

Modern Jewish Women Writers in America, edited and with an introduction by Evelyn Avery. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 288 pp., \$85.00, hardbound.

Norman Fruman

Published online: 30 July 2008
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Of the thirteen contributors to this collection of essays and interviews, twelve are women and all are or have been academics, mainly in English and women's studies departments. Two are active members of the National Association of Scholars: Carol Iannone, editor-at-large of this journal, and Evelyn Avery, the volume's editor and contributor.

The title *Modern Jewish Women Writers in America* will lead many to suppose that the authors dealt with will be such more or less familiar names as Hannah Arendt, Susan Sontag, Betty Friedan, Grace Paley, Erica Jong, Pauline Kael, Fanny Hurst, and Dorothy Parker. Instead,

Norman Fruman is professor emeritus of English at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455; fruma001@umn.edu. He is best known for *Coleridge: The Damaged Archangel* (George Braziller, 1971), an academic bestseller that was runner-up for the National Book Award in 1972.

the writers discussed, with three or four exceptions, are now obscure, however well-known in the past; information about them is, thus, all the more welcome. In the aggregate they represent a specific subset of Jewish women writers, those for whom their Jewishness in various ways creates social, moral, and spiritual problems. Some are ardent feminists, resentful of the second-class status assigned to women in orthodox worship. Others feel a debilitating spiritual void and desperately seek the consolations and rituals of religion to give their lives structure and meaning. The engrossing chapter on Anne Roiphe's long career as a novelist states the matter succinctly: "Attempting to balance feminism, motherhood, and Jewishness, her protagonists struggle to discover their identities and resolve the conflicts of modern Jewish American women" (67).

The first of the volume's four divisions reaches back to 1910 and the huge wave of mainly observant Jewish immigrants preceding the First World War. Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912) and subsequent *Those Who Knock at Our Gates* (1914) together sold more than a hundred thousand copies, an astounding number for that

time. *The Promised Land* was reprinted as late as 1997 by Penguin, proof of its durability and contemporary relevance.

The political radical Anzia Yeziarska, now almost forgotten, had an even greater success with a stream of novels and short stories drawn from her bitter experiences as an impoverished immigrant working in sweat shops, culminating in glamorous adventures in Hollywood when her stunningly successful novel *Hungry Hearts* (1920) was made into a film. She reached the heights of fame, led a very exciting life, and then things began to fall apart. Evelyn Avery's absorbing chapter ends on a somber note: "Yeziarska died lonely and regretful" (39). *Bread Givers*, reprinted fifty years after it was first published in 1925, has been hailed by some feminists as "more meaningful than ever."

Biographies of Yeziarska appeared in 1982 and 1988, published by Twayne and Rutgers. In 1989, the novelist Norma Rosen, the subject of a chapter later in this collection, published *John and Anzia: An American Romance*, "a fictionalized account of the well-documented love affair between Yeziarska and the philosopher John Dewey" (121).

Edna Ferber, born in 1855 in Kalamazoo, Michigan, was to become one of the nation's most popu-

lar, prolific, and influential novelists and playwrights. In all, "she wrote 11 volumes of short stories, 12 novels, and 8 plays, 5 of which were written with George S. Kaufman, including *Dinner at Eight* (1932) and *Stage Door* (1936)" (42), both made into major films, as were the best-selling novels *Showboat* and *Giant*. Ferber was an unobservant but passionately Jewish in her personal life at the same time that she was "virulently anti-Zionist," insisting that "the Jews' home was in their spirit" (57). Although she rarely dealt explicitly with Jewish characters in her fiction, attacks upon religious, ethnic, and class prejudice appear often. This is notably true in *Giant*, where virulent prejudice among white Texans against the large Mexican minority is a major theme.

The volume's Part II explores "Assimilation and Its Discontents" from the 1960s through the 1990s. Of the three writers discussed, only Anne Roiphe is fairly well-known. Two chapters are devoted to Johanna Kaplan (the only author besides the equally obscure Tova Myrvis so honored in this collection). Readers who have never heard of her will be surprised to learn that she has won a handful of major literary awards and that critics have mentioned her "respectfully alongside such distinguished Jewish American writers as

Saul Bellow, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, Cynthia Ozick, and Philip Roth” (79). Skeptics will find themselves running to the library after reading Nahma Sandrow’s “Conversation with Johanna Kaplan” and especially Carol Iannone’s brilliant survey of Kaplan’s work and thought.

Parts III and IV carry the story of the evolving problems and dilemmas of Jewish women in the United States into the twenty-first century, a world radically different from that preceding the Second World War. Though the Jewish world still faces hostility and outright enemies, anti-Semitism has diminished greatly in the United States, while the status of and opportunities for women have improved dramatically. We find, however, much old wine in new bottles. “Rebecca Goldstein’s protagonists,” we read, “are intellectual Jewish women who struggle with their ethnic heritage and religious ambivalence, and seek spirituality and self-fulfillment” (153). As for the work of Allegra Goodman, “Much of her fiction revolves around the preoccupations of middle-class postwar American Jews and the attendant anxieties about constructing an ethos that balances what for Goodman are the two often-competing identities of ‘American’ and ‘Jewish’” (200). And

so it goes. For Jews as well as Gentiles, much here will be both illuminating and surprising in that for many Jews, as Tova Mirvis writes: “to live according to Jewish law is to live knowingly out of step with the outside world” (246).

The final section is by Susanne Klingenstein, who is the author of two superb books worth the attention of any academic: *Jews in the American Academy, 1900–1940* (Yale University Press, 1991) and *Enlarging America: The Cultural Work of Jewish Literary Scholars, 1930–1990* (Syracuse University Press, 1998). Her wide learning and abundant gifts as a writer are on vivid display in the lengthy chapter entitled “Failed Conquests,” whose primary subject is intermarriage and its conflicts, particularly the special complexities of sexual relations between American Jewish women and German men. Insights and surprises enliven almost every page.

The volume concludes with Tova Mirvis’s lucid essay on the objectives and problems of “writing between two worlds,” followed by her revealing conversation with Evelyn Avery. For those wishing to pursue these subjects further, an appendix provides a useful “Select Annotated Bibliography of Contemporary Jewish American Women Writers.”