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Contemporary Jewish Writing in Canada: An Anthology (review)

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Book Reviews

Contemporary Jewish Writing in Canada: An Anthology, edited by Michael Greenstein. *Jewish Writing in the Contemporary World*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. 232 pp. \$60.00.

What is distinctive about contemporary Canadian-Jewish writing? In *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Canada: An Anthology*, part of the Jewish Writing in the Contemporary World series edited by Sander L. Gilman, Michael Greenstein provides two answers. The first answer appears in an introduction subtitled "Sambation to Saskatchewan." Citing Mordecai Richler's description of Canada as the "ghetto of the north," Greenstein adapts this Jewish version of the many truisms that foreground Canadian inadequacy in relation to the USA by asserting, "Jewish writing in Canada is doubly ghettoized and regionalized between Montreal and the prairies." Montreal dominates; the cross looming over Montreal's Mount Royal contrasts with "the welcoming words of Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty." In a nine-part introduction, five parts are devoted to Canadian-Jewish writing produced in Montreal: first its Yiddish sources; then the work of A. M. Klein, "the father of Canadian-Jewish literature"; followed by Klein's relationship to Montrealers Irving Layton and Leonard Cohen; "Montreal's other major Jewish writer" Mordecai Richler, the writer who, until the recent international success of Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*, is likely the Canadian-Jewish writer best known outside Canada; and finally Montreal's French connections. Greenstein's geographical introduction then leaps over Ontario to Winnipeg and the work of Jack Ludwig, Miriam Waddington, and Adele Wiseman, continuing its westward trek in the next subheading, "West of Winnipeg: Eli Mandel and Henry Kreisel." Only the last two subheadings, "Ontario's Outsiders" and "The Drift of New Voices," allow for the possibility of other stories, something Greenstein does acknowledge: "there are a number of distinctive voices during the course of the twentieth century who find mythologies outside of national boundaries."

These distinctive voices challenge the introduction's reliance upon two well-worn generalizations about Canadian writing. The first is the myth that Canada has no mythology, a view expressed by Sacvan Bercovitch: "Canada's status as a colonial country without a mythology in contrast to 'America' with its indigenous, imperialist sense of identity." The second adapts Northrop Frye's garrison mentality metaphor. Admitting that a garrison is not a ghetto, Greenstein appears reluctant to abandon the metaphor completely even though many critics of Canadian writing have done so: "Canadian-Jewish writing internalizes the ghetto-garrison mentality as each writer seeks a means of escaping the ghetto while adhering to its traditions." Obviously the series of which *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Canada* is a part requires that the editor offer his readers a pithy statement that sums up his subject, even if the thesis seems both too grand—does each Canadian-Jewish writer really seek a means of escaping the ghetto?—and also not specific enough. Surely such generalizations about escaping the ghetto/adhering to traditions might also apply to other countries' contemporary Jewish writing.

In contrast to the grand narrative of his introduction, in which A. M. Klein remains "source and mouth of Jewish writing in Canada," the seventeen writers Greenstein includes in the anthology represent more than the tributaries of A. M. Klein, and in that sense, offer a different story about Canadian-Jewish literature, which is less coherent, and more interesting. Although male authors dominate the discussion in the introduction, the anthology includes writing by nine men and eight women. Greenstein offers no explanation for his editorial choices. He includes one translation from Yiddish and three from French. Despite its title, Aryeh Lev Stollman's "Die Grosse Liebe" is not a translation, but a story first published in *Yale Review*. Stollman, born in Detroit, growing up in Windsor, Ontario, but now working in New York, is identified as a Canadian writer. But given that his work has been published mainly in the USA and has received honors there, it is not clear how "Die Grosse Liebe" marks a distinctively Canadian sensibility beyond the Canadian immigrant identity Stollman gives his characters.

Although a contributor's work as a poet is often mentioned in the brief biographical introduction, the anthology includes no poetry. It does include eight stories, two personal essays, and eight excerpts from novels (there are two excerpts from Robert Majzels's work). Greenstein also never defines what he means by contemporary, and begins the anthology with selections from Leonard Cohen's first novel, *The Favorite Game*, published more than forty years ago. All but two of the other contributions were originally published between 1984 and 2004. The two exceptions are a translation from Yiddish of Chava Rosenfarb's "A Friday in the Life of Sarah Zonabend" (since pub-

lished) and the page excerpted from Robert Majzels's *Apikoros Sleuth* (also now published). The work of Rosenfarb and Majzels, like that of several other contributors, supports Greenstein's assertion that Canadian-Jewish writing "begins, for the most part, after the Holocaust." Having escaped the ghetto and more importantly the Nazis, these characters rarely adhere to Judaic traditions. While a character returns to orthodoxy after learning of the death of a family member in the Holocaust in Gabriella Goliger's "Maladies of the Inner Ear," in Robert Majzels's *Hellman's Scrapbook*, and in Aryeh Lev Stollman's "Die Grosse Liebe," children of Holocaust survivors recall their parents' reluctance to enter a synagogue. The last entry in the anthology is taken from Michael Redhill's *Martin Sloane*, a work that Greenstein says "focuses only marginally on Jewish matters" but whose inclusion allows for a return to the river metaphor of Greenstein's introduction; in the last sentence of the excerpt, the protagonist is on the H.M.S. *St. Louis* in October 1939, about to cross the Atlantic for Montreal.

Ideally, anthologies such as *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Canada* encourage readers unfamiliar with the excerpted writers to read more. With that in mind, the collection might have been more effective had it not included so many excerpts from novels. The novel excerpts that were most inviting were, with the exception of *Hellman's Scrapbook*, those that the reviewer already knew in their complete form. Far more successful in terms of convincing this reader to read more were the stories: Norman Levine's "By a Frozen River," in which the narrator returns from England to northern Ontario because he misses the snow but ends up discovering/being reminded what it is like to be Jewish in small town Ontario in 1965, is wonderful. Similarly effective are Naïm Kattan's "The Dancer" and Miriam Waddington's essay, "Mrs. Maza's Salon," which explores her ambivalence about her parents' generation and her encounters with a Yiddish poet in Montreal. *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Canada: An Anthology* includes many writers whose work should be better known both in Canada and abroad, precisely because they challenge some of the clichés about Canadian literature and Canadian-Jewish literature that still circulate. But then this reviewer never grew up in Montreal and now resides west of Winnipeg.

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