

# LET'S TALK ABOUT IT!

## JEWISH LITERATURE

*Identity and Imagination*

## NEIGHBORS

The World Next Door

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# NEIGHBORS

## The World Next Door

Jeremy Dauber

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From the beginning of their history, if one is to believe the relevant texts, the Jews have been a neighboring people: a separate, identifiably different group living near or among other peoples, nations, or states. For much of antiquity, Jews purchased, conquered, surrendered, fought over, and shared a remarkably small plot of land with a dizzying array of peoples. Some, like the Philistines, remain familiar names; others, like the Jebusites, Meholathites, Pherethites, and Sidonians, are almost entirely forgotten. The competing empires of the biblical and post-biblical periods—the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans—took their turns as conquerors, occupiers, and neighbors to the Jews; the decidedly mixed results culminated in the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 c.e., and an end to Jewish autonomy in the area soon after. Exile and dispersion became Jewish characteristics, and Diaspora communities took root in Greece, Rome, North Africa, India, Persia, and elsewhere. The medieval and modern periods, with their expulsions and migrations, have seen Jewish communities form in places like Spain, France, Italy, Russia, Germany, Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, China, Morocco, Iraq—and, of course, Israel and America.

Jewish history, then, is in many ways a history of encounters with neighbors, and the story of the Jewish neighbor is, in turn, a story of the wider world. But if the Jewish experience has been in some ways exceptional, the experience finds ready parallels in those of other peoples—especially in contemporary America. Nineteenth-century Jews, trying to make a living in small towns out West, faced challenges not so different from those confronting Latinos today making their way in Midwestern farm country. The experiences of the immigrant Jews of the Lower East Side, trying to understand and be understood by their Italian and Irish neighbors, might well resonate with the thousands of Arab immigrants immersing themselves in the ethnically diverse communities of Detroit. Or with those from India who are creating places for themselves in South Carolina's suburbs. Or . . . but the list can go on. The history of Jews' encounters with their neighbors is its own particular story, but it is also part of a larger story of cultural encounters.

If we start with the Bible, we can see that Jews' relations with their neighbors were complex from the beginning. The Egyptians, for instance, were hardly the best of neighbors to the Jewish population dwelling in the land of Goshen. If we were to take this as our only example, we might subscribe to what the famed historian Salo Baron dubbed "the lachrymose view of Jewish history," where all subsequent Jewish history becomes the

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continual repetition of that essential and implacable hostility between Jews and their neighbors. This view does not lack for evidence: a weary and bloodstained catalog of pogroms, crusades, riots, expulsions, blood libels, and other acts of violence and persecution. But the Exodus narrative is hardly the only biblical text that merits our attention. Consider the subtle mixture of attraction and repulsion, of desire and anger that animates Samson's relationships with the non-Jewish women he woos. Or the Joseph story, which begins in captivity, but ends up with Joseph counterfeiting his powerful Egyptian "neighbors" so expertly that his own brothers fail to recognize him. The prophetic refrain against worshipping neighboring peoples' gods, so prevalent in the latter part of the Bible, is in its own way a testament to the appeal those neighboring cultures held for many Jews.

This attraction, of course, worked both ways: What is the story of Ruth, after all, if not a tale of a non-Jewish woman (from the bordering land of Moab), who comes to her neighbors' place, and, liking what she sees, decides to become one of them? Ruth, known in Jewish sources as the great-grandmother of King David, shows the appeal that Jewish life had and continues to have for some not raised within it. On the other hand, the Bible soberly records how intolerance can descend into genocidal bigotry, as in Haman's infamous speech to King Ahasuerus in the Book of Esther: "There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them." Esther's eventual triumph over Haman—a triumph accomplished by being simultaneously Ahasuerus's queen and Mordechai's proudly Jewish niece—ends up as a fantasy of removing and maintaining that Jewish difference, an exultant expression of the possibilities of being both a neighbor and comfortably at home at the same time.

The Book of Esther, with its depiction of a Jewish minority dwarfed by their non-Jewish neighbors, became a central book for Jewish self-conception in the Diaspora, those communities of the Mediterranean and beyond that become the simultaneously fragmented and vibrant centers of Jewish life. Despite their scattered existence, Jews shared texts, rituals, even family connections, and their relations with their neighbors exhibited rough similarities. For the better part of the next two millennia, most Jews would navigate their way under Muslim and Christian rule—under "crescent and cross,"—and Diaspora life was typically governed by a system of laws that were generally premised on Jews' inferiority by virtue of their religion. Whether regulating Jewish dress or the height of synagogues, these laws established visible markers of Jews' separate and unequal status. At the same time, they betray a widespread concern—among both Jews and non-Jews—about conversion. At a time when the concept of "secularism" essentially did not exist, religion was not merely a question of theological beliefs; it informed all aspects of daily life. To trade your faith for that of your neighbor was seen as the profoundest kind of treason. To claim a convert, however, could be seen as a great triumph, and the Christian and Muslim majorities often welcomed Jewish converts, seeing such conversions as confirmations of their theological beliefs.

All this concern about conversion reminds us that despite the barriers between Jews and their neighbors, there was enough social, intellectual, and cultural interchange to merit concern. And if a neighbor's religious ideals could be captivating, so, too, could his or her eyes, smile, or voice. (Samson wasn't the only one tempted.) Nor was neighborly romance limited to the erotic sphere; if Jews have been dubbed "the people of the book," the books



they loved often were written by their neighbors. From the rabbinic authorities of the sixth-century Babylonian Talmud to the leading commentators of seventeenth-century Eastern Europe, everyone had something to say about the permissibility of reading “foreign books.” Their arguments tell us something about how Jewish readers and writers viewed their neighbors, literarily and otherwise. On the one hand, Jewish authorities found real wisdom in neighboring cultures—in fields like philosophy, natural science, medicine—and valued it highly. On the other, they saw the potential for non-Jewish literature to lead Jews astray, to divert them from more edifying reading material. The European rabbis of the new age of printing, for example, inveighed against their communities’ habits of devouring the new chivalric romances translated or adapted from the French, German, or Italian, feeling that long Sabbath or holiday afternoons should be spent perusing morally instructive fables or legends of great rabbis.

These age-old questions—How should Jews respond to the world around them? How high and firm should these barriers between peoples and cultures be?—became especially pressing at the beginning of the modern period. In the mid-eighteenth century, Western European powers began to adopt state and national policies of civil emancipation that allowed Jews to more easily enter general society without conversion; this new openness, limited as it was, accelerated and deepened Jews’ interest in becoming more like their neighbors, both socially and philosophically. Jews read European books, collected European art, modeled European fashions. The salons hosted by intelligent and witty women like Henrietta Herz and Rahel Varnhagen, which became the toast of Berlin, found their counterpart in the figure of Moses Mendelssohn, the Jewish philosopher admired by Immanuel Kant and the model for Nathan the Wise, the saintly Jew in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s dramatic masterpiece. If a man like Lessing, one of the German Enlightenment’s most cherished authors and thinkers, could think so highly of his Jewish neighbor, the reasoning went, the future for Jews in Germany and elsewhere seemed bright indeed. Though traditionalists fought these changes, many champions of what would become known as the Jewish Enlightenment looked forward to an idyllic coexistence based on mutual respect and admiration between neighbors.

That’s not the way it turned out. By the turn of the twentieth century, Jewish optimism about the possibilities of social and political integration had faded in the face of grim realities—Russian pogroms, the Dreyfus trial in France, even the return, briefly, of the medieval blood libel, accusations that Jews butchered their neighbors’ children for religious purposes. While many Jews continued to espouse the ideal of a free and integrated Europe—often imagined as the culmination of a socialist revolution—others began to contemplate equally radical solutions: emigration to the New World and Zionism. Adherents of the former position suggested that a new set of neighbors, and the new life that went with them, would have to be better than the current one; the much smaller group who subscribed to the latter position dreamed of a society where their interactions with their non-Jewish neighbors would be far less important than the conduct of their own, national, affairs.

The majority of twentieth-century European Jews, however, chose neither of these options, and the fate of much of that community is tragically well known: Between 1939 and 1945, six million Jews were systematically killed by their neighbors. It is impossible to reduce the complexities of the Holocaust to a few sentences. For now, it will have to be enough to say



that while the destruction of European Jewry grew out of specific Nazi ideas and policies, it could not have been carried out without the acquiescence and often active collaboration of millions of ordinary citizens, some of whom seem to have used these events as an opportunity to act on long-held resentments. That a small number of non-Jews risked their lives to protect their Jewish neighbors illustrates the extremes to which neighborly relations were pushed during this period. Much of Jewish literature from the period can be seen either as an attempt to chronicle the unspeakable (Emmanuel Ringelblum's diaries) or to wrestle with what seems to be metaphysically impossible (Elie Wiesel's early novels). But other writers, both Jews and non-Jews, have tried to think about the people on the other side of the ghetto walls or camp fences: Why did they act as they did? What did they suffer? And what might the lessons of those actions, those experiences, mean for my own ethnic group, country, city, or block?

The Holocaust and the subsequent establishment of the state of Israel has led to yet another redrawing of the Jewish landscape, with an unprecedented concentration of the world Jewish population in two places: Israel and the United States. Though immigrants to the United States did not find quite the promised "golden land," the level of tolerance and acceptance they found in America made for a fundamentally different relationship to their non-Jewish neighbors. This largely amicable relationship only deepened as the 20<sup>th</sup> century ran its course. The renaissance in American Jewish culture during the past half-century reflects the many different ways in which Jewish artists, writers, and filmmakers have internalized the literature and culture of America as a whole. Bernard Malamud's novels, to take just one example, range from arguably the greatest novel written about the national pastime (*The Natural*) to a look at the American West through the prism of an American university (*A New Life*) to an updated take on the Jewish-Christian theological debate (*The Assistant*). And America has opened its arms wide in return: The evidence, in the form of prominent Jewish representation in groups ranging from Supreme Court justices to rap stars, to say nothing of the simple but by no means unnoteworthy ability to live safely and to flourish, is so well known as to require no further elaboration. This very success, however, has left many Jews—and Jewish writers—with unresolved questions: Are there limits to American tolerance? What are the dangers of assimilation? Are Jews no different from their neighbors? Or profoundly different?

Compare this to the state of affairs in Israel, where, both inside and outside the country, the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish neighbors is, to put it mildly, highly charged. These fraught encounters have permeated every aspect of Jewish life in Israel, and the country's belles-lettres are no exception; major writers like Yehuda Amichai, A. B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz, and David Grossman have, in their fictions, memoirs, poetry, and reportage, turned to the questions of how Jews treat their neighbors. But Israeli writers are under no obligation to discuss what is known in the country as "the situation," and many writers, like Etgar Keret, Savyon Liebrecht, and Yehoshua Kenaz, are equally attentive to the wide variety of neighbors within a Jewish country and community—differences between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, between religious and secular, between kibbutzniks and urbanites. In Israel as elsewhere, these writers remind us, neighbors come in all shapes and sizes, and distinguishing the good from the bad, the friends from the enemies, the desirable from the dangerous, is always a matter of discovery.

**A. B. Yehoshua, *A Journey to the End of the Millennium***

A. B. Yehoshua is one of Israel's leading writers and no stranger to epic novels featuring extensive journeys in time and space. His *Mr. Mani* traces six generations of the Mani family from Palestine to Crete to Israel, and in *Open Heart*, an Israeli doctor is irrevocably changed by his visit to a small town in India. But *Journey to the End of the Millennium*, which traces a voyage through Europe in the year 999, is even more ambitious. Ben Attar, a Jewish merchant, is encountering difficulties with his two business partners, his cousin Raphael Abulafia and the Muslim Abu Lutfi. The widowed Abulafia has taken a new European wife, whose disapproval of Ben Attar's polygamy leads to the dissolution of their partnership and eventually to juridical proceedings that will foreshadow the major schism of the next Jewish millennium.

According to Jewish tradition, 999 is the year before Rabbi Gershom, the "Light of the Exile," issued his famed decree prohibiting polygamy among Ashkenazic (roughly, Western European) Jews, thus separating them further from Sephardic (Iberian and Near Eastern) Jews. Yehoshua's novel shows how Jews can sometimes be as much strangers to each other as to non-Jews, and how that foreign country we call the past has significant relevance to our understanding of the present day. On the most intimate level, Yehoshua shows how deep the gulf can be between neighbors who share the same bed: The novel's tensions between husband and wife (and wife) drive the plot more deeply and fundamentally than any discussions of business or jurisprudence. Yehoshua's choice to set the novel in 999 also reminds us how even the most fundamental ways we measure our universe—dates and times—can themselves be different from that of our neighbors. The millennial excitement among the neighboring Christians is largely irrelevant to the Jews and Muslims, who have different calendars—except that it might lead to outbursts of dangerous violence against strangers, especially Jewish strangers.

But to emphasize difference and schism between neighbors would be unfair to the book and the historical period it purports to describe, as well as the contemporary world it allegorically stands in for. After all, Ben Attar's partner Abu Lutfi is a Muslim; and while Ben Attar does favor his cousin's welfare over his other partner's, one gets the sense that the warm professional relationship between Jew and Muslim is, for Yehoshua, an ideal paradigm for the Arab-Jewish question today. Yehoshua's optimism is based, in part, on his own experience as a novelist. His astute portraits of a wide variety of characters, and his ability to understand their ideas and emotions, serves as evidence that people are able to understand one another—and from understanding can come mutual respect and coexistence.

**Isaac Babel, *Red Cavalry***

By the time the October Revolution broke out, Isaac Babel was no stranger to the front; he had been conscripted and sent to the Romanian front in 1917, at the age of 23. He was also not entirely unknown in the literary world; the prominent Russian writer Maxim Gorki had published some of his stories in his literary journals as early as 1916. But it was in the 1920s, during the Soviet Polish War, that Babel's two experiences came together in an unforgettable way. The new Soviet Union, wishing to extend the permanent revolution to Poland, began its campaign in 1920; Babel joined the First Cavalry of the Soviet Red Army, then under the control of General Semyon Budyonny, as a correspondent for the Soviet news agency, ROSTA. The stories he wrote based on his experiences appeared in newspapers and magazines



between 1923 and 1926, when they were published as a book. Budyonny's campaign, despite some early triumphs in the summer of 1920, suffered reverses that led to an eventual retreat; Babel's unflinching presentation of the cavalry's failures—military and moral—earned him a powerful enemy in Budyonny, but also established his literary reputation.

The cavalry itself was composed in significant part of Cossacks, the Ukrainian irregulars and expert horsemen who had been a staple of anti-Semitic attacks and of popular Jewish nightmares for centuries. Babel, via his fictional alter ego, Lyutov faces a series of powerful questions when he is, as we might now say, embedded with the Cossacks. How can he balance his intellectual bent (Lyutov wears glasses, a fact made much of by various parties throughout the book) with his genuine admiration for the physical prowess of his fellow soldiers? Is it ever possible for him—as an intellectual or a Jew—to truly become like them? In the story "The Death of Dolgushov," Lyutov is unable to dispatch a fellow comrade who has been wounded in his gut and is dying painfully; in "After the Battle," he begs fate "for the simplest ability the ability to kill a man." We are not encouraged to see this as ironic, or his failure as anything but a failure.

That is not to say, however, that Lyutov (or Babel) embraces his Cossack neighbors—or the Communist cause they serve—with open arms. In "Gedali," for example, Lyutov's encounter with another Jew shows his disillusionment with the revolution. The soldiers, at times, seem to use the revolution to express their own violent impulses, and the neighbors they encounter—Jew and Christian alike—discover an unenviable solidarity as the victims of their mayhem. Babel's work was suppressed at times by the Soviet Union, and through most of the twentieth century it has been available in incomplete, infelicitous, or inaccurate translations. Nevertheless, its powerful images of life during wartime, written under the most harrowing of circumstances and eventually leading, at least in part, to Babel's execution at Stalin's hands, have remained unforgettable to those who have encountered.

### **Jan Gross, *Neighbors***

Gross's book is the only work of non-fiction on this list, though the reader devoutly wishes that the events he describes were only the product of his imagination: On July 10, 1941, practically the entire Jewish community of the small town of Jedwabne was massacred—not by the Germans, but by the Jews' Polish neighbors. Gross, a professor of history at Princeton, lays out his damning discoveries clearly and succinctly, combining broad histories of Polish-Jewish relations with detailed analysis of eyewitness testimonies given to illuminate a phenomenon seemingly beyond explanation.

While emphasizing that there are no neat conclusions, no firm answers, Gross stresses certain causes for the massacre. He suggests that there were financial motives, that the Poles wanted the Jews' property as well as their lives. He reminds us how Jedwabne was changing hands between the Germans and the Russians, and how the Poles demonized the Jews as enemies, faithful to outside forces. He also makes a compelling case that even those who might not have taken direct part in the massacre were aware of it—and, probably, watching. This is not the story of a few individuals, but of a community and a nation.

Gross uses this case study to force a re-examination of an aspect of Poland's history that Polish authorities had tried to keep buried for more than half a century. Gross suggests that even Polish historians with no particular agenda were willing to leave the history of



Polish Jewry to specialists on the margins, as if “the wiping out of one-third of its urban population [can] be anything other than a central issue of Poland’s modern history.” *Neighbors*, which sparked massive discussion throughout Poland when it was published there in 2000, becomes a case study in the making and unmaking of history: how stories are told, how they’re hidden, how they come to light. But even more, it shows how the conception of who and what your neighbors are is powerfully influenced by stereotype, imagination, and emotion—and that such conceptions can breed terrible realities.

### **Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant***

Malamud, along with Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, is considered one of the great Jewish writers of the middle of the twentieth century; *The Assistant*, Malamud’s second novel, is certainly one of the finest examples of his work. Published in 1957, at a time when America’s Jewish community was beginning to enjoy the long period of postwar success that would last until the present day, Malamud’s parable of failure and suffering serves as a sharp riposte to that bright future.

Morris Bober, one of the novel’s two protagonists, seems to live to suffer; the owner of a small grocery in a decaying neighborhood, he dies by inches. Malamud’s descriptions of Bober’s worsening health, his vain attempts to ensure a future for his grocery and for his daughter, may be some of the saddest examples of quiet desperation in American literature. The resulting resignation and suffering, though, is not quite Jewish—indeed, precisely *not* Jewish; in a discussion with his assistant, the Catholic Frank Alpine, Bober says, “I suffer for you,” thus aligning himself with another Jew who is believed, two thousand years ago, to have suffered for other people’s sins. Are Bober’s Christlike tribulations Malamud’s way of suggesting that American Jews, in an increasingly welcoming and strongly Christian country, are taking on the characteristics of the dominant culture? (Many, if not most, of Bober’s customers and neighbors are not Jewish.) To suggest this is to forget the second protagonist. Frank Alpine, whose background is a secret and whose eventual fate will not be revealed here, proves that America cannot remain unchanged by the Jews in its presence, and that some of that change comes from the sensibility of law, discipline, and unwavering commitment that Bober displays to his grocery and to his daughter.

His daughter: If law and discipline are attractive to Frank Alpine, the repentant law-breaker, Helen Bober is even more so. The novel is a sustained treatment, if not of intermarriage precisely, then certainly of romance between Jews and non-Jews. Helen’s name, that of the classical object of desire, and the fact that a volume of Shakespeare figures heavily in their courting, remind us that in this American world, notions of romance are shaped by neighboring forces, and that Frank’s appeal is not only personal, but, somehow, national. The novel does not end well, exactly; but the way it does end seems to suggest that Malamud understands that some American dreams—of full integration and communal difference, for example—are in conflict, and that painful choices need to be made. In that, the novel’s honesty seems as painful as the trials of poor Morris Bober.

### **Gish Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land***

Most of the works about Jews and neighbors, no matter the time and place of their composition, have one thing in common: the idea that the Jews are members of a minority





culture, trying to come to terms with the majority around them, either by adopting or resisting its ways of living and thinking. Certainly that's the case in almost all of American Jewish literature. But Gish Jen turns that perspective on its head: In her novel, set in the late '60s and early '70s, the Jews have become the representatives of the majority culture, and it's Mona Chang, the daughter of Chinese immigrants, who has become the one to struggle with questions of identity and belonging, who is the "new Jew."

Mona's attempts to fit into this new, Jewish majority culture—and the difficulties those attempts generate—follow familiar lines. She becomes attracted to Judaism's religious teachings, even if those teachings are, in the novel, somewhat tinged with the period's New Age-y sensibility. Even more so, she becomes attracted to Jewish people, especially her boyfriend Seth Mandel. Questions of acculturation, then, become necessarily intertwined with questions of romance, and, eventually, of family: Like many a Jewish immigrant, Mona has to navigate the complicated emotional shoals of mixed parental pride and disapproval. For Mona, these negotiations are shaded by the sentiment that her parents—particularly her mother, Helen—have never understood America, that they lack a certain wisdom that the native-born possess.

But Mona is not nearly as wise as she thinks; much of the humor of this genuinely funny novel lies in its evocation of the typical confusion and frenzy of adolescence, especially of adolescent romance. But it also arises from Jen's gentle if pointed satire of a new kind of Jewish affluence and Jewish success: keeping up with the Goldbergs, if you will. Jen's talent, though, is to combine these two comic strains to produce more serious results. Mona's inexperience ends up becoming less innocent and more dangerous, particularly when it comes to the issue of race: Mona and her successful, affluent family inherit the strained history of black-Jewish relations as well, and the complicated interplay of racism, rich liberal guilt, and bad judgment leads to a series of crises later in the novel. By the book's end, though, the optimism of the novel's title has been borne out; Mona's attempts to create a synthesis of past and future, of Jewish and Chinese, of old family and new, are largely successful. Gish Jen's appropriation of the title of Mary Antin's famous memoir, *The Promised Land*, is not ironic or cynical; Mona's world is a Promised Land.

### **Background Literature**

The following scholarly and literary works were referenced in the essay and are recommended for those who would like to explore the themes and subjects discussed in greater depth.

#### ***The Book of Judges***

As the Five Books of Moses end, the Jewish people are on the verge of entering the Land of Israel; as the Book of Joshua ends, they are on their way to finding their place within it. But in the Book of Judges, which immediately follows, the Jews are trying to make and keep their place, threatened by neighbors both physically and spiritually. The book's stories of the Jewish leaders who rise up to meet those challenges are stories not just of survival, but of maintaining identity and fidelity to Jewish ideals and laws.

#### ***The Book of Esther***

The first great book of Diaspora Judaism, the *Book of Esther* features neighbors who are both homicidally hostile and cautiously welcoming. Mordechai and Esther—whose names, let it be noted, come from those of foreign gods—struggle to save the Jewish people, but more subtly, they



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struggle over how they can practice their Judaism in Ahasuerus' court: openly or in disguise? The question has echoed through the centuries.

***The Book of Ruth***

How firm is the barrier between Jew and non-Jew, after all? The story of Ruth, her conversion to Judaism, and her relations with her mother-in-law Naomi and future husband Boaz remind us that the question of what it means to be a Jew—or a Jew's neighbor—has never been as clear as some might have thought.

**Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews***

If the first two decades of the twentieth century were, for the American Jewish community, about millions of Eastern European Jews settling down on American soil, the 1920s were about those Jews settling into America. Alexander's absorbing history—focusing on individuals like Arnold Rothstein, Felix Frankfurter, and Al Jolson—talks about how American Jews became an inseparable part of their American neighbors' landscape in a particularly memorable decade.

**Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen***

The beginning of modern Jewish life, in Germany, can be summed up for some in the image of the salon: a place where Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors interacted socially and casually, caught up by their shared love for a universal (by which they meant German high culture). By tracing the life of one of the most important salonnières—who, ultimately, converted to Christianity—Hannah Arendt ventures her own assessment of the promises and failures of modernity.

**Steven Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers***

Do Jews have more in common with each other, or with their non-Jewish neighbors? This is the question that Steven Aschheim addresses in his masterful history of the relations between German and Eastern European Jews in the modern era. The distrust between these two groups has become proverbial, and Aschheim, in discussing the roots of that alienation, traces much of it to German Jews' anxiety about what their neighbors thought of them, and their desires to be a part of German society.

**Stephen Bloom, *Postville***

Postville, Iowa, may be a town unlike any other in the United States: a highly Christian town which became home to a substantial ultra-Orthodox community, after a kosher slaughterhouse opened there. In this controversial but gripping account, Bloom traces the tensions that develop between the two groups, as the Jewish population booms and their non-Jewish neighbors react. At the same time, Bloom himself—a secular Jew—becomes a subject of his own writing, as he tries to see where his sympathies, as a writer and as a person, ultimately lie.

**Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross***

Late antiquity and the medieval period, speaking broadly, saw European Jews interacting with two kinds of neighbors: Christian and Muslim. In Cohen's readable comparative study, he traces the history of these two very different relationships, and reminds us, in so doing, how different Jewish historical relations with these groups have been from the way they are today.

**Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance***

Hostile as many of the Jews' neighbors were in the pre-modern period, the Jews didn't necessarily think very highly of them, either. But all generalizations are just that, and it takes a careful historian like Jacob Katz to show how the relationships between Jews and their neighbors—often marked by disputations, ghettos, martyrdoms, and the like—transformed over the centuries to a rapprochement that looked very different.

**Richie Robertson, ed. *The German-Jewish Dialogue: An Anthology of Literary Texts***

From 1749 to 1933, the Jewish question may not have been the most important question facing Germany, but it was certainly a vital one: the country defined itself through its relationship to others, especially the Jewish others in its midst. In this collection of short stories, plays, poems, letters, and diary entries, Robertson tells the story of how the German-Jewish encounter modeled German history itself, from the gleaming Enlightenment to the darkening storm of Nazism.



### Recommended Reading

The following works of literature also explore the theme of neighbors in Jewish literature and are recommended for those who are interested in continuing to read and discuss books on this theme.

#### Aaron Appelfeld, *The Conversion* (or *Badenheim 1939*)

Conversion is not an uncommon topic for Jewish writers, but it's rare to see a work written from the perspective of the convert. In Appelfeld's novel, set in the 1930s, Karl Hubner has become a Christian to advance his career, among other reasons; but the move has done nothing for his sense of comfort and of belonging. The novel—as in all of Appelfeld's novels—is a Holocaust novel without mentioning the word, and in reading it, we are constantly reminded of how utterly futile Hubner's decision is.

#### Saul Bellow, *The Victim*

In Bellow's second novel, Asa Leventhal becomes embroiled in an extremely fraught—and potentially dangerous—series of interactions with a non-Jewish acquaintance. Bellow's genius, though, is to upend our expectations entirely: it's the non-Jew, Kirby Allbee, who accuses his Jewish neighbor of being out to get him. In a slim novel from the mid-20th century, Bellow's handling of the changing nature of Jewish and Christian life in America remains prescient—and unsurpassed.

#### Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*

What if it happened here? Roth's paranoid masterpiece is a counter-history of his family's history and America's, where the United States, through a series of events that seem nightmarishly calm and logical, moves well on its way to becoming an outpost of Nazi Germany. Roth has always had faith in America, but the work raises disturbing questions: how connected are American Jews to their neighbors, really?

#### I.J. Singer, *The Brothers Ashkenazi*

In one of the great Yiddish novels, Singer depicts the rise and fall of Jewish Lodz in the first part of the twentieth century through the story of a single family. The epic scale of the novel extends outward, though, to provide detailed, rich pictures of the lost world of one of Poland's great manufacturing cities, and faithfully replicates the complex web of interactions between Jews, Poles, and others who come to make their livings in times of war, peace, and revolution.

#### Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*

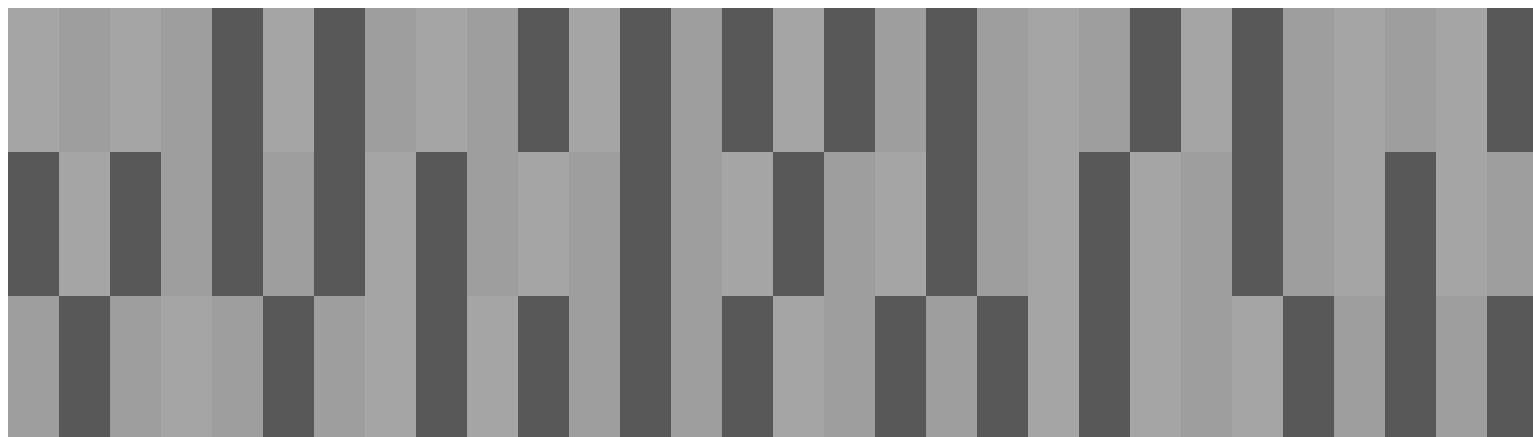
Wharton's place in the canon of American letters as one of its most acute chroniclers of society is secure; she is less well-known, for obvious reasons, in relation to Jewish matters. In *The House of Mirth*, though, her creation of Simon Rosedale—a social striver whose love for the novel's protagonist (and her social station) knows few bounds of propriety and fewer of ethics—is both troublesome and necessary reading, showing Jews of the period from a neighbor's problematic perspective.

#### Jeremy Dauber

Jeremy Dauber is the Atran Assistant Professor of Yiddish Language, Literature, and Culture at Columbia University. He graduated from Harvard College and did his doctoral work at Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. His first book, *Antonio's Devils: Writers of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Jewish Literature*, was published by Stanford University Press. He was also the project director of the National Yiddish Book Center's "Great Jewish Books" project and has given lectures on Jewish literature around the country. In addition, he writes an on-line column on television and movies for the *Christian Science Monitor*, for which he received an award from the National Society of Newspaper Columnists in 2003.

*We are always looking for the book it is necessary to read next.* SAUL BELLOW

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