



Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>

*Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.*

to do with the fact that it “does not *play* with categories—it obfuscates them, which is not the same thing” (169). As Suleiman caustically observes, “it would seem that a false memoir does not, by virtue of its falsity, automatically convert into fiction. More often than not, it converts into oblivion” (170).

Suleiman’s two main case studies in her discussion of “the 1.5 generation” are the authors Georges Perec and Raymond Federman, who both, on her account, grapple with the vexed issue of “how to say it while not saying, or while saying in pieces” (206). The literary technique she consequently identifies as being “emblematic” of their “experimental writing about childhood trauma” is that of “preterition.” By this she means a “paradoxical combination of ‘saying while not saying’” (208), a “self-contradictory figure of approach and avoidance, affirmation and negation, amnesia and anamnesis” (206) that comes with “its attendant figures of suspension, postponement, digression, juxtaposition, and metacommentary” (208).

The short final chapter, “Amnesia and Amnesty: Reflections on Forgetting and Forgiving,” cites as a possible way forward the approach of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, with its insistence that amnesty should be dependent on disclosure (rather than “artificial forgetting”) but does not presuppose forgiveness (226–27). Above all else, Suleiman pleads for a refusal of “tidiness” and “the temptations of closure,” a lead she herself follows “by not concluding; merely stopping, here” (232).

*Lars Fischer*

Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2007. 411 pp. ISBN 978-0-52024-961-5, \$39.95.

This is a truly remarkable book—as are the story of its making and the world that inspired it. Through descriptions, anecdotes, sketches, and paintings, Mayer Kirshenblatt recreates the daily life and culture of a small Jewish city in Poland before the Holocaust. It is a world remarkable in part because of its complete destruction by the Nazis, but also because of the richness of its characters and customs. “What I’m trying to say,” Kirshenblatt explains, “is ‘Hey! There was a big world out there before the Holocaust. There was a rich cultural life in Poland as I knew it’” (353). He fulfills his mission with insight, affection, and vibrancy.

Mayer Kirshenblatt, nicknamed Mayer July or Crazy Mayer, from the notion that the July heat caused craziness, was born in Apt, the Yiddish name for Opatów. Located in south-central Poland, near the city of Kielce, Apt had a

mixed population of Jews and Christians, but the majority was Jewish. Kirshenblatt lived there from his birth in 1916 until his emigration to Canada in 1934. The young Kirshenblatt was partially assimilated and considered himself a Polish Jew; he attended Polish public school, spoke Polish well, knew the national literature, and regarded himself as a patriot. His family was of the middle class, perhaps living above the average level, until his father's leather shop failed in 1928. This impelled the elder Kirshenblatt to emigrate, alone, to Canada. Though Kirshenblatt does not recount any anti-Semitic incidents, the economic climate in interwar Poland, which increasingly hampered Jewish livelihoods, led him, at age sixteen, to conclude that Poland held no future for him. As soon as he could, he joined his father in Canada.

There, in Toronto, he ran a paint and wallpaper store for several decades. The book would never have come about without the efforts and encouragement of his wife and, especially, his daughter. The latter, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, is a folklorist, now teaching at New York University. She began interviewing her father in 1967, and over the next forty years, she drew out her father's childhood memories of Apt. At the urging of his family, Kirshenblatt began to paint his memories in 1990, at the age of 73. The result: more than 200 paintings illustrating every aspect that he could recall, from his mother's kitchen to the market, from the local chimney sweep to the town's kleptomaniac, from a Purim celebration to a Christian funeral. The scenes come from his memory, or, in a few cases—such as the execution of his father's family by the Nazis in 1942—his imagination. In the style of naive or folk art, this self-taught painter revives the lost world of Apt, bringing his childhood memories to vibrant life.

Father and daughter have combined Kirshenblatt's tales and paintings in this beautifully produced volume. It is not a conventional autobiography. Though present in many of the stories and even paintings (as a small boy dressed in blue), Kirshenblatt does not make himself the center of the book. Instead, he focuses on the city of Apt and the life within it. While we get to know the young Kirshenblatt well, we also come to know the town leaders and tradesmen, the local characters and eccentrics. We learn also about their daily routines: how they bathed, what they ate, what work they performed, and where they spent their free time. This book is a veritable encyclopedia of life in a small, mostly Jewish, city in prewar Poland. A keen observer, Kirshenblatt has tremendous curiosity and power of recall. He elucidates, with precise illustrations, how to make such things as a tin whistle, a brush, a willow shofar, and shoes—practically lost handicrafts. He tells us how to bind a book, and shows us how a typical stove was constructed and used. Calling himself "a storehouse of memories," he details how the butcher slaughtered

animals, how families washed dead bodies, and how one would retrieve stolen laundry from the local mafia. These explanations fit well into his episodic style. Rather than presenting a long narrative, Kirshenblatt offers descriptions, character sketches, and anecdotes, moving first from the town—its landmarks, institutions, and inhabitants—to his family. Only then does he recount his youth in Apt, and, finally, his departure. Witty and sharp, he recalls his childish pranks and punishments, as well as the drudgery of public school, and religious classes and services.

At times the book is refreshingly humorous and bawdy, as when Kirshenblatt recounts how his cousin came to be called Malkele Shit, or divulges his first sexual encounter. He not only tells us about the rabbis and teachers, but about the local prostitutes and heavy drinkers. It is important to note that Kirshenblatt does not present Apt through rose-colored glasses. We also see the poverty and despair, the survival strategies of those individuals with little opportunity or resources.

This is a truly valuable creation—informative, colorful, moving, funny, and at times, sad. The Nazis murdered almost the entire Jewish population of Apt. Kirshenblatt lost both grandmothers, two of his mother's five siblings, eight of his father's siblings, and all of their families in the Holocaust. When he returned to Poland for the first time in 1990, he found that no trace of Jewish life remained in his hometown. With this book, Kirshenblatt restores and celebrates the life and culture that characterized prewar Apt, ensuring that others can share some part of it, long after he and the other surviving inhabitants have passed away.

*Katherine R. Jolluck*

Jing M. Wang. *When "I" Was Born: Women's Autobiography in Modern China*. Wisconsin Studies in Autobiography. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2008. 272 pp. ISBN 978-0-299-22510-0, \$65.00.

*When "I" Was Born* is a substantive inter-disciplinary study of Chinese women's autobiographies published in the late 1920s and mid-1940s. Combing through extensive sources from classical Chinese historiography to literary works and women's studies to contextualize her reading of these autobiographies, Jing Wang argues that these works should be seen as a genre of life writing, as defined by the author's intent and signature. She reconstructs the historical progression of women's life narratives, from male-authored official biographical traditions in pre-modern China to self-writing in the interwar years, when a large number of women wrote their life stories in response to the cultural and literary stimulus propelled by the May 4<sup>th</sup> movement in 1919.