

Ruth Panofsky

INTRODUCTION

This special issue of *Canadian Jewish Studies/Études Juives Canadiennes* brings together for the first time a series of critical essays that examine writing by Canadian Jewish women.¹ As critic Tamara Palmer Seiler acknowledges, Jewish women “have produced literary works that are among the best and most loved in the Canadian literary canon” (131), and she cites as evidence the work of Helen Weinzweig, Miriam Waddington, Shirley Faessler, Fredelle Bruser Maynard, and Adele Wiseman. Seiler laments, however, that the notable achievement of Canadian Jewish women writers “is not always as widely recognized and acknowledged as it should be” (132). This collection of essays – which ranges widely in scope and considers writing in Yiddish as well as English – aims, in part, to rectify the lack of recognition accorded writing by Canadian Jewish women.

This project is rooted in my own interest in archival research and an understanding of the archive as a site for potential discovery and recuperation of a subject. In the call for papers circulated for this special issue, I encouraged the submission of essays that drew on archival resources. I hoped to receive essays that would corroborate my experience of archival research as exhilarating and confirm the archive as a rich source of study, particularly in the case of writers whose work “gives voice to and celebrates life at the margins rather than at the centres of various kinds of social power” (Seiler 13).

Three of the five essays gathered here are founded, in large part, on archival research, while the remaining two essays foreground investigation – rooted in a variety of primary and secondary sources – as a seminal theme for the author under consideration. Four of the five essays – Marita Grimwood’s study of Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces* is the exception – also break new ground in considering writers whose work has received scant scholarly attention.

In their profiles of Esther Shumiatcher-Hirschbein and Chava Rosenfarb, Faith Jones and Goldie Morgentaler respectively introduce Yiddish writers whose work has been largely inaccessible to an English audience. These original studies rely on archival material to introduce the life and work of two remarkable writers, and add immeasurably to our understanding of North American Yiddish literature, its links to European Yiddish writing and culture, and an ever-diminishing Yiddish readership. Poet Esther Shumiatcher, who immigrated to Calgary early in the twentieth century and enjoyed a writing career based in the United States, lived a cosmopolitan life that included worldwide travel, a community of renowned Yiddish writers, and marriage to her beloved spouse and literary inspiration, the playwright Peretz Hirschbein. After a lifetime of lonely struggle to reach a Yiddish audience, many of the works by award-winning writer Chava Rosenfarb are today available in English. Now over 80 years old, Rosenfarb’s substantial oeuvre includes poems, stories, and novels that inimitably render her profound, brutalizing experience of the Holocaust.

Laura McLaughlan’s seminal work on the early poetry of Miriam Waddington incorporates, for the first time, Waddington’s life writing held in Library and Archives Canada. By grounding her analysis in the evidence provided by Waddington’s early journals, McLaughlan elucidates the intellectual and emotional strivings of a young modernist poet who self-consciously sought to shape her craft and her life in opposition to prevailing norms for women. As McLaughlan shows, a young, ambitious Waddington rejected the passive, domestic role and immersed herself in the work of becoming a poet and

cultivating a distinctive voice. Donna Krolik Hollenberg charts the conflicting pull toward identification as a Jewish woman that is felt first as threat and finally as liberation in Rhea Tregebov's poetry. In her study of *Fugitive Pieces* as memorializing text, Marita Grimwood probes the problematic "witnessing" in fiction of so traumatizing an actual event as the Holocaust. Contemporary writers Tregebov and Michaels can only envision a future by returning to the past.

Miriyam Glazer has commented that much literature written by Jewish American women reveals a "visceral identification . . . with the forces of life" (125-26). The essays gathered here suggest that the same may be said of Esther Shumiatcher-Hirschbein, Chava Rosenfarb, Miriam Waddington, Rhea Tregebov, and Anne Michaels, whose writing mines "the substance and the contours" (Glazer 127) of their experiences as Jewish Canadian women. They share a common interest in the theme of loss, for example, felt poignantly in their work as the widow's grief (Shumiatcher-Hirschbein); the survivor's pain (Rosenfarb); the social worker's identification with private struggles of other women (Waddington); the mother's concern for her chronically ill son (Tregebov); or the novelist's attempt to unearth and comprehend the trauma of the Holocaust (Michaels). They regularly explore the place of Jewish women in a culture and a religion that privileges men. As daughters, wives, mothers, and nurturers, they connect deeply with others; in their work as writers, however, they establish a distance and a separateness that sets them apart from other women. In fact, if there is a thread that links the work studied here, it is the irresolution of ambiguity and tension expressed most often as the struggle to come to terms with one's identity as a Jew, a woman, and a writer.

This collection represents a beginning. It should signal the need for further study of writing by Jewish Canadian women: works published in French; works by canonized and non-canonized writers not included here; works by lesbian writers; and works by emerging writers, for example. In fact, if this special issue inspires scholars, critics, and readers to explore beyond its limited scope, to unearth the vast riches of writing by Jewish

Canadian women, it will have served an important purpose.

For research assistance, I am indebted to Erin Kobayashi.

Works Cited

Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme 16.4 (Fall 1996). Jewish Women in Canada issue.

Fireweed: A Feminist Quarterly 35 (Spring 1992). Jewish Women/Femmes Juives issue.

Glazer, Miriyam. "The Will to Be Known: An Introduction to Contemporary Jewish-American Women Writers." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 11.2 (Fall 1992): 125-27.

Seiler, Tamara Palmer. "Carrying on the Tradition: Jewish Women Writers in Canada." *Canadian Woman Studies* 16.4 (Fall 1996): 131-33.

Notes

¹In 1996, *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* devoted a special issue to the subject of "Jewish Women in Canada"; it included scholarly essays, personal essays, poetry, and book reviews. In 1992, *Fireweed: A Feminist Quarterly* devoted a special issue to the subject of "Jewish Women/Femmes Juives"; it included personal essays, photo essays, poetry, and art work.