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Baer, Elizabeth R. *The Golem Redux: From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2012. Notes, Bibliography, Index, 229 pp. \$27.95 (paper). ISBN 978-0-8143-3626-7.

The golem is one of the most popular motifs in Jewish folklore. The tale of the clay statue given life by a holy man has many permutations in traditional use, ranging from salacious stories (such as when an unmarried rabbi creates a female creature to be his companion) to profound tales where the golem defends Jews against cruel pogroms. Elizabeth Baer's book is an affectionate analysis of the golem motif in contemporary creative work, with examples ranging from novels to film to comic books. She takes the readers from legends compiled in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through high literature of the post-Holocaust era into the post-millennial period. Baer's analysis addresses the golem's increasing prominence in creative works, especially since 1980, and examines the meanings authors have created with this enduring motif.

Baer's work is built around the intertextuality of golem literature, especially as it relates to the Holocaust. Employing concepts from theorists like Julia Kristeva and Geoffrey Hartmann, Baer interrogates the discursive genealogy of the golem in post-Holocaust fiction. Viewed through an intertextual lens, each new text (or "hypertext") builds on the "hypotext" preceding it, preserving the meaning of the hypotext while adding new interpretations. Baer explicitly places *The Golem Redux* in this intertextual paradigm, acknowledging that her study is a hypertext of scholarship by Gershom Scholem, Moshe Idel, and especially Arnold Goldsmith, whose monograph *The Golem Remembered, 1901-1980* was the first scholarly treatment of golem literature in English. Baer frames her book as an update to Goldsmith's, examining both new literature and previously inaccessible material. Though she does cover some earlier texts, Baer's book complements the earlier surveys; it does not replace them.

Most twentieth-century golem literature is derived from physician Leopold Wiesel's 1841 one-page folktale about the great

Reformation-era Prague Rabbi Judah Loew. In Wiesel's telling, Loew creates an artificial man as a helper, but lays him to rest in the synagogue attic after he runs amok. In 1909, Polish rabbi Yudel Rosenberg produced an extensive hypertext of Wiesel's story, adding the golem's defense of the Prague ghetto against a pogrom. Rosenberg claimed that his version was written in Rabbi Loew's time and recovered from long-hidden scrolls. Baer asserts convincingly (along with practically every serious golem scholar) that this is a literary fraud; indeed, pogroms were virtually unknown in Rabbi Loew's Prague. Golem enthusiasts may be disheartened to find out that their most beloved tale is more "fakelore" than anything else, but Baer redeems Rosenberg somewhat by contextualizing his work. 1909 Poland fostered growing antisemitism, with blood libel rumors running rampant. Loew's inspirational golem fighting against pogroms served the needs of the teller and his audience, not historical veracity or traditional ideas of authenticity. In this, Rosenberg's tale is an intertext: a hypertext of Wiesel's tale and the discourse of 1900s ethnic tension.

General readers will be most interested in Baer's critique of post-Holocaust literature by outstanding writers since 1980, including Nobel Laureates Elie Wiesel and Isaac Bashevis Singer as well as Pulitzer Prize-winner Michael Chabon. Baer takes a biographical approach for much of her study, emphasizing Wiesel and Singer's Holocaust experience and Chabon's more insulated American upbringing nurtured by comic books. From Wiesel and Singer's veiled parables of the Shoah (both simply titled *The Golem*) to Chabon's smugglers secreting Rabbi Loew's golem out of pre-Holocaust Europe in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Baer shows how these authors' golem works challenge Theodor Adorno's assertion that poetry in the wake of Auschwitz is barbaric. In Wiesel's words, "It is better if we end [Adorno's] phrase with a question mark: 'Can poetry still be written after Auschwitz?'" (88). Wiesel's answer is clear, though Adorno's admonition does call for humility.

Baer reaches beyond these renowned authors to more esoteric texts, including the avant-garde work of Cynthia Ozick,

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the historical fantasy of Frances Sherwood, the impassioned prose of Thane Rosenbaum, the satire of Daniel Handler, the golem's *X-Files* adaptation, and the expanding canon of comics and graphic novels, including works by Pete Hamill, James Sturm, and Len Wein. Baer reads most of these as hypertexts of hypertexts, preserving and transforming the meanings of traditional folklore and its corresponding literary fiction. Sturm's graphic novel, *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, is a good example. It depicts a Jewish baseball team in 1920s America. A Negro League veteran joins the pre-integration club, and they dress him as the eponymous character from Paul Wegner's 1920 film *Der Golem*. When the team faces an antisemitic riot, the "golem" protects them, much as Rabbi Loew's golem protected the Prague ghetto. Baer demonstrates the intertextuality of history, culture, and the golem canon in all these texts, presenting "an image of these texts as a palimpsest, a layering of legend that is both self-referential and self-renewing" (182).

Baer treats most golem texts affectionately, but does point out ethical limits on the motif's use. In her second chapter, "German Language Appropriations," Baer examines Wegner's *Der Golem* and Gustav Meyrik's 1915 novel of the same name. Baer illustrates these texts' endemic antisemitism, such as the magical, otherworldly Jewish image propagated by Wegner's film, which depicts Rabbi Loew as a sorcerer beholden to astrology and demonic pacts. Meyrik's indiscriminate blending of Jewish tradition with world mysticism is also heavily critiqued, as are commentators who have mitigated what Baer sees as antisemitic exploitation. Though this may be a bitter pill for admirers of Wegner's cinematic legacy, Baer makes a good case that, in the context of nascent Nazism, these pieces subvert the golem "into a figure of evil that turns him into an exotic other, a synecdoche for the 'evil' of Judaism and Jews" (68).

If anything, Baer is too thorough in places. She recounts plot points in great detail, whether they have anything to do with the golem or not. This indicates real love for the texts and helps make a case for their significance, but her style risks moving from solid analysis into less pertinent loquaciousness. Likewise, some of

her author biographies border on the belabored. Baer's desire to bring authors like Ozick, Sherwood, and Rosenbaum to greater awareness is commendable, but at some point the relevance of so much personal information is questionable. Conversely, Baer has excluded some of the more familiar treatments of the golem, including David Wisniewski's 1996 Caldecott-winning children's book and Isaac Lieb Peretz's influential Yiddish version of the story (though Peretz is covered in Goldsmith's precursor work, and is probably omitted for the sake of redundancy). Considering that Baer does such a painstaking job covering alternative literature, including graphic novels and television, these omissions are curious.

These criticisms should not detract from Baer's overall accomplishments. This study provides an excellent survey of the motif, and her theoretical framing of the literature in intertextual perspective is a formidable intellectual achievement. *The Golem Redux* is indispensable reading for anyone interested in the golem or any associated topics, and will likely remain so for some time.

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