The Ghost Writer, 1979, Zuckerman Unbound, 1981, and The Anatomy Lesson, 1983), and his autobiographical tetralogy (comprising The Facts, 1988, Deception, 1990, Patrimony, 1991, and Operation Shylock, 1993) are not only metafictional narratives foregrounding the relationship between text and author, but ongoing explorations of the self and the ways in which American (and Jewish) identity is constructed.

Sabbath’s Theater (1995), considered by many to be Roth’s masterpiece, is in many ways a transitional novel in that it both bridges and exemplifies the narrative exhilaration (and outrageousness) found in much of his earlier fiction and the more tempered historical consciousness embedded in his later works, which for many represent the pinnacle of his talents. These more recent award-winning novels – the American trilogy American Pastoral (1997), I Married a Communist (1998), and The Human Stain
(2000), as well as his alternate history *The Plot Against America* (2004) – concern key moments in late twentieth-century American experience and demonstrate how subjects often becomes hostages to the very history they help create. Following these substantive tomes has been a flurry of novellas, a narrative form that has come to define late-period Roth. Both *The Dying Animal* (2001) and *Exit Ghost* (2007) wrap up a series of novels defined largely by their (in)famous protagonists, David Kepesh and Nathan Zuckerman, respectively. And the most recent sequence, Nemeses, consists of four dark novellas – *Everyman* (2006), *Indignation* (2008), *The Humbling* (2009), and *Nemesis* (2010) – pitting individuals against psychological and natural forces over which they have no control.

Another Jewish American Nobel Prize-winner is Isaac Bashevis Singer. Although commonly, and misleadingly, grouped along with other Jewish writers of the postwar period such as Bellow, Malamud, Roth, and Chaim Potok, Singer stands out as a unique voice in the mid- to late-twentieth-century Jewish American literary experience. Not only is his primary domain the Old World of Eastern European Jewry and their Yiddish vernacular, but his narratives, especially his short fiction, distinguish themselves as a product of a master storyteller. Along with Chaim Grade, another Eastern European refugee writing in the United States, Singer stood as a steadfast custodian to the Yiddish language after many of its speakers were annihilated in the Holocaust. His novels *The Family Moskat* (1945), *The Manor* (1955), and *The Estate* (1969) are literary chronicles covering the Polish Jewish community from the Polish Insurrection of 1863 to the twentieth-century’s interwar period, epic works that examine the place of tradition within an increasingly secularized world. Many of his other novels, including *The Magician of Lublin* (1960), *Enemies, A Love Story* (1972), *Scum* (1991), and *Meshugah* (1994), revolve around individuals seeking to escape, or even quench, their various pathologies by plunging headlong into forbidden passions and sexual entanglements.

Other Jewish American novelists of the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated a wide range of approaches and concerns, from the profane to the sacred. Bruce Jay Friedman, for instance, writes comedies filled with *schlemiels* trapped in absurd situations. Novels such as *Stern* (1962) and *A Mother’s Kiss* (1964) anticipate much of the humor found in Philip Roth’s work after *Portnoy’s Complaint*. Stanley Elkin’s novels – for instance, *A Bad Man* (1967), *The Dick Gibson Show* (1971), *The Franchiser* (1976), *George Mills* (1982) – usually categorized as postmodern fiction or black comedy, are not so much concerned with Jewishness, *per se*, as they are with the labyrinthine twists and interconnected accidents found in contemporary American society. In a somewhat similar vein, Max Apple’s fiction is made up of humorous caricatures mixed with a pastiche of pop cultural artifacts. Although Apple is best known for his satirical short stories, his 1978 novel *Zip* brings together the unlikely subjects of J. Edgar Hoover, Jane Fonda, and a communist Puerto Rican boxer named Jesus. E. L. Doctorow is the author of a variety of historical novels that blur the boundaries of fiction. Works like *The Book of Daniel* (1971), *Ragtime* (1975), and *Billy Bathgate* (1989) merge historical and fictional figures and challenge the reader to question the distinction between liter-
ary artifice and historical “truth.” Unlike other writers who ignore Judaic faith or who concentrate on the more secular and assimilative side of their Jewishness, Chaim Potok has created a body of work that highlights Jewish religious issues and their importance in individual lives. In *The Chosen* (1967), *The Promise* (1969), and *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972), Potok integrates Jewish history, Talmudic study, and Western philosophy in order to demonstrate the importance of a spiritual ballast against the chaos of modern life.

The Jewish American novel, especially after 1945, is usually defined in terms of male authors. However, many women writers of this period deserve equal attention, even though much of their work may have been overshadowed by their male counterparts. Many of Marge Piercy’s novels – for example, *Small Changes* (1973), *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), *Fly Away Home* (1984), and *The Longings of Women* (1994) – are political in nature and focus on a variety of social issues, including feminism, lesbianism, ecology, and the working class. In novels such as *Her Mothers* (1975) and *A Weave of Women* (1978), E. M. Broner explores the burdens of a gendered Judaic tradition and how that history can be both a defining inheritance as well as a restrictive curse. And Tova Reich’s novels, *Mara* (1978), *Master of Return* (1988), and *The Jewish War* (1995), are satirical commentaries on Jewish American life, especially as it relates to the Orthodox community and a woman’s place within it.

But perhaps the most significant Jewish American woman writing in the postwar period is Cynthia Ozick. What distinguishes much of her work is a concern with religious and ethnic sensibilities and their place within a largely secular American society. Unlike Bellow, she has no problem with being labeled a Jewish writer. And unlike Roth, she explores Jewish identity not from a primarily cultural or secular standpoint, but from one that constantly highlights the presence of Jewish faith. In fact, Ozick’s fiction is preoccupied with the question of what it means to be Jewish, especially in America after the Holocaust. Her novels give form to the opposition between Hebraic ethics and Hellenist aesthetics. Ozick takes to heart the Mosaic law against idolatry, yet is torn by her place as a Jewish writer constantly in the act of creating literary “idols” that approximate existence. This strategy of literary negotiation is particularly significant in that Ozick not only questions the replications of texts, but also places her ethnic subject-position in the very center of this controversy. Many of her novels, including *The Cannibal Galaxy* (1983) and *Heir to the Glimmering World* (2004), use a series of ironic countertexts to explore the place and function of literature in relation not only to the world at large, but more precisely to the world as defined by her Jewish faith. What further particularizes her work is a curious mixture of realistic and fantastical discourse, a style that approximates that of magic realism. This can be seen most clearly in works such as *The Messiah of Stockholm* (1987) and *The Puttermesser Papers* (1997).

So what is the latest trajectory of the Jewish American novel? In the final decades of the twentieth century, many critics were asking this question. As early as 1965 Robert Alter believed that the Jewish American literary renaissance was playing itself out. In a statement that is now seen as notoriously premature, Irving Howe noted in
1977 that “American Jewish fiction has probably moved past its high point” (1977: 16). In that much of the previous writing had taken its strength from the trials and memories of the immigrant experience, Howe now believed that most of the vital material for assimilated middle-class Jewish writers had been hopelessly depleted. Critics Ruth R. Wisse and Leslie Fiedler concurred, with the latter stating bluntly in 1986, “the Jewish-American novel is over and done with, a part of history rather than a living literature.” However, confounding the dour predictions of these critics, the Jewish American novel is very much alive. Since the 1970s, it has taken on a wide variety of themes expressed in a diversity of forms, making it all the more difficult to define or to categorize neatly. In fact, the noticeable spike in activity from the more recent generation of writers led the editors of Tikkun, in a 1997 issue of their magazine, to call this outpouring a “Jewish literary revival” (Rosenbaum, 1997).

One can see many factors determining the directions of this younger generation of Jewish American novelists: the influential shadows cast by the previous generation of Jewish American writers, the shifting mores of late-twentieth-century culture, the growing emphasis on identity politics, the renewed sense of religious community and faith, the ambivalent relationship many American Jews have with the state of Israel, and, of course, the ever-present legacy of the Holocaust. These diverse influences make it difficult, if not impossible, to encapsulate the contemporary Jewish American novel in any categorical manner, suggesting a vibrant community of authors whose interests run the gamut. For example, in works such as The Mind-Body Problem (1983) and Mazel (1995), Rebecca Goldstein has focused on the crossroads of philosophy, science, and her Jewish heritage. Paul Auster has likewise betrayed a keen, and even vertiginous, philosophical tendency in his fiction, although in novels such as The New York Trilogy (1987), The Music of Chance (1990), and Leviathan (1992), there is little trace of ethnic self-awareness. Indeed, the themes that have come to define his works – the emphasis on contingency and coincidence, as well as the predominance of mistaken identity – all underscore a postmodern fragmentation and even erasure of the subject, ethnic or otherwise. Other recent novelists are more engaged with their Jewishness. In what could be called a dialogue with Orthodoxy, both Pearl Abraham (The Romance Reader, 1995 and Giving Up America, 1998) and Allegra Goodman (Kaaterskill Falls, 1998) look at the ways in which individuals and communities continue to define themselves through traditional measures of faith – an emphasis that would have been unheard of, with one or two exceptions, in fiction of the 1960s and 1970s. Other younger writers, such as Steve Stern, Thane Rosenbaum, and Michael Chabon, have appropriated Jewish folklore and fantasy – a rich tradition indeed – in ways that help signify the Jewish American present. Both Rosenbaum, in The Golems of Gotham (2002), and Chabon, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay (2000), have made effective literary use of the legendary golem, a strategy that Cynthia Ozick employed several years earlier in The Puttermesser Papers.

In fact, the implications behind Tikkun’s pronounced “Jewish literary revival” are beginning to rival that of mid-twentieth-century outpourings. Many of the novels defining our contemporary literary landscape – such as Robert Cohen’s The Here and
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Now (1996), Jonathan Rosen’s Eve’s Apple (1997), Ehud Havazelet’s Like Never Before (1998), Myla Goldberg’s The Bee Season (2000), Sam Lipsyte’s The Subject Steve (2001), Nicole Krauss’s A History of Love (2005), Nathan Englander’s The Ministry of Special Cases (2007), Elisa Albert’s The Book of Dahlia (2008), Joshua Cohen’s Witz (2010), and Adam Levin’s The Instructions (2010) – are testaments to the vibrancy of post-similative Jewish American writing. Novelist such as Jonathan Lethem (with Motherless Brooklyn, 1999, The Fortress of Solitude, 2003, and Chronic City, 2009) and Dara Horn (e.g., In the Image, 2002, The World to Come, 2006, and All Other Nights, 2009) maintain an impressively steady output and consistently garner critical praise. And a new breed of Jewish American novelists has warranted particular attention. Recent Russian arrivals have, in important ways, brought Jewish writing back to its earlier defining themes: ethnic and religious marginalization, intergenerational guilt and shame, conflicts between the old world and the new, and the in-between status of the immigrant. These issues are perhaps best exemplified by Gary Shteyngart in his wryly incisive The Russian Debutante’s Handbook (2002) and Absurdistan (2006), and they also make up the narrative worlds of Lara Vapnyar’s Memoirs of a Muse (2006) and Anya Ulinich’s Petropolis (2007).

Still another permutation of contemporary fiction pulls from the Jewish past. As scholar Alan L. Berger has demonstrated, many recent Jewish American novelists have turned their gaze on the post-Holocaust experience, the world after Auschwitz, as individuals who never personally experienced the horrors. The fiction of these second-generation “witnesses” to the Holocaust, the sons and daughters of survivors, highlights the ways in which the Shoah, almost as an inherited psychological trait, continues to define Jewish identity. Writers such as Thane Rosenbaum in his post-Holocaust trilogy, Elijah Visible (1996), Second Hand Smoke (1999), and The Golems of Gotham, Melvin Jules Bukiet in Stories of an Imaginary Childhood (1992) and After (1996), Joseph Skibell in A Blessing on the Moon (1997), Jonathan Safran Foer in Everything Is Illuminated (2002), Michael Chabon in The Yiddish Policeman’s Union (2007), Jane Yolen in her young adult novels The Devil’s Arithmetic (1988) and Briar Rose (1992), and Art Spiegelman, in his two-part graphic novel, Maus (1986, 1991), have been the most outspoken narrators for this facet of their generational experience.

Spiegelman’s graphic novel is just one example of the ways in which the more recent generation of Jewish American novelists is innovatively adapting form to content. Indeed, the graphic novel has been the medium of choice for many contemporary Jewish writers. Will Eisner – in A Contract with God (1978), A Life Force (1988), To the Heart of the Storm (1991), Dropsie Avenue (1995), and The Name of the Game (2003) – has done more than any comics author to establish the legitimacy of the form, paving the way for not only Spiegelman and Maus, but for Jules Feiffer’s Tantrum (1979), Ben Katchor’s The Jew of New York (1998), James Sturm’s The Golem’s Mighty Swing (2003), Joe Kubert’s Yossel: April 19, 1943 (2003), Peter Kuper’s Stop Forgetting to Remember: The Autobiography of Walter Kurtz (2007), Aline Kominsky-Crumb’s, Need More Love (2007), Miriam Libicki’s Jobnik! (2008), Neil Kleid and Nicolas Cinquegrani’s The Big Kahn (2009), and Sarah Glidden’s How to Understand Israel in 60 Days
or Less (2010). And this is only the tip of the graphic novel iceberg. An equally telling illustration of stylistic adaptation can be found in the short-story cycle, or the composite novel format. In a post-Holocaust, postassimilation, and post-9/11 world, what better narrative strategy could there be than one that highlights an uncertain and fragmented “reality”? Examples of this narratologically intriguing form include Joyce Reiser Kornblatt’s Breaking Bread (1986), Steven Stern’s Lazare Malkin Enters Heaven (1986) and A Plague of Dreamers (1994), Allegra Goodman’s Total Immersion (1989) and The Family Markowitz (1996), Melvin Jules Bukiet’s Stories of an Imaginary Childhood, Thane Rosenbaum’s Elijah Visible, Leslie Goldstein’s Goldkorn Tales (1998), Merrill Joan Gerber’s Anna in Chains (1998) and Anna in the Afterlife (2002), Gerald Shapiro’s Bad Jews (1999) and Little Men (2004), and S. L. Wisenberg’s The Sweetheart Is In (2001).

Much has changed for Jewish Americans since Nathan Mayer melded Jewishness to his adopted homeland and Abraham Cahan narrated the life of the Lower East Side. Jewish ethnic ties have loosened; religious observance and ritual have significantly declined; the immigrant past has become for many a distant, even sentimentalized, memory; the melting pot mythos has been replaced with the multicultural mosaic; Zionism as an idealistic political force has been called into question; the state of Israel has turned out to be both a sense of pride and, for some, a political embarrassment; and anti-Semitism, at least in its overt American forms, has largely subsided. In light of these vast changes, and given the kind of writing being produced over the last decade, it is interesting to note that Jewish American novelists today are taking these conditions and asking many of the same questions that their great-grandparents, and their great-great-great grandparents, asked years before: what does it mean to be a Jew? What does it mean to be an American? And what might be the relationship between these two identities? Such questions remain pertinent and are certain to drive the Jewish American novel for years to come.

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