Josh Lambert describes “a little experiment” that he does with his Jewish literature classes: “I ask them to take out a piece of paper and a pen or pencil…. I say, ‘Draw a Jew.’…. One of my favorite questions to ask first is this: ‘How many of you drew a woman?’ (Usually, it’s at most one or two…)” (paras.1-3). Since Lambert notes that “usually, it’s at most one or two,” the students’ inability to imagine a woman inhabiting the category “Jew” is worth dwelling upon. Why is it Jewish American women are invisible, inaudible, and insufficiently read? This essay proposes a curriculum that engages students to think broadly and fluidly about Jewish American women authors and the issues and themes in their fiction. Previous pedagogical essays on Jewish American women’s writing include two in sociology/women’s studies on identities (see Friedman and Rosenberg; Sigalow), Sheila Jelen’s in Shofar on Hebrew and Yiddish texts, and a special issue in MELUS 37:2 (Summer 2012) that include women’s literature but without gender as a focus. The aim of this essay, by contrast, is to introduce teachers of American literature to an array of texts written by American Jewish women that will engage critical reading, thinking and writing by contemporary college undergraduates.

Two questions must be dealt with right away. First, how does one justify treating Jewish American women’s literature in isolation? Second, how does one challenge the expectations of what such a course entails? As Lambert demonstrated from his informal survey, Jewish women writers are doubly invisible, to Jewish literature as women and to
women’s literature as Jews. Yet, scholars like Ann Shapiro call upon “Jewish feminists to make sure that [Jewish] women’s literature is included in the Jewish American canon” (78). A pragmatic as well as ideological strategy for responding to the issue of treating women’s literature in isolation is to turn the question itself into one the course seeks to problematize. Ask students: How should we place Jewish American women writers within a “female literary tradition” or an American one or a Jewish one? How does the term “tradition” itself resonate for Jewish American women? How does “Jewish” religious or community membership influence women authors’ representations of gender, nationality, class, sexual orientation and ethnicity? What are the problems of and justifications for grouping these writings together? Rather than think of JAWW as isolating, reductive or selective course, instructors can focus on the advantages of an intersectional approach to these texts found in overlapping questions of Jewishness and gender, racial/ethnic, queer and religious feminist identities.²

On an ideal syllabus of a JAWW course one challenges the “expected narrative” by adopting unexpected stories about unexpected issues and through constant, active questioning of preconceptions. Professors and students must do the work of “unlearning” together to dislodge preconceived and erroneous ideas (Tinberg and Weisberger 103-7). As Lambert’s initial description of his class exercise demonstrated above, despite being unfamiliar with the writers they will encounter, students will nonetheless arrive with preconceived ideas instructors will want to help them question. These preconceptions derive from no knowledge of Jewish women’s lives or from a reductive knowledge that, in the words of Evelyn Torton Beck, “often focus[es] exclusively on the patriarchal aspects of the Jewish religion, fail[s] to mention feminist transformations of Judaism, and
fail[s] to speak of the diversity [of] Jewish Women…” (187). This comment reinforces
the need to introduce students to institutions such as the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute (for
the Study of Jewish Women), the Jewish Women’s Archive and JOFA, the Jewish
Orthodox Feminist Alliance, as well as the need to diversify the conventional narrative of
Eastern European Orthodox male immigration to America by including “un-thought-of
Jews” recounting unforeseen stories.

The JAWW course I teach is aimed at an undergraduate, generalist audience, admitted with the prerequisite of either an introduction to the study of literature, or
gender, sexuality and women’s studies or religious studies. This experience has taught
me to assume no prior knowledge, to pose the big theoretical questions immediately, and
to bring some coherence to the course’s organization. To explore the diverse fiction
produced by American Jewish women within the constraints of a ten-week term, I teach
four sections with about two novels each (interspersed with a few, select short stories),
and I limit myself to the long twentieth century. The course does not remain static
between offerings but rather, constantly changes.³

Each time I offer it I invite pre-enrolled students to respond to a questionnaire
soliciting information about their interests and preferences, including a list of titles I am
considering. In this way, I accomplish three things. First, the students invest in the
ownership of the class. Second, I get a sense for the enrollees’ interests before placing
final book orders. Third, students are primed to think about how many texts there are to
choose from, and (one hopes) how appealing they are. Provided a selection of novels
within a certain rubric, such as, for example, novels by Iranian-American Jewish women,
those students whose choice was not selected by the majority to be read by the entire
class still have the opportunity to do the extra reading themselves and give the class a comparative book report. Each presenter links an interpretation of her outside reading to the book with which the class is familiar, which also helps her to prepare a comparison essay.

The course itself is divided into four sections that survey the issues and themes prevalent in Jewish Women’s writing: (1) Have we Arrived or Were We Already Here? (Wolf; Antin, Yezierska or Paley short stories; Sinclair; Olsen and Orringer short stories); (2) “Historical Fiction/ Fictions of History” (Horn, Diamant); (3) “Americans on/in Israel” (Kadish, King) and (4) Jewish American “Otherness”/ Other Jewish Americans (Obejas, Sofer). Professors may wish to include genres besides fiction (drama, poetry, memoir, or graphic novel) within these general categories or in a separate, generic one; they also may decide “Holocaust” is its own category. Given the pervasiveness of the Holocaust in the Jewish imagination, however, its shadow tends to stretch over a great many postwar texts and so I usually treat it obliquely.

The first novel in “Have we Arrived or Were We Already Here?” explodes stereotypes. In Other Things Being Equal [1892], California writer Emma Wolf sets her book in 1880s San Francisco and focuses on intermarriage. Barbara Cantalupo’s 2002 critical edition offers abundant surrounding materials to situate Wolf both in the Jewish community of 19th-century San Francisco and in the American publishing world of the period. Wolf’s novel is a good place to start because it challenges preconceptions of a monolithic Jewish culture, since it is inhabited by Jews who are neither Orthodox, nor Eastern-European, Yiddish-speaking, impoverished, New Yorkers, nor partake of any aspect of the “expected narrative” aside from the intermarriage debate, a topic that
remains timely. Although I include subsequent texts that contain many of these conventional elements, beginning the course with Californian, nineteenth-century Jews interacting on equal footing with their Christian neighbors effectively shatters assumptions. Therefore, in terms of the criteria for inclusion, Wolf’s novel is unexpected and her culturally Jewish world can balance well with Orthodox worlds in other texts to follow.4

This first section of the syllabus features books also set in other unexpected American cities: San Francisco, Boston, and Cleveland. After Wolf, one may read a short memoir by Mary Antin (*From Plotzk to Boston* [1894]), or Antin’s short story, “Malinke’s Atonement,” about a young Eastern European Jewish small town girl and her crisis of faith. When teaching these and other short stories complementing the latter, such as Anzia Yezierska’s “The Fat of the Land” or Grace Paley’s “The Loudest Voice,” instructors can stress how the authors contrast Yiddish-inflected syntax and sound against the clear American, unmarked sound of the narrator’s point of view. While these short selections partake of the more conventional narrative this course design contests, there can be no basis for argument if students read nothing canonical. Balancing pro- and contra-tradition (with Wolf) permits teachers to bring a meta-discussion into the classroom regarding the contested histories of the Jews that ignore so many identity positions.

I follow Wolf with Jo Sinclair’s (the pseudonym for Ruth Seid) *The Changelings*, set in Cleveland in 1950s, which implicitly thematizes queer issues while overtly confronting intermarriage, generational conflict, and the racial prejudice perpetrated by recent immigrants, both Jews and Italians, who want to “become real Americans.” I read
Sinclair alongside two short stories that, as a potential module on Jewish American women’s depictions of mid-century relations with African-Americans, again counters expected narratives. With *The Changelings* (1955), we read “O Yes” (1956) by Tillie Olsen, and “Stations of the Cross” (2003), an historical fiction by Julie Orringer, all of which feature complex relationships between Blacks and Jews. Sinclair, in tandem with Olsen and Orringer, are all Jewish women authors who describe female characters asking intersectional ethical questions about racial, religious and gender prejudice. This constellation of texts meets the criteria of “unexpected” and offers a range of perspectives with which to identify. Whether or not the non-African-American family in Olsen’s story is marked as Jewish forms a wonderful subject for discussion. For Jewish American women writers “tradition can no longer be assumed as a framework,” such that their fiction is populated by “protagonists [who] must define the terms of their Jewishness” (Burstein 9, 10). These three texts set up a thematic thread that continues in other parts of the syllabus, inviting potential comparative discussions or assignments: Wolf, Sinclair, and Orringer on intermarriage; Sinclair, Olsen, Orringer, Horn and Obejas on prejudice, horizontal oppression or sexual orientation.

Subsequent course sections, “Fictions of History,” “Americans and Israel,” and “Jewish American +s,” concentrate on issues such as intersecting nationalities, ethnicities and patriotisms; gendered relations toward traditional Judaism; Jewish heteronormativity; crypto-Judaism, and non-Ashkenazi American immigrants. Following Sinclair, Dara Horn’s third novel, *All Other Nights* (2010), is an historical fiction about Jewish participation on both sides of the American Civil War. Despite an anti-chronological movement on the syllabus, the text has the advantages of reinforcing the
notion that Jews inhabited America prior to 1880s Eastern European immigration, and continuing a thematic link to multiple axes of inequality by presenting Jewish slaveholders celebrating Passover waited on by black servants. Anita Diamant’s *Day After Night*, about British incarceration of new Holocaust-survivor arrivals in 1945-1948 Mandate Palestine, completes this section. The novels by Horn and Diamant are lesser known within each author’s corpus and portray little-discussed historical events that will surprise readers. Other more well-known “fictions of history” that both strike a religious balance and are multifocal also have a critical presence that may facilitate a research-oriented writing assignment: for example, Diamant’s *The Red Tent*, Horn’s *In the Image*, Rebecca Goldstein’s *Mazel*, and Allegra Goodman’s *Katterskill Falls*.5

The syllabus category “Americans and Israel” contains Ruchama King and Rachel Kadish, with novels set in Israel, religious and secular respectively. King’s *Seven Blessings* is a multifocal text, generally positive in its depiction of religion, that also contains a Holocaust survivor, as does Rachel Kadish’s secular *From a Sealed Room*, which discusses Gulf War trauma and features an American college student abroad with whom students identify. Other effective college-student-in-Israel, multifocal novels are Joan Leegant’s politically complex *Wherever You Go* and Jessamyn Hope’s Marxist-Kibbutz setting *Safekeeping*.

The last category grouping “Jewish American ‘Other/ness’” features Cuban-American Achy Obejas and Iranian-American Dalia Sofer and again provides writing that dislodges preconceptions and the conventional narratives by “unexpected Jews,” here represented by Sofer and Obejas. Gina Nahai could substitute for Sofer; however, Obejas’s *Days of Awe* is particularly valuable because it combines immigrant dislocation,
bisexual orientation, and a desire to unearth the author’s Jewishness. Other texts could include works about or by Jews-by-choice, such as Geraldine Brooks, whose *People of the Book* is also a multifocal historical fiction of Sephardim. “Other/ness” may also include stories about Mizrahim (Nomi Eve’s *Henna House* about Yemen), American-Russian-Jewish immigrants (Anya Ulinich’ *Petropolis*), or LGBTQ+ characters (in Elana Dykewomon’s *Beyond the Pale* or Lilian Nattel’s *The River Midnight*). Of course all these “categories” may intersect, as with Sinclair and Obejas discussed above. Gender-inflected issues to consider for discussion throughout the term include hetero-normative pressure, intermarriage, purity laws, menstruation, childbearing and infertility, modesty, intra-familial relations, women’s education (sacred and secular), traditional women’s *mitzvot* or obligations (to bake Sabbath bread, light Sabbath candles, and to observe ritual immersion) and exemptions (praying with phylacteries, studying Talmud, reciting the mourner’s prayer, singing or praying aloud).

A course exclusively in Jewish American women’s literature offers unexpected choices of texts, providing nuanced rather than one-note depictions. Instructors may choose from a wide variety of complex, multifocal narratives that reward classroom study, create a fulfilling, intersectional class that dislodges preconceptions and challenges expectations.
Notes

1 On Jewish women’s invisibility see Peskowitz, Boyarin, and Oksman.

2 “Intersectionality” originally discussed the multiple oppressions of gender, race and class; the concept has broadened to include ethnicity, sexuality, ability and religion. Yet Jewish women’s experience continues to be excluded, a fact which this essay and the course it describes seeks to remedy. For Jewish intersectionality in practice, see Brettschneider and Hahn Tapper.

3 See Doyle for learner-centered teaching, esp. chapters 5 and 6.

4 Lori Harrison-Kahan promotes Wolf’s novels as offering “alternatives to the ghetto genre” (5).

5 For criticism see Meyers, Lewin, Zierler, Shapiro.

6 On Obejas see Kandiyoti, Socolovsky, and Wirth-Nesher; in relation to Sofer and Nahai see the special issue on Iranian Jewish women in Nashim 2009 and Sarshar; on Brooks see Kondali; in relation to Eve, see special issue on Yemenite Jewish women in Nashim 2006; on Ulinich see Senderovich; on Nattel see Burstein 2001; on Sinclair see Zierler.

7 For background on these issues see Adler, Alpert and Biale. To introduce traditional religious issues through fiction, use Anton, King or Brafman (all of which clearly explicate gender issues related to of Orthodoxy, and balance pro and con).
Works Cited


---. *The Luminous Heart of Jonah S* Akashic, 2014.


Take a moment and picture an image of a rapist. Without a doubt, you are thinking about a man. Given our pervasive cultural understanding that perpetrators of sexual violence are nearly always men, this makes sense. But this assumption belies the reality, revealed in our study of large-scale federal agency surveys, that women are also often perpetrators of sexual victimization. In 2014, we published a study on the sexual victimization of men, finding that men were much more likely to be victims of sexual abuse than was thought. To understand who was committing the abuse, we next analyzed four Women's underachievement in maths may not be due to their poor self-image in the subject, a new report suggests. Researcher Dr. Gijsbert Stoet at the University. The report has done well to challenge the myths behind womenâ€™s underachievement in schools, but more work still needs to be done to address the problem of womenâ€™s lack of achievement in the workplace. At least in the spheres closely related to science and engineering. 12. Dr. Gijsbert Stoet claims that women do worse than men at maths because they â€¦ 13) The authorâ€™s expectations about women in science have not come true. D) Britain has fewer women engineers than other European countries. 15. According to the author, social conditioning taking place in Britain implies that â€¦ While womenâ€™s experiences during the Holocaust were not entirely different from those of men, it would be false and misleading to assert that they were identical. There were many instances in which an individualâ€™s ordeal was shaped by his or her gender and it is only by understanding what was unique to womenâ€”and what was unique to menâ€”that we can provide a complete account of what occurred. Â While womenâ€™s experiences during the Holocaust were not entirely different from those of men, it would be false and misleading to assert that they were identical. There were many instances in which an individualâ€™s ordeal was shaped by his or her gender and it is only by