

THEY ATE THEIR SPAM WITH
THEIR YARMULKES ON:
YOUNG LIONS/OLD TROPES

M A S H E Y B E R N S T E I N

Young Lions: How Jewish Authors Reinvented the American War Novel

By Leah Garrett

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PRIOR TO THE 1940S, JEWISH CHARACTERS were often bound to old tropes. Either because of reader expectation or the writer's desire to stick with the tried and true, Jewish characters, when they appeared in mainstream literature, worked familiar territory: the conniver, the learned, the victim, the exotic "other." Rarely, if ever, the hero. Despite some wonderful exceptions (Abraham Cahan's David Levinsky or George Eliot's Daniel Deronda), they could hardly breathe in the narrow realm to which they had been confined. After the Second World War, the threads that bound these groups began to unravel as a new group of writers emerged.

In an almost uncanny confluence during 1948 (also the year of the creation of the State of Israel), six novels appeared at the same time, all written by Jews, that explored life in the military during the just-ended war, both in the battlefields of the Pacific and Europe. All featured Jews in prominent roles, and all were best sellers. Top of the heap was Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, followed by Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions* and lesser remembered works by Ira Wolfert, Merle Miller and Stefan Heym. The sixth was Martha Gellhorn's *Point of No Return*. They were quickly followed by Herman Wouk's best seller *The Caine Mutiny*—the most popular book since *Gone With the Wind*—and Leon Uris's *Battle Cry*. A decade later came Joseph

Heller's wild and trenchant anti-war *Catch-22*. Such a collection leads Leah Garrett in her study *Young Lions: How Jewish Authors reinvented the American War Novel* to posit some interesting arguments about the portrayal of Jews in the army, the place of Jews in America and the development of the image of Jews in future literature.

Garrett admits that most of these works fall into the category of "middlebrow"—with the exception of Mailer, who bestrides this text like a colossus and to whom Garrett constantly returns as a sort of yardstick by which to view the others. "Middlebrow" is a form of literature that confirms and conforms; it does not confront. It requires little of an intellectual nature, yet it satisfies the aspiration of readers to believe that they are reading something of literary merit. It is above the trash novel of airport bookstores (though it can be found there) but below the demands of the truly artistically adventuresome writers. Their works are beloved by a certain kind of public, while they are abhorred by critics in academia and elsewhere. Therefore, in treating these works to a serious and in-depth examination, Garrett is the rare exception. Bringing together these disparate works requires some deft footwork. There is no doubt, for example, that *The Naked and the Dead*, while also a popular best seller, is far superior in style and content to the simpler plot of *Battle Cry*. Nonetheless, while their connections are superficial (Jews, Army, America), they can be illustrative of larger issues.

There is something in the nature of "middlebrow" writers that because they aim for a broader audience makes their authors less inclined to take chances, and even though a work or two may move someone slightly to the left in its acceptance of types, the needle is not going far off the mid-point. Uris, Shaw and Wouk definitely are in the middle and safely so. Though Garrett sees them all as accurate portraits of Jewish men of a certain era, their characters and plots often border on cliché and pulp. (Uris after all created the Israeli Ari Ben Canaan, an iconic figure of such bravado that nowadays he seems as quaint as the hero of a "bodice ripping" romance novel.) A comparison to the soldiers in Tim O'Brien's masterwork *The Things They Carried* (in which no Jews appear) underlines this point. (Jewish women, even mothers, make rare, if any, appearances in these texts. Needless to say, the object of Jewish desire is the inevitable *shiksa*.) Their heroes, Noah Ackerman in *The Young Lions* for example, wimpy, unassured and conflicted both as a Jew and a soldier, are walking stereotypes, and even with Shaw's attempts to present his Jewish soldiers as John Wayne's with sidelocks, they seem a sad and dis-

appointed group. They face serious racism, hate themselves in myriad ways, play victim, assimilate or die trying to; their triumphs are few and far between and often pyrrhic. They tend to be overly intellectual or timid. Their stories are uninspired and hardly heroic. Nearly all die in the end—some futilely like Roth in *Naked* and others nobly (and melodramatically) like Levin in *Battle Cry*. Looking at this cast of Jews through the prism of the heyday of American-Jewish literature shortly to emerge and that was soon to give us much richer characters like Herzog and Portnoy and Zuckerman and Malamud's panoply of rich figures and the emergence of wonderful women writers like Alison Krause, the Jews of Shaw et al. seem very limited. They are locked in a war not only on the battlefield but also in the minds of their creators, who seem to be working out their own demons in relationship to their Jewish identity. The image of the Jew here still lives in the ghetto of the American mind. If one was to rely on these novels for a picture of American Jewish life, one would walk away with a very dismal and pessimistic view.

The distinction, however, provides a revelatory insight into the fundamental differences between conservative and liberal Jewish writers in the early 50's—as well as their respective artistic prowess and/or the lack thereof. Central to this disparity is the conflict between Wouk and Mailer, which has the makings of a great drama. Wouk, a conservative writer, in both ideology and style, had a deep dislike of Mailer and made Keefer, a none too thinly disguised Mailer stand in—he happens to be “a novelist and intellectual”—the “villain” of his *Caine Mutiny*. (Seemingly, the animosity was fueled by personal and professional jealousy, and not necessarily by ideology.) Full of braggadocio and a hypocrite, Keefer eggs on his crew to mutiny. But as many critics of the time noted and Garrett concurs when Jewish lawyer Barney Greenwald (a stand in for Wouk?) turns on the smug crew who has brought down the pathetic Queeg, and praises the sad captain as the type that had helped win the war, it upends his novel. As Mailer succinctly put it: “[It] was about the best slick novel I had ever read until I got to the last fifty pages which were pretty god-awful.” Why does Wouk do this? In the time of the Cold War when conservatives held the upper hand, he wants to prove that liberals are dangerous and self-serving. They may win battles, but they also make us lose wars. He does the same to his protagonist Marjorie Morningstar who, after dabbling in the flesh pots of Broadway, is packed off to the suburbs, where at novel's end she is found barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen.

As a novelist, Wouk suffers in comparison to Mailer, who presents a broad and often difficult portrait of America as a whole in a style that is complex and yet accessible. Nothing in Wouk or the others comes close. Conservatives make tentative writers. Orthodoxy (Wouk is also an Orthodox Jew), as Orwell points out in *Politics and the English Language*, “demands a lifeless, imitative style.” Their characters may learn, but the lessons border on the glib and lack finesse. To invert Tolstoy, “all unhappy Jewish soldiers are unhappy in the same way.”

In one important respect, though, Wouk held the upper hand, and there is a lesson to be learned here. The success of *Caine* and *Morningstar* show that one cannot go poor underestimating the taste (or the intelligence) of the American public. Compare Wouk’s success—at least with the public, if not the critics—to the struggles that Mailer underwent in trying to get his second novel, *Barbary Shore*, and especially his third, an examination of Hollywood, *The Deer Park*, published. Luckily, the race is not always to the swift. And while *Caine* continues to be popular, the tide of history has turned in Mailer’s (and his ilk’s) favor.

A more serious problem lies with the lack of Jewish identity given to these characters. As Garrett succinctly puts it, “in all these . . . novels . . . the definition of ‘Jewish’ is almost entirely about being a discriminated minority within a majority culture.” (They call to mind the central character in John Berryman’s short story “The Imaginary Jew” where a Gentile is taken for a Jew and eventually embraces the definition or Sartre’s argument in *Anti-Semite and Jew* that a Jew is one because he is defined by external forces rather than by his internal identity.) From a Jewish perspective, they are thin caricatures. With the exception of Wouk, Judaism is discarded as soon as possible, and Jewish characters are emblems of shame and scorn. They recall Irving Howe’s criticism of Philip Roth’s portrayal of Jews:

The stories come out of a thin personal culture . . . when we speak of a writer’s personal culture we have in mind the ways in which a tradition, if absorbed into his work, can both release and control his creative energies.

None of these writers (again, pace Wouk) come from that place, and it impacts how they portray their Jewish figures. As Jews, they have no rich inner life. I am surprised that Garrett does not refer to Mailer’s discussion of this

issue, as it would add a lot to her cause. In an interview with Steven Marcus (*Paris Review*, 1967) Mailer defends this problem: “I feel in a way that one’s ignorance is part of one’s creation . . . if I, as a Jew, for instance, am writing about other Jews and if my knowledge of Jewish culture is exceptionally spotty, as indeed it is, I am not so sure that that isn’t an advantage in creating a modern American Jew.” He goes on to argue that his ignorance may in fact be a more of an accurate portrait of his character’s ignorance than if he were “immersed in the culture.” Ironically, Mailer begs the question, as his Joey Goldstein in *Naked* is one of the few soldiers to actually reflect on his Jewish heritage in another passage not quoted by Garrett.

One day when Joey, who seems to be a stand-in for Mailer, comes home after being beaten up by a gang of neighborhood kids and his grandfather tries to convey his understanding of what being a Jew means: “Yehudah Halevy said Israel is the heart of all nations. What attacks the body attacks the heart and the heart is also the conscience which suffers for the sins of all nations.”

Joey ultimately rejects this notion and “drops it.”

It is not entirely surprising then that, in the process of time, only Mailer broke away from the pack and moved on to examine other themes in American literature, though he remained ever-cognizant of the Holocaust (as in *Advertisements for Myself*) and his Jewishness (more in his essays than novels), while the others hoed the same row.

Despite the fact that these authors all served in the military in some capacity and based their characters—Jew and Gentile—on people they met (Mailer even interviewed scores of them for the novel long before he wrote it), I am less willing than Garrett to assume that the novelists accurately portray the reality for Jewish soldiers in the war. Contrary to what we read here, there were plenty of Jewish soldiers who were valiant, did not suffer identity crises every time they met a non-Jew and knew about their religion and observed it even in the most difficult of circumstances. One can see pictures of Jews observing the High Holidays or Passover or donning phylacteries in many a fox hole. They ate their Spam with their yarmulkes on. Yet, those portrayals never make it into the pages of these novels. Or can we attribute the popularity of these works to a sort of wish fulfillment for American Jews who wanted to feel at ease in a nation for which they had fought?

Only in the final chapter with a discussion of James Jones’s *From Here to Eternity* and *The Thin Red Line* (both of which feature Jewish characters)

and other contemporary novels like Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* does Garrett add some needed perspective. She might have gone deeper. Rather than relying so heavily on the texts alone as proof, the text needed more sociological data or surveys to look at how American Jews viewed themselves and to situate the novels in those contexts. After all, they are fiction and take a lot of artistic license. She could have compared the way that homosexuals (another group barely emerging from stereotype and ignorance) were similarly portrayed in war novels. I say this not arbitrarily, but there are a number of instances where the two groups intersect: for example, how the victim of Richard Brooks' novel *The Brick Foxhole* (1945), with its homosexual victim, morphed into a Jew in the movie version called *Crossfire* (also appearing in 1948); or the way that the Jewish hero of Sanford Feldman's cult favorite *Totempole* (1961) is both a Jew and a homosexual and who during the Korean War falls in love with a Korean doctor. His triumph in both love and war offers yet another dimension to the discussion and might better have served this work than a long diversionary discussion of whether *Catch-22* actually is a Jewish novel or not.

So at some fundamental level therefore, these novels are hardly a "reinvention" of a genre at all; they more closely herald the end of an old one. With the exception of *Naked* and *Caine* still fighting in the American literary consciousness, these "young lions" are caught in the riptide of what is to follow. Despite an interesting exhumation of a largely forgotten or ignored group of novels, regretfully Ms. Garrett has not made a strong enough case for a revival of interest.