

Research on Jewish American Writers in Recent Ten Years

XU Li^[a]*

^[a]Foreign Language Teaching Department, Inner Mongolia University for the Nationalities, Tongliao, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by the Scientific Research Funds Project of Inner Mongolia University for the Nationalities “Research on the Jewish American Fictions in the Recent Ten Years” (NMDYB15056).

Received 8 October 2015; accepted 12 December 2015
Published online 26 December 2015

Abstract

In recent ten years, Jewish American writers emerge in large numbers. Among them, Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer and Michael Chabon are distinguished and popular among the readers. Their fictions represent the third generation of the Jewish writers and have their own characteristics, such as holocaust, Jewish identity and Jewish problems and so on. The thesis tries to summarize the literary review of the three writers and their common points in their works.

Key words: Jewish American writers; Identity; Holocaust

Xu, L. (2015). Research on Jewish American Writers in Recent Ten Years. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 11(12), 96-98. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/8076>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8076>

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there are some popular Jewish American writers that influence the American literature largely. They are Nathan Englander (1970—), Jonathan Safran Foer (1977—), and Michael Chabon (1963—). Englander grew up as part of the Orthodox Jewish community in West Hempstead, New York. He attended the Hebrew Academy of Nassau County for high school, and is an alumnus of the Binghamton University, and the Iowa Writers’

Workshop at the University of Iowa. Jonathan Safran Foer is best known for his novels *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), and for his non-fiction work *Eating Animals* (2009). He teaches creative writing at New York University. Michael Chabon is the bestselling and Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, *A Model World*, *Wonder Boys*, *Werewolves in Their Youth*, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, *The Final Solution*, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, *Maps and Legends*, *Gentlemen of the Road*, and the middle grade book *Summerland*. He altogether writes 10 fictions till now. His fictions involve intense male-male relationships and his work has become increasingly and explicitly Jewish-centered. There are also some specific topics in his fiction, such as Holocaust in Chabon’s fiction or his depiction of gay characters and relationships.

1. LITERARY REVIEWS

After the birth of Jewish American literature, the research on it started as well. Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer and Michael Chabon are known as the third generation of the Jewish American writers. Their works focus on the daily life of modern Jewish people and the beliefs of Jews when they confront with the Holocaust and wars.

Herman David delivered his essay *New World Reorder* in 2011 and discusses Nathan Englander’s book of short stories, for the Relief of Unbearable Urges (1999), Michael Chabon’s *Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000), Jonathan Safran Foer’s first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), followed by *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), *The History of Love* by Nicole Krauss (2005) and Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* (2007) - these are just the best-known fruits of this renaissance. *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* is a detective story set in an eastern European Jewish

community that has survived in Alaska; in his novella *The Final Solution*, he gets an elderly Sherlock Holmes to solve a mystery involving a German Jewish refugee. Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pedich published his article *Representing the Neighbours: Tadeusz Słobodzianek's Our Class and Jonathan Safran Foer's Everything is Illuminated* in *Holocaust Studies* in 2013. The essay discusses two recent works of literature representing the Holocaust: A Polish play *Our Class* by Tadeusz Słobodzianek (2009) and an American novel *Everything Is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer (2002). The focus of attention is on two issues which are present in both texts: the collaboration of the local population (Polish and Ukrainian) in the crimes against the Jews during the German occupation as well as various ways of experimenting with language when speaking about antisemitism and the Holocaust. The problem of the neighbour turned perpetrator is scrutinised and linguistic strategies used by both authors shown, such as distortions of grammar, incoherence, allusion, significant words or literary quotations. Sien Uyttershout, Kristiaan Versluys published his essay *Melancholy and Mourning in Jonathan Foer's Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* in 2008, who discusses that whereas melancholy (or 'acting out') entails a complete repression of all trauma-related memory, mourning (or 'working through') is an endeavour to remember the traumatic event and fit it into a coherent whole. In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, these two ways of reacting to and dealing with trauma are embodied respectively by the protagonist's paternal grandfather and by his paternal grandmother, both survivors of the Allied firebombing of Dresden in 1945. Foer ties up this 'old' trauma with a fresh one – 11 September 2001 – by having the Schells lose their only son, the protagonist's father, in the attacks on the World Trade Center. Aspects of both acting out and working through are in turn synthesised in the protagonist himself – Oskar Schell. In his behaviour, the boy displays characteristics of both a melancholic and a mourner. About Chabon, scholars are from the perspective of the Jewish ethnic, Jewish identity, the difficulty and ransoming, including the Jewish ethnic political problems, the internal family problems, problems of friendship and so on. During the summer in 2008, Meyer Helene published *Reading Jewishness as a Marker of Ethno-Racial and Culture History*. The author describes the difficulty of teaching Jewish American literature at a college in Texas with mostly Christian students and faculty without making Jewish literature seem too foreign or too normal, which she describes as heterosexual and masculine. She says she begins her courses by teaching the students about the history of Jewish American identity and by convincing them that Jewish culture can be secular as well as defined by religion. She uses works such as the novel *Katerskill Falls* by Allegra Goodman which also deal with feminist theory, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* by Michael Chabon and the play

Caroline, Or Change by Tony Kushner. Also, in the fall in 2008, Myer. D. G's article "*Chabon's Imaginary Jews, Explores the Modern Jewish Tradition*. Chabon's novel, which includes *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*", *Wonder Boys*, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* are discussed.

2. THE DESCRIPTION OF THE HOLOCAUST

Jewish American writers of the third generation describe more scenes and lives before and after the holocaust, which brings much damage to the Jewish people and their families. In Michael Chabon's book *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, "one night burns in a three-shade floor lamp by the television. Every other bulb in the room apart from the bathroom tube has been removed or allowed to burn out. On the windowsill sits a package of a popular brand of over-the-counter laxative. The window is cranked open its possible inch, and every few seconds the metal blinds bang in the stiff wind blowing in off the Gulf of Alaska. The wind carries a sour tang of pulped lumber, the smell of boat diesel and the slaughter and canning of salmon." (Chabon, 2008) It describes the scene after the Holocaust. And Jewish people are eager to be accepted by the mainstream society. And they want to build their own country and lead their own lives. However, the reality is cruel. They need to confront with the society, in which they have no right to speak something for themselves. Within the splendid reach of "what if", Chabon with ingenious daring challenged the imagination to reshape history itself to accommodate such a place. Imagine a contemporary world without the nation-state of Israel. What if months before the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1940 when America was still officially neutral? Chabon asks us to imagine the American Northwest suddenly opened up and millions of oppressed European Jews, facing the menace of Nazi brutality in accepting the offer of asylum in a distant and decidedly hostile frontier much like first generation puritans.

For sixty years Jewish refugees and their descendants have prospered in the Federal District of Sitka, a "temporary" safe haven created in the wake of the Holocaust and the shocking 1948 collapse of the fledgling state of Israel. The Jews of the Sitka District have created their own little world in the Alaskan panhandle, a vibrant and complex frontier city that moves to the music of Yiddish. But now the District is set to revert to Alaskan control, and their dream is coming to an end. Homicide detective Meyer Landsman of the District Police has enough problems without worrying about the upcoming Reversion. His life is a shambles, his marriage a wreck, his career a disaster. And in the cheap hotel where Landsman has washed up, someone has just committed a murder—right under his nose. When he begins to investigate the killing of his neighbor, a former chess prodigy, word comes down from on high that the case

is to be dropped immediately, and Landsman finds himself contending with all the powerful forces of faith, obsession, evil, and salvation that are his heritage. The trauma which the holocaust bring to the Jewish people cannot disappear and to be forgotten. The writers give us a complete scene of after-holocaust scenes, it can make the next generation to remember what happened and how to lead their lives better. Yiddish is certainly not dead in Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. In fact, the primary language of Jews throughout the *Pale of Settlement* (where Jews were allowed to live in Imperial Russia) suffuses this book with the rich aroma of a language whose every word can take on a paragraph or even chapter of meaning in the hands of the right speaker. Chabon is one such speaker (or writer) and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is a book that is rich in enjoyment.

3. JEWISH PROBLEMS AND JEWISH IDENTITY

Jewish identity refers to the identity of people and the specific society. Therefore, people like to ask who they are and where we are from and where to go (Tao, 2004). That is to say, sometimes people aren't conscious about their identity sometimes.

However, when the war broke out or their lives and people are treated badly, even discriminated, their national consciousnesses are awakened. They want to get the place and right in the mainstream society; they want to speak in public to express their own ideas; they want to build their own country and live there. In the writers' fictions, some are self-hatred Jews, some thoughtful and empathetic Jews, some wannabe-Jews, some not-wannabe-Jews, some just anti-Semites. He says so much about the human condition, and, as Darryl points out, about men, their friendships, their dreams and disappointments. Another strand in the novel is political. This novel will annoy a lot of people of the liberal. Probably that explains most of the negative reviews. The novel tackles the modern Western mass media's fashionable and generic stance on Palestinian and Israeli issue. It is nothing but a politically correct and prejudicial genre of news reporting to demonize Israeli Jews and present the Palestinians and Muslims as their victims.

Jewish problems are complicated and still have a long time to solve, such as political problems, cultural differences, discrimination and so on. The works of Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer and Michael Chabon all mention the Jewish problems. Their problems are made by history and are difficult to deal with. The

deep hearts of the victims are hurt by the war and the modern society.

CONCLUSION

The thesis only does the research to the main three Jewish American writers. It is limited. It still has a long way to do research to more writers. Jewish problems and fictions deserve to explore and analyze. After the birth of Jewish American literature, the research on it started as well. Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer and Michael Chabon are known as the third generation of the Jewish American writers. Their works focus on the daily life of modern Jewish people and the beliefs of Jews when they confront with the Holocaust and wars. They are worth doing research.

REFERENCES

- Benfer, A. (2000). The amazing adventures of Kavalier and Clay by Michael Chabon. *Salon*. Retrieved September 28 from <http://www.salon.com/books/review/2000/09/28/chabon/index.html>
- Chabon, M.(2008). *The Yiddish Policeman's union*. Harper Perennial.
- Lee, B. (2004). The escapist: Fantasy, Floklore, and the pleasures of the comic book in recent Jewish American holocaust fiction. *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, 10, 59.
- Meanor, P. (2013, June 2). Michael Chabon. In R. G. James & H. G. Wanda (Eds.), *American novelists since World War II: Seventh series. Dictionary of literary biography* (Vol.278). Gale. Retrieved from <http://www.Gale.cengage.com>.
- Meyers, H. (2010). *Reading Michael Chabon* (p.66). Santa Barbara, Calif: Greenwood Press.
- Miller, L. (2002, October 22). The Lost adventure of childhood. *Salon*, 6, 77
- Myers, D. G. (2008). Michael Chabon's Imaginative Jews. *Sewanee Review*, 39-68.
- Pinsker, S. (2007, June 14). Northern Exposure: Imagining Yiddishland in Alaska. *New Jersey Jewish News*.
- Punday, D. (2008). Kavalier & Clay: The comic-book novel and authorship in a corporate world. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Ficiton*, 291-303.
- Rong, B. (2007). *What Kind of writer is Michael Chabon*. Book City.
- Siegel, R. (2007, October 30). *Chabon's latest is literary, linguistic adventure*. All Things Considered, NPR.
- Tao, J. J. (2004). An introduction of identity. *Foreign Literature*, (3)
- Uytterschout, S., & Versluys, K. (2008). *Melancholy and Mourning in Jonathan Safran Foer's extremely loud and incredibly close*. Orbis Litterarum.