On July 2, 2016, one of the most important voices to have emerged from the Diaspora after World War II was lost to us. Elie Wiesel lived through the Holocaust—an event of such terrible magnitude as to take the lives of most of his family members and to destroy the community where he was raised. It is remarkable not only that he survived and found a way to write about his experiences, but that when he did write it was with such elegance and profundity. Wiesel's works speak of silence, of loss, of frenzy, of madness, of community, and of faith. His writing is at once compelling, tragic, grotesque, and powerfully moving. He was not only a prolific novelist, but a teacher, chair of the US Holocaust Memorial Council, public speaker, activist, and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. He stands alone among those who have shaped the discourse on Holocaust memory, human rights, and modern Jewish culture.

Many of us who have had an ongoing relationship with Wiesel’s work feel the tragedy of his loss all the more keenly because he passed away at a time when we needed him the most: in the six months that followed his death the world saw the acceleration of xenophobic politics on a global scale, a Holocaust Remembrance Day statement from the White House that made no explicit mention of Jewish victims or anti-Semitism, and the desecration of Jewish cemeteries in Philadelphia and New York. In August 2017, in Charlottesville, Virginia, many protestors at the violent Unite the Right march waved swastika flags and called out anti-Semitic chants, and on October 27, 2018, a man opened fire at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, killing eleven and injuring six more.
In a time when such issues seem as urgent as they have ever been, the questions of scapegoating, violence, the minority experience, memory, and memorialization remain at the heart of Wiesel’s work, and they continue to yield insights. Over the course of commissioning chapters and working with our contributors for this collection, we were struck again and again by the ways in which the questions he raises felt, and continue to feel, more important, and more prescient, than they have ever been.

Wiesel Scholarship: An Overview

Elie Wiesel’s life and literature has generated a sizeable canon of critical works, some dating back more than a decade. Such is the depth of his works that they will no doubt continue to attract new readers and produce an outpouring of scholarship for many decades to come. The recent publication of Elie Wiesel: Messenger for Peace by Alan Berger (2017) suggests that critical interest remains, and will continue to remain, high.

Biography

Some of the most significant early scholarship on Wiesel has been primarily biographical. John K. Roth’s A Consuming Fire: Encounters with Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust blends Wiesel’s biography with references to his literary works and with Roth’s own personal responses to Wiesel’s life, work, and religious identity.1 His insights, bolstered by his personal relationship with Wiesel, represent one of the earliest interventions in Wiesel scholarship, and his work remains one of the most important points of reference for subsequent writing.

Irving Abrahamson’s major, three-volume Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel remains a towering, authoritative source on Wiesel.2 This collection of Wiesel’s thoughts and commentary was gathered through his interviews, speeches, and articles, as well as his testimonial work. These volumes provide historical and contextual information. Frederick Downing’s Elie Wiesel: A Religious Biography, similarly, is invaluable in its extensive research into Wiesel’s origins and background.3 As Wiesel’s life, shaped by his religious upbringing and his faith, is retold by Downing, with his career and his literary responses to the world around him plotted alongside, this is a useful resource for any reader who wishes to understand the bibliographical context for Wiesel’s
fiction. Finally, of course, we have Wiesel’s own memoirs, *All Rivers Run to the Sea* and *And the Sea Is Never Full.*

As a further discussion of Wiesel’s life, the focus of Margaret Taft’s *From Victim to Survivor: The Emergence and Development of the Holocaust Witness 1941–49* is the development of a collective status for survivors—turned—public figures. Taft challenges the notion that the Holocaust witness emerged largely from and after the 1961 Eichmann trial, uncovering the defiant and tenacious efforts of the first witnesses, some writing as early as 1941, to plot the first course from victim to survivor. The recurring themes Taft discovers in the experiences of these survivors, from indifference to hostile anti-Semitism, provide a solid literary and historical context for the scenes Wiesel sets in his novels, which so often feature a survivor coming to terms with the people and places of his past. Wiesel’s own status as public survivor, of course, has informed the ways in which we must approach his works; while he has been instrumental in shaping Holocaust discourse, his name itself has accrued certain signifiers that he would not necessarily have chosen. Phillip Lopate contends: “Sometimes it almost seems that ‘the Holocaust’ is a corporation headed by Elie Wiesel, who defends his patents with articles in the Arts and Leisure section of the *Sunday Times.*” However fair we might consider such assertions to be, they unavoidably provide a context for our approaches to Wiesel’s work.

**Holocaust Fiction and Holocaust Testimony**

The Holocaust is, of course, central to Wiesel’s life and literary output, and Wiesel’s oeuvre is, in turn, integral to discourse on Holocaust literature. Wiesel, famously, has argued against the fictionalization of the Holocaust and the reduction of a topic of such philosophical and material immensity to a simple three-act structure. Instead of reading fictional accounts, he asserts, we should look first to survivor testimony.

At the same time, however, his own works often tread a careful line between what is remembered and what can be expressed. While this volume is primarily interested in Wiesel’s novels rather than his life, it is often difficult to disentangle the two. Wiesel’s biography is important to those who study his novels, of course, because of the dense relationship between his life and his literary works. While Wiesel himself described his trilogy *Night, Dawn,* and *Day* as memoir, the works shuttle between biography and fiction. Lawrence Langer writes of *Night*:
Wiesel’s account is ballasted with the freight of fiction: scenic organization, characterization through dialogue, periodic climaxes, elimination of superfluous or repetitive episodes, and especially an ability to arouse the empathy of his readers, which is an elusive ideal of the writer bound by fidelity to fact.8

_Night_, then, is too literary to be pure memoir but too committed to the ideal of testimony, and too autobiographical, to be read as fiction. Wiesel’s works suggest that we lack a widely accepted vocabulary to discuss this kind of work. As editors of this collection we decided that, while a strong case can be made for _Night, Dawn_, and _Day_ as memoir, the three texts contain sufficient novelistic elements to fall within the purview of this collection.

Tackling the challenging question of the discourse between historiography, biography, and literary invention, Ruth Franklin’s _A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction_ considers well-known examples of both survivor testimony and Holocaust fiction, including Wiesel’s _Night_.9 Franklin, a literary critic and third-generation survivor, argues, counter to Wiesel, that fictional accounts of the Holocaust can serve an important role in public remembrance.

Beyond the question of the literary and the biographical, Rosemary Horowitz’s edited _Elie Wiesel and the Art of Storytelling_ contains some of the earliest interventions in Wiesel scholarship to identify some of the core thematic questions in Wiesel’s fiction, among them being the role of silence.10 The Holocaust, as scholars such as Berel Lang and Lawrence Langer and writers such as Primo Levi have argued, offers an apparent paradox—the Holocaust is beyond representation and yet, as Roger Luckhurst asserts, “silence is no option.”11 Wiesel himself argued that “Auschwitz is something else, always something else. It is a universe outside the universe, a creation that exists parallel to creation.”12 It is impossible to represent either the scale or the horror of the Nazi killing project, and yet, precisely because of its scale and its horror, it demands representation. Wiesel manages this paradox through the careful negotiation of different kinds of silence: Graham B. Walker argues that “there are at least two kinds of silence in Wiesel’s novels: the silence of possibility, community, and creativity; and the silence of chaos, solitude, and destruction.”13 In Wiesel’s work we encounter characters who use silence as an instrument of tragic defiance (in the vow taken by the community depicted in _The Oath_, for example), as a means to protect
oneself (Gregor pretends to be mute to pass as a gentile in The Gates of the Forest), and in the terrible recognition of the impossibility of fully articulating the horror of genocide (“I feel unable to tell the story of this event, much less imagine it,” says the narrator of Day).  

Wiesel’s works, of course, have also informed the wider subject of Holocaust literature. Sue Vice, one of the United Kingdom’s leading scholars on Holocaust literature and the first to establish an MA in Holocaust studies in the United Kingdom, published Holocaust Fiction in 2000, exploring, like Franklin, the often-controversial subject of fictional texts using the Holocaust as their context. Vice’s book is a scholarly analysis into the ethics of writing Holocaust fiction and the key academic debates that remain live. Aukje Kluge and Benn E. Williams’s edited volume Reexamining the Holocaust through Literature covers discussion of a range of types of Holocaust literature, including survivor literature in the works of Charlotte Delbo and Wiesel, before broadening the scope to include works by second- and third-generation writers, including plays, novels, and comic books, across a range of national and cultural contexts. Kluge and Williams’s text, as Sara Horowitz identifies in her foreword, demonstrates the problem of attempting to isolate a definitive canon of Holocaust literature. Vice’s colleague Jenni Adams brings the field even more up to date, editing the Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature in 2014, a thorough treatment of a range of themes that arise in the broader field of Holocaust writing.

Taking a transnational approach, the contributors to Alan Rosen’s earlier edited volume, Literature of the Holocaust, offer considerations of the responses to and after the Holocaust in the literature of a number of countries, languages, and cultures. Rosen’s text showcases literature’s special contribution to our understanding of the Holocaust and also its reach across the world, from the countries and languages of the victims’ persecution to those of their refuge. The contributors of Rosen’s volume note the interplay between history and literature but also the momentous points where the nuances of literature tell far more than historical facts can. The eight simple words uttered to arrivals at Auschwitz, directing men to the left and women to the right, is Rosen’s case in point, as he illuminates how Wiesel brings this into sharp focus at the point he departed from his mother forever. Rosen’s volume recognizes that the war years yielded a rich source of Holocaust literature, several years before the likes of Wiesel took up the mantle and transformed it into the vast field we have today.
Steven Katz's edited *The Shtetl: New Evaluations* looks closely at the roots and representations of the shtetl and its significance in Jewish literature.\(^{21}\) Although making a broader survey of this unique facet of Jewish life, one that reaches beyond its presence in literature, Katz and his contributors plot the representation of the shtetl through time and literature, without shying away from the less romantic realities of these Jewish worlds. Katz's volume identifies the shtetl's role in cultivating some key Jewish literary figures who emerge in Wiesel's fiction, such as the innkeeper—notably *The Trial of God*'s Berish. Wiesel's own chapter in the volume identifies the peculiar paradox of a community almost beyond the changes of time in the world outside the shtetl, and one whose religious influence dictates a fixation on the significance of time, place, memory, and looking to a better future. It is a world Wiesel returns to in his novels time and again.

**Religions Belief and Tradition**

Horowitz's volume also offers perspectives on the complex, and sometimes seemingly contradictory, role religion plays in Wiesel's writing. Wiesel draws heavily upon, and shows great reverence toward, the traditions of Talmudic scholarship while at the same time expressing a crisis of faith—not in the existence of God, but in the possibility of a loving God. This has been a recurring feature in Wiesel's writing throughout his career; in his foreword to the 2016 edition of *A Consuming Fire*, for example, Roth reflects on how in his later years, following emergency life-saving surgery and a subsequent book *Open Heart*, Wiesel's authorial tone and focus, although more conciliatory and less religiously rebellious than when Roth first encountered Wiesel, remained theologically challenging. The place for Jewish religious traditions in Wiesel's work arises once more in Carole J. Lambert's *Ethics After Auschwitz: Primo Levi's and Elie Wiesel's Response.*\(^{22}\) Comparing the testimonies of Primo Levi and Wiesel with the specific focus on the survivors' approach to religious ethics, this ten-chapter volume is structured around the Ten Commandments. The premise illuminates some points of convergence between Levi and Wiesel's ethical and authorial voices. The fact remains, however, that on many issues of religion, faith, and ethics within and outside of the camps, Wiesel and Levi stand apart and often distinctly at odds.

Carole J. Lambert's *Is Man God's Friend? Theodicy and Friendship in Elie Wiesel's Novels* takes as a starting point the pained question of
theodicy in a post-Holocaust world in conjunction with Wiesel’s preoccupation with friendship. Lambert considers the central characters of six of Wiesel’s novels (The Town Beyond the Wall, Twilight, The Gates of the Forest, A Beggar in Jerusalem, The Accident, The Judges), and the values, faith, and goodness the characters might have hoped to find in God, but in the face of trauma and suffering, find instead in their friendships. Lambert further argues that Wiesel’s novels deserve the same scholarly attention that his nonfiction work has so rightly achieved, recognizing that the reception of Wiesel’s novels in the United States is a far cry from the acclaim they have received in France.

Steven Katz and Alan Rosen’s edited Elie Wiesel: Jewish Literary and Moral Perspectives offers a further intervention in the role of religious belief and scholarship in Wiesel’s writing. It offers insights not only on Wiesel’s novels but his nonfiction (particularly his commentary on his Hasidic writing), and his work as a teacher and activist. The volume is perhaps most insightful in its demonstration of the ways in which Wiesel’s works act as a bridge between Jewish theological traditions of the past and Jewish culture today. Wiesel’s writing, the volume convincingly demonstrates, is deeply infused with Talmudic and Midrashic traditions. The Bible, Talmud, Midrash, and Hasidism provide both Wiesel’s recurring points of reference and, in a more structural sense, his propensity for drawing out conflicting and textured interpretations from a given story—his deep skepticism, in other words, of simplistic or seemingly transparent readings.

Elie Wiesel’s Literary Works

Given the volume of work on Wiesel, then, one may ask why a new collection is necessary? One of the central motivating impulses of this work is to bring a scholarly apparatus to bear upon Wiesel’s later novels. Such was Wiesel’s output that, even as he has attracted the attentions of many of the most authoritative scholars to study Holocaust literature, he consistently outpaced his commentators. While there has been an outpouring of works on Night and Wiesel’s Hasidic writings, his later novels such as Hostage have gone almost completely unrecognized in critical works. Several of the essays featured in this collection address these later novels.

This collection, then, seeks to engage with the existing critical work on Wiesel, to move forward certain debates, and to expand the
conversation by offering interventions on works which, until now, have not received any significant critical attention. We have grouped these essays into four parts: Hasidic Origins, The Other, Theology and Tradition, and Later Works. These parts offer broad thematic groups and a very broad chronology of the fiction under consideration.

Hasidic Origins

For the purposes of this volume we define Hasidic origins as the traditions, spiritualism, and mysticism that characterize the culture of the specific branch of Orthodox Judaism that Wiesel grew up within and identified with. Menachem Keren-Kratz’s essay opens this collection. He seeks to locate Wiesel in the literary and cultural environment of Sighet—the town in which Wiesel spent the first fifteen years of his life. Sighet, he contends, was not the isolated and culturally conservative shtetl popularly represented in Wiesel (auto)biography, but a thriving literary hub. Wiesel, he argues, was deeply influenced by the writers of his hometown. Their impact on Wiesel’s authorial voice remained palpable throughout his literary career. Keren-Kratz raises challenging questions, such as why Wiesel appeared to willfully deny the literary scene he was surrounded by as a youngster, or the literature that he suggests Wiesel was influenced by. Our opening chapter further raises a broader question: as a human rights activist, theologian, figure of public admiration and political influence, is Elie Wiesel as a novelist held to higher standards than other authors of fiction in telling a faithful story? Keren-Kratz challenges the reader to not read Wiesel’s fiction and novels passively, but to ask what agendas and motivations drove such a prolific output that started at such a young age and following such trauma to span, as Keren-Kratz identifies, a lifetime of literary, journalistic, and academic writing.

Following the literary scene setting of chapter 1, chapter 2 offers a Hasidic context to the themes that recur in Wiesel’s fiction. As a corollary to scholarly work on Wiesel and God, Yakir Englander proposes that Wiesel’s writing articulates a loss of faith in humanity. Englander argues that, just as the Holocaust led Wiesel to reexamine his relationship with God, his understanding of human beings, too, was irreparably shaped by the events he witnessed and was subject to. The tests—and failures—of human strength recalled in Night, are, as Englander asserts, “the moments that truly terrify Wiesel.” Faced with the impossibility of faith in either the human or the divine, Englander argues, Wiesel’s
only recourse was to a theology grounded in Hasidic teachings, Wiesel’s “spiritual mother tongue,” in Englander’s words. Wiesel’s religious and philosophical position, then, which Englander sees as a deviation from the traditional ultra-Orthodox response to the Holocaust, can be understood as analogous to that of the tzaddik—one who lives among, and influences, those who do not understand him. The loneliness of the mystical figures in Wiesel’s texts resounds with his own distance from any particular Hasidic community after the Holocaust, despite his clear attachment to Hasidism.

The question of Jewish, and particularly Hasidic, teachings recur throughout this volume. One prominent figure from Jewish theological traditions to appear in Wiesel’s work, Mary Catherine Mueller argues in this volume, is that of the prophet. With Night as her focus, Mueller proposes that Wiesel uses various prophet figures—those who both see and proclaim—to grapple with the (perhaps impossible) task of experiencing and describing both the empirical and experiential truth of the Shoah. The prophet in his or her various guises, she argues, serves as a bridge between the world the reader occupies, and the “anti-world” of the Nazi death camps.

The Other

The authors in part 2 of the volume offer detailed readings of three groups of characters who feature in Wiesel’s novels not as central protagonists, but as vital to the narratives in their “otherness” to the leading characters: the madmen (and women), the bystanders, and the Christians. The Other encapsulates the outsider figures that populate Wiesel’s texts, those who stand apart from the protagonists and the mass, be they Jews who are spiritually or psychically “other” or non-Jews.

Jennifer Murray examines the “mad” characters who appear in Night and The Town Beyond the Wall. Each of these figures, she argues, represents a form of mystical madness—their insanity provides them with insights and revelations unavailable to either the reader or the other characters around them. Mueller and Murray’s pieces can thus be read as two overlapping readings of a recurring figure in Wiesel’s work, the messenger, whose eccentricity (etymologically “outside of the circle”) belies a crucial insight into the nature of the world.

The tragedy of the messengers was that their visions and prophesies would not, could not be believed until the violence was already visited.
upon the Jews. For Wiesel, however, one of the greatest tragedies of anti-Semitic violence was not in the actions of the perpetrators, but in the lack of intervention from others. The bystander, by virtue of his or her failure to act, permits and even normalizes an act of violence. Christin Zühlke’s chapter concerns the role of the bystander in Wiesel’s *The Town Beyond the Wall*. The novel poses a central question—why would an individual who is perfectly capable of saving lives with little personal risk choose to allow an act of violence to occur? This question, of course, concerns both individual and geopolitical entities. It has far-reaching implications for both psychology and global politics. By way of an answer, Zühlke turns to studies of the bystander in psychology and social psychology. The bystander exists, Zühlke concludes, because, first, individuals typically do not feel responsible for those they consider to be outsiders, and, second, because they feel (perhaps artificially) that they are separate from, and thus not responsible for, the things they witness.

A recurring theme in Wiesel’s work is the problem and question of anti-Semitism. In novels such as *The Oath*, which places two survivors—one of a pogrom, one of the Holocaust—in dialogue, Wiesel seeks to show that the Holocaust was not an aberration, but the culmination of a long history of blame, victimization, and explosive acts of mass violence. Two chapters in this volume document and examine the rhetoric and psychology that has facilitated and sought to justify violence against the Jewish people. Lucas Wilson uses the Passion play that occurs in *The Gates of the Forest* as a lens to understand certain forms of Christian anti-Semitism. Wiesel uses the Passion play, Wilson proposes, as a means to make explicit the invocation of Christian scripture in anti-Semitic rhetoric. The novel then, represents an injunction to “go off script” as it were—to find new forms of Christian-Jewish dialogue.

Theology and Tradition

In part 3 questions of Jewish theology and tradition are explored as they arise in a number of historical, geographical, and social contexts in several of Wiesel's novels. For the purposes of this work, Theology and Tradition relates more broadly to Jewish values and the relationship between God and the Jews. In chapter 7, Rabbi Ariel Evan Mayse seeks to intervene in the question of silence in Wiesel's works. Silence was for Wiesel, as discussed earlier, a theme of central importance, and one he returned to in literature and journalism. Mayse argues that a Hasidic philosophy of
language offers a means to understand the role silence plays in Wiesel’s *The Gates of the Forest*. Hasidism, Mayse argues, presents forms of utterance, including silence, laughter, song, and the absurd, which operate outside of and in concert with directly or transparently communicative forms. Where Englander identifies departures in Wiesel’s approach from certain traditions, Mayse sees Wiesel’s embrace of this distinctly Hasidic spectrum of language.

Federico Dal Bo takes up a recurring theme in the question of Wiesel’s religiosity: the problem of reconciling belief in God with the Holocaust. This is a subject commentators and scholars of Wiesel have grappled with as much as the author, who negotiated a deeply personal faith with searching and pained theological questions, often utilizing his novels. Wiesel’s works have taken a range of positions on God, at times separating a respect and deep affection for Jewish traditions from a belief in a Jewish God, at times declaring that the Holocaust represents the end to any possibility of belief, and at times proposing a misotheistic worldview—one that proposes a malevolent or criminally negligent deity. Dal Bo seeks to ground Wiesel’s various approaches to belief in Jewish theology, arguing that Wiesel ultimately takes a position that requires us not to argue about God, but to argue *with* Him.

In chapter 9, Eric J. Sterling takes up the question of memory. Using *The Forgotten* as his focus, Sterling examines Wiesel’s portrayal of Alzheimer’s disease as a gateway to consider the profound importance of memory in Jewish tradition and among survivors. For Wiesel, Sterling argues, the act of remembering is a solemn duty placed upon the living by the dead and the divine. In the novel, Sterling argues, Alzheimer’s and (more broadly) human frailty represent a threat to memory. The transmission of memory between generations, however, offers hope.

Later Works

Our final part, Later Works, considers those novels published after 2000, as the World Wars, the Holocaust, the creation of the State of Israel became events of the past century. Although earlier literature is brought into these chapters as points of comparison, this section considers the work of an aging yet ever-active Wiesel. A recurring theme in these chapters is the porous boundary between Wiesel’s life and fiction; it can be no coincidence, for example, that many of his leading characters are writers of some kind themselves. His novels, as the chapters in this
volume make clear, are deeply colored by Wiesel's political, religious, and philosophical views, none more so than his later works.

Dana Mihailescu's chapter can be read as an intervention in the question of transnationalism and the Holocaust as highlighted by the contributors to Rosen’s volume. Mihailescu considers The Time of the Uprooted and affirms Wiesel's role in the trailblazing position of literature to intervene in discourses of transculturality, memory, and the politics of memorialization. She argues that the novel describes the effects of distance—geographical, generational, and temporal—on memory and the act of memorialization. The novel, she asserts, complicates and resists the easy assimilation of Holocaust narratives into US popular culture, a self-conscious reference on Wiesel's behalf, perhaps, to his own position as a writer in that culture.

Rosemary Horowitz seeks to place Wiesel's later works in dialogue with both his life and the emergence of political and religious Zionism. Seeing Wiesel's novels as a call to action on the central principles of his life, she offers a reading of Hostage through the lens of the captivity narrative. This framework not only provides a means to approach Wiesel's later fiction, but can inform our understanding of Wiesel's earlier works, namely, Dawn and The Testament. Horowitz presents these three novels as an ongoing discourse on Israel, charting the period of Mandatory Palestine under the British, armed resistance, communist Zionism, and the modern Israeli state.

In the final chapter, Sue Vice addresses The Forgotten, The Sonderberg Case, and Hostage. She seeks to draw connections between these texts, considering Wiesel's later meditations on the role of memory, autobiography, the relationships between different generations of Holocaust survivors, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She argues that these novels can be productively read as a form of autofiction—literature that draws upon, and relies upon the reader’s knowledge of, true events of a historical or autobiographical nature.

As anyone who has had the pleasure of reading Wiesel's works will attest, his fiction endures. It raises questions that demand answers and it lingers long after one has set the volume down, but, as Peppy Margolis attests in this volume’s foreword, entering Wiesel's world with his literary works is a beginning. The events of the Holocaust—both during and after—remain close to the surface in Wiesel's novels, yet as the contributors to this volume demonstrate, Wiesel’s literary themes are as expansive and prolific as his novels. Subjects that replay in novel after novel, such
as how to meaningfully respond to genocide, or the place for God after atrocity, are questions to be struggled with rather than answered. His work will undoubtedly provoke reflection and debate for many years to come. This volume, then, should be read as a continuation of existing conversations and an invitation for further discussion.

Notes


**Works Cited**


