



THE NEW  
**DIASPORA**

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THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF AMERICAN JEWISH FICTION

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Edited by Victoria Aarons, Avinoam J. Patt, and Mark Shechner

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Detroit

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## THE NEW DIASPORA

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hobos and bums, fact and fiction,  
roam the earth. But which is which?

For Dr. Irving and Frances Waltman

"A wonderful thing, Fanny," Manishevitz said.  
"Believe me, there are Jews everywhere."

Bernard Malamud, "Angel Levine"

# PREFACE

This is a Jewish story, so it starts with food. It was April 2011, and the editors of this anthology were sitting around a table at Rizzuto's Italian Restaurant in West Hartford, CT, having lunch and planning out that evening's Edward Lewis Wallant Award ceremony. While not a kosher deli, Rizzuto's is our favorite restaurant in West Hartford, one that we routinely frequent to kibbitz over the books and readings of the past year and anticipate the current year's event. At Rizzuto's, if your taste doesn't run to Italian salamis and French cheeses, you can get a good vegetarian platter. This particular occasion was the forty-eighth annual presentation of the Wallant Award to the recipient for 2010, Julie Orringer, for her novel *The Invisible Bridge*. An intimate and painfully detailed story of the ordeal of Hungary's Jews during the Shoah, and in particular those who were assigned to work on the forced labor battalions or *Munkaszolgálat*, Orringer's novel had swept the judges away and emerged as the unambiguous winner for the previous year's prize. The ceremonial presentation of the award was to be that evening at the University of Hartford.

But beyond our discussions of the evening, we began looking ahead two years, to 2013 and the fiftieth anniversary of the Wallant Award, whose initial winner was Norman Fruchter, for his novel *Coat Upon a Stick* in 1963. We marveled at the longevity of the award and the determination of its sponsors to pursue it over almost five decades. The Wallant Award's track record for persistence and devotion to literature, and for making so many inspired choices of writers who were scarcely known at the time, called for recognition. The Wallant Award has been, from the outset, a one-family show, the family being Dr. Irving Waltman and his wife Fran, who founded the award in 1963 and kept it going with their own funds, dedication, and labor, though it now has institutional support from the University of Hartford's Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies and support from a small phalanx of judges, currently Victoria Aarons, Ezra Cappell, Thane Rosenbaum, and Mark Shechner. Still, the Waltmans remain after fifty years the durable backbones of the enterprise, and they still read fiction along with the judges. In all, with the fiftieth anniversary of the prize just two years away, we felt that acknowledgment was due, if not long overdue, to the Waltmans, and what better form of recognition than a book? And so we embarked on this project, which began



as a celebration of the Waltman family and their dedication to the life of literature, and that celebration gradually took on a life of its own.

That life of its own, as we planned it, would divide the book into two sections. One would be a selection of former winners of the Wallant Award, presenting them through their more recent work. The other would be a selection of writing from the many other books that have crossed our desks in the course of our reading for the award. We believed that our reading had provided us with an overview of new fiction by Jewish writers in North America and that we had an obligation to share some of this abundance with others in order to, in effect, expand awareness of Jewish writing and celebrate it. Few people, other than the occasional book editor or reviewer or awards judge, are fortunate enough to see the bounty of writing that we do, and so we felt a responsibility to share at least some of our discoveries. In doing so, we wanted to try our hand at redefining what we talk about when we talk about Jews writing books in America. The more we have read, the less straightforward the work of definition has come to appear and, not surprisingly, the more multifaceted our discussions have grown.

There is more first-rate writing in print than we have space for in this volume, and we have floated the idea among ourselves of a second volume. That is premature, we know, but we privately lament the works of fiction we had to rule out and the many important questions that we have left unasked. We know that we have only scratched the surface of the writing we would like to place before you and the conversations we would like to have. This volume, *The New Diaspora*, is a first step.

By the end of lunch, we had a plan. Three and a half years later, you have a book. Enjoy.

Victoria Aarons, Avinoam Patt, Mark Shechner  
September 1, 2013

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## INTRODUCTION

For the past eight years, this volume's editors, Victoria Aarons, Avinoam Patt, and Mark Shechner, have served as judges and administrators for the Edward Lewis Wallant Award. Given annually to "an American writer, preferably unrecognized, whose published creative work of fiction is considered to have significance for the American Jew," the Wallant Award was established fifty-one years ago by Dr. Irving and Fran Waltman in honor of the novelist Edward Lewis Wallant, who died in 1962 at the age of thirty-six. Inaugurated as a memorial book award at the Emanuel Synagogue in West Hartford, CT, the Wallant Award has been given institutional support by the University of Hartford's Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies since 1986. The award historically has focused its attention on younger Jewish writers in America, frequently the authors of debut works of fiction. The initial Wallant Award in 1963, given to Norman Fruchter for his novel *Coat Upon a Stick*, has been given in subsequent years to writers including Chaim Potok, Cynthia Ozick, Arthur A. Cohen, Francine Prose, Daphne Merkin, Steve Stern, Dara Horn, Thane Rosenbaum, Jonathan Rosen, Allegra Goodman, Melvin Jules Bukiet, Nicole Krauss, Ehud Havazelet, Sara Houghteling, and Joshua Henkin. While not inclusive, this is a robust list of writers, many of whom have gone on to major careers in American letters.

In the eight years since we began working together, the award's judges have read more than one hundred works of fiction—novels and short story collections—by Jewish writers living in the United States. Recently, as Jewish writers have gained increasing prominence in Canada, we have begun to include them in our considerations as well. In our deliberations, we exclude such marquee writers as Philip Roth, Michael Chabon, Paul Auster, and Jonathan Lethem, preferring to introduce new writers and recognize those whose work has been relatively neglected. Authors who have drawn our attention include our most recent prize winners: Ehud Havazelet (2007), Eileen Pollack (2008), Sara Houghteling (2009), Julie Orringer (2010), Edith Pearlman (2011), Joshua Henkin (2012), and Kenneth Bonert (2013). Other writers we have read with appreciation include David Bezmozgis, Tony Eprile, Robert Majzels, Rachel Kadish, Avner Mandelman, Scott Nadelson, Lara Vapnyar, Nadia Kalman, Jonathon Keats, Maxim Shraye, Margot Singer, Joseph Skibell, Nathan Englander, and many others whose fiction has called attention to the diversity of Jewish expression in America.

This is the tip of a vast continent of prose fiction whose full mass is still unmeasured, and this partial catalogue should give evidence to the shortsightedness of Irving Howe's famous and now quaint prophecy that with the death of his generation of Jewish immigrant writers, "American Jewish fiction has probably moved past its high point. Insofar as this body of writing draws heavily from the immigrant experience, it must suffer a depletion of resources, a thinning-out of materials and memories. Other than in books and sentiment, there just isn't enough left of that experience."

The evidence is plain that Jews are writing and publishing in ever-greater numbers and that North America is one of the epicenters of this burgeoning productivity. And it isn't just the volume of production that is distinctive about this literature, but its attitude and reach. This new writing has its own signature, no longer defined by such hyphenated titles as "Jewish-American writers" and "Jewish-American literature." Those terms have always been fraught, and writers themselves have protested their indiscriminate, reductive, and marginalizing use. Such terms are weighed down with ill-defined meanings, implying hybridized consciousnesses and crises of identity. Such dividedness is now barely in evidence. Philip Roth has announced of late that he prefers to be called a "Newark-American" writer, suggesting an ironic fusion of terms rather than an antagonistic schism. The novels and stories we read for the Wallant Award suggest that "Jewish-American" was never a term for the ages, but rather an idiom of convenience for a moment when Jews were ascending in the ranks of American culture and viewed themselves as split personalities, divided in loyalty and spirit, as if they lived the title of one of Lionel Trilling's essay collections: *The Opposing Self* (1955). In our own estimation, the hybridizing metaphors have lost their utility even as the literature they purport to describe has grown more vigorous. Not surprisingly, to abandon that historically laden term has been to redefine North American Jewish writing as a richly diverse body of pluralistic fiction, a "modern Jewish literary complex," to quote literary historian Dan Miron, that is "vast, disorderly, and somewhat diffuse" and looks ahead to new forms of Jewish self-awareness as much as it looks back for history, sustenance, and collective memory.

Significantly, since the turn of the twenty-first century, an increasing number of Jewish writers who reside in North America are not Americans by birth. The United States and Canada are the ports at which they have dropped anchor and established their careers, though they come from elsewhere, and sometimes from other languages, such as David Bezmozgis (Latvia, to Canada); Joseph Kertes (Hungary/Canada); David Unger and Francisco Goldman (Guatemala); Ilan Stavans (Mexico); Tony Eprile, Shira Nayman, and Kenneth Bonert (South Africa); Anouk Markovits (France); Gigi Anders and Achi Obejas (Cuba); Keith Gessen, Nadia Kalman, Lara Vapnyar, Maxim Shrayer, David Shrayer Petrov, Gary Shteyngart (Russia); Sana Krasikov (Georgia); André Aciman (Egypt); Dalia Sofer and Gina Nahai (Iran); Danit Brown and Avner Mandelman (Israel);

Ayelet Tsabari (Yemen, Israel, Canada). There is another group of authors who live in the United States but continue to write in their original languages, such as Guatemala-born Eduardo Halfon, whose *El boxeador polaco* has only recently been translated into English as *The Polish Boxer*. Emigrant writing in America is scarcely remarkable in itself, but the vast contribution at present by Jews surely can't escape notice, and speaks to the intersection of cultures, histories, and identities that marks our time. This list of names may be a labor of pure demographics, a social history of literature, but it is a uniquely contemporary demographic: When have we seen anything like this influx of fresh voices and unique histories since the great migration of 1881–1924?

The literature we regularly review in our judging does not appear to build solely or even primarily on the celebrated post-World War II fiction of Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Isaac Rosenfeld, Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozick, and Philip Roth. Whatever else may have been true of that generation, those writers lived at both edges of their hyphens—American-Jewish—and defined themselves or found themselves defined through their incongruities. “I am an American, Chicago born,” declaims Saul Bellow’s Augie March. A celebratory gesture of identity such as Augie’s would seem archaic now. Contemporary literature by American Jews easily dispenses with these hyperbolic declarations. New Jewish writing seems to have more in common with the broad currents of contemporary American fiction, so much of which is the work of émigrés. The new population of Jewish writers appears to mirror a broader movement in American literature: writers come from afar to seek sanctuary in America and to find their voices in a country and a language that offers them protection and opportunity. From that point of view, immigrant Jews are less special cases than they are typical examples of new Americans putting down roots in an adopted land and a new language. They are part of a larger global movement, and their literature reflects both their commonality with other cultures and their distinctive history.

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Thus, formerly vital questions about identity have lost their traction, as an entire conceptual framework that once sustained them has begun to seem transient and insensational. Identity remains an issue, but often it metamorphoses into something else, ironized, detached from the traditional anxieties about acceptance and exposure. In our collection, the most candid instance of identity fiction is Eileen Pollack’s story “The Bris,” in which a father, nearing death, reveals to his son that he is not Jewish and begs the son to find him a mohel who will perform on him a deathbed bris so that, passing as a Jew, he can be buried in a Jewish cemetery beside his wife. The story is a classic identity-as-quandary fable upended, the Gentile in search of acceptance and self-validation now desiring to be a Jew.

The “self,” the grandly declared and anxiously defended “self” that once reigned as the dominant subject of earlier generations of Jewish writers in America, has all but disappeared. Once upon a time, an entire movement that stretches back to the early decades of the twentieth century could be epitomized by a phrase from Alfred Kazin’s memoir, *A Walker in the City*: “I was so happy I could not tell what I felt apart from the evenness of the heat in which I walked . . . I was me, me, me, and it was summer.” From Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* and Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers* through Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* to Saul Bellow’s *Henderson the Rain King*, with its plangent refrain of “I want, I want, I want,” and Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* with its silent Dr. Spievogel taking notes in the background, the insistent “me, me, me” had a force and implacability that made the obsessional self virtually a cornerstone of Jewish writing in America. The writer’s freedom to reinvent himself as a *larky* (Saul Bellow’s term), or haunted American, was the measure of his initiation into the American republic of individuality. This New World agenda, however, could not have achieved its full expression without a dash of Old World sponsorship—specifically a *Mitteleuropean* import in the form of the feverish theories and daunting professional apparatus of psychoanalysis. While psychoanalytic theory in all its extravagant varieties—Freudian, Jungian, Reichian, Adlerian, and Kleinian—captured the imagination of so many American writers, the vast institutional network of analysts and clinics and institutes was on the ready to provide logistical support. Psychoanalysis promised not only to open the doors of perception for writers—“where id was, there ego shall be”—but also to lift the malaise of alienation from which they declared themselves to be suffering. Fiction absorbed psychoanalysis at a moment in history when a writer’s mission was to keep a fever chart of a character who was often a thinly disguised stand-in for himself: Roth’s Alexander Portnoy, Bellow’s Moses Herzog, Malamud’s Arthur Fidelity. Saul Bellow describes Von Humboldt Fleisher in *Humboldt’s Gift* as a man who “owned a set of Freud’s journals. Once you’ve read *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* you knew that everyday life was psychopathology.” Saul Bellow’s novels and the self-lacerating heroes of Philip Roth answer most clearly to this preoccupation with mapping the unexplored catacombs of the American self by means of *Mitteleuropean* and Jewish theories of the unconscious. For critic Lionel Trilling, Freud served as one of the building blocks of his sturdy critical enterprise. Norman Mailer and Allen Ginsberg apprenticed themselves to the sexological principles of Wilhelm Reich. Bellow’s friend Isaac Rosenfeld spent hours in an orgone box.

A mode of investigation that seemed so pioneering mere decades ago is now so far removed from Jewish writing in America as to seem as out of place as, say, Jewish stories about whaling. The therapist is as hard to find as a harpoon. By the first decades of the twenty-first century, Sigmund Freud has become something of an historical curiosity, a folk tale, a *bobe mayse*. Freud appears in Joseph Skibell’s *A Curable Romantic* as a disciple of Wilhelm Fliess’s oddball theories of the nasal reflex neurosis as the organic basis



for hysteria. The patient, Emma Eckstein, whom Fliess mistreated with history's most famous nose job, turns out in Skibell's book to have been in fact possessed by a dybbuk. Here ancient folklore trumps the modern. Freud appears as a narcissist and adulterer in *Freud's Mistress* by Karen Mack and Jennifer Kaufman and as a stony-hearted brother who abandons his sisters to the Nazis in *Freud's Sister* by Macedonian novelist Goce Smilevski. The inventor of the Oedipus complex who gave intellectual nourishment, not to say promise of remedy, to a generation of Jewish writers and thinkers in mid-twentieth century, has become himself a museum piece of intellectual history. And along with Freud has departed the "self" to which his theories had once given profound meanings.

In much of the best newer fiction, the arias of "me, me, me" have faded into choruses of "us, us, us," the Jews as a collective body embedded in history, culture, and a collective memory. Virtually all the writers in our anthology are not only uninterested in the self-analyzing and self-indulgent "oy vey" psychodramas of the past, but they also no longer question their connection to the tribe. Gone is the alienation that they once attributed to being strangers in a strange land, who could say with Cynthia Ozick "I am third generation American Jew, perfectly at home and yet perfectly insecure, perfectly acculturated and yet perfectly marginal."

We readers no longer encounter the self-irony associated with early Roth or the assimilation angst that characterized Abraham Cahan's David Levinsky and his many descendants. Contemporary Jewish fiction writers take it as a given that they are Jews just as much as they are Americans, or, for that matter, Canadians, Russians, Latvians, or Israelis. Hyphens have given way to syntheses; they now look more like bridges than barriers. Left behind are Abraham Cahan's Yekls who change their names to Jake. Somewhere in the dark backward and abysm of time are Saul Bellow's philosopher clowns, with intellects to quote Heidegger and souls that say "quack" at the sight of women. Out on the margins are Ozick's Jewish characters, perfectly acculturated yet perfectly marginal. In retreat are Henry Roth's immigrants who tiptoe through America as if it were booby trapped with land mines. Missing from the new literature are disorders like Alex Portnoy's, "in which strongly felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature." Gone are the anxious, phobic, dislocated Jewish protagonists for whom America is a landscape of frustrated desire. In their place, we find history.

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At no time before have Jewish writers in America turned so repeatedly to history for their visions and inventions. The prevailing time setting of Jewish writing in America, from Abraham Cahan through Philip Roth, had been the contemporary. "Seize the Day," proclaims the title of one of Saul Bellow's early novels, "the day" meaning this day,