



PROJECT MUSE®

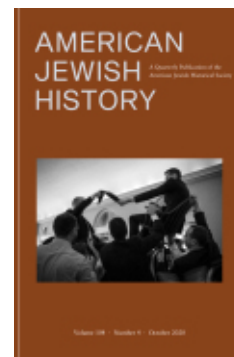
From Antisemitism to Homophobia: Laura Z. Hobson as Activist
Jewish Writer

Rachel Gordan

American Jewish History, Volume 104, Number 4, October 2020, pp.
579-603 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ajh.2020.0052>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/785291>

From Antisemitism to Homophobia: Laura Z. Hobson as Activist Jewish Writer

Rachel Gordan

If Laura Z. Hobson (1900–1986) has any name recognition today, it is as the author of *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), the quintessential *anti*-antisemitism novel of the post-World War II era, which became an Academy-Award-winning film starring Gregory Peck. What is far less well known is that a generation after her most famous novel was published, Hobson made a significant contribution to American gay literature. The story of Hobson's later career and turn to anti-homophobia has important implications for our understanding of postwar American Jews and the social protest novel in America.

Published in 1975, Hobson's seventh novel, *Consenting Adult*, told the story of Tessa and Ken Lynn, and their gay son, Jeff, who discloses his gay identity to his parents. In 1985, *Consenting Adult* became a popular made-for-television film, starring Marlo Thomas and Martin Sheen, who played the parents of a gay child; like the novel, the film portrayed these parents as admirable for their acceptance of their gay son.¹ And like *Gentleman's Agreement*, *Consenting Adult* was the kind of social message story suited for multiple media.

At a time when parents of gay children were beginning to organize—PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) was founded in 1973 in New York City—*Consenting Adult* reflected contemporary concerns about the specific challenges faced by parents of gay children.² As the anthropologist Kath Weston has noted, it was only in the wake of the 1969 Stonewall Riots and the emergence of the gay rights movement that deliberately disclosing one's sexual identity to relatives became “structured as a possibility and a decision for self-identified lesbians and gay men in the United States.”³ Prior to gay liberation, “coming out”

1. *Gentleman's Agreement* was made into a film less than a year after its publication as a novel. Despite interest from producers, *Consenting Adult* struggled to enter TV or film production for nearly a decade. The 1985 TV adaptation updated the story by a decade and transplanted the story from NYC to Seattle.

2. Heather Murray, *Not In this Family: Gays and the Meaning of Kinship in Post-war North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), x–xi.

3. Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 44.

carried a different meaning, usually signifying “a person’s entrance into the ‘gay world,’ which could involve frequenting a gay bar or revealing one’s sexual identity to a few close friends who were also ‘in the life.’”⁴ Until the 1970s, in other words, revealing gay identity in a heterosexual context was primarily associated with loss; the price of coming out to straight parents was assumed to include damage to, if not the demise of, personal relationships with straight family members, while potential gains seemed fraught and uncertain. By the time *Consenting Adult* was published in 1975, the idea that a new and positive relationship between parent and child could be forged in the wake of a child coming out was still new within mainstream culture. Hobson helped to make this idea more palatable through her popular novel. Hobson accomplished this, in part, as she had done in *Gentleman’s Agreement*, by focusing on educated, liberal, upper middle-class characters, for whom readers felt an aspirational connection.⁵ She wrote the novel, moreover, at a moment when the cultural climate regarding sexuality was changing and greater openness in discussing subjects that had once been considered private was becoming the norm— what Rochelle Gurstein describes as the disappearance of a “reticence sensibility” among Americans.⁶ The postwar liberalism in which *Gentleman’s Agreement* had landed and which that novel promoted through its portrayal of *anti*-antisemitism, had evolved, leading to a reconsideration of themes such as assimilation, religious and ethnic particularity, racism, and prejudice, in Hobson’s 1975 novel.

In this essay, I examine how these two novels fit into Hobson’s arc of writerly interests. The connection between these two topics can be broadly explained as Hobson’s concern for marginalized groups in the US and their relationship to the liberalization of American culture. In the late 1940s, Jews were the first notable group in a series of marginal-

4. Ibid.

5. As Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis note in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, “Like virtually every other aspect of modern social relations, lesbian [and gay] social life and culture differed according to social class.” Kennedy and Davis were writing about lesbians, but many of their findings apply to gays, as well. They found that wealthy lesbians “could risk being open about their lesbianism with few material consequences. But this privilege also meant that their ways of living had limited benefit for the majority of working lesbians.” Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2. In *Consenting Adult*, the Lynn family’s class privilege becomes apparent in the opening pages, when Tessa offers to find the best possible psychological treatment for her son.

6. Rochelle Gurstein, *The Repeal of Reticence: America’s Cultural and Legal Struggles Over Free Speech, Obscenity, Sexual Liberation, and Modern Art* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999), 255.

ized groups to be integrated into mainstream society. Members of the LGBTQ community would go through a parallel process of integration almost seventy years later. Historian David Sorkin refers to these post-WWII processes of equalization, which include the equalization of Catholics and African-Americans, as emancipation processes, suggesting that Jewish involvement in the fight for gay liberation was an extension of their own post-WWII equalization.⁷ Within a decade—for Jews, this occurred in the 1940s and for LGBTQ people the most dramatic legal changes occurred in the 2010s—societal views of both groups changed dramatically. Although *Consenting Adult* was published decades before the most significant legal changes for LGBTQ people, it was a novel that helped pave the way toward more significant change. More than simply recreation, novels like *Gentleman's Agreement* and *Consenting Adult* helped readers imagine new attitudes towards issues like antisemitism and homophobia.

REWRITING THE PROBLEM OF ANTISEMITISM/ HOMOPHOBIA INTO A MAJORITY CULTURE PROBLEM

As she would do in *Consenting Adult*, in *Gentleman's Agreement*, Hobson focused on the experiences and reactions of the non-Jewish majority. *Gentleman's Agreement* told the story of Phil Green, a non-Jewish reporter working undercover as a Jew in order to expose antisemitism. A young Californian widower, Green moves to New York with his son and his mother, to write for *Smith's Weekly*. When Phil's editor assigns him a story about antisemitism, Phil searches for a new approach to the topic, so as not to “spin out the same old drool of statistics and protest,” on what feels to him like a difficult assignment.⁸ Phil decides that the best way to humanize the story is to investigate the experience of antisemitism from the inside: “Over and above what any other normal man thinks about it, what must a Jew feel about this thing? That's what he must find out, thinking himself into the very brain of another human being to find his answer.”⁹ Remembering that in a previous assignment about miners, Phil had “damn well gone to Scranton, got himself a job, gone down into the dark, slept in a bunk in a shack . . . He'd *been* a miner,” Phil decides that the best way to write about antisemitism is to *be* a Jew.¹⁰ “I was Jewish for Six Months” is the article that Phil envisions. It was

7. David Sorkin, *Jewish Emancipation: A History Across Five Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), chapter 27.

8. Hobson, *Gentleman's Agreement*, 6–7, 8.

9. Hobson, *Gentleman's Agreement*, 51.

10. Hobson, *Gentleman's Agreement*, 63.

a story of passing. But instead of passing in the usual direction—toward a more socially accepted identity, as when Jews passed as gentiles or Blacks passed as whites—Phil Green passes as a Jew.

In researching his article, Phil chronicles his experiences with a range of typical antisemitic episodes. It was a narrative strategy that allowed Hobson to write an *anti*-antisemitism novel that was not all about the Jewish experience, focusing instead on the non-Jewish experience of antisemitism. At the time and later, this format provoked criticism. By making Phil a gentile, one typical review noted, “it seems to me to condemn her novel to do no more than scratch the surface of her subject,” explaining that, “The inner anxieties of persecuted races cannot be explored by tourists. They are known only to those who dwell as natives among such slights, apprehensions, and shameful humiliations.”¹¹ Similarly, the prominent Reform Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman (himself an author of the bestselling *Peace of Mind*, a book about Judaism), praised Hobson’s novel for being “a valuable contribution to social sanity,” while acknowledging that Hobson had not portrayed anything positive about the Jewish experience. “There is, for example, nothing in the whole of ‘Gentleman’s Agreement’ that would give the sympathetic Christian an awareness of the moral vitality of the Jewish spirit or the spiritual majesty of Jewish life and history.”¹² Such critics suggested that Hobson’s focus on antisemitism should have led her to a Jewish protagonist. Instead of “I was Jewish for Six Months,” these readers wanted a “I’ve Been Jewish My Whole Life” perspective.

Hobson had her reasons for her approach, however. Through non-Jewish protagonists, Hobson was able to present antisemitism as an *American* problem, not just a Jewish problem. As a result of his experience passing as a Jew, Phil learned the important lesson that:

antisemitism had never been a Jewish problem, for the Jews alone could never solve it. It was a nonsectarian problem. And because of the simple thing of majority, it was mostly a Christian problem. He’d always known that. But now he was a different sort of Christian. Now he was one of the Christians able and ready to act. On whatever front the thing showed itself.¹³

In today’s terms, we might call this Phil’s awakening to his identity as an ally in the *anti*-antisemitism movement.

11. John Mason Brown, “If You Prick Us,” *The Saturday Review*, December 6, 1947, 71.

12. Joshua Loth Liebman, “Gentleman’s Agreement,” Addresses Broadcast by Stations WBZ and WBZA Sunday Morning, February 1 and February 15, 1948 From Temple Israel, Boston.

13. Hobson, *Gentleman’s Agreement*, 268.

In *Consenting Adult*, Hobson adopted a similar approach, focusing on the shifting perspectives of straight parents in order to showcase the positive lessons to be learned by the majority culture. Ken Lynn, Jeff's father, has a hard time accepting his gay son, but even he undergoes a change in attitude toward homophobia. Eventually, Ken's sympathy is with his son, and Ken confides to his wife that "Every time somebody says the word 'fag' I want to hit him."¹⁴ At another point in the novel, Jeff listens as his relatives, who are unaware of his gay identity, discuss a news item related to gay activism, and realizes, "It was horrible and yet marvelous. It was the first time anybody ever had talked about it as if it was any other big question, like ban-the-bomb or civil rights or Kennedy and Nixon, not as if it was something to send you to a doctor or psychoanalyst."¹⁵ In Hobson's portrayal, the significance of the majority culture's perception is made clear. For Jeff, hearing his straight relatives speaking reasonably and non-judgmentally about gays leads to a profound discovery: "It had never even occurred to him that there might be that kind of people. Not once had he ever thought there might be another way you could feel about it."¹⁶ In this scene, Jeff listens in on the majority culture, much as Phil does in *Gentleman's Agreement* when he investigates perceptions of Jews. This kind of "listening in" was also what Hobson allowed her readers to do through her novels.

Although the novel and the film now seem dated, *Gentleman's Agreement* was considered path-breaking in its day. Hobson was applauded for "naming names"—including the names of towns (Darien, Connecticut) and infamous bigots (Gerald L.K. Smith and John Rankin). Through *Gentleman's Agreement*, Hobson called out the misdeeds of a group of supposed liberals who had largely given themselves a pass when it came to their bigotry and antisemitism. *Gentleman's Agreement* forced a reckoning, as non-Jewish readers identified with the attractive character, Kathy Lacey, who was Phil Green's girlfriend and the niece of Phil's editor. A seemingly progressive Manhattan divorcee, who teaches nursery school and has memories of having "fallen in with the radical group—we worshipped Roosevelt" at Vassar, Kathy appears every inch the good 1940s liberal.¹⁷ She is even the one who suggested the idea for a story about antisemitism to her uncle. Yet, throughout the novel, signs of Kathy's latent antisemitism emerge, provoking readers to recognize their own implicit biases and endangering Kathy's relationship with Phil, whose *anti*-antisemitism comes ever more into focus. In *Consenting*

14. Hobson, *Consenting Adult* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947), 93.

15. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 108.

16. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 109.

17. Hobson, *Gentleman's Agreement*, 20.

Adult, too, Hobson focused on those liberal New Yorkers (her novel was set in 1960), who thought they were “free of prudery, of the vicarious prurience that saw sin and wickedness in anything beyond the primer ABC’s of sexual conduct.”¹⁸ In *Consenting Adult*, Tessa, Jeff’s mother, believed herself to be open-minded:

She was not given to moral judgment and disapproval, not even now with the enlarging dreads in this permissive year of 1960. The widening use of marijuana, the widening promiscuity, the reckless speed in cars and on motorcycles, all these new dreads of parenthood she had faced with equanimity. Was it only an assumed equanimity? She had never asked herself that before.¹⁹

Tessa, like Kathy, learns to question her assumed liberalism, and to come to terms with her own biases. Just as Jeff serves to highlight his parents’ liberalism or lack thereof, the primary role of Jews in *Gentleman’s Agreement* was in affirming the importance of non-Jewish responses to antisemitism, and in showing that Jews needed allies in the fight against antisemitism. Thus, it is Phil’s Jewish friend, Dave Goldman, who helps Phil grasp this insight. When Phil tells Dave about his assignment to write about antisemitism, Dave responds with “satisfying insouciance.” It is a reaction that fulfills the central message of Hobson’s novel: that it doesn’t matter whether someone is Jewish or not when it comes to fighting antisemitism; fighting antisemitism was instead a shared obligation of Jews and non-Jews. Just because Dave is Jewish does not mean that he cares any more about antisemitism than Phil. This is what it means for antisemitism to be, in Hobson’s words, a “nonsectarian problem.”²⁰

Later, when Phil asks Dave about his seeming indifference, Dave explains: “Well, I’m on the side lines of antisemitism . . . It’s *your* fight, brother.”²¹ Here, Hobson makes her point directly: gentiles must take ownership of the problem of antisemitism, or nothing will change. To emphasize the point that antisemitism is a problem that afflicts all of society, not simply the Jewish population, Dave tells Phil: “the hell with the Jews, as Jews.” “It’s the whole thing, not the poor, poor, Jews.” Dave’s pointed remark about the “poor, poor, Jews,” implying that the Jewish experience of discomfort and discrimination is not the primary

18. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 14.

19. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 15.

20. Regarding Dave’s indifference to hearing about Phil’s antisemitism assignment, Phil thinks, “Without surprise, he noted that Dave showed as little steam as he himself had, nodding judiciously, trying to visualize it as if he were also a writer, but not aroused. Obscurely, it pleased him that Dave should react also on this low-voltage level. He’d been right – they *were* just the same about things like this.” Hobson, *Gentleman’s Agreement*, 131.

21. Hobson, *Gentleman’s Agreement*, 133.

reason to care about antisemitism, drives home Hobson's message that *anti*-antisemitism is not about "special pleading" and taking care of the Jews; it is about safeguarding the country's ideals. In Hobson's vision, fighting antisemitism becomes another way to make America stronger.

In *Consenting Adult*, homophobia is not presented as an American problem so much as a problem that liberal America ought to address for its own benefit. Early on, when Tessa Lynn confronts her husband and yells, "You, a great big liberal civilized man, you threw him out because you can't stand the idea of your son being homosexual," it is a challenge that Hobson vicariously presents to all of her readers: you think you're liberal, but how would you feel if it were your son who was gay? A real liberal American, Hobson implied, would find a way toward acceptance.

"THE HABIT OF GRAPPLING WITH PAINFUL AND SUPPRESSED SUBJECTS YEARS BEFORE THEIR TIME"

Connections between the subject matter of *Gentleman's Agreement* and *Consenting Adult* were noted by 1970s reviewers of *Consenting Adult* who routinely drew parallels between the two Hobson novels. A *Boston Globe* reviewer wrote that in *Consenting Adult*, Hobson "goes after the same social slights [as in *Gentleman's Agreement*], the same devastating impersonal hostilities—though this time directed towards homosexual men and women."²² In his *New York Times* review, historian and activist Martin Duberman similarly noted, "My guess is that the book will have something of the impact of her 1947 novel about anti-Semitism, 'Gentleman's Agreement.'"²³ And in the *Washington Post*, the writer and activist Perry Deane Young observed of Hobson's treatment of social issues: "There are deadly serious aspects of being a homosexual in our society and Laura Z. Hobson chooses to deal with them in a deadly serious manner—just as she did with anti-Semitism in *Gentlemen's Agreement*."²⁴ In her *New York Times* review of *Consenting Adult*, Nan Robertson wrote that the novel fit in with the author's oeuvre because Hobson, "a vivid, zesty woman of 75 . . . has the habit of grappling with painful and suppressed subjects years before their time. This was true of her enormously popular and unsettling novel 'Gentle-

22. Jean Curtis, "How Could My Son?" (review) *Consenting Adult*, By Laura Z. Hobson, *Boston Globe*; July 13, 1975, C8.

23. Martin Duberman, "Gentlemen's Agreement: Consenting Adult," *New York Times*, July 6, 1975, 159.

24. Perry Deane Young, "The Other Side of Gay," *Washington Post*, January 4, 1976, 125.

man's Agreement,' a story of anti-Semitism among American liberals that came out in 1947."²⁵ Reviewers had come to expect a certain kind of gutsy writing from Hobson.

By continuing over the decades to address difficult topics through her writing, Hobson had proven herself a reliable activist-writer. Most of her earlier novels had dealt with social issues. *The Trespassers* (1943) followed wartime refugees from Europe. *First Papers* was Hobson's 1964 semi-autobiographical novel about her Russian-Jewish parents, her upbringing, and the value of free speech. *The Tenth Month* (1971), was Hobson's semi-autobiographical novel about a divorced woman of forty who becomes pregnant and has a child on her own. To her fans, one of Hobson's strengths as a novelist was her willingness to take on once-taboo topics in a manner that made her novels feel like warm and inviting spaces in which to explore difficult issues. As a reviewer noted of Hobson's 1964 *First Papers*:

[T]he protagonists speak out for unionism and pacifism at a time when these topics are particularly touchy ones. The issues these characters grapple with are real ones and important ones; they are issues still with us and the principles are still important and frequently still dangerous to stand for. Mrs. Hobson deals with issues and principles but her novel never becomes a tract. It deals with the people involved and how they are affected by their own actions and by the actions of others, always important to remember when standing on principle and sometimes forgotten by those who loudly urge others to do so.²⁶

The reality of such writing was that it entailed retaining aspects of human behavior likely to be objectionable to some readers—sex outside of marriage, divorce, adultery, and inappropriate relationships between older men and younger women. In fact, in the first years after *Gentleman's Agreement* was published, it was not uncommon for readers to write to Hobson with complaints about these parts of the novel. Hobson responded directly, as when she explained to a woman from Saskatchewan:

I am so sorry that you found my book spoiled by what you call 'the objectionable language and the immorality' of its characters. I can only say that when a novelist is trying to write truthfully about a certain milieu, that novelist must report the way things are and not the way some of his or her readers will think they should be. If you have ever known a group of journalists in New York City or in any other large city who did not swear at all and who were completely Victorian in their behavior, then your experience has been

25. Nan Robertson, "A Story, Fictional and True, of Homosexual Son," *New York Times*, September 22, 1975, 38.

26. Mildred Bulpitt, "Right of Free Speech Subject of Hobson Novel," *Arizona Republic*, November 8, 1964, 74.

very different from mine. I hope you will forgive me for feeling that I had to write the book in accordance with my knowledge of the way people like Phil and Kathie and their contemporaries act.²⁷

Hobson's fiction was based on her own life experiences, and she took pride in not sanitizing the content, even if that meant giving offense. Not every septuagenarian female author would have been game to write a novel about having a gay son. The subject matter demonstrates Hobson's status as an "activist writer" in the mold of a Betty Friedan – highlighting issues that, like "the problem that had no name," in the case of Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, had received little serious public attention. Indeed, Hobson's parallels with Friedan began even before the latter's rise to fame. In 1959, a *New York Times* profile of Hobson – by then a celebrity author of a dozen years – opened with these lines: "If you continue to be the least bit obstinate or dubious about women having equal rights with men – though it has long been a *fait accompli* – a talk with Laura Z. Hobson should straighten you out."²⁸ Hobson's status as a *de facto* feminist surely influenced her writing, in part because she was a female writer who became increasingly comfortable disrupting social norms, writing about issues that polite society usually deemed off-limits.

This truth-telling writing mode, while not unique to Jewish woman writers, has several prominent woman Jewish exemplars, including Betty Friedan, Judy Blume, Dr. Ruth Westheimer, Nora Ephron, and Erica Jong.²⁹ These were writers whose reputation and fame hinged, in part, on their breaking taboos in service of exposing truths and airing social problems through their writing. Sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, their writing dealt with sex, one of the sturdiest taboos in polite society during the first half of the twentieth century, when all of these writers were born.

27. Laura Z. Hobson to Mrs. George Ketcheson, April 16, 1949, box 20. Hobson's letters defending sexual relations, cigarettes, wearing, and alcohol in her novel, include one to Mrs. Marguerite Carmalt, November 24, 1948 and to Mr. Howard Fuller, November 24, 1948, box 20, Laura Keane Zametkin Hobson Collection, Columbia University Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York (henceforth LKZHC).

28. Harvey Breit, "Talk With Laura Z. Hobson," *New York Times*, November 4, 1951, 229.

29. As literary scholar Josh Lambert observes in his study of Jewish involvement in obscenity debates, exploring the ways that a literary trend has been relevant to Jews, even if Jews are not the only group for whom they have been important, "allows for the recovery of influential interventions in American literary history that have gone mostly unnoticed." Here, too, the Jewish presence, in this truth-telling mode is significant for what it can show us about American literary history and American Jewish culture. Lambert, *Unclean Lips: Obscenity, Jews, and American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 177.

In *Gentleman's Agreement*, Hobson's truth-telling focused on non-violent American antisemitism—the kind of bigotry and discrimination that had become not just accepted but expected in everyday American life. Despite its pervasiveness, this taken-for-granted antisemitism was regarded as unfit for polite conversation. At a time when unpleasant subjects were often left undiscussed, the low-grade antisemitism at the heart of *Gentleman's Agreement* rarely received the “sunlight” treatment—particularly in popular culture—that Hobson's novel gave it. In *Consenting Adult*, Hobson's truth-telling turned to the experience of the *parents* of gay children, a topic which Hobson saw as “one aspect of homosexuality that I think has always been overlooked in novels or plays about homosexuals,” as Hobson explained in 1975 to her friend, the novelist John Hersey.³⁰ Given the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Hobson's own liberal views of sex, and her experiences with her gay son, Hobson had plenty of reasons to turn her writerly focus, in the 1970s, to coming out experiences, which offered another version of truth-telling. A generation earlier, Phil Green's reverse-passing as a Jew, done in service of achieving empathy, offered an important twist on truth telling, allowing her to portray a non-Jewish male interested in discovering the truth about antisemitism.

When Hobson began writing *Gentleman's Agreement* in 1944, her focus on antisemitism evidenced a concern for marginalized groups that, a generation later, extended to the experience of gay youth and their parents. Hobson's important contribution to a postwar genre of Jewish social conscience fiction would become a template for her writing about homophobia, as both groups—Jews and gays—dealt with managing knowledge about their true identities. But Hobson also seems to have learned from her experience of writing about antisemitism, as well as from her life experience as a Jewish woman, novelist, and mother of a gay son, in ways that contributed to her narrative strategies in *Consenting Adult*. It was not the Jewish or gay experience that interested Hobson in either novel, but rather the experience of being marginalized and presented with the possibility of assimilating to the mainstream and/or passing. Hobson's lack of interest in the experience of Jewishness is apparent in the very premise of *Gentleman's Agreement*, when the protagonist Phil Green assumes he can simply “be Jewish” by declaring himself so, without any understanding of Jewish religion or culture. It was an approach that revealed the superficiality of Jewish identity for Phil (and for Hobson), because Phil makes no effort to understand

30. Laura Z. Hobson to John Hersey, April 2, 1975, box 1, folder Hersey, John, New Haven, CT, LKZHC.

Jewishness, instead directing his efforts at understanding the problem of Jewishness in 1940s America—i.e. antisemitism. This disinterest in probing the distinctiveness of Jewish identity fit the immediate postwar climate in which, as Kirsten Fermaglich observes, “Group attachments to or identification with racial, class, or ethnic communities were severely out of fashion in the United States after 1945, while the often unstated but sometimes loudly trumpeted assumption that individuals of all backgrounds were the same ‘under the skin’ was widespread throughout the worlds of academia, art, and film.”³¹ The two novels thus participate in the postwar liberalism in which Hobson came of age as a successful novelist. This was a view that “ignored differences among racial and ethnic groups and subtextually presumed a male and middle-class perspective, thus ignoring gender and class differentiation as well.”³² While Hobson carried her midcentury universalistic perspective into her 1975 novel, *Consenting Adult* also shows signs of other cultural trends that emerged after *Gentleman’s Agreement*. Even before the spirit of cultural transgression that characterized the 1960s, the Kinsey Reports (1948, 1953) inspired a new openness toward discussing sexuality. “The Kinsey Report has done for sex what Columbus did for geography,” the authors of a 1948 analysis of Kinsey’s findings declared.³³ As Rochelle Gurstein observes, “The Kinsey Report’s candor, unexpected findings, and enormous popularity ensured that ‘it will be impossible to go back to the old folkway of reticence about sex.’”³⁴ Indeed, *Consenting Adult* is sprinkled with references to Kinsey that show that Tessa’s early 1960s openness to researching and exploring sexuality—if only through the safe confines of reading—have been made possible by the “phenomenal success” of Kinsey and other sexologists whom she has read and who have influenced her thinking. Reading thus changes minds, and as Tessa’s approach to Jeff evolves, it becomes clear that books can ultimately lead to changed behavior.

This lack of interest in probing the distinctiveness of Jewish or gay identity was a strategy that protected Hobson’s novel about antisemitism from being labeled a “Jewish novel” at a time when such a designation would likely have hindered its popular success. Similarly, in *Consenting Adult*, while no straight character tries to become gay, in the manner of a Phil Green, or even to understand Jeff’s experience, Tessa does conduct

31. Kirsten Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares: Early Holocaust Consciousness and Liberal America, 1957–1965* (Lebanon: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 9.

32. Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares*, 9.

33. Quoted in Rochelle Gurstein, *The Repeal of Reticence*, 252.

34. Gurstein, *The Repeal of Reticence*, 253.

a clandestine research project into homosexuality, leaving work during her lunch hour, so she can stop at the New York Public Library, because she feels “She had to learn whatever there was for a layman to learn about homosexuality, learn it fast, learn it for Ken’s sake, her own sake, perhaps for Jeff’s.”³⁵ Jewishness and gayness are treated as problems in the two novels—a portrayal that fit the era in which they are set, as well as Hobson’s largely assimilationist vision, in which differences or divergences from the mainstream were viewed as problems fixable with the right liberal mindset. When, at her son’s college graduation, Tessa finally grasps that Jeff is not alone in his homosexuality—that something like ten percent of his graduating class is likely homosexual, based on what she has learned from her research—it is a community of suffering and not a community of proud and joyful gay identity that Tessa envisions. “Tonight she knew he was not isolated, that among those four hundred who were homosexual like Jeff, who had faced and would face the same hazards and the same prejudice Jeff had faced and would face as he and they went forth to begin life out there beyond the university.”³⁶

For Hobson, Jews and gays both carry the burden of a closeted self, and of identities that some perceived as “sins” against the American creed.³⁷ Hobson’s construction of antisemitism and homophobia thus bear strong similarities. In both novels, Hobson shows that those who feel antagonism toward Jews and gays are offended by disturbances to societal norms. Hobson’s two novels sought to repair that perception of Jews/gays transgressing midcentury norms, by assimilating Jewish and gay identities, and bringing them closer to a white, gentile, mainstream society. The few Jewish or gay characters that appear in each of the novels bear no traces of stereotypically Jewish or gay traits, nor do they show interest in distinctive Jewish or gay culture. In *Consenting Adult*, Jeff, echoing David Goldman in *Gentleman’s Agreement*, criticizes the kind of media treatments of gays which portray the “kind of crap about how talented all gays are, look at all the gay playwrights and the gay novelists and artists.” The focus in *Consenting Adult* on a parental perspective on gay identity was not one that all gay advocates found useful or important. As one reviewer put it, “it is precisely sensitivity to parents’ discomfort which we must submerge if we are successfully to leave the closet.”³⁸ But to Hobson, it was always the “whole thing,” (as Dave had put it in *Gentleman’s Agreement*)—meaning the experience

35. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 54.

36. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 180.

37. See Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini, *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (New York: Columbia University Press), 8.

38. Merv Walker, “Consenting Adult,” *Body Politic* 20 (October 1975).

beyond the marginalized person—and not simply or primarily the gay or Jewish perspective that mattered.

In line with her broader view of the “problem” of gay identity, Hobson connected homophobia to sexism and other forms of discrimination in *Consenting Adult*, revealing it to be part of a larger family of prejudices. Tessa is accorded greater insight into these prejudices because of her own Jewishness. The unitary view of prejudice, or the theory that all prejudice was connected, had become popular in the 1940s and 1950s, and found support in social science and popular culture, as well as in the agenda of Jewish defense organizations.³⁹ Toward the end of the novel, Tessa reveals an understanding that those who hate gays, tend to hate all difference.

They are wrong, she would think, not pausing to define the “they.” It was the same they who were so often wrong about people outside other prescribed patterns, people with black skins, people with Puerto Rican names, girls, women, foreigners, Catholics in some communities, Protestants in others, Jews everywhere, though antisemitism had become fairly unfashionable by now except among the true-blood bigots.⁴⁰

Antisemitism may have become less socially acceptable, but to Hobson’s mind, the Jew still held a special victim status, attuned to the marginalization of others, and in relation to whom liberal American society defined itself. A good midcentury liberal did not show a trace of antisemitism in public just as, in later decades, a good liberal would not display prejudice toward other marginalized groups. In *Consenting Adult*, Jeff realizes early in the novel that he may get along better with his mother than with his father, precisely because his mother has had to manage a Jewish identity. “I just got this idea,” Jeff confides to a friend, “that maybe it’s easier to get along with my mother because she’s Jewish, and harder with my father because he isn’t. Maybe being Jewish helps you dig other people’s hang-ups more.”⁴¹ Hobson thus portrays Jewish and gay identities as handicaps that provide insight into the experience of other socially undesirable identities. During the last third of the twentieth century, as psychological insights imbued postwar liberalism, having “hang-ups,” became a tool for understanding other minority experiences. Here again Hobson was broadening the problem, just as she had done in *Gentleman’s Agreement*, making homophobia understandable and relevant to a wider group of people.

39. Stephen Whitfield, “The theme of indivisibility in the post-war struggle against prejudice in the United States,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 48, no. 3 (2014): 223–247; Stuart Svonkin, *Jews Against Prejudice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 18.

40. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 194.

41. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 100.

When Jeff begins medical school, Tessa realizes that her son's professional opportunities as a physician will be severely restricted because of his gay identity. The injustice offends Tessa—as the injustice of anti-semitism offends Phil Green—and she realizes:

How sexist, how blindly unjust . . . It was monstrous, an injustice so obvious that its true name should be persecution, oppression. Sexist oppression. There was a good deal of discussion these days, particularly in the strengthening feminist movement, about sexism and sexist oppression, but all too few people saw that the world's treatment of gay people was also a sexist oppression."⁴²

As she had done in *Gentleman's Agreement* by highlighting genteel or non-violent antisemitism, Hobson highlights the less-visible injustice of homophobia in *Consenting Adult*.

EVOLVING WHITE LIBERALISM: ANTI-ANTISEMITISM AS A MODEL FOR COMBATting HOMOPHOBIA

That Hobson shifted from antisemitism to homophobia in her writing is testament to the evolution of white liberalism during the second half of the twentieth century. As revelations of Hitler's atrocities targeting Jews, homosexuals, and other minorities received attention in postwar America, racism and antisemitism came to be seen as "aberrations from the American system, rather than as inherent characteristics."⁴³ Over time, liberals' concern for marginalized groups shifted from Jews, at midcentury, to a succession of sidelined groups, including people of color, women, and eventually members of the LGBTQ community. The American social protest novel—a genre that includes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as one of its earliest landmark examples, and which continues to thrive in the twenty-first century—indexed this shifting focus, as did Hobson's writing trajectory.

Consenting Adult appeared a generation earlier than the more thorough mainstreaming of LGBTQ identity, capped by the 2015 Supreme Court case recognizing same-sex marriage. It was acceptance of a much more limited kind that Hobson advocated for gays in her 1975 novel, just as *Gentleman's Agreement* had promoted a very circumscribed acceptance of Jews. Hobson included mention of an actual 1944 *Time* magazine

42. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 190.

43. Gregory Jay, *White Writers, Race Matters: Fictions of Racial Liberalism from Stowe to Stockett* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 23. *An American Dilemma*, Gunnar Myrdal's study of American race relations, made the claim that racism was foreign to the American system in 1944. Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1944).

article, in *Gentleman's Agreement*, that showed a change in American attitudes toward antisemitism. Similarly, in *Consenting Adult*, Hobson included an actual 1963 *New York Times* article about homosexuality. "Growth of Overt Homosexuality," was all that Hobson quoted from a front-page article, on December 17, 1963, although the headline had included a second line: "In City Provokes Wide Concern." In both novels, these factual news items served as a kind of footnote for Hobson, providing external proof of the change in societal attitudes that Hobson hoped to further through her fiction.

The 1963 *New York Times* article citing growth of homosexuality allowed Hobson to place her story within the context of changing American attitudes, but also to subvert the larger message of the original article. By simply quoting the first line, Hobson excluded the rest of the article's critique of homosexuality. Hobson, a mother of a gay son, likely did not appreciate some of the article's perspectives, such as the conclusion of some "experts" that homosexuals are "created—generally by ill-adjusted parents—not born."⁴⁴ The article cited a study which showed "significant differences in the family patterns of the homosexual group as compared with the heterosexual sample." Those dynamics included a "close-binding intimate" mother and/or a hostile, detached or unrespected father." Some parts of the article may have sounded similar to the kind of antisemitic views of the 1940s that had informed Hobson's writing of *Gentleman's Agreement*, such as the observation that "There is a cliquishness about gay individuals that often leads one who achieves influential position in the theater—as many of them do—to choose for employment another homosexual candidate over a straight applicant, unless the latter had an indisputable edge of talent that would bear on the artistic success of the venture."⁴⁵

What Hobson did take from the actual *Times* article for her novel was the idea that gay people should be treated with dignity. Despite her rejection of persecution of gays and Jews, Hobson made no attempt to celebrate something that could be identified as gay culture. Indeed, in Jeff Lynn, Hobson presented a gay protagonist who pointedly does not display stereotypically gay traits or interests (Jeff exhibits none of the interests that the 1963 article describes). Hobson thus portrayed the kind of limits of tolerance that also characterized *Gentlemen's Agreement*. Gentle protagonist Phil Green defines the boundaries of midcentury liberal acceptance of Jews when he first conceives of his plan to pretend to

44. Robert Doty, "Growth of Overt Homosexuality In City Provokes Wide Concern," *New York Times*, December 17, 1963, 33.

45. Robert Doty, "Growth of Overt Homosexuality In City Provokes Wide Concern," *New York Times*, December 17, 1963, 33.

be Jewish and realizes, “He could not ‘think into’ a deeply religious old Jew in a prayer shawl, or into the poor, ignorant Jewish peddler behind a pushcart on the East Side, or into the wealthy tycoon in business. The deeply pious, the truly ignorant, the greatly powerful of any creed or religion were beyond his quick understanding.”⁴⁶ As critics of *Gentleman’s Agreement* pointed out, the novel made no room for anyone who resided beyond the moderate, American mainstream society (“There are certainly no religious Jews in her section of American society,” Trilling observed of Hobson’s fictional portrayal). Hobson’s white liberalism meant that her theme is not “the Jewish experience as such; it is antisemitism, a systemic white supremacist ideology that resides in the minds, behavior, and action of non-Jews (and among some of Jewish ancestry as well),” as Gregory Jay observes in *White Writers, Race Matters*.⁴⁷ That interest in the discrimination faced by Jews and other minority groups guided Hobson’s treatment of gays, too.

It was not identity politics or acceptance of Jews as Jews or gays as gays that interested Hobson so much as equality for all individuals, regardless of their particular affiliations. This was an outgrowth of Hobson being a certain kind of Jewish novelist. Similarly, in *Consenting Adult*—also a “Jewish novel,” both by virtue of being authored by Hobson (or “the author of *Gentleman’s Agreement*,” as advertisements for *Consenting Adult* announced), and because of the Jewish character, Tessa. Tessa’s Jewishness was incidental, not integral, providing another layer of commentary on Hobson’s 1947 perspective on Jewishness. More than her Jewishness, it was Tessa’s agnostic identity (like Hobson’s), that shapes her. Tessa does, however, distinguish a Jewish intellectual agnostic culture, with which Hobson identified by this point in her life. This would be even more evident in her 1979 novel, *Over and Above*. In many ways, Hobson’s growing comfort and pride in her Jewishness mirrored that of the wider American Jewish community during the second half of the twentieth century.⁴⁸ *Consenting Adult*, in fact, reveals a cautious embrace of a distinctive Jewish identity, as well as an effort to determine just what Jewish identity means. This question did not preoccupy Hobson or her characters in the antisemitic 1940s of *Gentleman’s Agreement*. Tessa considers a stereotype about Jewish “heightened capacity for emotion. Heightened? How different were her own feelings now from what they would be if she had been born Anglo-Saxon Protestant like

46. Hobson, *Gentleman’s Agreement*, 51–2.

47. Gregory Jay, *White Writers, Race Matters* (need full cite), 146.

48. On growing comfort and pride in American Jewish identity, during the second half of the twentieth century, see Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), chapter six.

Ken?” Tessa elaborates: “She never had gone along with the stereotypic clichés about Jewish mothers; she was a mother; not a ‘Jewish mother’ in accord with all the Jewish-mother jokes and the Jewish-mother books and the Jewish-mother plays.”⁴⁹ Through Tessa, Hobson rejects the old stereotypes about Jews, and through Ken, Hobson uses anti-antisemitism as a template for how to deal with homophobia.

But the *Gentleman’s Agreement* conception of Jewishness still prevails in *Consenting Adult*. As in *Gentleman’s Agreement*, Hobson gives the struggle with antisemitism to a non-Jewish character, Ken, whose Jewish son-in-law, Nate Jacobs, had once made Ken wish that Nate were “Not quite so Brooklyn.” Ken realizes that it was not simply that Nate was Jewish, for Ken’s wife, Tessa, was also Jewish. It was Nate’s “outer-borough” kind of Jewishness that the Waspy Ken finds slightly offensive. Nate was a Brooklyn Jew. “Tessa wasn’t Brooklyn. She wasn’t Bronx. Nate was different from Tessa.” Ken understands that it is Tessa’s assimilation and Nate’s lack of assimilation that makes his wife an acceptable Jew and Nate less so. “A funny thing, assimilation. He believed in it, Tessa believed in it, Tessa’s parents had believed in it.” Ken realizes that it was Tessa and her parents’ belief in assimilation (similar to Hobson’s belief in assimilation that had been bred in her by her parents) that had made their own marriage possible. Ken also believes that being a New Yorker has made it hard for him to be antisemitic because he is surrounded by Jews.

Despite Ken’s latent bigotry, Hobson’s portrayal of Ken, who is a decade older than his wife Tessa, is sympathetic and illustrative of Hobson’s larger message about such societal change taking time. Hobson sets *Consenting Adult* over a period of thirteen years in order to showcase how views shifted. Hobson portrays Tessa absorbing the latest research on homosexuality, a process that leads to her own views changing. When Tessa wishes that societal attitudes could change more quickly, the psychiatrist friend who has been helping her assimilate the newest findings, responds, “Look how much medicine has learned in the last ten years. The last five. In every branch of it.”⁵⁰ Attitudes *do* change, the doctor reminds Tessa.

In *Consenting Adult*, Ken’s reflections about his evolving feelings toward his Jewish son-in-law similarly offer a guide to the reader. Ken realizes the challenge of changing his thinking about gays is analogous to the one he faced regarding Jews. He “still remembered his own struggling not to admit, if only to himself, that he wished Nate were not quite so

49. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 32.

50. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 178.

Jewish a Jew. Now Nate was very nearly the core of the family, and even to remember that old secret wish made him feel iced over with apology or remorse.”⁵¹ As Hobson makes clear through Ken’s interior monologue about his feelings regarding Jews, assimilation is often the key issue for those, like Ken, who are more attached to a traditional culture:

So the twinge of reluctance was laced through not with being Jewish but with the concept of assimilation. That was mighty different, easier to accept. When he and Tessa were young, assimilation was highly approved of, but later on the word had been tinged with accusation. It turned into a dirty twelve-letter word . . . Was that because of Hitler or was it later, when Israel became a state? He rather thought it was later, in the Forties and Fifties, when many Jews felt a heightened awareness of being Jews, of having a Jewish heritage, of a duty to keep their Jewishness unimpaired.⁵²

Ken’s reflections suggest that Hobson was likely aware of criticism leveled at her as a writer who advocated for the assimilation of difference into the mainstream culture—something that critics of *Gentleman’s Agreement* saw as a problem at the time of its publication and later—and yet was still intrigued by the central problem of assimilation. Indeed, while several of the characters contain hints of Hobson, the surprise for many readers might lie in the degree to which Ken’s thoughts resemble some of Hobson’s earlier views. Having grown up during the early twentieth century era of Melting Pot America—an idea that Israel Zangwill made famous with his 1908 play by that name and that Theodore Roosevelt warmly embraced—Hobson, like Ken, recalled a time when assimilation was a positive ideal in American culture.⁵³ In *Consenting Adult*, Hobson portrays younger characters teaching Ken new views on assimilation. In a conversation between Ken and Nate, Nate elaborates on liberal as well as Jewish perspectives on assimilation: “A hot word among liberals . . . Not just among Orthodox Jews, where assimilation is as big a crime as intermarriage, but a hot word among liberals and radicals too.”⁵⁴ Nate described his family, “Look at my own family. Reform Jews, right? You’ve met them, you know they’re not Orthodox, but get them going on somebody who’s Jewish but sounds goyish, or looks like a goy or acts like a goy, and they decide he’s a rat who’s trying to pass . . . They believe in something you could call ‘Jewishness Intacta.’”⁵⁵ Here, Hobson

51. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 148.

52. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 41.

53. Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 50–1.

54. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 42.

55. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 42.

might have been parroting what she understood to be the harsh assessments made by the American Jewish establishment of someone like her, as a Jewish woman who, to some onlookers, appeared to be passing as a non-Jew for much of her life.⁵⁶ *Consenting Adult* includes a scene in which Tessa recalls Ken first introducing her to his family (in what would have been the 1940s), in which Hobson portrays Jewishness as a disturbance to polite society: “Ken, will they mind, about me being Jewish?” And yet, in that very scene, Hobson provided reasons that a Jew might try to pass, when Ken explains, “Sure they’ll mind a little, but they’ll never be mean or small about it. Let’s give them the room they need.”⁵⁷ Presented as though it were a disagreeable fact, Jewishness is something that can be gotten past, but not something in which to take pride. In that way, it is similar to Hobson’s portrayal of having a gay son.

ACTIVISM THROUGH FICTION

What makes both of these novels important for scholars of social protest novels and of American Jews is the connections they make between Jews and social change. In the case of *Gentleman’s Agreement*, it was the 1940s social movement of *anti*-antisemitism that the novel embodied. *Anti*-antisemitism was not an organized movement so much as a change in culture. *Anti*-antisemitism often took the form of calling out the bad behavior of Americans, even as those same Americans felt assured of their superiority to their racist European enemies. Hobson was not the only writer to tap into this shifting culture. The 1940s was the decade of the “anti-anti-Semitism” novel as writers such as Saul Bellow and Arthur Miller—and lesser-known writers, such as Jo Sinclair (a lesbian, working-class, Jewish writer whose real name was Ruth Seid) and a wealthy Torontonian named Gwethalyn Graham—made their contributions to the genre of fiction that exposed the problem of religious bigotry in America.⁵⁸ Yet the *Times* predicted that Hobson’s novel would be “one of the most discussed” of its day.⁵⁹ *Gentleman’s Agreement* outstripped rival works in the number of reviews it garnered and the readers it reached—over two million copies were sold in the US—even before the film appeared (*Cosmopolitan* magazine serialized the novel

56. On the possibility of Hobson as a Jewish writer passing as a non-Jew, see, Rachel Gordan, “Laura Z. Hobson and the Making of *Gentleman’s Agreement*,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 34, no. 2 (2015): 231, 256.

57. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 44.

58. Jo Sinclair, *Wasteland* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946); Gwethalyn Graham, *Earth and High Heaven* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1944).

59. Charles Poore, “Books of the Times,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1947, 19.

in the months leading up to its publication).⁶⁰ *Gentleman's Agreement* remained a *Times* bestseller for almost a year.

Back in 1944, when Hobson and her publisher Richard Simon of Simon and Schuster corresponded about the possibility of Hobson writing her next novel about antisemitism, Simon was skeptical, even discouraging. An assimilated Jew like Hobson (although born into a wealthier family of German-Jewish descent), Simon recognized the problem of antisemitism in America, but did not believe that writing a novel about the problem would do any good—and might actually do harm. Hobson thought otherwise, writing in an October 1944 letter:

Any serious author who attempts the fight, might just be lucky enough to chip off a bit here and there from this growth, if it's only by opening the thing to table-talk and women's club discussion, as I'm sure Peg Halsey's book and Gwethalyn Graham's *Earth and High Heaven* are bound to do. Maybe six other authors are right this minute finishing novels on the same subject - maybe not one will do much by itself, but perhaps all together those authors could become a kind of force for ending the conspiracy of uncomfortable or scared silence which defaults to the rantings of the bigots, who don't practice that conspiracy of silence at all.⁶¹

In this letter and others, Hobson displayed her “designs on the world,” as literary scholar Jane Tompkins describes the intentions of female authors to change attitudes and mores through their popular fiction (in her case, Tompkins wrote about nineteenth century sentimental fiction). Tompkins sees popular, sentimental fiction, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as “a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time.”⁶² Hobson, too, had such designs on the world. In *Gentleman's Agreement* it was a desire to change attitudes about antisemitism, and a generation later, in *Consenting Adult*, her desire for change was directed at homophobia and the experience of parents of gay youth.

Just as Hobson's decision to write about antisemitism was rooted in her experiences as an adult Jewish woman who socialized and worked in largely non-Jewish circles, Hobson's decision to write about a mother coming to terms with a gay son emerged from her life experiences. As Hobson's son, Christopher Z. Hobson described in a 2017 interview with

60. “Laura Z. Hobson,” *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2007, *Biography In Context*, accessed August 29, 2018, http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/H1000046059/BIC?u=mlln_m_brandeis&sid=BIC&xid=48680e11.

61. Laura Z. Hobson to Richard Simon, October 18, 1944, box 21, Scrapbook, LKZHC.

62. Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford, 1985), 126.

OutCasting, an LGBTQ youth program on public radio, the experience of his mother writing a novel that was loosely based on his coming out experience was a painful one.⁶³ “My mother was originally quite horrified to find out that I was gay,” a nearly eighty-year-old Christopher Z. Hobson remembered of those years. “She referred to it as ‘the most terrible tragedy of my life.’” To be sure, Hobson learned that her son was gay at a time when homosexuality was seen as deviant behavior and pathologized by the medical establishment.⁶⁴ It was 1958 when seventeen-year-old Christopher wrote a letter to his mother, explaining that he was gay. As Hobson wrote in her autobiography, the letter she received from Christopher informing her of his gay identity was “a letter that was to change my life as deeply, as pivotally as any other single experience of my life.”⁶⁵ Hobson transposed that experience of reading Christopher’s letter into a scene in *Consenting Adult*, when the mother, Tessa Lynn, receives a similar letter from her son, who, like Christopher, was at boarding school. Upon reading it, Tessa feels “love for him, pity for his suffering, pride for his courage in telling her, horror at it, at the monstrous unendurable *it*—a savagery of feeling crushed her, feelings mutually exclusive yet gripping each other in some hot ferocity or amalgam.”⁶⁶ At that point in his life when he wrote to his mother, Christopher had his first sexual experience with another male, and realizing the direction of his sexual interests, he was upset: “To be homosexual was at best to be subject to a medical condition that was very disturbing,” Christopher recalled. Initially, he hoped to be cured, as did the character, Jeff. “I imagined I could become normal,” Christopher recalled. Like Tessa, Hobson helped her son find appropriate therapists (and paid for them) throughout his teen years, in New York, and then in Boston, while Christopher was an undergraduate at Harvard. It may even have been easier for Hobson to be a relatively supportive parent to her gay son because of her already non-traditional family circumstances. She had always been a single parent, and did not have to consult with

63. OutCasting Episode 35: Connecting youth with LGBTQ history — a conversation with gay elder Christopher Z. Hobson, accessed November 27, 2020, <http://mfpg.org/index.php/outcasting/87-outcasting/outcasting-episodes/200-outcasting-0035-lgbtq-history-a-discussion-with-gay-elder-christopher-z-hobson>.

64. Although gay children never posed quite the pathological threat to family life that gay parents did—an issue explored in Daniel Rivers, *Radical Relations: Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and Their Children in the United States Since World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

65. Christopher Z. Hobson, *Laura Z: A Life, Years of Fulfillment* (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1986), 593.

66. Hobson, *Consenting Adult*, 10.

a husband about how to respond to a gay son. In *Consenting Adult*, Tessa's husband, Ken, has more difficulty accepting their gay son.

Christopher Hobson was ultimately critical of his experience with therapy as a young adult, writing an essay, "Surviving Psychotherapy," published in the 1972 anthology, *Out of the Closet: Voices of Gay Liberation*: "All I can claim is that their treatment contributed nothing to my awareness of myself and even retarded it; that this was connected to their view of homosexuality as an illness; that my self-understanding eventually grew from quite different sources."⁶⁷ He felt that his therapists had "failed to help me understand my situation – to overcome my own lack of understanding."⁶⁸ What did help Christopher better understand his situation was his involvement in social movements, including the women's movement and then the movement for gay liberation. Learning to see women as human beings (not merely as sexual prospects – "something I had always felt unable to do," Christopher explained), allowed Christopher to see himself—a gay man—as a human being, too. The women's movement also helped Christopher sharpen his critique of psychiatric theory:

Very late, relations with my therapist became strained when, discussing my mother and her ambitions for me, he referred to her using me as "her penis." I saw that what women's liberationists had been saying was true: my mother's ambitious and successful life, in which she had always had to struggle against the limits placed on her as a woman, was to my therapist a manifestation of the desire for a penis rather than a rebellion against constraints which warred against her great abilities. Had it not been for the women's movement, I might have accepted this view—and found a new, apparently analytical way to despise my mother, rather than coming to understand her.⁶⁹

It was not until the Stonewall Riots of 1969 that Christopher came out, more publicly, at age twenty-seven, and became involved in gay activism. It had always been difficult for him to talk with his mother about being gay. Christopher felt his mother was overly interested in the details, almost prurient in her desire to know about his relationships, perhaps because she was already thinking about it as material for a future book. When Christopher told his mother that he was involved in a gay organization, Laura Z. Hobson interpreted the news of his activism as a signal that she, too, could now go public with the story—using the

67. Christopher Z. Hobson, "Surviving Psychotherapy," in *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, eds., Karla Jay and Allen Young (New York: New York University Press, 1992 [orig. 1972]), 147.

68. Christopher Z. Hobson, "Surviving Psychotherapy," 150.

69. Christopher Z. Hobson, "Surviving Psychotherapy," 151.

topic of a gay son as the seed for her novel. The result was *Consenting Adult*. “She fictionalized my life in some ways lightly and in some ways radically,” Christopher told OutCasting. Christopher was disturbed by the young man whom his mother had based loosely on him. Jeff Lynne seemed like “a bit of a brainless idiot,” in Christopher’s words, although the character does have athletic and academic talents in the novel. Over time, Christopher identified virtues in his mother’s fictional portrayal of the gay son and his parents. The “mother-centeredness” of *Consenting Adult*, Christopher felt, allowed the novel to effect social change, which was Hobson’s motivation in writing the book, according to Christopher. Like the non-Jewish protagonists in *Gentleman’s Agreement* that facilitated greater identification by the non-Jewish mainstream, the focus on the parents and their “heroic” change in attitude toward their gay son made the novel an effective tool for gay young adults to give their parents.

In focusing on Tessa Lynn’s perspective, Laura Z. Hobson may also have been picking up on societal interests in the experience of parents of gay children. She would likely have read the 1972 *New York Times* article, “For Homosexuals, It’s Getting Less Difficult to Tell Parents,” which reported that a “growing number of homosexuals who have found that what used to be one of their most traumatic experiences—‘telling the parents’—has now become somewhat easier and much more commonplace.”⁷⁰ The reporter noted several reasons for the change. “Foremost is the influence of the homosexual men and women who have found that they were not as different and alone as they might have once thought they were.”⁷¹ It is in this climate of finding common cause that gay identity and activism became, to use historian Heather Murray’s words, “less integrationist and more unrepentant,” as Americans, in general, moved toward recognition of the rights of minority groups.⁷² The *New York Times* article also focused on the question of passing among young gay men and women, and their desire to tell their parents so that their “fathers and mothers can learn about it from their children rather than ‘cold turkey’ via a television or newspaper report on the latest homosexual demonstration.” As Ed Eisenberg, a student at Columbia University who was arrested during a demonstration at City Hall commented in the article, “My mother sympathizes with the movement—but she doesn’t want me to be a public homosexual . . .

70. Judy Klemesrud, “For Homosexuals, It’s Getting Less Difficult to Tell Parents,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1972, 32.

71. Judy Klemesrud, “For Homosexuals, It’s Getting Less Difficult to Tell Parents,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1972, 32.

72. Heather Murray, *Not in This Family: Gays and the Meaning of Kinship in Post-war North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2011), x.

She says lobbying in the background is one thing, but she doesn't want my picture on ABC-TV."

Over time, Christopher came to feel that his mother's focus on the straight parents, in *Consenting Adult*, was a wise choice, for two reasons: his mother "didn't know enough to base the book on the life of the son" and secondly, she wanted to affect parents like herself, to "put a tool in the hands of young lesbians and gay men to speak to their parents." Christopher reported that he heard from "many, many, many, many young men and women—men particularly," that the book had been a helpful tool to give their parents.⁷³ While Christopher and his mother initially fought about the book, eventually he accepted that his mother had needed to write this book, and mother and son made peace, although according to Christopher, that peace was accomplished by putting their differences aside rather than resolving them.

While Hobson's son, Christopher had his misgiving about the novel, gay reviewers were generous. Journalist Perry Deane Young wrote in the *Washington Post*, "As a (practicing, avowed, acknowledged) homosexual, I wish that Laura Z. Hobson's novel *Consenting Adult* were an outdated melodrama," he wrote:

Instead, I see it as one of the most important books yet published on the subject of homosexuality—important, not for its contribution to the art of the novel, but because the information it contains will reach many people who would never read any of the other gay books being published. It is a rare homosexual book that becomes a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. The special value of this book is its point of view: not that of the young homosexual male (almost the antagonist in the story) but of his mother. Her side of the story is understandably bleak. It is, however, the side most people can comfortably identify with and understand. There are deadly serious aspects of being a homosexual in our society and Laura Z. Hobson chooses to deal with them in a deadly serious manner – just as she did with anti-Semitism in *Gentleman's Agreement*. Perhaps this is because the fictional drama parallels her own experience Laura Z. Hobson's *Consenting Adult* does more than any other book I've read to create a healthier climate of understanding that may one day let us be.⁷⁴

In both *Gentleman's Agreement* and *Consenting Adult*, Hobson used a narrative strategy that allowed readers to identify with the story she was telling: she focused on the majority culture and its shifting attitudes. Although gay identity had not been a concern of Hobson's until it touched

73. OutCasting Episode 35: Connecting youth with LGBTQ history — a conversation with gay elder Christopher Z. Hobson.

74. Perry Deane Young, "The Other Side of Gay," *Washington Post*, January 4, 1976, 125.

her life through her son, as a Jewish woman who had been shaped by the pervasive antisemitism of the first half of the twentieth century, she was sensitive to marginalizing experiences, and possessed a writer's antennae for picking up on social problems that were not receiving honest depictions in popular culture. In *Consenting Adult*, Hobson portrayed homophobia as part of a family of prejudices rooted in a bigot's hatred and fear of difference. As Hobson again took up the themes of passing and assimilation in that book, she demonstrated the insight that a Jewish writer could bring to this subject. *Anti*-antisemitism—the centerpiece of *Gentleman's Agreement*—becomes the model for anti-homophobic thinking in *Consenting Adult*. To be sure, it was a very particular perspective on gay identity and homophobia that this seventy-five-year-old, straight, Jewish woman novelist offered. Yet, based on its generally positive reception at the time, *Consenting Adult* was a social protest novel that benefited from an author who had, decades earlier, been preoccupied with the problem of antisemitism in America.