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As Ruth Panofsky’s *At Odds in the World: Essays on Jewish Canadian Women Writers* suggests, this slim volume surveys Jewish women’s writing in Canada. Primarily focused on “lesser known writers” (4), Panofsky demonstrates that the women in question have all experienced oppression in the forms of patriarchal religion, hegemonic society, sexist relationships, exclusion from the entitlements of community, but have refused to let those oppressions dominate them. They are diasporic writers who imagine new ways of addressing their experiences as women, as Jews, and as Canadians. As such, this text reflects implicitly a general theme in Jewish Studies internationally, the desire to examine Jewish experience inclusively rather than accenting its exceptionality in relation to other diasporic traditions. The audience for this book will most likely be Jewish Studies academics and literature professors. The essays themselves are mixed in style, some lending themselves to an undergraduate audience, others designed for readers familiar with cultural studies critiques, and in the case of the interview with Helen Weinzweig (chapter 2, “Ambiguity and Paradox, a Conversation with Helen Weinzweig), audiences with a general interest in the topic will want to look at this text too.

In six chapters, Panofsky covers Miriam Waddington, Helen Weinzweig, Nora Gold, Adele Wiseman, and Lilian Nattell. She aims to map Jewish women’s experience in Canada on to the global history of women’s oppression as well as the history of Jewish women’s experience in Diaspora. By concentrating on the particular context of Jewish women living with and under oppression in Canada, Panofsky considers these writers as mimetic observers of Jewish women’s experiences. She suggests that their voices have historical and cultural relevance not only because they reveal the layers of historical
oppression Jewish women have confronted, but also because they reflect strategies in which Jewish women reimagine the terms of their existence, i.e. different ways of being and becoming subjects in modernity. Panofsky buttresses her analysis by arguing that each writer typifies the kind of oppression discussed by feminist critics “Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Nancy K. Miller” (3). Her thesis investigates “the intersecting complexities” of each writer’s “identity as a Canadian, a Jew, and a woman,” critiquing “prevailing notions, for example, of Canada as a country that embraces people of all faiths, of Judaism, as open to female participation, and of Jewish women as submissive within marriage” (4). Thus, Panofsky illustrates that Jewish women have historically suffered, both at the hands of a dominant culture, and a patriarchal religion, that endorses masculine privilege as divine right.

However, Panofsky’s essays can be heavy-handed, moving between a didacticism aimed at an undergraduate audience to the vernacular of academic readers who should see her work as a corrective to a history of oppression that omits Jewish women from the larger group of its victims. This heavy-handedness is unfortunate though since her subjects are intriguing and Panofsky offers nuanced ideas in her analyses.

“Chapter 1, This Problem of Identity, Miriam Waddington’s *Summer at Lonely Beach and Other Stories*” describes Waddington’s biography and work in terms of the writer’s inability “to identify with the dominant culture of English Canada” (17). Panofsky sees this lack of identification as motivating Waddington’s literary endeavors so that “[M]any of Waddington’s protagonists are girls and women whose narrative journeys lead to painful revelations they do not fully comprehend” (19). “Chapter 2, Ambiguity and Paradox, a Conversation with Helen Weinzweig” is an interview between Panofsky and Weinzweig in which Weinzweig comments on why she begins to write at forty-five and how her biography informs her fictive choices. In “Chapter 3, a Sense of Loss, the Fiction of Helen Weinzweig,” Panofsky picks up her analytical thread again and tacks events in Weinzweig’s life to elements of Weinzweig’s work. Panofsky’s emphasis in this chapter is on Weinzweig’s introduction of new subject positions for Jewish women in Canada through her fiction. This identification of new “women’s roles
and narrative conventions” (54) emerging in Weinzweig’s work opens up Panofsky’s discussion so that “Chapter 4, Close to the Bone, Woman’s Place in Nora Gold’s Marrow and Other Stories,” highlights Gold’s belief that modern female subject positions are often “thwarted by a religion that refuses them full participation” (61). This realization pushes Panofsky then to describe the narrative arc of Adele Wiseman’s fiction in “Chapter 5: From Complicity to Subversion, the Female Subject in Adele Wiseman’s Novels.”

Panofsky’s background as one of the major commentators on Wiseman’s work is perhaps most evident here. Panofsky has written, The Force of Vocation: the Literary Career of Adele Wiseman (2006); has edited Adele Wiseman, Essays on her Work (2001); has co-edited Selected Letters of Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman (1997); and compiled Adele Wiseman, an Annotated Bibliography (1992). In other words, Panofsky speaks with authority when she analyzes Wiseman’s texts. The chapter is “an examination of the female subject [that] . . . charts the radical shift from complicity with the patriarchy of orthodox Judaism in The Sacrifice (1956) to subversion of that culture in Crackpot (1974)” (73). Continuing in that vain, Panofsky moves to contrasting Wiseman to Lilian Nattel in “Chapter 6: This Was Her Punishment: Jew, Whore, Mother, in the Fiction of Adele Wiseman and Lilian Nattel” (83-97).

In this chapter, Panofsky compares Wiseman’s Crackpot (1974) with Nattel’s The Singing Fire (2004) to illustrate “the punishing cost to Jewish prostitutes who dare to become mothers” (83). As in preceding chapters, Panofsky demonstrates that the choices fictional characters make are mimetically linked to Jewish women’s historical experience of oppression. This reflex leads Panofsky to argue that “[D]espite the persistent and widespread belief that prostitution within the Jewish community ‘was always insignificant,’ historical and literary evidence suggest otherwise. Scholarly studies, government documents, and archival records confirm the presence of Jewish prostitutes in urban centres” (84). Panofsky’s desire to find historical precedent for literary choices continues in her contrast of Wiseman’s character, Hoda, “an obese Jewish prostitute who services the boys and men of her North Winnipeg community” (83) to Maimie Pinzer,
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“who worked as a prostitute in Philadelphia in the early years of the twentieth century” (84).

Panofsky’s need to pin fiction to history seems to me a weakness; it takes away from the strengths of her analyses of Wiseman the fiction writer as well as the other writers included in this volume. Likewise, I would have liked Panofsky to link her readings of Wiseman and Nattel to Miriam Waddington’s identification of “the themes that preoccupy the Jewish Canadian writer,” a citation Panofsky uses in her introduction (5), but that remains disconnected from the majority of the book. Such a connection might have prepared us for the extremely thought-provoking final chapter of the volume.

In the last chapter, “The Freedom to Write, the Memoirs of Fredele Bruser Maynard and Joyce Maynard” (99-112), Panofsky shifts gear to advance a sophisticated rethinking of freedom as a signifier, with all the emphasis on the “freedom to do something” rather than the “freedom from something.” Panofsky’s strategy signals the Jewish woman writer’s move away from an oppressive status, a subject position into which she is forced, to a fluid process, in which her writing discovers multiple subject positions. This essay is the most productive of the six chapters because it suggests so many implications for the study of Jewish literature both comparatively and in the particular context of Canada. Thus Panofsky emphasizes that Jewish women writers approach “the freedom to write” not only as a search for emancipation from a variety of restrictive roles and forces, but also as a freedom to do something necessary and important. To Panofsky’s mind, this emphasis enables women to move beyond restrictive roles, but I believe that she touches on another element pertinent to the Jewish Studies academic as well as the literary scholar. Panofsky alludes to a theme pertinent to Jewish women writing as informed critics of halakhah and suggests that these writers articulate writing as a necessary act that repairs the brokenness of Judaism in the ways that Jewish women experience it. In this way, Panofsky broaches the idea that these authors participate in a larger tradition in which Jewish women writers have understood their actions both as necessary and as performative.
Focusing on the relationship between authors, Fredele Bruser Maynard and her daughter, Joyce Maynard, Panofsky illustrates that the author of *Raisins and Almonds* (1972) and *Tree of Life* (1988), Fredele Bruser Maynard “remains strikingly mute on the experience of motherhood” and only writes “frankly of herself as the ‘most imperfect of mothers’” (99) after sixteen years and when Joyce Maynard is also a mother. Citing Joyce Maynard’s “new, self-proclaimed honesty of the mother who ‘put the pen in my hand,’” Panofsky adds that Fredele Bruser Maynard “chose mentoring over faith and culture as the primary means to nurture Joyce and prepare her for adulthood” (100). Panofsky’s analysis draws readily on the task of writing as a particular strategy in which the “the most imperfect of mothers” mentors her daughter by giving her the means to write. Fredele’s imperfections are repaired so to speak by the necessary act of writing. In other words, their writing is akin to a new form of *tikkun*. One might argue that the entire written tradition of Judaism has been a similar project of *tikkun* with the major caveat that Judaism’s mending of the world (*tikkun olam*) neglects Jewish women as subjects, confining them to the status of subaltern on the one hand, and property on the other. Panofsky’s emphasis on Jewish women’s writing, then, as a project and process that restores Jewish women to a place or status of entitlement is laudable.

Few have examined how Jewish women’s writing inflects Judaism, and how the Jewish woman’s act of writing performs a kind of *tikkun* because it is a necessary action for the Jewish woman as subject. In Judaism, once an act is proposed as a necessary one, it becomes a part of the larger category of *mitzvot*, the obligations one must fulfill in order to be observant. The concept of the mitzvah underpins Panofsky’s text interestingly in just this way: for the most part, Jewish women have found themselves obligated to perform the *mitzvot* of masculine privilege. But the desire to intervene in this obligation in a meaningful way, to inhabit the subject positions of the patriarchs, has produced Jewish women writers whose use of biblical signifiers, figures, and narratives, cannot be viewed arbitrarily. Thus, Wiseman’s use of Abraham and Sarah, or even her use of the Akedah narrative of Abraham’s obligation to sacrifice Isaac in *The Sacrifice*, are important rethinking of Jewish narrative and are more productively read through the lens
of inscribing new subject positions, rather than a mimetic representation of Jewish women’s experience in which Abraham is revealed to be the oppressor we’ve always known him to be. In this way, Panofsky illustrates that Jewish women writers in Canada re-use or re-purpose the foundational narratives of Jewish life, Judaic tradition. This perspective resonates with Waddington’s claim that Jewish writing reflects “the continuity of a Jewish tradition containing religion, ethics, and culture . . . a moral dimension” (5).