



The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey Through Language and Culture

Ruth R. Wisse

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What makes a great Jewish book? What makes a book "Jewish" in the first place? Ruth R. Wisse, one of the leading scholars in the field of Jewish literature, sets out to answer these questions in *The Modern Jewish Canon*. Wisse takes us on an exhilarating journey through language and culture, penetrating the complexities of Jewish life as they are expressed in the greatest Jewish novels of the twentieth century, from Isaac Babel to Isaac Bashevis Singer, from Elie Wiesel to Cynthia Ozick. The modern Jewish canon Wisse proposes comprises those books that convey an experience of Jewish actuality, those in which "the authors or characters know and let the reader know that they are Jews," for better or worse.

Wisse is not content merely to evaluate the great books of Jewish literature; she also links the works together to present a new kind of Jewish history, as it has been told through the literature of the past hundred years. She tells the story of a multilingual, multinational people, one that has experienced an often turbulent relationship with Hebrew (the liturgical and scriptural language) and Yiddish (the commonplace vernacular tongue), as well as with the numerous languages spoken by Jews around the world. Wisse insists that language informs the essential meaning of a Jewish work, creating and ratifying political and religious alliances, historical and cultural circumstance, and methods of interpretation.

Drawing from a broad sweep of twentieth-century Jewish fiction, Wisse reintroduces us to the deeper side of much-beloved books that remain touchstones of Jewish identity. Through her eyes we reencounter old friends, including:

1. Tevye the Dairyman from Sholem Aleichem's landmark Yiddish stories, the character on whom *Fiddler on the Roof* is based
2. Joseph K. of Kafka's *The Trial*, who "without having done anything wrong" was famously "arrested one fine morning"
3. Anne Frank, whose poignant diary has shaped the way we think about the Holocaust
4. Nathan Zuckerman, the enigmatic narrator of numerous Philip Roth novels

Destined to be a classic in its own right, one that reshapes the way we think about some of the classic works of the modern age, *The Modern Jewish Canon* is a book for every Jewish reader and for every reader of great fiction.

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