LAURA Z. HOBSON AND THE MAKING OF *GENTLEMAN'S AGREEMENT*

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ABSTRACT

Scholars of postwar American Jewish history have traditionally focused on highbrow texts in charting the shifting ways that "Jews," as a category, has been defined and characterized. Including postwar middlebrow publications in our analysis offers a more comprehensive picture of the changing discursive representation of Jews during the twentieth century. Despite the fact that *Gentleman's Agreement* rarely receives more than a line or two of mention in scholarly accounts of postwar Jews, it is a text that ably demonstrates the power that popular novels wield in shaping cultural sensibilities. Hobson was not the only 1940s novelist to publish an anti-Semitism themed novel, and her connection to a larger body of such literature contributes to the value of *Gentleman's Agreement*. The novel's best-selling status (and its adaptation into an Academy Award-winning film) is what makes it exceptional among this genre. The making of *Gentleman's Agreement*, with all of the debate and opposition it aroused, indicated tectonic shifts within publishing circles and the wider American culture about how to treat the topic of Jews and anti-Semitism.

KEYWORDS: Laura Z. Hobson, anti-Semitism, middlebrow fiction, Jews and publishing, Simon and Schuster, Dorothy Thompson, best sellers, protest literature, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Joshua Loth Liebman, pluralism

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Scholars of postwar American Jewish history have traditionally focused on highbrow texts, such as journals and academic treatises, along with particular novels, in charting the shifting ways that "Jews," as a category, has been defined and characterized.[1] Including postwar middlebrow publications in our analysis offers a more comprehensive picture of the changing discursive representation of Jews during the twentieth century. Historian Daniel Wickberg notes the singular ability of literature and art to express "cultural sensibilities," a term that he defines with help from Susan Sontag: "The sensibility of an era is not only its most decisive, but also its most perishable, aspect," Sontag wrote. "One may capture the ideas (intellectual history) and the behavior (social history) of an epoch without ever touching upon the sensibility or taste which informed those ideas, that behavior."[2] An investigation of what makes the cultures of the past different is at the heart of a sensibilities approach to history, Wickberg explains, which "seeks to understand what and how other people have perceived, thought, and felt . . . and thus involves a kind of interpretation that is analytical and descriptive in its orientation and imaginative in its capacity to understand otherness, but that gives secondary importance to causal explanation."[3] The highly "perishable" texts that are best-selling, middlebrow novels offer a useful source to mine this "ground of perception and feeling" to which Sontag and Wickberg refer.[4] For this reason, although Will Herberg's 1955 *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: A Treatise in American Religious Sociology* is very likely the most oft-cited text in scholarly accounts of Jews' evolving status in postwar America, it may not be the best text for capturing the mid-century shift in status of American Jews. Eight years prior to *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, Laura Hobson pronounced America a "tri-faith" nation in her best-selling novel *Gentleman's Agreement* and reached a considerably wider audience.[5] "You can be an American and a Catholic, or an American and a Protestant, or an American and a Jew," the protagonist Phil Green famously explained to his son Tommy about the nation's religious landscape.[6] Here, Hobson expressed positively what Herberg communicated in the negative: "Not to be—that is, not to identify oneself and be identified as—either a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew is somehow not to be an American," Herberg wrote in his *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*.[7] If we understand American literature not (or not merely) as art that embodies timeless truths, but as "attempts to redefine the social order," and as proposals to solve the social problems of a particular historical era, then works such as *Gentleman's Agreement* hold value for scholars of Jewish history.[8]

Those who do write about *Gentleman's Agreement*, the post–World War II classic about anti-Semitism in America, rarely discuss the novel and its Jewish author, focusing, instead, on the 1947 Twentieth Century Fox production, based on Hobson's novel.[9] For example, in a *New York Times* 1997 fiftieth-anniversary retrospective, film studies scholar George Custen observed that the movie "was more than a hit; for many people, it was a landmark in American culture, blowing the whistle on anti-Semitism in the country."[10] It was the writer

Laura Z. Hobson who created this cultural touchstone—and the film adheres remarkably to Hobson's book—but she is paid scant attention in commentaries about *Gentleman's Agreement.* Instead, articles like Custen's recall the courage of the small-town-Nebraska-born producer Darryl Zanuck in bringing the story of anti-Semitism to the silver screen. Recounting Zanuck's history of social-problem films, beginning in the 1930s with *The Public Enemy* (1931), *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), and moving up to *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), Custen's *New York Times* article establishes that *Gentleman's Agreement* was part of "Zanuck's master narrative of more than a thousand films."[11] (Zanuck had also produced *The Jazz Singer*, in 1927.) Midwesterner Darryl Zanuck is described, at length, as the brave outsider (in Jewish Hollywood) who brought *Gentleman's Agreement* to American viewers, while Hobson is only briefly mentioned.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FILM

To be sure, producing a film that dealt with anti-Semitism as explicitly as *Gentleman's Agreement* did was a feat for Hollywood in 1947, the year that the first two films about American anti-Semitism were produced: RKO's *Crossfire* and Twentieth Century Fox's *Gentleman's Agreement.*[12] Hollywood's Jewish moguls were famously skittish about treating Jews and anti-Semitism in their movies, an observation that surfaced in readers' letters to Laura Hobson.[13] "How in the world are they going to do it in the movies?" one fan wrote to Hobson in February 1947, evincing incredulity that Hollywood would remake Hobson's explicit treatment of anti-Semitism into a film. "Out there they've never given even a hint that there was such a thing as a Jew," the reader mused, "except once in a while when they showed some pathetic old nameless doctor being beaten up by a Nazi thug. Well, it would be nice if they are finally waking up."[14] Contemporary scholars of American cinema echo the letter writer's observations, citing studio executives' circumspection "in making public rejoinders to anti-Semitism and (to a lesser extent) to Nazism," right up until the era of *Gentleman's Agreement.*[15] In a similarly skeptical vein, the psychoanalyst Ernst Simmel wrote to Laura Hobson after reading her novel: "I hope too that the producers of the movie do not get cold feet and decide at the last minute to change the Jew into a Negro."[16] American Jewish filmmakers may have been unwilling to assess their Jewishness in relation to their films, but sensitive viewers duly noted such evasions.

Hobson's plot offered no way around the topic of Jews and anti-Semitism. A brief summary is in order here. *Gentleman's Agreement* told the story of a gentile reporter, Phil Green, who is assigned to write a magazine series about anti-Semitism in America. Seeking a fresh "angle" on what was apparently, already, a hackneyed topic, Green decides to go under-cover as a Jew, and discover "what a normal Jew would feel."[17] By 1944, when Hobson began to write *Gentleman's*

Agreement, the genre of investigative reporting stories was already a well-trod path, with examples such as, *The Front Page* (1931); *Foreign Correspondent* (1940); *His Girl Friday* (1940); and *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). Hobson drew on her background as a reporter and as an employee at Time Inc., in creating the character of Phil Green, and tapped into this genre, with its potential for exposing moral wrongs in a comedic vein.

In the course of Phil's undercover reporting, he discovers anti-Semitism all around him: in the offices of the liberal magazine where he worked (something Hobson experienced working for Time Inc., in the 1930s, when the magazine referred to the French premier Leon Blum as "Jew Blum," to Hobson's consternation[18]), in his own Jewish secretary, and in his well-educated, liberal-minded fiancé, Kathy. The eventual happy ending between Phil and Kathy hinges on Kathy's ability to overcome her own bigotry—with help from Phil's friend, Dave Goldman, a Jewish G.I. Although the protagonist in *Gentleman's Agreement* was not a Jew, the novel displayed an unusual candidness in dealing with anti-Semitism.[19] Hobson bravely "named names," as reviewers noted—of prominent anti-Semites, such as Gerald K. Smith and Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo, and of towns with restrictive real estate practices, such as Darien, Connecticut. Hollywood's record of glossing over Jewish characters and issues meant that Twentieth Century Fox's purchase of the movie rights to *Gentleman's Agreement* indicated a changing cultural sensibility.[20] With most Americans viewing at least one movie a week, a film like *Gentleman's Agreement,* which was TCF's top grossing film of 1948, had the potential to teach lessons with far greater reach than a single book.

Notwithstanding the significance of Zanuck's 1947 film, this article seeks to shift attention back to the source of that important movie. Hobson's novel and the circumstances leading to its publication are worthy of investigation for what they reveal about the role of middlebrow literature in inculcating a new cultural sensibility regarding postwar religious pluralism.

GENTLEMAN'S AGREEMENT AS MIDDLEBROW LITERATURE

Scholars have chronicled the 1920s development of the middlebrow literary genre that resulted from a growing professional managerial class and institutions designed to support it, such as the Book-of-the-Month-Club (whose founder, Harry Scherman, was a friend and advisor to Laura Hobson).[21] Yet the genre's utilitarian aims were not new in the twentieth century. The most famous pre-twentieth century example of a sentimental and realist novel with a "direct pedagogical goal" was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).[22] Hobson's readers and reviewers noted the association between her novel and Stowe's. One fan wrote to Hobson: "It may not be an 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' in the popular conception of propaganda literature but, to me and to those of my

friends who have already read it, it seems about the most honest and perceptive as well as the most entertaining and interesting piece of a social-political nature in current literature."[23] Other readers found Hobson's iteration of the form less satisfying. In a 1947 article for the academic journal *College English*, Professor William Tindall lamented the recent decline of "the sociological best seller," as authors employed the genre as a gambit to sell more books. By the late 1940s, Tindall asserted, "if an author wants his novel to sell better than the best sellers, he has only to choose for his subject either the evil of drink or the prejudice against Jews, Negroes, or, sometimes, Chinese."[24] For Tindall, as for other academic and highbrow reviewers, the problem with *Gentleman's Agreement* was that its form had become *too* integral to the culture; readers' embrace of the postwar problem novel had become instinctive. Late 1940s readers seemed, to observers like Tindall, to unreflectively purchase whatever book followed the mold established by the best-selling 1944 protest novel *Strange Fruit*, about an interracial romance.[25] "Sociologically exciting as this prospect must remain," Tindall observed of Americans' reflexive enthusiasm for this moralizing genre, "it is aesthetically depressing." Instead of "character, symbol, vision and richness"—the special province of literature, according to Tindall—Americans were turning to fiction to learn what might as easily be attained from newspapers: "for information alone, not for aesthetic experience."[26]

The purpose of this article is not to argue for a recovery of Hobson's novel on the basis of it aesthetic value (and Tindall was not the only reviewer to find it "thin and artistically trivial," as he called it). Rather, legitimate reasons for resuscitating *Gentleman's Agreement* within contemporary scholarship have more to do with its being embedded within its historical epoch.[27] As the literary scholar Jane Tompkins writes, "The novel's impact on the culture at large depends not on its escape from the formulaic and the derivative, but on its tapping into a storehouse of commonly held assumptions, reproducing what is already there in a typical and familiar form."[28] The very reasons for which Tindall and others criticized *Gentleman's Agreement*—because it seemed too fully a product of its time, too embracing of stereotypes—are likely the most solid ground for its inclusion in American Jewish history. Before American cultural trends shifted toward a celebration of diversity, it was the embrace of a moral culture shared by Christians and Jews, as *Gentleman's Agreement* recalls, that presented an exciting vanguard in American culture.

APPROACHING ANTI-SEMITISM

The objections of Hobson's publisher, editor, and literary associates, when she first proposed writing a novel about anti-Semitism, illuminate the quandary of 1940s American Jewish writers. At a time when anti-Semitism was rife, finding an effective register in which to speak out against bigotry presented a challenge

to writers like Hobson. Jewish writers, publishers, and editors feared accusations of "special pleading," despite generations of Americans of diverse faiths organizing on behalf of their co-religionists abroad. The charge of "special pleading" was especially poignant for Jews during the 1930s and 1940s, as they struggled to balance a need to prove their loyalty as Americans in the face of nativism with their growing concerns for the persecution of European Jews.[29] As Stuart Svonkin has shown in his study of postwar intergroup relations, Jewish defense organizations negotiated this difficult terrain by defining Jewish and American values as congruent, and by adopting a "theory of the unitary character of prejudice," which tied anti-Semitism to all other forms of prejudice poisoning American democracy.[30] Continuing to see Jews as victims and fearful about the possibilities of a Holocaust-like event occurring on American shores, leaders of American Jewish defense organizations explicitly linked the fight against anti-Semitism with the fight against all bigotry.

Hobson's project does not fit the mold of the 1940s American Jewish defense organizations. In her novel, Hobson focused solely on the problem of anti-Semitism in the United States. *Not* linking American anti-Semitism with other forms of prejudice became Hobson's method of revealing the issue's legitimacy; anti-Semitism did not require affiliation with any other prejudice to warrant attention and a solution. Hobson also avoided drawing parallels between American anti-Semitism and the murderous forms of anti-Semitism in Nazi Europe. Laura Hobson's son, Christopher Hobson, an English professor, interprets his mother's avoidance of the Holocaust as indicative of her laser-like attention to the problem of anti-Semitism in the United States.[31] To Hobson, her son maintains, mentioning the European suffering of Jews would have seemed a sensationalist shortcut, suggesting that it was European Jewish victimhood and vulnerability that earned Jews pity and tolerance. The character Dave Goldman makes a vague and fleeting reference to Jewish suffering, the only one in the novel, in which he says, "'The hell with the Jews, as Jews. . . . It's the whole thing, not the poor, poor Jews.' He waved toward the windows, as if he were waving to the whole stretch of country beyond."[32] Whether Dave is referring to European Jews or to American Jews is unclear, but the latter part of the statement suggests Hobson's resistance to thinking about anti-Semitism as a "Jewish problem." Not for the sake of European Jews or even American Jews should the fight against anti-Semitism be waged, Dave (and Laura Hobson) explains, but for the welfare of the entire country.

Hobson's main concern was the effect of anti-Semitism on American society. Her gentile protagonists were intended to allow the average non-Jewish reader to identify with a non-Jewish engagement with the problem of anti-Semitism. Herein lies the challenge of *Gentleman's Agreement* for its Jewish readers and later generations of Jewish Studies scholars: Hobson's novel about anti-Semitism was strikingly unconcerned with "the Jewish experience." Despite Hobson's Jewish bona fides (her father was a founder of the *Jewish Daily Forward* and her

mother wrote for the Yiddish newspaper *Der Tog*), her best-selling novel about anti-Semitism seemed, to many readers, to lie outside the boundaries of Jewish literature. Indeed, even Hobson resisted this categorization of her novel. When the Jewish Book Council sought to honor Hobson with the National Jewish Book Award for best Jewish novel of 1947, Hobson declined, explaining that *Gentleman's Agreement* was not a "Jewish book." But whereas the Jewish Book Council was not disturbed by the lack of Jewish content in *Gentleman's Agreement*, religious reviewers felt otherwise. In a 1948 radio broadcast, best-selling author Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman remarked, "The author, Mrs. Hobson, apparently has little awareness of the positive and creative aspects of Judaism."[33] Liebman's assessment was echoed by Jewish and gentile reviewers who found Hobson's treatment of Jewish religion shallow and assimilationist. In the pages of the Catholic magazine *Commonweal*, a reviewer wrote: "I do wish . . . that another angle could somehow have been brought in—the feeling that Jews might be proud of their Jewishness and wish to defend the good and just things for which they stand."[34]

These reviewers were not off the mark. Hobson did not express interest in or loyalty to Jewish particularity. What was "good for the Jews" was also not her concern as a social message author—although this was precisely what concerned most Jewish defense organizations. In tune with the 1940s politics of consensus and integration, Hobson's novel presented the possibility of individuals overcoming their ethnic backgrounds in order to inhabit a shared American identity.[35] Having imbibed her parents' socialism, Hobson's liberal politics found expression in her belief that America's promise could be realized when all individuals from diverse backgrounds chose to assimilate. To call Hobson a liberal is to say that she followed in the tradition that developed after the French Revolution, which had inspired liberals to believe that "once the light of freedom is allowed to permeate the alleys of the ghetto, all the stigmata of medieval separatism will disappear and the Jew will become indistinguishable from the rest of society."[36] In texts by ethnic and religious minorities, this kind of assimilation is frequently interpreted as betrayal, as literary scholar Michael Kramer notes, but Kramer offers an alternative reading of the integrationist trend in works such as *Gentleman's Agreement*:

> If America were indeed a multicultural wonderland, wasn't assimilation, wherever and however it appeared, all the more remarkable? If the cultural makeup of ethnic Americans were fundamentally different from that of regular Americans, didn't that make assimilationist texts the sites of real imagined work? Shouldn't assimilation be taken seriously, as achievement, and not dismissed as surrender, as a presence rather than an absence? Assimilation did not negate ethnicity; it expressed ethnicity, albeit ironically. It was not a failure of imagination but an imaginative success, a cause for astonishment and wonder.[37]

As Kramer sees it, "to celebrate the Jewishness of Jewish American texts, while devaluing or ignoring the assimilatory core and context of the writing is not only to miss a significant part of the literature but to distort and to minimize its creative matrix."[38] In portraying the gentile, Phil Green, and his friend Dave Goldman as interchangeable, Kramer's analysis suggests, Hobson achieved a remarkable imaginative feat. Historian Matthew Frye Jacobson also reads Hobson's creative and assimilationist project as highly imaginative. To challenge the "perceived 'difference' dividing Anglo-Saxon from Hebrew" and offer a "deracinated Jewishness," that had few precedents, "was no slight undertaking on her part," Jacobson writes.[39] *Gentleman's Agreement* also proved a creative site because of the response it generated. While Hobson accepted diversity as a fact and valued assimilation, her critics found her vision of a mainstream American culture overly limited and responded with calls for a deeper vision of pluralism and greater recognition of the distinctiveness of Judaism.

The boldness of Hobson's fictional portrayal of gentile-Jewish "passing" is indicated, too, by the incredulity of Hobson's publisher, Richard Simon, when Hobson first proposed her idea. Simon attempted to dissuade Hobson from writing the novel, because he found its central premise too bold: "Readers will not believe that a gentile would pose as a Jew," Simon responded to Hobson's proposal for her new novel in 1944.[40] That Hobson persisted, despite warnings from both her publisher and her editor about the unfeasibility of her idea, suggests, in part, Hobson's belief in the creative solution that she had found to her problem of how to treat anti-Semitism in fiction. Hobson portrays this creative success in a scene where Phil Green realizes that he has come up with a new "angle" on anti-Semitism: "An elation roared through him. He had it, the idea, the lead, the angle. . . . He'd known that there was somewhere, around some unexpected corner, a better idea, stronger, more real, the only. He'd stalked it, beseeched it, spied for it, waited, rushed, fought."[41] Hobson, too, had been searching for an approach for a novel about anti-Semitism—a theme that had haunted her for decades, if not her entire life. In the scene described above, Phil (with Hobson) discovers a solution to the challenge of writing about anti-Semitism in an affecting mode for American readers: if Jews were portrayed as "just like" other Americans, in appearance and manners, the logic behind anti-Semitism would crumble, and there would be no basis for discrimination or exclusion. In her own life, Hobson had achieved a level of assimilation unusual for a daughter of Russian immigrants who were enmeshed in the Yiddish-speaking labor movement. It is little wonder that Hobson's novel portrayed her hope that Jews might *appear* more like gentiles, so that they might, over time, *become* more like non-Jewish Americans; this was the path that she had followed in her own life.

In a scene from the novel that illuminates the importance of appearance and manners in Hobson's solution to the problem of anti-Semitism, Phil Green's girlfriend, Kathy, judges a pair of "ill-bred" Jewish girls whom she encounters at a ski resort. "Why do they *do* it? She thought miserably. Why do they make

themselves so noticeable? It's awful. It's just awful," Kathy reflects, after noticing the girls' unrefined language and "the glittering costume jewelry at their ears below their ski caps, the frozen beads of mascara of their eyes, the gleam of eye shadow, the thick lipstick, congealed and cracked in the dry five above zero," which is contrasted with Kathy's "oiled-silk ski mitten."[42] Kathy feels indignant over how their image might harm other Jews: "All Jews *aren't* vulgar and overdressed, she thought passionately, and wished Phil could know how hotly she despised with him the injustice that taxed a whole group for the offense of two ill-bred girls."[43] Kathy is not defending the two unassimilated Jewish girls, but rather a hypothetical group of Jews who might more successfully navigate the terrain of civility and should, therefore, not be penalized by the girls' unrefined behavior. Class difference is what marks these girls as different, in Hobson's portrayal—a standard that mirrored Hobson's personal ascent from working to middle class.

Such scenes had a galvanizing effect on critical readers who found Hobson's portrayal of "anti-anti-Semites" not nearly up to the level of postwar ecumenical ideals. The place of *Gentleman's Agreement* in American culture, then, was somewhat paradoxical: the book and film were considered trailblazing and not trailblazing enough, signaling a rapid shift in social norms regarding Jews, in the late 1940s. As remarkable as it seemed that the country's leaders and culture-makers were finally discrediting anti-Semitism as un-American (at least on the level of stated ideals), postwar religious thinkers were soon faced with the realization that mere acceptance of Jews was insufficient. *Gentleman's Agreement*, with its limited vision of pluralism, spurred reviewers to articulate what kind of additional progress was necessary.

With its tradition of social pedagogy, middlebrow literature offered a unique solution to Jewish writers, who sought to make an argument about the American-ness of fighting bigotry. As Matthew Hedstrom has argued, the category of middlebrow "refers to a relationship between consumers and producers, between readers and those who tried to shape reading."[44] These relationships pivoted around producers' desires to mold readers' sensibilities and the desires of readers to be molded into middle-class Americans with the proper cultural sensibility.[45] As the archival evidence surrounding *Gentleman's Agreement* demonstrates, Hobson's novel was written with the same goals that literary scholar Jane Tomkins identifies as characteristic of the middlebrow: "in order to win the belief and influence the behavior of the widest possible audience."[46]

THE CULTURAL FUNCTION OF 1940S MIDDLEBROW AMERICAN JEWISH LITERATURE

Middlebrow novels such as *Gentleman's Agreement* helped to make anti-Semitism (and Jews) accessible to a wide American readership. Many of

these 1940s readers had little understanding of how Jews differed from other Americans, since most did not count Jews as close friends, or socialize with them in the intimacy of their homes. Given Jewish demographics, particularly outside of New York and a few other major metropolitan centers, this is not surprising. As the 1944–1945 *American Jewish Year Book* revealed, Jews constituted 0.38 percent of the total population of rural towns in America.[47] After the events of World War II had pushed Jews into the spotlight of current events and made them front-page news, Americans began both to wonder about this much-discussed, tiny people and to question the basis of anti-Semitism. Hobson's notes and drafts of *Gentleman's Agreement* (housed at Columbia University's Rare Book & Manuscript Library) reveal her effort to resolve questions about Jews in the minds of her readers by demonstrating that Jews were not substantially different from other white Americans.[48] Among Hobson's papers are her typed notes of the 1945 nonfiction work *One Nation*, by novelist and historian Wallace Stegner and "the editors of *Look*." The Stegner book represented a popular effort to expose America's "minorities problem," raise awareness about intolerance, and to advocate for equality of opportunity.[49] *Look*'s photographers provided a fitting counterpart to Stegner's prose, and the first photograph in the book portrays a hotel patio with a sign: "Private Beach—Gentiles." One of the Stegner passages that Hobson transcribed into her notes and that presaged her novel's discussion of anti-Semitism describes the second-class status of non-Anglo-Saxons in the United States: "There is a wall down the middle of America," Stegner wrote. "A wall of suspicion, distrust, snobbery, hatred, and guilt. On one side is the majority of our people—white, Protestant, and gentile—with social, economic, and religious patterns of behavior derived from Anglo-Saxon and North European ancestors. On the other side are people who because of color, religion, or cultural background are not allowed to be full citizens of the United States."[50] Stegner's book, which surveyed "racial and religious stresses in wartime America," defined these societal divisions in terms accessible to all Americans. Hobson took note.

In his chapter about Jews (titled "Eternal Scapegoat: When Does a Jew Become an American?"), Stegner assumed a cultural gap between Jews and American culture. His chapter began with the questions that he took to be common among 1940s Americans: "What is a Jew? What has been the effect on both Jew and Gentile of eight centuries of Jewish persecution in Europe? Where do the vicious stories about hateful Jewish traits and activities originate? How much of those stories is based on observation, how much on fiction? How has the Nazi campaign of vilification, suppression, and massacre affected America's attitude toward its 4,500,000 Jews?" These questions about the origins of Jewish persecution had been implicitly and explicitly treated in American debates about whether to intervene in World War II.[51] As stated by Stegner, they also absolved American churches and religious institutions of the guilt of teaching Christian anti-Semitism. These questions continued to preoccupy Americans during and

after the war, as the extent of Jewish suffering became known and as American towns and cities absorbed survivors of the Holocaust.[52]

As Hobson would do in her novel, Stegner gave the lie to Jewish difference by delegitimizing anti-Semitic canards and asserting Jewish humanity. The moral was that Jews were "just like everyone else." "Undoubtedly there are miserly Jews, dishonest Jews, unmannerly Jews—Jews are people," Stegner wrote. "But what is more important is that wherever the structure of myth and lie about the composite 'Jew' is touched by finger of inquiry, it falls apart."[53] Like all Americans, Stegner exhorted, Jews should be judged as individuals. Hobson repeated this lesson in *Gentleman's Agreement*. Early in the novel, Phil Green's son, Tommy, asks his father what Jews are, and whether they're "bad." "Some are, sure," Phil replies. "Some aren't. It's like everybody else."[54]

Without delving too deeply into sectarian distinctions (which had never been important to Hobson, personally, although this would change in the late 1960s and 1970s), Hobson sought to educate Americans about Jews, and to cultivate within them attitudes of tolerance. In line with cultural studies scholar Janice Radway's contention that, rather than constituting a "watered-down version of a more authentic high culture," middlebrow culture in fact creates its own "constellation of tastes, preferences, and desires," *Gentleman's Agreement* reveals Hobson's molding of a new American affect toward anti-Semitism among her readers.[55] In creating this new sensibility, Hobson drew on existing tastes, preferences, and desires in order to negotiate a new place, in the cultural imagination, for Jews and anti-Semitism.

As was the case with other middlebrow popular novels, Hobson's efforts to reshape humanitarian concerns through fiction were constrained by certain features of the middlebrow genre. Here, Radway is again helpful in illuminating the disciplining nature of the genre: "Middlebrow culture taught us to think, to desire, and to do" by ushering readers "into a particular world still too complacent about certain social hierarchies."[56] In *Gentleman's Agreement*, as Matthew Frye Jacobson has shown, Hobson's interest in collapsing the walls of segregation in American society did not extend beyond white Americans.[57] Hobson's later support of the civil rights movement suggests that this omission was not active resistance to the idea of equality for blacks. When Phil Green asked, "What the hell chance have we of getting decent with thirteen million Negroes if we can't lick the much easier business of anti-Semitism?"[58] he suggested a vision for increasing pluralism in postwar America that began with Jews. Yet, Hobson's rationale for extending equality to Jews in *Gentleman's Agreement* was "same-ness" or interchangeability—as portrayed by Phil's "passing" as a Jew—which did not apply to blacks. Hobson's novel about a gentile who passes as a Jew implied that only those who *could* pass as white Anglo-Saxons should be accepted as equals. Only *invisible* difference was acceptable, in Hobson's schema.[59] Yet, these limits in the novel's vision of tolerance should not detract from an appreciation of Hobson's powerful subversion of the reigning sensibility

regarding anti-Semitism. Understanding novels such as *Gentleman's Agreement* as agents of cultural transformation shows that they were only able to perform the work of molding sensibilities within the cultural boundaries of their era. A certain degree of cultural "fit" between the book and its time was necessary for the work to be successfully embraced as a popular, middlebrow novel.[60] Through an examination of the making of *Gentleman's Agreement*, we learn how Hobson shaded her vision of American religious pluralism toward mid-1940s mainstream American values, and about the cultural implications of her doing so, in 1947 and today.

THE JEWISH INTELLIGENTSIA RESPONDS

That the "politics of sameness," which Stegner and Hobson employed, strikes us as insufficient to combat anti-Semitism likely accounts for some of the contemporary scholarly neglect of *Gentleman's Agreement* and its author. Hobson's sensibilities toward anti-Semitism, Jewish identity, and American anti-Semitism are out of sync with contemporary sensibilities toward these themes, and those differences give her work a dated quality. Aside from a few encyclopedia entries, very little has been written about Hobson by scholars of American Jewish history. The Jewish Publication Society *Guide to American Jewish Literature* (2009) does not include Hobson, although it does encompass other postwar anti-Semitism-themed novels. Editor Josh Lambert explained his decision to include Arthur Miller's 1946 novel about anti-Semitism instead of *Gentleman's Agreement*: "I liked the idea of including Arthur Miller; I prefer the rawness and weirdness of *Focus*."[61] That choice is not unusual among scholars treating postwar American Jewish literature. In a 2008 Radcliffe Institute lecture about post-WWII American Jewish literature, literary critic Vivian Gornick similarly elided Hobson's Jewishness. Gornick noted the importance of *Gentleman's Agreement*, as a postwar novel about anti-Semitism, but she described Hobson as a non-Jewish author.[62] This mistake (at a time when such facts are easily checked online) is emblematic of Hobson's position in the cultural imagination. As the rabbis who sermonized about *Gentleman's Agreement* noted, neither Hobson nor her novel showed marks of Jewishness. That Hobson was female further distances her from the canon of postwar American Jewish writers that has been characterized by its own "gentleman's agreements" that have seemingly safeguarded the intellectual, highbrow, and masculine character of the corpus.

In November 1946, when editor Elliot Cohen invited Hobson to contribute to *Commentary* magazine, the clash between Hobson's female, middlebrow status and the highbrow New York Jewish intellectuals became apparent.[63] The popularity of *Gentleman's Agreement*, recently serialized, had inspired Cohen to get in touch with Hobson, but his condescension toward a female writer whose

fiction was serialized in *Cosmopolitan* in 1946 was evident even as he solicited Hobson to write for his magazine. "My dear Mrs. Hobson," Cohen wrote to the writer whom he had never met. "If you were as old as I am and had a long grey beard (as I do), I daresay you would not be so completely sure about a lot of important and complex things as you seem to be."[64] It was Hobson's embrace of non-sectarianism—a term that, more than any other, signified her brand of 1940s American liberalism—that had irked Cohen. If non-sectarianism was a value among liberals, Cohen's journal, *Commentary*, came up lacking. Its bias was unequivocally toward Jewish interests. Hobson replied: "Even if you disagree with me about the importance or unimportance of the idea of non-sectarianism, couldn't you at least pretend that I'm not just a prattling infant and make believe that I have a right to my beliefs too?"[65] The two never did meet for the friendly "lunch or a drink sometime" that Cohen had initially suggested. Hobson's icy thanks to Cohen for sending her copies of "non-sectarian" articles in *Commentary* that, Hobson noted, "prove your point—which, incidentally, I myself never raised at all—that *Commentary* prints as good or better articles than most so-called general magazines," very likely had its intended stinging effect, because of the self-doubt that characterized Cohen's New York Jewish intellectual milieu at mid-century.[66] *Commentary* and its writers were nationally acclaimed, but the magazine's Jewishness had been the source of both its strength and insecurity at a time when Jews were on the cusp of full integration into American society.[67] Laura Hobson, largely unencumbered by the constraints of Jewish identity, proved that there were non-sectarian approaches to writing about issues such as anti-Semitism (Hobson had *not*, after all, written a novel about the more global issues of bigotry or racism) that could also be financially rewarding.[68] By writing a middlebrow novel about anti-Semitism as an *American* problem, Hobson had deftly extracted the issue from the insular world of Jewish defense organizations and rabbis' sermons and made it central to emerging American ideas about religious pluralism.

THE CHALLENGES OF WRITING ABOUT ANTI-SEMITISM

When Hobson began to write her novel in 1944, the United States was in the grip of war. At the time, and as Hobson's correspondence reveals, it was unclear to publishers and fiction writers whether American anti-Semitism—then in the shadow of Europe's more violent anti-Semitism—was too provocative a topic to be treated in a novel intended for mass consumption. In their mid-1940s correspondence, Hobson and her literary associates sought to predict what Americans would buy, when it came to moralizing literature about anti-Semitism. How would a novel that brought attention to a feature of American culture that bore some resemblance to Nazi culture fare in the nation's consumer culture? Would such a book appeal to a largely non-Jewish American mass-market?

Could a Jewish author (Hobson) write about non-Jewish attitudes toward Jews without stirring up even more resentment? These were the kinds of questions that Hobson and her peers debated as she began work on what would become *Gentleman's Agreement*.

Gentleman's Agreement was not Hobson's first fictional treatment of anti-Semitism. In 1932, *The New Yorker* published her short story "The Perfect Man." The story focused on reactions to a Jewish butler named Percival Cohen. Here, too, Hobson's concern was upper-crust society—the social circles that Hobson moved in. Other than his surname, there was nothing Jewish about the fictional butler. Yet, the name "Cohen" was sufficient to give pause to a prospective employer. The reader witnesses the employer's interior reaction as it shifts from shock to the eventual decision, in the idiosyncratic manner of the wealthy, that there is a certain cachet to employing a butler with a Jewish name. By the end of the short story, the employer is on the telephone, regaling her friend: "His name is Cohen. . . . Yes, that's what I said, Cohen. . . . Isn't it precious? . . . What? . . . Yes, I adore it too. It's too priceless. I couldn't resist it. I . . ."[69]

In her fiction, Hobson may have been able to turn Jewishness into a quality so precious as to be acceptable in a society that was otherwise anti-Semitic. In her own life, however, Hobson's experience was of Jewishness as a liability. Hobson's autobiography explains Jewishness as the reason that she was not accepted into Phi Beta Kappa or a sorority at Cornell, for instance.[70] Yet, Jewishness was a handicap that Hobson was able to successfully negotiate in various ways.[71] For example, Hobson never published under her family name, Zametkin. Before marriage to publisher Francis Thayer Hobson, she used the surname of her boyfriend, Tom Mount (her *New Yorker* story is published under the byline, "Laura Mount"). In keeping with her desire not to be labeled a "Jewish writer,"[72] Hobson did not publicize her own ethnic-religious identity to her readers, and many wrote letters to Hobson asking whether she were Jewish. That her romantic relationships and marriage were with Protestant, Ivy League men also suggest a social maneuvering highly unusual among Jewish women or men during the 1920s and 1930s.

More than a decade had passed between the time when Hobson had written "The Perfect Man" and when she started writing *Gentleman's Agreement*. In the interim, anti-Semitism remained a pervasive feature of American life, even as newsreels educated Americans about Hitler's persecution of Jews.[73] In 1940 and 1941, as Americans engaged in a heated debate over intervention in World War II, Hobson, whose day job included writing advertising copy, wrote promotional material exhorting Americans to join the fight against the Japanese and the Nazis, for the interventionist group, Friends of Democracy, Inc., whose work she supported. Between 1939 and 1941, as Americans debated whether or not to enter the European war, the question of what it meant to be an American (to remain isolated from the war in order to preserve America's Christian civilization, or to fight fascism and preserve democracy on a global

scale) was at the crux of this debate, just as it defined the terms of Hobson's fictional treatment of anti-Semitism. In Hobson's portrayal, anti-Semitism was not a Jewish problem; it was an American problem that tested the purity of American democracy.[74] It was gentiles who possessed the greatest power to combat anti-Semitism. "*I'm* on the side lines on anti-Semitism. It's *your* fight, brother," the Jewish character Dave Goldman tells the gentile protagonist Phil Green, somewhat counter-intuitively.[75] On the face of it, that gentile efforts to fight anti-Semitism would be most efficacious might not have seemed like an empowering message for American Jewry, but it was based on the reality of numbers: Jews were a tiny minority.

Hobson's notion that gentile action was required to combat anti-Semitism is somewhat counterbalanced by her belief that individual writers (gentile or Jewish) could effect change through the stories they told. This feeling was buttressed by the growing genre of anti-anti-Semitism themed novels and short stories during the 1940s.[76] In letters to her publisher, Richard Simon, Hobson referred to these new stories, novels and screenplays. Among her papers, Hobson kept clippings of the short stories of another assimilated Jewish writer, Irwin Shaw, who had achieved a more highbrow status than Hobson. In 1940, Shaw's story "Select Clientele" was published in *The New Yorker* and marked a turning point in what could be said in mainstream fiction regarding anti-Semitism. In the story, anti-Semitism is described as a disease "growing stronger in the veins and organs of America." The story's protagonist, Sam, a Jewish writer, notices that, "All the time there were more hotels you couldn't go to, apartment houses right in New York City you couldn't live in." Ironically, the story noted, "A hotel advertises that its clientele is exclusive . . . if it allows in everybody but six million Jews and fifteen million Negroes." With every passing day, Sam observed, the American public seemed to be shifting toward the anti-Semitism that was once the province of hoodlums:

> The American people were becoming like them [the hoodlums]. Men and boys selling Father Coughlin on the street corners and the mean little middle-aged ladies buying him. The undernourished baleful faces on those newsboys and their customers. . . . Sam sold stories to magazines that published advertisements for vacation places that said, "Distinguished clientele" or "Exclusive clientele" or "Select Clientele."[77]

As Ben Yagoda has written, Shaw used "Select Clientele" as a way of "picking a fight with the very publication in which it appeared," since *The New Yorker* included advertisements for restricted inns.[78] Through the character of Sam, Shaw's story expressed the frustrations that a writer like Shaw must have felt. "I'm a fiction writer," Sam tells his non-Jewish friend. "I write, 'The moon shone down brilliantly.'" And yet, there were things that needed to be said about the violence being done to Jews. "What can you say today?" Sam asks his friend,

helplessly. In the story, Sam is uncertain and depressed about the possibilities of fiction for improving social conditions. What needs to be written, Sam feels, is something as straightforward as, "Stop this! Please stop shooting each other. Please stop shooting my brother, my wife, my child. Please become reasonable human beings."[79] Writing in *The New Yorker*—about the kind of writer who aspires toward publishing in *The New Yorker*—Shaw succinctly described the limits that highbrow literature placed on a writer's ability to moralize. When Sam's friend suggests, "You could write what you want to say, the truth as you see it," Sam laughs and responds, "The truth as I see it. . . . The world stinks. People are terrible and there is only despair. Should I write that? Who gets any good out of that? Why should I be the one to tell it?"[80]

Shaw's protagonist expressed Shaw's quandary in writing about anti-Semitism: condemning anti-Semitism did not make for good literature and there was no guarantee that such fiction would help society. Nonetheless, Hobson was willing to "be the one to tell it." Although she admired Shaw's regular contributions to *The New Yorker*—a magazine that accepted Hobson's work only once, despite her repeated submissions—she had different goals from Shaw as a writer: Hobson sought to bring social issues to the attention of her readers. Writing in the less prestigious middlebrow genre of commercial fiction gave her the freedom to moralize. There was nothing subtle about Hobson's message in *Gentleman's Agreement.*

THE DEBATE OVER *GENTLEMAN'S AGREEMENT*

Despite circumnavigating some of the challenges of writing about anti-Semitism, Hobson encountered objections to her idea for a novel. To explain the skepticism that Hobson confronted and what it signified about American sensibilities regarding anti-Semitism, I will turn now to the epistolary conversation that Hobson engaged in when she began work on *Gentleman's Agreement*. Here, we find that Hobson met resistance where she had expected support, as friends, such as Dorothy Thompson and publisher Richard Simon, attempted to warn her away from a theme they perceived as too controversial. As dispiriting as this was for a writer, these exchanges also educated Hobson about the culture that she was trying to combat.

In the summer of 1944, Hobson mailed an outline of a novel about anti-Semitism to several of her friends in the publishing world, asking for their opinions.[81] Her idea for a novel had taken root six months earlier, after she read an article in *Time* about an anti-Semitic episode in the House of Representatives. In February of 1944, Mississippi Democratic Congressman John Rankin had referred to Walter Winchell as a "little kike." *Time* reported: "This was a new low in demagoguery, but in the entire house, no one rose to protest."[82] This news alarmed Hobson, but *Time*'s editorializing comment about the lack of a protest

affirmed Hobson in her indignation: if the editorial staff at *Time* expressed moral outrage at a public display of anti-Semitism, the "average American" was probably not far behind. Similarly outraged reactions by her non-Jewish, politically liberal friends alerted Hobson to a story that extended beyond the American Jewish community. She later recorded her response about the incident and ensuing conversations among friends and acquaintances: "How antisemitic [*sic*] *was* this country. . . . Not just among the outright bigots like Congressman Rankin, Senator Bilbo, the white supremacists and Father Coughlin on the radio with his following of millions for his nightly hate talks, but other people, people who'd never call anybody a kike, people who said they loathed prejudice?"[83]

Given Hobson's background, it is not surprising that she gravitated toward this wider context of anti-Semitism. Hobson's focus on the non-Jewish, mainstream response to anti-Semitism bespeaks both the author's worldview and her goals for her book. Rather than instilling within their daughter a sense of the primacy of Jewish interests, the Zametkins' universal socialist ethos had engendered in Hobson a belief that she could transcend Jewish parochial concerns. After graduating from Cornell in 1921, Hobson's professional career in advertising and at Time Inc., and her romantic life, dotted by relationships with Ivy-League-educated, Protestant men, reinforced Hobson's impression that she—a Jewish woman—was as American as anyone else.[84] In the early 1940s, this may have been a misperception, but her acceptance in non-Jewish society afforded Hobson a singular perspective on anti-Semitism. By the mid-1940s, Hobson had spent the previous fifteen years socializing with a New York literary establishment that included the likes of Henry Luce, Clare Boothe Brokaw, Sinclair Lewis, and Dorothy Thompson. At a 1930s dinner party that Hobson hosted with her then-husband, publisher Francis Thayer Hobson, Mrs. Hobson had been shocked to hear anti-Semitic remarks made by her politically liberal friends when the conversation turned to events in Nazi Europe. Along with the *Time* article, that dinner party became another experience that planted the seeds of Hobson's most famous novel.

Yet, the timing of such a novel seemed potentially harmful. Was it reasonable to publish a novel critiquing American anti-Semitism while the country was in the midst of war? This was Hobson's main concern when she wrote to her friends and colleagues, seeking their advice. The responses that she received in the summer of 1944 ignored the issue of timing, to Hobson's relief, but revealed considerable cultural resistance to Hobson's idea for exposing genteel anti-Semitism. Lee Wright, Hobson's editor at Simon and Schuster, where Hobson had published her first novel in 1943, warned Hobson:

> I don't think that you have the objectivity necessary to handle this thing. You are writing about a man who pretends to be a Jew in order to find out what they go through. But you who are writing this book, are a Jew. How can you put yourself in his place? There are generations of philosophic

> submission in your blood and bones. You were born with an instinctive acceptance of a special place in the world. He would be hurt more deeply and in a special way than a Jew would be hurt, because he would be both the victim and the persecutor. . . . I am afraid of this for you. You will put your heart and your guts into it, and you won't get what you want. You will be accused of artificiality and special pleading, and you may do more harm than good.[85]

A Jewish woman married to a Christian, Lee Wright believed that as a Jewish writer, Hobson was too afflicted by a history of oppression to be able to portray a gentile protagonist. Wright's view expressed yet another angle to the midcentury straitjacket facing American Jewish fiction writers when it came to the topic of anti-Semitism. Whereas Irwin Shaw and his fictional character Sam had groped for the words to speak out against Jewish persecution, Wright did not believe that a Jewish writer possessed the imaginative capacity to describe a non-Jewish perspective.

It did not escape Hobson that the Jews whose opinions she sought out were among the most skeptical about her project. Like Wright, Hobson's publisher, Richard Simon, an assimilated Jew who had married a non-Jew (Simon had been reared in the Ethical Culture movement and attended the Ethical Culture School, before Columbia University), was not enthusiastic about Hobson's project, despite his own liberal politics.[86] He replied to Hobson's letter with a four-page letter that outlined what he described as the "heartbreak possibilities" should she proceed with the novel. Foremost among them was the likelihood that she would not find a publisher for such a book, he wrote, with the implication that although "Essandess" had published her first book, Simon could not guarantee that they would be interested in her novel about anti-Semitism. His letter highlighted the paralysis that many Jews felt, in light of pervasive American anti-Semitism. "A lot of us have felt that we should do something about the growth of anti-Semitism, and we feel so helpless," Simon wrote. Although it is not clear to whom Simon referred with his "us," it is likely that he meant the very liberal, decent Americans about whom Hobson wrote. "The problem is not to do something about it but to do something effective," Simon wrote. "I think if you write this book you will find that readers will not believe that a gentile would pose as a Jew."[87]

Again, it is baffling that someone in the publishing world could seem as blinkered as Simon (and Wright) about the possibilities for fiction to change readers' perceptions about the world. Yet, these objections attest to both the ascendancy of middle-class literary realism during the early 1940s, with its commitment to recreating middle-class life in all of its prejudices and anxieties, and the paralysis that Jewish publishers and editors felt, regarding anti-Semitism, during the 1930s and 1940s. Hobson's editor and publisher were not the only ones to offer objections. Hobson's friend, the journalist Dorothy Thompson,

warned Hobson: "I am not sure that the book would not do more harm than good. I have come to the conclusion . . . that anti-antisemitism [sic] campaigns are very dubious means to overcome intolerance. They are (or may be, so it seems to me,) advertising campaigns for anti-Semitism. . . . In fact your novel, if it were not a political tract. . . would be fascinating, but—forgive me—it would take a Dostoevsky to write it."[88]

In responding to these objections, Hobson articulated her motivations for writing her novel. Perhaps it would require a Dostoevsky to do full justice to the theme, Hobson conceded, "Yet if I succeeded in doing partial justice to it, I am not too unhappy, for novelists would never write novels at all if they had to be sure they could do what a genius would do," Hobson wrote. "I think I could write a good book on the theme—and that is all I must let myself worry about."[89] To Richard Simon, Hobson replied with renewed determination and a desire to win back the support of her publisher and friend:

> I think maybe I should go back to business and security for my boys if I am going to give up a book merely because it might bring *me* heartbreak . . . because I can't see what the hell is the use of enduring the chancy insecurity of being an author unless you write stuff that you yourself find a deep satisfying rightness in. Maybe this is not the book. Maybe I'll fail in finding the ways to keep it a novel and a love story and a human story. Maybe it will smell "tract" to high heaven. If it does, then I'll give it up because it's no satisfaction to keep writing a lousy tracty book. But I just won't know, unless I try about six chapters. Maybe those first chapters would be so different from what you expect, so fascinating and interesting, that you will yourself urge me to go on, and will be with me heart and soul.[90]

In a way, Hobson benefited from challenges like those she received from Simon. The uncertainty of others forced Hobson to become more certain herself, and to think hard about what she was writing and why. Similarly, Richard Simon's commercial aspirations for Hobson's novel, combined with her need to support her family, made Hobson think about writing a book to rival Lillian Smith's 1944 *Strange Fruit* in sales and popularity. Simon wrote to Hobson during that summer of 1944: "'The Trespassers' did not achieve the hundred thousand or more which we had hoped for because not enough people found that, for whatever reason—it rang a bell in their hearts," Simon wrote of the disappointing sales of Hobson's first novel. "On the other hand 'Strange Fruit' did ring that bell and so did 'Native Son' and so did 'Under Cover.' The great Jewish book corresponding to 'Strange Fruit' has yet to be written. Perhaps you are the one to do it."[91] Hobson had her own economic reasons to work toward a best seller: she was a single mother of two boys who attended private schools. College tuitions loomed on the horizon. Earning a livelihood had been a spur to productivity since her teenage years, and these

responsibilities continued to impel Hobson in the writing of *Gentleman's Agreement*. Simon's eagerness for a best seller may have encouraged Hobson's belief in this possibility, too.

Although Richard Simon's discouraging letter dealt the strongest blow to Hobson, who put off writing for a month after receiving it, his admonitions were countered by the encouragement of others, including Norman Cousins, editor of the *Saturday Review*, Harry Scherman, founder of the Book-of-the-Month Club, and Carroll Whedon, the wife of the screenwriter John Whedon. Whedon wrote to Hobson about the urgent need for her novel: "I think that the book ought to be written—and the sooner the better—not to highlight the plight of the Jew, but to examine the even more appalling plight of the non-Jew, and what the seeping poison of prejudice can mean to America."[92] Preoccupied by her idea and encouraged by the support of friends, Hobson moved forward with her novel in the fall of 1944.

CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that *Gentleman's Agreement* rarely receives more than a line or two of mention in scholarly accounts of postwar Jewish literature, it is a text that ably demonstrates the power that popular novels wield in shaping cultural sensibilities. *Gentleman's Agreement* was far from the only anti-Semitism themed novel of its era, and its connection to a larger body of literature contributes to its value. The novel's best-selling status and its adaptation into an Academy Award–winning film makes it exceptional among this genre.[93] The making of this novel, including the debate and opposition that it aroused, indicated shifts within publishing circles and the wider American culture about how to treat the topic of Jews and anti-Semitism. As a platform onto which writers could project the beliefs and behaviors of the body politic, as well as instructions for its reform, fiction provided an arena for authors to describe their version of national self-improvement. For a country that had just won a war against racial extermination—only to return home and find its own social structure still infected by racial and religious bigotry—guilt and aspiration ran deep. Through their cathartic truth telling and aspirational visions of society, middlebrow novels such as *Gentleman's Agreement* offered the means for national regeneration. Such books did not result in immediate change in American attitudes toward Jews, but they did offer a realistic portrait of the beliefs, behaviors and sensibilities of an era—with suggestions for how they might be changed for the better. For this reason, when we look back at a novel like *Gentleman's Agreement*, it may be tempting to dismiss it as too dated and marked by the styles and thinking of its time for contemporary scholarly use. In fact, there is no better reason to reconsider *Gentleman's Agreement*.

1. Two excellent contemporary studies of the mid-twentieth century evolution of "Jews" and "Judaism" follow this pattern: Lila Corwin Berman's *Speaking of Jews: Rabbis, Intellectuals, and the Creation of an American Public Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), shows how "Jewish leaders—rabbis and intellectuals—sought to generate a public language of Jewishness, one that carried authority and was disseminated into an American public sphere" (2). One could argue that the public square has been at least as shaped by more popular works, such as *Gentleman's Agreement*. In a similar vein, Laura Levitt's article, "Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference: Revisiting Jewish Secularism," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 807–32, focuses on the journal, *Judaism: A Quarterly of Jewish Life and Thought*. Recent work on the significance of Leon Uris's *Exodus* marks a new direction, but these interpretations of popular fiction have yet to become more fully integrated with the scholarship on modern Jewish history. When Jewish Studies scholars do include literature, there is a penchant for the highbrow.
2. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 276.
3. Daniel Wickberg, "What Is the History of Sensibilities? On Cultural Histories, Old and New," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 3 (June 2007): 675.
4. Ibid., 684.
5. K. Healan Gaston recently described *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* as "the most influential work of its generation on American religion," and a "landmark in the evolution of an atmosphere of tolerance and inclusion in postwar America" (Gaston, "The Cold War Romance of Religious Authenticity: Will Herberg, William F. Buckley Jr., and the Rise of the New Right," *Journal of American History* 99, no. 4: 1134.
6. Laura Hobson, *Gentleman's Agreement* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947), 34. Unlike Herberg, the secular writer Laura Hobson's aim was not to encourage Jews, or any Americans, for that matter, to define their identity in religious terms. On a superficial level, Hobson shared Herberg's view of the United States as a country of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, but her preference was for the watered-down version of that religious pluralism—the very form Herberg lamented. Nonetheless, both writers, in their distinctive ways, heralded the tri-faith nation for which Herberg is given substantial credit among all postwar Jewish writers.
7. Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 257.
8. I am indebted to Jane P. Tompkin's *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), for this analysis of American fiction. Mashey Bernstein makes this point about *Gentleman's Agreement*. Bernstein writes that the novel "joins those few works of literature, for example, Zola's 'J'Accuse,' to which it bears a social sensibility, which can be said to have altered the social and moral fabric of a nation" (Mashey Bernstein, "Laura Hobson," in *Contemporary Jewish American Novelists: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Joel Shatzky and Michael Taub [Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997], 160).
9. For example, see Leonard Dinnerstein, *Uneasy at Home: Anti-Semitism and the American Jewish Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); and Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Susan A. Glenn and Naomi

B. Sokoloff's edited collection *Boundaries of Jewish Identity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010) does discuss the novel, but with little mention of Hobson.

10. George Custen, "Over 50 Years, a Landmark Loses Some of Its Luster," *New York Times*, November 16, 1997.
11. Ibid.
12. These films not only proved Hollywood's shifting response to anti-Semitism; they were also found to have marked effects on American attitudes toward anti-Semitism. A 1960 article, "Ethnic Prejudice and Susceptibility to Persuasion," in the *American Sociological Review* reported, "Of the several studies concerned with possible influence of motion pictures upon ethnic prejudice, most of them have found that motion pictures which urge tolerance toward minority groups and foreign nationalities do reduce the expression of ethnic prejudice" (Russell Middleton, "Ethnic Prejudice and Susceptibility to Persuasion," *American Sociological Review*, 25, no. 4 [October 1960]: 679).
13. Neal Gabler has noted the chasm that existed in 1930s Hollywood between more radical Jewish writers and the reactionary Jewish executives. The moguls' attitude "was Jews should not stick their necks out"—an argument that "enraged the anti-Nazi Jews among the writers" (Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How Jews Invented Hollywood* [New York: Anchor Books, 1988], 342). Thomas Doherty's measured observations about Hollywood's treatment of Nazis, in particular, bears repeating: "The motion picture industry was no better or worse than the rest of American culture in its failure of nerve and imagination, and often a good deal better in the exercise of both" (Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood and Hitler 1933–1939* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2013], 12).
14. Mrs. Axel G. Rosin to Laura Z. Hobson, February 25, 1947, Correspondence, Box 20, Columbia University.
15. J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, "Hollywood's Jewish Question," in *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 65. In 1939, with *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, Warner Bros. was the first Hollywood studio to release a blatantly anti-Nazi film. In *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2013), Ben Urwand argues that with Hitler's ascension to power in 1933, the major Hollywood studios tacitly agreed not to negatively portray Germany.
16. Dr. Ernst Simmel to Laura Z. Hobson, May 2, 1947, Correspondence, Box 20, Columbia University.
17. Laura Hobson, *Gentleman's Agreement*, 55.
18. Laura Hobson, *Laura Z: A Life—Years of Fulfillment* (New York: Donald I. Fine Inc., 1986), 160.
19. Ten years earlier, Jack Warner of Warner Brothers Studios had agreed that the word "Jew" would not be spoken in the studio's 1937 production *The Life of Emile Zola*, about the Dreyfus Affair. This concession came as a result of demands placed by Georg Gyssling, Hitler's consul in Los Angeles (see Urwand, *The Collaboration*).
20. The other anti-anti-Semitism movie of 1947, RKO's *Crossfire*, was also significant in portraying a shift in Hollywood's culture, but *Gentleman's Agreement* was the grander production, starring a bigger movie star: Gregory Peck.
21. See Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/*

Lowbrow (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and Jane Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

22. Melanie Ho, "Useful Fiction: Why Universities Need Middlebrow Literature" (PhD diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2008), 17.
23. Dorothy Fletcher to Laura Z. Hobson, March 7, 1947, Correspondence, Box 20, Columbia University.
24. William York Tindall, "The Sociological Best Seller," *College English* 9, no. 2 (November 1947): 55.
25. Lillian Smith, *Strange Fruit* (New York: Harcourt, 1944).
26. Tindall, "The Sociological Best Seller," 60.
27. As Matthew Frye Jacobson has observed, *Gentleman's Agreement* "offers a unique snapshot of the contest in the mid-twentieth century between a waning racial order that identified Jews as 'Semites' or 'Hebrews,' and the waxing order by which their status as 'Caucasians' would become more salient" (Matthew Frye Jacobson, "Becoming Caucasian: Vicissitudes of Whiteness in American Politics and Culture," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 8, no. 1: 93). Jacobson is particularly interested in the ways that *Gentleman's Agreement* evidenced racialized conceptions of Jewishness, yet the novel also bears witness, more generally, to a shifting sensibility toward Jews and anti-Semitism, in the wake of World War II.
28. Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), xvi.
29. This concern had been reignited in the mid-1930s when FDR's administration was attacked for "alleged subservience to Jews." As Richard Breitman and Allan Lichtman note, "Never before in U.S. history had such a small fragment of the population (about 4 percent) stirred such political strife" (*FDR and the Jews* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012], 75).
30. Stuart Svonkin, *Jews Against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 18.
31. October 18, 2013, phone conversation.
32. Hobson, *Gentleman's Agreement*, 133.
33. Joshua Loth Liebman, "Gentleman's Agreement" (Boston: Brotherhood of Temple Israel, 1948).
34. Philip T. Hartung quoted in Philip Smolovitz, "Purely Commentary," *Detroit Jewish News*, December 5, 1947, 9.
35. Philip Gleason describes the period between 1940 and the early 1960s as the era when "ethnicity was most recessive" in American identity (Philip Gleason, "Americans All: World War II and the Shaping of American Identity," *Review of Politics* 43, no. 4 [October 1981]: 483–518).
36. Jacob B. Agus, *Jewish Identity in An Age of Ideologies* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1978), 129.
37. Michael Kramer, "The Art of Assimilation: Ironies, Ambiguities, Aesthetics," in *Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 305.
38. Ibid., 306.

39. Matthew Frye Jacobson, "Becoming Caucasian: Vicissitudes of Whiteness in American Politics and Culture," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 8, no. 1 (2001): 95.
40. Richard Simon to Laura Z. Hobson, August 29, 1944. Scrapbook, LKZH Papers, Box 21, Columbia University.
41. Hobson, *Gentleman's Agreement*, 63.
42. Ibid., 242.
43. Ibid., 243.
44. Matthew S. Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press), 9.
45. See Gordon Hutner, *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). Hutner's focus is wider than the social protest novel; he examines modern American realist fiction "in its ascendant years, the middle decades of the twentieth century" (2).
46. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, xi.
47. H. S. Linfield, "The Jewish Population of the United States," *American Jewish Year Book* 46 (1944–1945): 492.
48. This method of responding to anti-Semitism came under fire by several rabbis who gave sermons on *Gentleman's Agreement* during the 1940s, inspiring their own efforts to educate Americans about the distinctiveness of Judaism.
49. Stegner's book was similar to *A Nation of Nations* (1945), by the journalist Louis Adamic, which also sought to display America's diversity and unity at a time when prejudice continued to smolder.
50. Wallace Stegner and the Editors of *Look*, *One Nation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1945), 3.
51. In the debate over intervention in World War II, isolationists focused on Jews as threats to "true Americanism." Lynne Olson writes that "such misplaced nativism had been fueled in large part by the massive social and economic upheaval that sent shock waves through America in the 1920s and 1930s" (*Those Angry Days: Roosevelt, Lindbergh, and America's Fight Over World War II, 1939–1941* [New York: Random House, 2012], 238).
52. Peter Novick reminds us that from early 1933 to late 1942, "Jews were quite naturally seen as among, but by no means as the singled-out victims of the Nazi regime. This was the all-but-universal perception of American gentiles; it was the perception of many American Jews as well" (*The Holocaust in American Life* [New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999], 21).
53. Wallace Stegner, *One Nation*, 305.
54. Hobson, *Gentleman's Agreement*, 33.
55. Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 12.
56. Ibid.
57. Jacobson writes, "The thing that makes anti-Semitism an 'easier business' is Hobson's own willful act of re-racialization, her decision to challenge the perceived 'difference' dividing Anglo-Saxon from Hebrew while leaving intact that which divides 'Caucasian' from 'Negroid' from Mongoloid. What makes anti-Semitism an easier business, in short, is Hobson's endorsement of the color-line" (Matthew Frye Jacobson, "Becoming Caucasian," 95).
58. Hobson, *Gentleman's Agreement*, 184.

59. Diana Trilling's 1947 *Commentary* review of *Gentleman's Agreement* similarly found fault with it for obliterating differences even between Jews: "There are certainly no religious Jews in her section of American society, and there are no Jews to whom historical or cultural criteria have any meaning" (Diana Trilling, "Americans Without Distinction," *Commentary*, March, 1947, 290).
60. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, xviii.
61. Joshua Lambert e-mail to author, March 7, 2013.
62. Vivian Gornick, "Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and the End of the Jew as Metaphor," Julia S. Phelps Annual Lecture in Art and the Humanities, February 4, 2008.
63. Also central to this opposition between Hobson and *Commentary* was the fact that the magazine was concerned to promote Jewish identity, and in the 1940s, Hobson had little interest in this.
64. Elliot Cohen letter to Laura Z. Hobson, November 29, 1946. LKZHCU, Box 21 folder 24. Cohen, born in 1899, was actually just one year older than Hobson.
65. Laura Z. Hobson letter to Elliot E. Cohen, December 7, 1948. LKZHCU, Box 21 folder 24.
66. Ibid.
67. In these years, according to Nathan Abrams, *Commentary* embodied the determination of its editor, Cohen, to launch postwar American Jews in a new direction, one characterized by confidence and not anxious defensiveness ("A Significant Journal of Jewish Opinion?: The Jewishness of Commentary Magazine," *American Jewish Archives Journal* 55, no. 1 [2003]: 45). In some ways, we can understand these objectives as springing from Cohen's desire to define *Commentary* in opposition to what it had been, up until that moment.
68. As a point of comparison, *Gentleman's Agreement* sold 100,000 copies on its first day of publication; *Commentary*, according to Nathan Abrams, had a subscription base of 60,000 at its high point.
69. Laura Mount, "The Perfect Man," *The New Yorker*, April 23, 1932, 21.
70. Hobson, *Laura Z*, 56.
71. To contemporary readers, Hobson's autobiography appears to be an archetypal one of "passing," and she did draw parallels between her own life and that of her protagonist Phil Green, who pretends to be Jewish. In the summer of 1944, Hobson wrote to journalist Dorothy Thompson about her idea for a gentile protagonist who passes as a Jew: "It *would* be a strange, schizophrenic situation to write about, and one that I feel in many ways is my own. For anybody who is Jewish by birth and not Jewish in up-bringing or religion or environment for all the formative decades of one's life becomes a sort of schizo on the subject when the world goes as anti-semitic [*sic*] as it has been in the last decade."
72. Hobson declined to accept the National Jewish Book Award for *Gentleman's Agreement*—a decision she came to regret—because she was uncomfortable having her book recognized as a "Jewish novel," when she viewed it as a "book about at American problem of social interest to Jewish people" (Hobson, *Laura Z*, 78).
73. Lynne Olson explains that this bigotry formed the backdrop to American debates over intervention (*Those Angry Days*, 380).
74. Hutner, *What America Read*, 249.
75. Hobson, *Gentleman's Agreement*, 133.

76. Other novels of that decade on the theme of anti-Semitism included Gwethalyn Graham's *Between Earth and High Heaven* (1944), Arthur Miller's *Focus* (1945), Josephine Lawrence's *Let Us Consider One Another* (1945), Jo Sinclair's *Wasteland* (1946), Arthur Koestler's *Thieves in the Night* (1946), Saul Bellow's *The Victim* (1947), Andrew Bernstein's *Home Is the Hunted* (1947), Norman Katkov's *Eagle at My Eyes* (1948), Merle Miller's *That Winter* (1948), Mary Jane Ward's *The Professor's Umbrella* (1948), Burke Davis's *Whisper My Name* (1949), and the short stories of Irwin Shaw. Unique in its focus on the anti-Semitism of educated, liberal, "decent Americans" (reviewers took note of Hobson's avoidance of the fringe, "crackpot" segments of society), *Gentleman's Agreement* became the most popular book of this genre (although Sinclair's *Wasteland* received more praise as a work of literature) and the only one to be made into a film during the 1940s.
77. Irwin Shaw, "Select Clientele," *The New Yorker*, August 17, 1940, 16.
78. Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 165.
79. Irwin Shaw, "Select Clientele," 16.
80. Ibid.
81. These friends included Hobson's publisher, Richard Simon; her editor at Simon & Schuster, Lee Wright; *Saturday Review* editor Norman Cousins; journalist Dorothy Thompson; and the founder of the Book-of-the-Month Club, Harry Scherman, and his wife, Bernadine.
82. "U.S. at War," *Time*, February 14, 1944.
83. Hobson, *Laura Z*, 329.
84. After her career in advertising, during the 1920s, Hobson became a reporter for the *New York Post* and then joined the staff of Luce Publications. Her first short story was published in 1935, after which Hobson published several short stories in *Cosmopolitan, Collier's,* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. In her forties, and with two young sons to support, Hobson devoted herself to writing full-time.
85. Lee Wright to Laura Z. Hobson, August 30, 1944, Scrapbook, LKZH Papers, oversize Box 1, Columbia University.
86. Hobson's son remembers that Jackie and Rachel Robinson were among the Simons' guests at their Stamford summer home. Christopher Z. Hobson e-mail to the author, June 7, 2013.
87. Richard Simon to Laura Z. Hobson, August 29, 1944, Scrapbook, LKZH Papers, Box 21, Columbia University.
88. Dorothy Thompson to Laura Z. Hobson, August 25, 1944, Scrapbook, LKZH Papers, Box 21, Columbia University.
89. Laura Z. Hobson to Dorothy Thompson, August 30, 1944, Scrapbook, LKZH Papers, Box 21, Columbia University.
90. Laura Z. Hobson to Richard Simon, October 18, 1944, Scrapbook, LKZH Papers, Box 21, Columbia University.
91. Richard Simon to Laura Z. Hobson, September 26, 1944, Scrapbook, LKZH Papers, Box 21, Columbia University.
92. Carroll Whedon to Laura Z. Hobson, September 12, 1944, Scrapbook, LKZH Papers, Box 21, Columbia University.
93. Here I draw on Tompkin's theory of exceptional American literature (Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, xvi).