by Dara E. Goldman and Brett Ashley Kaplan

During the 2018–2019 academic year, Gordon Hutner, Dara Goldman, and Brett Kaplan organized the 21st Century Jewish Writing and the World initiative, which furnished a vibrant and exciting series of discussions with contemporary writers. The idea was to examine the state of Jewish literature, its history, and how it has evolved over the years. Many of us grew up with copies of iconic volumes on our bookshelves: Saul Bellow’s *Herzog*, Chaim Potok’s *The Chosen*, Phillip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*—to name just a few prominent examples. How have those and other works shaped our understanding of Jewish literature? How has Jewish writing evolved in recent decades? Twenty-first century literature often delves into questions of ethnic and/or multicultural identity, of time and place, and of international migration. What perspective and insights might 21st century Jewish writing offer when grappling with these questions, and how are they elucidated by literary texts?

The series consisted of visits by four preeminent contemporary authors: Ruby Namdar, David Bezmozgis, Ayelet Tsabari, and Nicole Krauss. Each of these novelists connects classic Jewish themes, including alienation and the endless quest for identity, with a sense of the global character of literary confines; the places in the novels range from Israel to New York to the USSR and beyond. At the same time, the questions discussed in these works touch and reach audiences well beyond Jewish literature. With Ruby Namdar, we discussed *The Ruined House* and considered what constitutes Jewishness, what it meant in ancient times, and what it means to us today. We reflected on how to tell stories of both the sacred and the quotidian and how certain characters, settings, and narrative styles might lend themselves to the telling of such stories. In his lectures, David Bezmozgis shared thoughts about his novel, *The Betrayers*, and the process of developing it into a screenplay for a feature film. Our conversations probed what it means to be a moral person and to grapple with the consequence of choices people (both real and fictitious) make. The lectures and exchanges with David also highlighted the question of nationalisms and how the attachment to a particular homeland informs our sense of community and our relationships with one another more broadly. Ayelet Tsabari shared excerpts from her recently published memoir, *The Art of Leaving* as well as her short-story writing and her explorations of her family history and of other Yemeni Jews in both Israel and Yemen. She shared her experiences growing up in Israel as a Yemeni Jewish woman, traveling the world, and eventually returning to live in Israel again. Her visit offered tremendous insight into the complexity of Israeli society and raised compelling questions about how we think about Judaism, Jewish culture, and Israeli identity. Audience members were surprised by some of the statistics and anecdotes she shared and mesmerized by the glimpse of less familiar vignettes of Jewish communities and world views that she offered. During Nicole Krauss’s visit we discussed her latest novel, *Forest Dark*, and how it evolved from her previous writing, reading, and experiences. Nicole’s visit also included a discussion of her work in dialogue with a chapter from Abraham Joshua Heschel’s *Man is Not Alone*. Students, faculty, and community members had a chance to discuss her treatment of time and space, family relations, the connections she draws across different Jewish sites (particularly Israel and New York), and what it means to be a Jewish writer.

The penultimate event in the series was a stimulating symposium with four scholars, each matched with a brief response from a UIUC faculty member. The symposium
crystallized critical opinion and scholarly interest in these subjects and tested the vitality and resources of the literary development—both formal and historical—that these writers’ oeuvres, taken together, offered. The scholars, Sarah Phillips Casteel, Dean Franco, Dalia Kandiyoti, and Benjamin Schreier were chosen because of their expertise and their ability to discuss contemporary Jewish literature and the world as well as their knowledge of/interest in the writers who made the series so spectacular. The symposium offered an intense day-long discussion of Jewish literature with excellent responses from UIUC faculty and many engaged and thoughtful questions from students and community members. We hope that these essays will be published in a special issue of American Literary History devoted to the symposium.

The title of this piece evokes Jean Paul Sartre’s famous essay, “Why Write?” (as David Bezmozgis did in his lectures). Certainly, all of the more deeply existential questions that Sartre raises in that essay are entirely relevant to the series and its impact. At the same time, Sartre’s question is evoked here to draw attention to some more concrete aspects or corollaries of those philosophical meditations. What drives us to put pen to paper, as it were, to represent our perspectives and experiences—both our own, more individual ones, or those that claim to represent our communities in some way? What compels us to read literature that has been specifically identified as Jewish? How do we understand the term “Jewish literature,” and what characteristics do we associate with that designation? When we say “Jewish Writing and World,” what are we implying about the relationship between the two? Is the world something we understand as being within the “Jewish,” outside of it, or perhaps both? How does Jewish-American (US) literature intersect with other national/regional subcategories of Jewish literature? Throughout the series, we grappled with all of these questions while also pondering the weight of Jewish history, notions of wandering and permanence, and of displacement and the search for the elusive space from which to speak to and about all of these issues. We noted how all of the authors in the series weave together voices and story lines, spanning multiple continents and generations, as they present their particular narrative worlds—worlds in which a multitude of truths converge and intersect yet persistently refuse to neatly fit together.

These conversations continue to echo throughout the program’s classes, events, and critical conversations. The links below offer the opportunity to learn more about the series, and we are preparing the aforementioned special issue that will further explore the import of the material and the questions raised during the year-long initiative. We also invite you to join us for more exciting events that examine Jewish cultures and societies during the 2019-2020 academic year—including a screening of Liberation Heroes: the Last Eyewitnesses and presentation by Advisory Council member Scott Gendell on January 27, 2020 and a visit by Villanova professor Rena Potok (who recently edited a collection of plays by her father, Chaim Potok) on April 6th, 2020. Of course, you can always visit the program website and Facebook page and/or contact the Program office about upcoming events.

For our write-up on Ruby Namdar and David Bezmozgis’ visits, click here: jewishculture.illinois.edu/news/2018-10-26/recap-ruby-namdar-and-david-bezmozgis-visits

For information about Ayelet Tsabari’s reading in the Lucy Ellis Lounge, click here: jewishculture.illinois.edu/ayelet-tsabari

For a transcript of Ayelet Tsabari’s Q&A with Professor Brett Kaplan published in The Ninth Letter, click here: www.ninthletter.com/tsabari

For a video/transcript of Nicole Krauss’ book reading and Q&A with Professor Brett Kaplan, click here: cas.illinois.edu/node/172