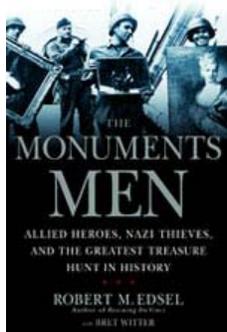


On the Bookshelf

Jews and Germans, Trotsky, Clarice Lispector

BY JOSH LAMBERT | 7:00 am August 24, 2009 [Print This Post](#)

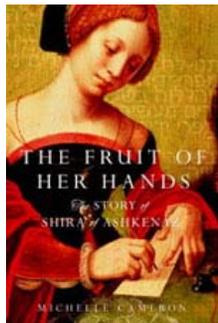


As of this week, the psychodrama of Jews, Germans, and World War II can be experienced at a theater near you in full Tarantinocolor, that exuberantly violent, talky, quaintly outrageous late-20th-century cinematic technology. Meanwhile, the publishing juggernaut keeps on truckin', bringing forth yet more thrillers, fictional or not, that draw intrigue and excitement out of the Third Reich's crimes. Dan Fesperman's *The Arms Maker of Berlin* (Knopf, August), for example, dispatches an American professor to track down missing Nazi-era paperwork—but, rest assured, a series of murders, and a sexy but possibly treacherous colleague, quickly raise the stakes of his research assignment.

Former oil baron Robert M. Edsel's *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History* (Center Street, September), co-written with Brett Witter, also features protagonists from the buttoned-down world of academia laboring against National Socialist evil: art historians, museum curators, and archivists, in this case. During World War II, hundreds of these cultural professionals politicked, cajoled, and sleuthed with the aim of preserving *objets d'art* and historic buildings from destruction during battles. Later they turned to recovering millions of artworks looted by the Nazis. Think of them as real-life Indiana Joneses, sans whips and ophiophobia.

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The real story of Jews and Germans has never been quite as simple as it looks in the movies or in thrilling tales of World War II-era derring-do. That's one of the lessons of Sharon Gilleman's *Germans into Jews: Remaking the Jewish Social Body in the Weimar Republic* (Stanford, August), Gilleman, a historian at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, explores how German Jews wove themselves into the fabric of German national life in the years after World War I, maintaining distinctiveness as a minority community but insisting on their fundamental Germanness, too.



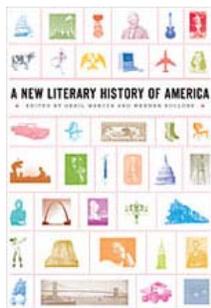
Many centuries earlier, Jews already called Germany home, long before anything resembling modern Germany existed. *In The Fruit of Her Hands: The Story of Shira of Ashkenaz* (Pocket, September), a historical novel set in 13th-century Bavaria, Michelle Cameron recreates the tense atmosphere of that place and time. Jews could be capriciously taxed and punished by the authorities, but they also produced indelible works of talmudic commentary and interpretation. Famed as the learned wife of the scholar and martyr Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg and supposedly an ancestor of the author, Cameron's title character, Shira, lives up to the legacy of the Talmud's *Beruriah* as a scholar's wife who earned respect for her own brilliance in a patriarchal culture.

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Long after Meir and Shira's time, Germany established itself as a center of scholarship: the very notion of a Ph.D. derived from the 19th-century German system. Many great German scholars were Jewish, and not just the famous *members of the Frankfurt School*. Jacob Taubes, who lectured on hermeneutics to Susan Sontag at Harvard before settling into the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Free University of Berlin in the mid-1960s, was one such paradigmatic German Jewish intellectual. Scion of a rabbinical dynasty who earned a doctorate in philosophy at 23, Taubes pursued interests from St. Paul to Kierkegaard and from *Joachim of Fiore* to Jean Genet. *Occidental Eschatology* (Stanford, September)—his doctoral dissertation and the single book he published during his lifetime, now translated and introduced by David Ratmoko—displays his wide erudition and his understanding of apocalypse and messianism through the ages.

Here's just how good German scholars can be: they can teach Americans about America. That's what Werner Sollors—trained at Taubes' home institution, the Free University of Berlin—routinely does: he publishes some of the sharpest criticism of American literature, especially of African-American and American Jewish fiction. Along with rock critic and intellectual jack-of-all-trades Greil Marcus, Sollors has edited an eccentric and inexhaustible reference book, *A New Literary History of America* (Harvard, September), which unlike many books in the field does not give short shrift to Jewish luminaries, including among its entries essays on such figures as Arthur Miller, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Henry Roth, Philip Roth, and Adrienne Rich.

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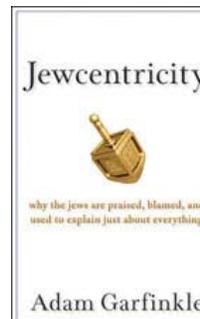
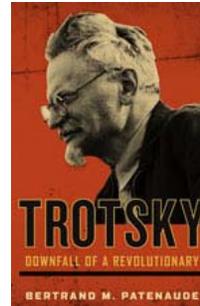
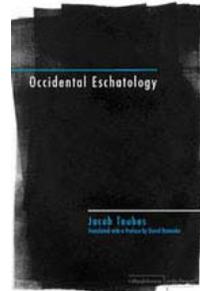
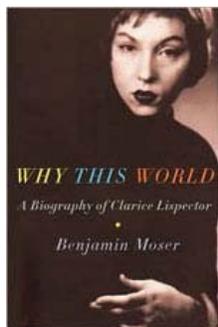


The assassination of Leon Trotsky in Mexico in 1940—subject of Bertrand M. Patenaude's *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary* (Harper, September)—might not seem like Americana, but readers of Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* know better. Like Augie, who went "wild with enthusiasm" upon encountering Trotsky in Mexico, many Jewish leftists in the U.S. fixated on the former head of the Red Army. Part of their fascination, certainly, was that before Trotsky fled Russia, before he befriended Diego Rivera and bedded down with Frida Kahlo, and before a KGB goon offered him with an ice pick, he had been just another schnook named Lev Bronstein.

It might be argued that Trotsky bears responsibility, indirectly, for Clarice Lispector's celebrity as a leading Brazilian author. In December 1918, Ukrainian anti-Semites blamed Jews for the Russian Revolution—partly because of Trotsky's visibility as a leading Bolshevik—and fomented pogroms that forced Lispector's parents to emigrate from their home in Podolia to Brazil. Clarice, born as Chaya, would become one of the more prominent Portuguese-language writers of the 20th century, and one of the most *fascinating*. Harper's "New Books" columnist Benjamin Moser, who claims competence in no less than ten languages, draws upon her family papers and careful reading of her fiction to produce *Why This World: A Biography of Clarice Lispector* (Oxford, August).

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Pinning Bolshevism on Trotsky, or crediting him for Lispector's Brazilianess, furnish examples of what Adam Garfinkle, a former speechwriter for Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell, has labeled "Jewcentricity": the tendency of many people, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, anti-Semite or Jewish chauvinist, to "exaggerate the significance" of Jews. Zygmunt Bauman, a sociologist and cultural theorist, called the same phenomenon "allosemitism," and while neither term seems destined for wide adoption, the underlying point deserves serious consideration. In *Jewcentricity: Why the Jews Are Praised, Blamed, and Used to Explain Just About Everything* (Wiley, August), Garfinkle suggests very sensibly that everybody would be better off if non-Jews would just "pay less attention to the Jews." Yet if they did, would a book like Garfinkle's still sell?



More in: [Adam Garfinkle](#), [Benjamin Moser](#), [Bertrand M. Patenaude](#), [Brett Witter](#), [Dan Fesperman](#), [David Ratmoko](#), [Indiana Jones](#), [Jacob Taubes](#), [Michelle Cameron](#), [Robert M. Edsel](#), [Sharon Gilleman](#), [Werner Sollors](#)