

***Memory Work: The Second Generation.*** By Nina Fischer. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. 262. US\$ 95.00 hardcover.

Nina Fischer analyzes the memory work of children of Holocaust survivors as presented in published life writings and fictional texts. She identifies a number of specific features in the writing of the Second Generation, and she traces those in thematically organized chapters. The great value of her book is that it goes beyond a descriptive listing of themes and leitmotifs and, instead, demonstrates how the children of survivors interact with their parents' experiences and stories over time. As opposed to a videotaped or otherwise archived testimony of a survivor, the literary texts of children of survivors are not merely receptacles for their parents' stories but a medium through which they work with, remediate and re-purpose the past. Actively making sense of, and bringing perspective to, their experiences of having grown up in the intimate settings of a survivor family, the Second Generation engages in what Fischer aptly calls "memory work," which she defines as an "individual's conscious voluntary, and methodical interrogation of the past within collective frameworks" (2). She focuses on familial settings, because it is there that most of the memory work of the Second Generation takes place.

Those who witness survivor testimony occasionally can safely return to a world untainted by calamity. Children of survivors do not have this option. Traumatic memories in their families are present in the intimate rhythms of everyday life, accentuated at special occasions (like *yahrzeit* or holy days), symbolically condensed in names and objects, and sometimes they erupted in the form of eccentric behavior. Coming to terms with their parents' past through writing is, according to Fischer, a relational task. It is an attempt at making sense of childhood experiences and, at the same time, at gaining adult perspectives on their parents—through the venues of family biography, historical knowledge, psychological interpretation, preservation of their parents' voice (from interviews to retrieved letters), physical visits to the lost homes in Europe, and descriptions of their families post-1945 migrant status.

Fischer suggests that the terms "trans-generational life-writing" (Victoria Stewart) or "relational life writing" (John Eakin) well describe the literary oeuvre produced by the Second Generation. The goal of such relational memory work is to turn their parents' experiences into a "usable past"

(3), a past to which children of survivors are no longer exposed as passive recipients (in childhood) but one that can be actively incorporated into their adult lives. “Not the imagination, only memory work can ultimately change the author’s relationship to the past...by finding elements of a usable past” (7). Helen Epstein’s vivid description of her childhood around the dinner table may serve as an example. Her father, hunched down at the table and swallowing his food as quickly as he could, would fly into a rage when his children refused to eat or did not eat enough. Helen’s vivid childhood memories speak of a child trying to make sense of the unbearable tensions around mealtimes, observing her father’s rage and her mother’s depression without comprehension. The past was present at every meal, even though her father’s starvation during the Holocaust was never explicitly stated. Only later in her text does Epstein shift “from description to explanation” when she recognizes that “anything that endangered the health of [her father’s] children was a personal threat” (162). This episode exemplifies Fischer’s main argument: there is a difference between the raw material of a child’s memory and the memory work of an intentional literary text, the latter of which formulates family relationships anew.

In consultation with the theoretical literature on memory studies, Fischer suggests insightfully that “nodes of memory” is a fitting term to describe those areas in Second Generation literary texts in which family memories are expressed in condensed ways. Rather than considering these areas as “sites of memory” (Pierre Nora)—suggesting a set of discrete locations—nodes of memory suggests a network, where “memory converges across different memory objects, across generations...and across smaller and larger mnemonic structures” (8). These nodes of memory are, in consecutive order (each comprising a full chapter in *Memory Work*), objects, names, bodies, food, and Passover. Each of these nodes (and chapters) is—for anyone familiar with Second Generation texts—intuitively understood: it is through *objects* with “mnemonic value” (32) that memories are triggered and relationships to the past established; it is through *names* given to children in honor and memory of their murdered relatives that loss and grief is remembered; it is the *body* that is marked physically and emotionally (scars, tattoos, nightmares); it is the elemental nature of *food* that lends itself as a memory node, either because of lack of food (starvation in the ghettos and camps, later manifesting itself in obsessive behavior) or because smells and tastes trigger nostalgic memories of a lost prewar life; it is the ritual remembrance of the liberation of slavery during the *Passover* seder that invites storytelling

about surviving the Holocaust. Only the last chapter comes as a surprise: here, Fischer suggests that the event of 9/11 is also a node of memory. The connection between the terrorist attacks and the Holocaust might not be self-evident, yet a surprisingly large number of Second Generation writers have commented on 9/11—not to draw parallels to the Holocaust itself, but to connect the immediacy of their own felt fears to those they imagined their parents must have felt in Europe. 9/11 made the children relate affectively to the dread of their parents' generation.

Fischer's study limits itself to the Anglophone literature (Canada, USA, UK, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa)—mining a set of well-known and lesser known Second Generation writings for evidence of the nodes of memory mentioned above. It is a rich and detailed analysis; its focus on a limited body of materials works well. Yet, it would have been helpful to indicate somewhere how an Anglo-centric sample might differ from Second Generation writings of families who stayed in Europe or from the abundant literary texts of postwar Germans whose memory work deals with the legacy of perpetrators.

Problematic is Fischer's understanding of the term "Second Generation." Even though her study is not restricted to families who survived ghettos and camps but includes children whose parents were refugees, she seems to presume that the Second Generation suffered from a completely and utterly interrupted intergenerational chain. "The term 'Second Generation' refers to those born in the aftermath of the Holocaust," Fischer correctly notes; she adds, somewhat misleadingly, that the "term implies that the survivors' children are the 'second generation' of a family that only goes back as far as the Holocaust; the multigenerational family...is gone" (3). This is misleading insofar as it presumes that the Second Generation comes from a family with two parent survivors, with each of them having lost their entire family. Survivors, however, often married non-survivors, and in other cases, some members of the survivor's nuclear or extended family had survived as well. In other words, many children of survivors have multigenerational family roots, although the focus of their literary memory work is on the surviving parent. Given the gravity of the loss, this is very understandable. For a scholarly study, however, there should have been some awareness of the difference. Otherwise, it can lead to a new kind of omission: preoccupied with loss, the Second Generation may have neglected their non-survivor side of their family. If so, what does it tell us about the memory work of the Second Generation? What

might it tell us about the cultural frameworks in which memory work is equated with trauma? What does it say about our time if memory is culturally valued only when it contains traumatic content?

This critical comment does not take away from the study's fine analysis of a dynamic relation to intimate memories. Children of survivors have been actively engaged in turning tormenting memories into a usable past, thus anchoring themselves in the present with a renewed understanding of their survivor parent(s).

BJÖRN KRONDORFER

*Northern Arizona University*