

## Reviews

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**Identity Papers: Contemporary Narratives of American Jewishness.** Helene Meyers. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011. 247 pages. \$70.00 cloth; \$23.95 paper.

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More than thirty years ago, Irving Howe declared that “American Jewish fiction has probably moved past its high point,” yet today, scholars of Jewish literature generally take the patent falsity of this statement for granted. A host of critics, including Ted Solotaroff, Morris Dickstein, Andrew Furman, Derek Rubin, and Janet Burstein, have argued that we have witnessed a literary revival in the years since Howe made his famous, contentious statement. The question is not whether or not there is a thriving Jewish American literary presence, but rather whether, as several critics have asked, there are new tensions at the core of this writing that replace the theme of marginality characteristic of previous fiction.

Helene Meyers’s *Identity Papers: Contemporary Narratives of American Jewishness* attempts to answer that question. Her argument, that “contemporary Jewish American literature redefines Jewish difference and resists a lachrymose view of contemporary Jewish American life,” is based on the premise that, in a post-assimilated culture, contemporary American Jews are all Jews “by choice” (3). Meyers sees this choice as an opportunity to open conversations about difference that do not revert to particularist or essentialist models. Contemporary Jewish American fictional works are sites where such conversations are being creatively and productively engaged, as Meyers explains: “here Jewish identity trouble is not the path to deracinated selves but rather a potential creative source, a well that might nurture new ways of becoming Jewish” (7). Meyers uses Susan Stanford Friedman’s concept of relational positionality to focus on negotiations of difference among Jews that reveal the countless creative ways it is possible to be Jewish or to represent Jewishness. She sees, for example, the so-called problem of assimilation as a potential site of transformation, with “some seemingly assimilative strategies . . . hav[ing] the effect of affirming Jewish difference” (13).

In five distinct chapters, including an impressively comprehensive

introduction, Meyers focuses on four marginalized categories of contemporary American Jewishness. She uses these categories—"feminist Orthodoxy, queerness, off-whiteness, and intermarriage" (3)—to initiate her examination of redefinitions of Jewish difference, an undertaking she sees as both literary and critical. Her goal is to analyze a set of texts reflecting a "distinctive national ethos," which, she explains, is one of the reasons that she does not make Israel a focus of her study (17). Additionally, she explains her omission of literature directly examining the Holocaust as a way of privileging "Jewish agency, Jewish creativity, and Jewish life" over loss and mourning, a means of "refusing to grant Hitler a posthumous victory" (16). Meyers's omissions are calculated and persuasively argued, serving to sharpen the focus of an affirming and productive examination of contemporary Jewish American life and literature.

In questioning the dominant lens through which Orthodoxy and gender have been examined, Meyers focuses on well-known Jewish American literary works such as Allegra Goodman's *Kaaterskill Falls* (1998) and Tova Mirvis's *The Ladies Auxiliary* (1999). In her chapter on "Feminism and Orthodoxy," Meyers examines Goodman's and Mirvis's books, among several others, as a way of "challenging feminist narratives that reduce Orthodoxy to patriarchy" (36). These texts reveal that certain traditions, while they may have resulted in misogynistic practices in the past, might have "feminist potential" in contemporary Jewish life (42).

Conversely, in her chapter on "Queering the Jewish Family," Meyers focuses on Jewish American literary works that "have received much less critical attention than they merit" in order to argue that gay and lesbian Jewish experiences have been marginalized in contemporary American literature (79). Through her readings of a diverse literary collection that includes Jyl Lynn Felman's "The State of Extreme Agitation" (1996), Lev Raphael's *Dancing on Tisha B'Av* (1990), Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* (1978), and Lesléa Newman's *In Every Laugh a Tear* (1992), Meyers argues for the importance of "queering the Jewish family," rather than trying to "assimilate Jewish queers" (97). She is interested in how these narratives reimagine Jewish conceptions of kinship and question normative valuations of reproduction and family life, which too often remain uncontested.

The second half of *Identity Papers* centers on the racial conceptualization of Jewish identity in both canonical and lesser-known Jewish American literary works. In her chapter "The Color of White Jewry," Meyers reads Philip Roth's novels *The Human Stain* (2000) and *The Plot Against America* (2004) alongside memoirs such as James McBride's *The Color of Water* (1996) and Rebecca Walker's *Black, White, and Jewish*

(2001). Meyers rejects the notion that Jews easily can be dismissed as white in contemporary American life. Instead, she sees both “the perils and possibilities of Jewishness through assigned and/or chosen off-whiteness” (126). Recognizing the complexity of the oversimplified whiteness/non-whiteness dichotomy also allows for a continued recognition of the diverse groups of people incorporated in the term *Jewish*, such as those from diverse racial, geographic, and ethnic backgrounds.

*Identity Papers* ends with what Meyers terms “A Polemical Epilogue” on narratives of intermarriage. The topic has received a great deal of attention as a potential threat to the culture of Jewish life in the United States. Meyers sees “certain responses to the perceived threat of intermarriage” as the destructive factor (179). She joins contemporary scholars, including David Biale and Keren McGinity, who contend that “the cultural meaning of intermarriage is not static” and that it can present opportunities for renewed and thoughtful considerations of what it means to affiliate as Jewish (181). Meyers recognizes that her epilogue literalizes the “metaphorical intermarriages” that she focuses on throughout her text, and she calls upon “skeptical . . . readers to, at the very least, provide me and the writerly voices highlighted here a fair hearing” for the argument on the potential of narratives of intermarriage to widen the scope of definitions of Jewishness in contemporary America (179). This last-minute qualification downplays an otherwise confident and thorough argument for the need to redefine Jewishness.

*Identity Papers* is an important, thoughtful text that will appeal to those with an interest in postmodern inquiries into multiculturalism, identity theory, and selfhood. For those looking for an overview of contemporary Jewish American identity theory and literary studies, the opening chapter provides an unrivaled introduction.

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