

Helen Finch. *German-Jewish Life Writing in the Aftermath of the Holocaust: Beyond Testimony*. Camden House, 2023. 230 pp.

Belatedness and displacement characterize the selection of Holocaust survivor texts included in Helen Finch's comprehensive consideration of the troubled state of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, coming to terms with the past, specifically National Socialism. Proposing an innovative look at less-considered texts by German-Jewish Holocaust survivors, Finch not only makes salient arguments for the inclusion of these literary autofictional volumes in contemporary Holocaust Studies conversation, but also examines why these particular texts have received so little consideration. Aside from Ruth Klüger's internationally regarded *weiter leben (Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered)*—which Finch acknowledges as the most recognized of her selection—the texts examined in *Beyond Testimony* have been largely relegated to the background of 20th century survivor writing and frequently dismissed by a German literary milieu still unwilling to face the thornier and more raw survivor voices. Belatedness, Finch argues, is all but inherent to the literary processing of trauma, whether published during the “testimonial turn” of the 1960s, or the advent of Holocaust literary studies as such. The wounds themselves can never be temporally fixed to the site of the injury, a dislocation which pervades each of the authors that Finch considers. Rather than simply appealing to the value of survivor testimony, Finch situates her treatment of works by H. G. Adler, Fred Wander, Edgar Hilsenrath, and Ruth Klüger in the urgent context of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and the rise of far-right nationalism in Germany and Austria. *Beyond Testimony* is a call not only to reexamine the state of German Holocaust memory culture, but also to closely trace the through-lines of political violence and genocide from the Holocaust into the 21st century.

Counter-memory is given center-stage as the first means of untangling the fraught notion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. In order to approach this leviathan task, Finch offers a critique of German Holocaust memory culture by bringing Max Czollek's polemical critiques together with the 2022 bombing of Babyn Yar, underscoring the ironic banality of such invocations as “never again” in reference to the Holocaust. Language—the German language specifically—and genre are fundamental to Finch's approach. As has been queried quite often of German-Jewish survivor literature, why write testimony in the language of the perpetrator? German serves a special purpose, both as a site of irreparable trauma, but also as the origin of linguistic and cultural identity for each of the authors considered. Writing in German, as a Jewish survivor, is to stake a claim to German literary tradition, culture, and politics. The biggest hurdle facing these authors manifests as literary gatekeepers—the willingness of German publishers and readers to integrate these emotional archives of ongoing, atemporal trauma is, at best, reluctant.

In approaching this persistent issue, Finch proposes that her selection of texts, and similar works, be treated as a body of work in and of themselves. This body of work has been largely passed over and under-translated; in this way, it testifies significantly to the enduring stigmata of surviving. Finch specifies with surgical precision that this poetic mode constitutes what she terms “Holocaust metatestimony,” or, bearing witness to the process itself of bearing witness. What would be more palatable to the post-war world is a Holocaust testimony that treats it as singular, unique, and as a horrific historical moment in a vacuum. These texts, however, attest to the ongoing and intensely painful experience of living on. While the collection of works considered spans nearly 70 years, they are connected by an attempt to reconnect, in German, with uniquely European-Jewish narrative tradition, leaning on folkloric structure and *Erzählung* (a novella format unique to Germanic literature), while also claiming literary legitimacy in the competitive and selective German forum of narrative.

Finch not only provides in-depth analysis of individual texts by each author; rather, she also considers series of memoirs, autobiographies, and autofictional narratives in sequence, by author. This structural approach offers a wholistic and fluid perspective on the oeuvre of each author, and it elucidates the personal and literary context in which the author wrote and sought to publish. Finch intertwines the traditional value of testimony as historiographically salient with her proposition that emotionality and affect are just as ripe for politically vital interpretation. These texts trouble the already tenuous genre boundaries between fiction and nonfiction by asserting emotionality and the ongoing experience of Holocaust metatestimony as integral to the survivor experience. Adler, Wander, Hilsenrath, and Klüger resist the sentimentalization and kitschification of the survivor experience, a trend all too common in late 20th century and contemporary published survivor testimony. Rather than making themselves palatable—and easily integrated into Germany’s *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—these texts prioritize the displaced violence that endures with them.

Unflinchingly facing the complex trauma of her authors, Finch’s monograph offers a new interpretive method for incorporating overlooked post-Holocaust testimony into scholarly conversation not only of Holocaust literature, but of the treatment of survivors more generally. While the works of these four authors can be characterized as being in tension with Germany’s post-war narrative, Finch stakes a broader claim, one which interpolates scholarly treatment of survivors as a demographic: the “end” of an event does not comprise an end to the experience of trauma, and no amount of “coming to terms” can effectively fix ongoing pain to the past. Though discussion of life writing as a genre and conceptual field occupies relatively little space in Finch’s text, her challenge to accepted genre definitions is latent in analysis of each author’s works. This probing of comfortable interpretive strategies parallels the obvious discomfort prompted by

the content of her authors' texts, giving readers the unique experience of feeling Finch's argument as she is applying it. Her analysis furthermore leads to the understanding that, just as the trauma captured in the pages of her authors is necessarily and always belated, so too is our attention to their texts, making her work all the more urgent in our current political climate.

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