

WHO WE ARE; On Being (and Not Being) A Jewish American Writer

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WHO WE ARE; On Being (and Not Being) A Jewish American Writer is a collection of twenty-nine essays edited by Derek Rubin and published in 2005 by Schocken Books, New York. The essays were written after the Second World War on different occasions by the major Jewish American writers such as: Saul Bellow, Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozick, E. L. Doctorow, Philip Roth, Max Apple, Erica Jong, Johanna Kaplan, Rebecca Goldstein, Lev Raphael, Jonathan Rosen, etc. The dialogue that can be constructed by listening to the diverse voices of these writers is centered around several issues: for whom is the Jewish-American literature written, what makes an “ethnic” writer different from an American one, what is the Jewish identity and how it is visible in the works of these authors, can these elements survive in the literature of the contemporary multicultural America? Basically, the question that they are trying to answer is what it means for them to be a Jew and a writer in America, especially as their community seems to grow more and more estranged from their immigrant past and become fully acculturated and integrated in the affluent American life.

Saul Bellow rejects the process of pigeon-holing writers in categories such as “Jewish (American) writer” since he believes that fiction cannot be imprisoned by such constraining limitations and since American life itself functions as a nourishing source for his creation. His opinion is doubled in almost the same terms by that of Philip Roth, another writer of Jewish origin who has entered the American canon. Answering the critiques raised by the members of his own community regarding the apparently negative way in which he painted Jews in his stories, he admits writing for the American Jews as a larger audience and not endorsing the role of public speaker on behalf of his ethnic community. It is not necessarily the ethnic background of his characters that matters, but their human quality; he is rendering in his novels and stories people in general, not Jews. The same dichotomy between the literary depiction of human consciousness as being universal versus the otherness of one’s ethnic roots is present in the essay written by E.L. Doctorow. When he mentions “literature as assimilation” he actually refers to the

assimilation of the larger culture into the specificity of the book's representations, and not, as one might have expected, the reflection of the sociological process into art.

A different point of view is brought by Cynthia Ozick for whom a Jewish book should necessarily be built on elements of liturgy, ethics, philosophy; it should more or less resemble the Torah and the Talmud in its attempt to create a world in the image of God. She equally rejects the term of "Jewish writer" which she considers an oxymoron. Ozick suggests that the true Jewish subject matter-for literature and not only-cannot be found in America, but in Europe (the consequences of the Holocaust, the rise of the state of Israel). Everything else that is discussed by the Jewish American novel tells nothing more but American stories. She rejects ethnic background as the only address a Jewish American writer might have. No writer should be expected to be a champion of identity as it is often the case with those who use the multicultural line when interpreting literature.

A different stance is presented by Max Apple who sees in himself two different personalities that both have contributed to the birth of Max Apple- the writer. On the one hand there is Max, the self-confident and somehow superficial American and on the other hand there is Mottele, the traditionally educated son of Jewish immigrant parents. Only when adopting them both, does the author feel complete and accomplished; one identity needs the other in order to survive. It is exactly this hybridity that makes him more open to new experiences and thus provides him with a richer material that can be developed in his work.

The younger generation of writers has the tendency to return to the old values of their community. Allegra Goodman states that institutional identity as is the one enjoyed by Bellow and Roth has its drawbacks. Since these two writers have long entered the canon of American literature, it is hard for the public to hear them as ethnic voices, their fame in the eyes of the mainstream American public denies them their role as artists of the Jewish community, their work being thus often perceived in reductive terms. Returning to the Jewish culture and the spiritual dimension of Judaism may provide a fresh spring for a type of writing which for many seems to fade away once it is divorced from its first subject matter-the experience of Old World immigrants in the Promised Land and their previous plight in a rather anti-Semitic Europe.

This anthology brings together voices pertaining to different generations of writers with various views regarding their European Jewish immigrant descendance and their new life and role as writers of a community that is well adapted and integrated in their new culture and country. In the end, through the kaleidoscopic images of authors and points of view, the collection tries to discover the sources and the new possibilities for illustrating through fiction the Jewish experience on the American soil.