

Nancy E. Berg and Naomi B. Sokoloff, eds., *Since 1948: Israeli Literature in the Making* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), pp. 306.

by *Piera Rossetto*

In 2018, Nancy E. Berg and Naomi B. Sokoloff<sup>1</sup> convened the symposium “Enshrining the Book: Israeli Literature at 70” at Washington University in St. Louis. The conference represented an opportunity for scholars to reassess “the literary history and trajectories of Israeli culture since the founding of the state in 1948.”<sup>2</sup> It is precisely out of this conference that the volume *Since 1948: Israeli Literature in the Making*, edited by Berg and Sokoloff, arose. Indeed, the cover image—showing the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem under construction in 1964–65—evokes not only the conference title but also, most significantly, the whole idea of the national literary canon as a “process” rather than a “product” (p. 3) and of Israeli literature as “still very much under construction” (p. 4).

The ‘constructedness’ of Israeli literature, the questions raised by the new genres it embraces (such as graphic novels and science fiction), and the multiple geographical and linguistic directions it has taken: these are some of the issues at the core of this important book. Organized in four parts, including three chapters each, the edited volume is concluded by the English translation of a short story by Eitan Notev.

Part one, “Through Time: Silences, Voices, Echoes,” discusses “how new voices have succeeded old ones [...] as well as how they have reverberated with one another and built on intertextual references” (p. 14). This chain of successive transformations is explored in poetry in two different ways. A close reading of the theme of silence—its uses and reuses—in selected poems by Nathan Zach, Haim

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<sup>2</sup> Naomi B. Sokoloff, interview by Anna Learn, March 21, 2022, University of Washington, Department of Middle Eastern Languages and Culture, <https://melc.washington.edu/news/2022/03/21/interview-dr-naomi-b-sokoloff-1948-israeli-literature-making>.

Guri, Yona Wallach, Carmit Rosen, and Tehila Hakimi reveals that the poet and translator Eran Tzelgov is interested in sketching “the moments of change, rather than a linear development” (p. 27) of Israeli poetry. By considering the use of Hebrew poetry by Yehuda Amichai and Avraham Halpi in liberal *siddurim* (Jewish prayer books), Wendy I. Zierler engages with contrasting opinions about “liturgical appropriation of secular Israeli poetry” (p. 62) and convincingly argues for the benefits of such appropriation both in terms of complicating “the very notion of contemporary Jewish religiosity” and deepening “the meanings, for an attentive reader, of both poetry and prayer” (p. 75). By expanding the understanding of poetry to include literary production at large, Michal Raizen explores the thematic of *ḥafḥa* in Eli Amir’s trilogy (*Mafriach hayonim*, 1992; *Tarnegol kapparot*, 1983; *Yasmin*, 2005) and Almog Behar’s book *Tchachla veHezekel* (2005). A “poetic reservoir in its own, [...] an Arabic literary idiom couched in musical affect” (p. 55), the *ḥafḥa* trope represents a knot of memory and a source of challenging innovation for contemporary Mizrahi authors.

Part two, “Across Language and Territory: Literature and Identity,” “emphasizes the point that the words *Hebrew*, *Jewish*, *Israeli*, *Eretz Yisraeli*, and *Zionist* are not coterminous” (p. 14). The three essays included here (by Shachar Pinsker, Yael Dekel, and Melissa Weininger) explore “the complex multilingual literary reality in Israel” (p. 85) by focusing on examples taken from “marginal” literary movements of the 1950s and 1960s (Yung Yisroel and the Young Hebrews, or the Canaanite movement and from two recent novels (*The Ruined House*, 2013, and *Isra Isle*, 2005) written in Hebrew in the diaspora. Despite the heterogeneity of the authors and the works analyzed, all three essays lead readers to experience permeability and the blurring of places and times, characters and registers, as well as perspectives and points of view. The appendix offers readers the opportunity to “encounter” directly an example of the literature produced by the Canaanite Group, thanks to the English translation of Eitan Notev’s “The Lord Be Praised.” Shai Ginsburg’s chapter “From Here to Elsewhere and Back in Israeli-Hebrew Children’s Literature” opens the third part of the volume, “Between the Lines: Rethinking Genres,” in which new genres are considered, which up until recently were marginalized from mainstream literature. The most unsettling case is perhaps that of the pulp fiction called *stalagim*, critically addressed in this part of the book by Eric Zakim, while Ginsburg and Naomi B. Sokoloff deal, respectively, with

children’s literature and biographical novels. The main argument in Ginsburg’s essay is that in Israeli-Hebrew children’s literature—in contrast to European and American children’s literature, where fantasy often works as an escape from real experience—the “transition between real and imaginary spaces are employed to reflect on the politics of the Israeli here and now and to engage with Israeli rhetoric of territory and history” (p. 143). This argument is thoroughly demonstrated by analyzing the children’s series *Hasamba* (1950–1994) by Yigal Mossinsohn and Avraham Shlonsky children’s book *Ani veTali* (1957). Devorah Omer’s novel *Kol mah shehayah (ulai), veKol ma shekarah (kim‘at) leKarashindo veli* (1970) is also discussed in terms of “critical engagement with Israeli reality” (p. 149), including critical portrayals of the kibbutz, communal ethos, and state ideology. In her essay, Naomi B. Sokoloff reflects on the trilogy (*Yaldah*, 2004; *Na’arah*, 2009; *Ishah*, 2009) by the author and illustrator of children’s literature Alona Frankel. In particular, she considers the role of animals in Frankel’s writing and shows how “the text touches on the kind of question that has been fundamental in animal studies’ approaches to fiction: how to reassess the scope of the human and rethink ideas about personhood” (p. 167–168).

The fourth and final part of the volume, “Concerning Canons,” includes chapters that, according to the editors, “deal most directly or most self-consciously with questions of constructing canon” (p.14) but also, I would add, of departing from and transcending canons. Riki Traum’s chapter on the poetry of Rina Shani provides an example of the “formation of a counterculture identity” in the Israeli poetics of the 1960s. By reading Leah Goldberg (who was a mentor to Shani at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and Rina Shani poems in parallel, Traum shows how the two elaborated differently on the questions of exile and belonging, double affiliation, and nonbelonging. By addressing the question of “What did Shani preserve of Goldberg’s, and what did she discard?” (p. 221), Traum shows how Shani could identify with Goldberg’s tension “between belonging and nonbelonging” (p. 221) and finally develop her own “nomadic stance [that] moves in-between modes of nonbelonging and intensities of alienation that merge biographical elements with cultural ones” (p. 225).

In the second chapter, Yaron Peleg discusses the five books by Asaf Schurr (all published between 2007 and 2014) as a way to navigate the aftermath of postmodernism in contemporary Israeli fiction. Peleg suggests reading the five

books as a series that, as a whole, addresses the question of how to deal with “the dissolution of the Zionist metanarrative and the inability to narrate history that such loss brings with it” (p. 231). Nancy Berg’s essay on literary awards in Israel concludes this part. Notwithstanding the fact that all the examples of literary prizes discussed by Berg refer to the Israeli context, her reflection on the role such (contested) prizes play as “an expression of national identity and values, as opportunity for dissent, and as a discussion of changing times and tastes” (p. 248) undoubtedly has global value.

“Cultural memory,” suggests Hanna Meretoja, professor of Comparative Literature at Utu University, Finland, “refers to the collective practices that societies use to build and uphold their relationship to the past, live in the present, and prepare for the future.”<sup>3</sup> Literature is part and parcel of this very complex process. When a country turns 70, as was the case for Israel in 2018, the “national literature” might indeed serve as a useful litmus test to read the past of a nation, its relationship with the present, and how it imagines itself in the future. This volume represents, in the reviewer’s view, an excellent instrument for such a reading.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.utu.fi/en/research/thematic-collaborations-in-research/cultural-memory-and-social-change>. Accessed November 13, 2023.