Working-class Jews: A Poetics of American Assimilation

Panel Discussion | Multiple Literary Genres Craft & Criticism

For decades, the struggle of American identity has played out in the literature of Jewish immigration. Collisions of class and culture, personal and economic sacrifices made for survival. What does it mean to forge this identity on the page? How do we continue telling these familiar yet necessary stories? Do we resist or embrace pressures to assimilate? In this conversation, panelists of varying genres, and varying generations from the Old Country, discuss writing the Jewish experience.

Panelists & Moderator:


Dan Alter’s poems and reviews have been published in Field, Fourteen Hills, Pank, Zyzzyva, and elsewhere. His first collection, My Little Book of Exiles, won the 2022 Cowan Writer’s Prize for Poetry. His second collection, Hills Full of Holes, will be published by Fernwood Press in 2025. He lives with his wife and daughter in Berkeley and makes his living as an IBEW electrician.

Kim Brooks, a graduate of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, is the author of Small Animals (Flatiron Books, 2018)—an NPR Best Book of the Year, described by the National Book Review as “an impassioned, smart work of social criticism”—as well as a novel, The Houseguest (Counterpoint Press, 2016).

Jeffrey Wolf is a fiction writer from Chicago. His work has appeared in Prairie Schooner, Tupelo Quarterly, Bat City Review, Jewish Fiction, and elsewhere. He teaches at Columbia College Chicago and is currently working on his debut manuscript.
Opening Remarks:

What does it mean to be working-class? What does it mean to be Jewish? How does the combination of these identities create a seemingly paradoxical liminal space of belonging that is distinct yet also recognizable across the legacy immigrant experience?

In America, the status of “working-class Jew” still applies to thousands, though it was once much more common, was perhaps a quintessential component of the American Dream mythology in the early and middle parts of the last century. That story of rags to riches and social aspiration. A myth that, for many, never fulfilled its promise, and, for many others, required a familiar Faustian bargain: to concertedly give up what made one Jewish.

As Jewish writers today, we live varying distances from both a working-class lifestyle and active assimilation. Yet no matter how far, the echoes of these processes and identities still exist—in our personalities, in the generational scars we carry—and they find their way into our work.

Jewish culture—built from its earliest days not only around literature but literature of exile and diaspora—has always been particularly well equipped to deal with that space of existing between worlds, of forging an identity steeped in preservation, survival, and uncomfortable bargains. Ours is just the latest wrinkle in a conversation that’s been going on for centuries. But it’s one that remains relevant because it speaks, as all great literature does, to that aspect of existence for which the human power of expression will always feel inadequate.

Today, we’ll try to expound on this subject as best we can: why we write it, how we write it, and how we can’t help but write it.

Questions for Discussion:

1) Each panelist here has a unique connection to “working-class Jewish” identities and experiences. Rather than trying to define this descriptor, I want to invite each panelist to describe their own connection to it—both what part this identity plays in their own personal story and how it affects their writing. What does working-class Jewishness mean to you?

2) As we’ve already touched on, this topic is inherently paradoxical, full of dual and dueling identities. In that landscape, questions of home and belonging can be fraught. In today’s America, working-class occupations are not a friendly place for Jews. Even decades ago, many of my ancestors gave up parts of their Jewishness to become more “authentic” working-class Americans. At the same time, there is this notion that you must aspire beyond the working class to be “authentically” Jewish.
So I’m wondering if each panelist could speak to their own experiences with this contradiction. Where do you feel “at home” in Jewishness, and how does that show up in your writing? Or is it the contradiction itself, the sense of being an outsider in your own skin, that gives voice to your work?

3) Let’s direct our attention to craft. How does this identity come forward in the language itself—whether that’s through form, structure, cadence, aspects of oral storytelling, a diction that combines blue-collar contractions and old-world Yiddish, etc.? Whether in your work or in work you admire, how do you see a “working-class Jewish” identity expressed through craft? What is a working-class Jewish “voice”?

4) One theme that often cut across Jewish-American experiences, particularly among working-class and middle-class Jews, is an inherited sense of precarity—the feeling that even when all seems to be going well, things can fall apart at any moment. It’s not a worldview that’s particularly conducive to inner-peace—but it can be quite conducive to literature, creating a sense of tension or “stakes.” Can you talk a little about how a cultural sense of precarity—or what some might call intergenerational trauma—has impacted your writing or your writing life?

5) What twentieth-century, Jewish-American writers have influenced you most? Whom do you think are the most relevant for writers today?

6) There’s a certain amount privilege that comes with being an artist, especially if you come from a working-class background. All of us, to a certain extent, had ancestors who sacrificed their dreams so their kids or grandkids could get an education and attain financial security. In this context, choosing to become an artist can feel like a slap in the face. (And even if our ancestors wouldn’t want us to feel this way, we’re saddled with the guilt.) How do we, as writers, reconcile this? How do we give ourselves the ability to write—and to simultaneously embrace or embody the working-class identity—without feeling like failures or frauds?

**Panelist Excerpts:**

Each panelist will read a two- to five-minute excerpt of their work relevant to the panel theme. Most panelist have elected to read new and/or unpublished work; for this reason, excerpts will not be reprinted or distributed.

**We will reserve the final 10 minutes for audience Q&A.**
Further Reading:

**POETRY**

**FICTION**
Berriault, Gina. *Women in Their Beds: New and Selected Stories*. Washington:
Howland, Bette. Hughes, Brigid, Ed. *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage: The
    1997.
    --. *Last Car Over the Sagamore Bridge: Stories*. New York: Little, Brown and

**NONFICTION**

**ARTWORK**