

Fictional Rabbi-Sleuths

A Novel Idea

ABSTRACT Although American sleuth fiction became popular in the late nineteenth century, the first clerical fictional protagonist appeared in 1910 with G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown series. More than five decades later, in the mid-1960s, a rabbi-sleuth protagonist debuted in Harry Kemelman's weekday Rabbi Small series (*Friday the Rabbi Slept Late*, *Saturday the Rabbi Went Hungry*, etc.). Following in Kemelman's footsteps, several authors claim to have been influenced by his works. Rabbi-sleuths, male and female, are found across the denominational spectrum in Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform Judaism. While there are examples of rabbi-sleuths featured in one-off short stories or novels, we focus on six who appear in series of at least two novels. The rabbis and the locales in which we find them are as follows: Harry Kemelman's David Small in Barnard's Crossing, Massachusetts, a town north of Boston; Joseph Telushkin's Daniel Winter in Los Angeles; Roger Herst's Gabrielle (Gabby) Lewyn in Washington, D.C.; Sheyna Galyan's David Cohen in Minneapolis; Ilene Schneider's Aviva Cohen in Walford, New Jersey, a small town near Philadelphia; and Marvin Wolf's Ben Maimon in various locales, including Los Angeles, Chicago, Brooklyn, and Pittsburgh. These rabbi-sleuths, like all congregational clergy, are "outsiders within"—part of their communities and yet apart from them. They use their knowledge of Judaism and their rabbinical education, which includes psychology, social studies, and counseling, to unravel mysteries, often murders. They frequently serve as mediators between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds and explain or comment on Jewish practices and traditions. Building on Rabbi Small as a prototype for the rabbi-sleuths, we explore several key questions in the various series: How do the authors portray their rabbi-sleuths? Do their novels explain Judaism and Jewish practices, traditions, or thought to readers—and if so, how? Do the fictional rabbis act as spokespersons to the non-Jewish world or level social criticism against American Jews and/or broader American values? What is their relationship with their congregations? What insights do we gain into their biographies, familial relationships, education, and theology? **KEYWORDS** American-Jewish literature, fiction (novels), Jewish community, "outsiders within", rabbi-sleuths

INTRODUCTION

While fictional sleuths in novels and short stories became popular in the late nineteenth century and the first clerical protagonist—G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown—took to the page in 1910, rabbinic detectives made their debut over five decades later, beginning with Harry Kemelman's Rabbi David Small in 1964.¹ Wendy Zierler explains that

1. For Christianity and detective fiction, see Raubicheck and Morlan 2013. For fictional rabbis, see Zierler 2006; Zucker 2019.

Kemelman's Rabbi Small marked a turning point in the representation of rabbis in American Jewish fiction², from mostly a negative figure representing "old Judaism" to a more favorable one representing modern and postmodern Judaism.³ In this article, we examine six fictional rabbi-sleuths, each of whom stars in a series of novels. Numerous one-off rabbi-sleuth short stories and standalone novels also exist. This article explores only *series* that consist of at least two novels: the twelve Kemelman books; Joseph Telushkin's three Rabbi Daniel Winter novels (1987, 1992, 1998); Roger Herst's seven Rabbi Gabrielle books (the first four of which are set in the United States) (2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2021); Ilene Schneider's three Rabbi Aviva Cohen series (2007, 2012, 2016); Sheyna Galyan's two Rabbi David Cohen volumes (2013, 2015)⁴; and Marvin Wolf's four Rabbi Ben Maimon works (2013, 2017a, 2017b, 2020).⁵ By examining these rabbi-sleuths, we show that Kemelman's Rabbi Small influenced the subsequent writers in creating their rabbi protagonists. Moreover, we suggest that Rabbi Small's main characteristics align with the description by Margaret J. King and Sheldon J. Hershinow, who describe him as:

an isolated man of uncompromising integrity and inventive wisdom. He is set off from the Gentile community, on the one hand, by his Jewish beliefs, and from his own temple [synagogue] membership, on the other, because of his refusal to strive for the accommodation of his religion to the American way of life. (1978, 85)

Thus, he exemplifies what Brooke Lenz calls an "outsider within"—an individual whose position is among those "inhabited by groups who are included in dominant cultural practices but are nevertheless, and for various reasons, unable to fully participate in them" (2004, 99). As such, he and the other rabbi-sleuths can look at the Jewish community and general American society from both outside and within, mediating between them while simultaneously critiquing both.

2. This article addresses rabbis situated in the United States. However, Rabbi Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg, a Polish-Canadian rabbi, published Yiddish detective stories in 1909 featuring the Maharal of Prague as his "Sherlock Holmes" or rabbi-sleuth (Judah Loew ben Bezalel, sixteenth to early seventeenth century, is also known as Rabbi Loew, the Maharal of Prague), and his "Watson" is the Golem. In 1913, Rosenberg also wrote a detective novel in Hebrew where the Maharal is the sole detective. In the introduction to the novel, *Sefer Hosben ha-Mishpat shel ha-Koben ha-Gadol*, he claimed he only translated/adapted a story of Conan Doyle. See Leiman 2002.

3. Zierler suggests that most rabbis depicted before Kemelman were treated as the *maskilim* (people of the Jewish Enlightenment) portrayed them: narrow-minded, whose "insistence on stringencies and legal minutiae was the source of all that was wrong with Diaspora Jewish life" (2006, 255).

4. While the latter book, *Strength to Stand*, fits the common theme of the mystery/suspense novel, with the police investigating a hate crime, the former work, *Destined to Choose*, contains no criminal act.

5. Subsequent to the research and writing of this article, we learned that two more authors had written additional rabbi-sleuth novels: Philip Graubart's *Women and God* (2020), the sequel to his *Rabbis and Gangsters* (2012), and Rachel Sharona Lewis's *The Rabbi Who Prayed for the City* (2023), the sequel to her *The Rabbi Who Prayed With Fire* (2020). These rabbi-sleuths follow the same patterns that we discuss in this article. Also, it is interesting to note that among the authors of these series, some are rabbis themselves and some are not: Harry Kemelman (1908–1996), Marvin J. Wolf (b. 1941), and Sheyna Galyan (b. 1968) are laity; Joseph Telushkin (b. 1948) is an Orthodox rabbi; Roger Herst (b. 1938) is a Reform rabbi with a PhD in Middle Eastern History; Ilene Schneider (b. 1948) is one of the first wave of women rabbis in America, having been ordained at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1976; Philip Graubart (b. 1960) is a Conservative Rabbi, ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary; and Rachel Sharona Lewis (b. 1987) is a lay person.

Theology and detective fiction share a number of features. Both revolve around the conflict between good and evil, morality and immorality. Satisfying the need for both entertainment and moral rectitude, the classic mystery must show that justice is served. This exercise, often described as “cathartic and even redemptive,” forms the perfect genre for the “writer of faith” (D. King 2018). Although contemporary detective fiction rarely deals with pure theology, it often portrays a theological concept of humankind, with the culprit identified and punished (Paul 1966, 24). Additionally, while mystery tales seek to bewilder and befuddle, detective stories strive to demonstrate the existence of an “inner logic and rationality” despite the surface chaos (22).⁶ Their primary goal is to reach a logical conclusion rather than curdle the reader’s blood, even though they often deal with despicable crimes—since no murder is possible without horror. And just as any work of fiction may include a love interest without being a love story or involve adventures without being primarily an adventure story, so too, detective stories may incorporate any or all of these elements for added interest while still focusing on the process of inquiry and detection (22). These factors collectively make the detective fiction genre particularly suitable for a rabbi-sleuth protagonist.

Jews, in general, and rabbis, in particular, are known for their propensity to ask questions. The Talmud is replete with inquiries and answers. The annual Passover Seder responds to the central query: “Why is this night different from all other nights?” Similarly, we address the question: Why is this Jewish sleuth different from all other sleuths? Invoking Arthur Conan Doyle, who commented on Edgar Allan Poe—the author widely acknowledged as the inventor of modern detective fiction—“Where was the detective story until Poe breathed the breath of life into it?” (Murch 1958, 33), we propose that Kemelman similarly breathed life into the rabbi-sleuth novel.⁷

THE RABBI IN THE CHANGING AMERICAN JEWISH SOCIETY

The three-decade period between 1965 and 1995 saw the flowering of rabbi-centered or rabbi-as-major-character novels (Zucker 2019, 7–22). As Jews, among others, flocked to the suburbs after World War II, the “consciousness of being a Jew suddenly came to the fore as Jews found themselves living in predominantly Gentile communities and neighborhoods. More was involved than just a shift from being part of the majority to being a tiny minority” (Silberman 1985, 176–77).

This sweeping integration into the wider world prompted interest in Jews and Judaism. Philip Roth’s 1959 collection of stories, *Goodbye, Columbus*, depicted this phenomenon of integration in several aspects including its portrayal of several rabbis, although mostly in negative hues.⁸ The collection won the 1960 (US) National Book Award for

6. Pointing to the links between mysteries and Jewish identity, Lawrence Raphael contends that “The mystery is all about right and wrong, crime and punishment, justice and mercy. And isn’t every gumshoe in some sense a rabbi, scouring the mean streets or the sacred texts to get to the truth?” (1999, 8).

7. On Edgar Allan Poe as the first modern detective fiction writer, see Eschner 2017.

8. On the controversy regarding Roth’s *Goodbye, Columbus*, see for example: Zucker 2008; Schreier 2011; Silvey 2014; Cohen 2022.

Fiction. Chaim Potok's immensely popular 1967 novel, *The Chosen*, portrayed life in an ultra-Orthodox family.⁹ The novel received the Edward Lewis Wallant Award and was also nominated for the National Book Award. The critical acclaim of these two vastly different books is indicative of the extent to which Jews had become "mainstream." The success of Kemelman's weekday series further reflects this broad acceptance; *Friday the Rabbi Slept Late* earned the prestigious Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best First Novel in 1965.

The new suburban synagogues offered friendship and fellowship—a necessary resource in light of the attendees' lack of extended family. These synagogues also provided religious education for the younger generation. According to a study of the period, very few Jews affiliated with a synagogue simply because they deemed themselves "religious." Rather, some joined because the rabbi was "available for counseling in the many personal and family problems that dislocation" brought about with their move (Karp 1987, 25).¹⁰ According to Abraham Karp, the rabbi was also a leader in the Jewish community and an "esteemed representative to the general community" (25). The fictional rabbis discussed in this article—David Small, Daniel Winter, Gabrielle Lewyn, David Cohen, Aviva Cohen, and Ben Maimon—align closely with this description.

THE APPEARANCE OF THE RABBI-SLEUTH

Exploring Jews in detective fiction, James Yaffe links the appearance of the first fictional Jewish detectives to Jewish social status in the United States and suggests that in the wake of World War II, Jewish self-confidence increased due to factors such as the revelations of the Holocaust, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the growth of ecumenism. These factors created an atmosphere in which Jewish detectives could thrive (1990, 23). As mentioned earlier, Kemelman's Rabbi Small mysteries started the new subgenre of rabbi-sleuths in 1964. According to Tresa Grauer, in the 1960s, a heightened interest in identity in the West followed what she describes as "the revolutionary politics . . . in which group identity served as the basis for political solidarity." She adds that "against this background, many American Jews who had once embraced the dominant cultural narrative of assimilation began to seek alternative plots that could be read as particularly 'Jewish'" (2003, 270–271). As Kemelman himself observes, his decision to use the popular genre of detective fiction was meant to connect the murder plot with "the story of [an] entire community in which the murder occurs and which affects everyone involved" (1967, 11).

Additionally, Laurence Roth states that the late fifties and early sixties were "a transition period in American culture and in American Jewish life," and that "events in those years precipitated a variety of reappraisals and widened the horizon of the

9. On Potok's significance, see: Rosen 2013; Nissenson 2013; McClymond 2013.

10. Karp cites statistics showing that fewer than 2 percent selected "I am religious" as their reason for synagogue affiliation (26). This datum recalls Howard Singer's comment that most of "the post-World War II generation of Jewish suburbanites, were motivated in their community activities less by religious feeling than by the desire to establish a discreet presence in what was then a totally non-Jewish environment" (Singer 1985, 56).

possible in American Jewish literature and culture, enabling new improvisations” (2004, 24). He also suggests that Kemelman’s series reflects the changes in Jewish American life during that period:

Kemelman launches his mystery series at a time when attenuated American Jewish memories are being renewed and reinvented, both in service of building a new communal life in the gentile suburbs and in reaction to other social and cultural changes in America. These combinations and contradictions reveal Kemelman as a bridge, a writer whose works connects two halves of the twentieth-century American Jewish experience. (26)

Roth further notes that featuring a Jewish sleuth as the principal character in Kemelman’s series reflects the pattern of American Jewish cultural assimilation at the time: “Thus, the publication date and setting of Kemelman’s first Rabbi Small mystery help to place the genesis of his series at a moment when American Jewish expression was reaching one of its high water marks, a moment when American Jewish writers yoked Jewish memory to American popular culture in surprising and fruitful ways” (257). Donald Weber also suggests that,

If, as scholars assert, popular culture expresses a subculture’s desires, fears, longings, and dissent; if, that is, popular culture both enables the psycho-social ordeal of “Americanization” and provides opportunities for cultural dissonance, then Jewish American popular culture offers a rich testament to how that complex dialectic of acculturation and resistance works. (2003, 130)

Hence, the emergence of rabbi characters in popular genres like detective fiction echoes the changes in American Jewish communities and their literary expression during this period.¹¹

Furthermore, Kemelman asserts that through the characterization of Rabbi Small, who is portrayed as first and foremost a scholar and a teacher, he wanted to introduce Judaism both to the new Jewish community, whose members “had any knowledge of Judaism, any knowledge of the religion,” and to the non-Jewish American society at large (Sege 1996, 77). His intent aligns with the fact that congregational rabbis are, in most cases, employed by the Jewish community they serve, making them simultaneously integral members of the community and outsiders appointed to serve it. The rabbis’ station also positions them as spokespersons for the Jewish community to the broader society, thereby rendering them the ideal “outsider within,” a concept introduced earlier.

Harry Kemelman wrote his twelve-book series between the mid-1960s and mid-1990s. The novels center around Rabbi David Small, a Conservative rabbi serving a congregation, initially of about one hundred families, in Barnard’s Crossing, a town north of Boston. With the exception of *Conversations with Rabbi Small* (1981), which explores Small’s thoughts on various Jewish themes and issues, the series belongs to the rabbi-sleuth genre. Small solves mysteries—usually murders—through Talmudic pilpul

11. Other writers of popular genres use rabbis in their books. In Noah Gordon’s *The Rabbi: A Novel* (1965), the story revolves around the love story of Rabbi Michael Kind and his wife, the daughter of a Christian minister who converts to Judaism. In Tod Goldberg’s *Gangsterland* (2014) and *Gangster Nation* (2018), the protagonist is a former non-Jewish Chicago hitman who, rather improbably, emerges as a rabbi in Las Vegas.

(reasoning) and traditional Jewish hermeneutical principles, such as *qal vahomer* (inference from the minor to the major or vice versa), *im ken* (“if so,” a type of *reductio ad absurdum*), and *miggo* (inference of credibility) (Kemelman 1966, 146–47; 1969, 180).

RABBI SMALL’S INFLUENCE

Following in Kemelman’s footsteps, others have created a pool of rabbi-sleuths. Several authors explicitly credit Rabbi Small as their influence in creating their own rabbi-sleuths. Rachel Sharona Lewis, for example, notes that she

fortuitously stumbled upon a collection of mystery novels from the Rabbi Small series. . . . Throughout the series, the author, Harry Kemelman, used the genre of mystery and the contemporary milieu of a New England Conservative congregation to comment on the dynamics of the American Jewish community at the time. . . . As I devoured the first few books, it became clear to me that an updated version was needed for *this* moment, one that would capture the formations and evolutions going on in Jewish communities across the U.S. today. I had never written fiction before, but building off of the foundation set by Kemelman, I started to dream up scenes of a new young rabbi: queer; female; someone who must negotiate how to do right by her congregation and, simultaneously, the world beyond its four walls. (2021, 269–70; original italics)¹²

When Ilene Schneider’s Rabbi Aviva Cohen is asked if she is “hot on a case? . . . [A]re you Rabbi Small?,” she answers in the negative, acknowledging that she “used to be a fan of . . . the Kemelman books . . . [but she does not] sleep late on Fridays” (2012, 209).¹³ Marvin J. Wolf’s Rabbi Kimmelman, a character in *For Whom the Shofar Blows* (2013), is explicitly reminiscent of Kemelman. The fiancée of Wolf’s protagonist, Rabbi Ben Maimon, bears the same first name as Rabbi David Small’s wife, albeit with a minor spelling variation. Small may, therefore, be regarded as an archetypal rabbi-sleuth.

Building on Rabbi Small as a prototype for the rabbi-sleuths, we explore several key questions in the various series: How do the authors portray their rabbi-sleuths? Do their novels explain Judaism, Jewish practices, or Jewish thought to readers—and if so, how? Do the fictional rabbis act as spokespersons to the non-Jewish world or level social criticism against American Jews and/or broader American values? What is their relationship with their congregations? What insights do we gain into their biographies, familial relationships, education, and theology?¹⁴

PORTRAYING THE RABBI

The fictional rabbi-sleuths included in our analysis represent a fairly wide swath of American Jewish life. There is denominational representation: Rabbis David Small, David

12. Lewis references the Rabbi Small mysteries on several occasions in *The Rabbi Who Prayed With Fire* (89, 208, 237).

13. The Schneider books have been published in various formats including as a Kindle version. Therefore, some of the pagination differs from version to version.

14. The examples are representative rather than exhaustive.

Cohen, and Ben Maimon are graduates of the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary. Rabbi Daniel Winter is ordained by the Maimonides Seminary (presumably a pseudonym for the Orthodox Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Theological Seminary at Yeshiva University), although he leads a Conservative congregation. Rabbi Gabby Lewyn is ordained by the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College, and Rabbi Aviva Cohen appears to be a graduate of the Reconstructionist seminary. Geographically, their congregations are situated across the United States: Los Angeles, Chicago, Minneapolis, "near Philadelphia," Pittsburgh, greater Boston, Brooklyn, and Washington, D.C. Most of the rabbis range in age from their early thirties to mid-fifties, though in the first novel, *Kemelman's Small* is twenty-eight.

As for the rabbis' family backgrounds: David Small grows up in a rabbinic family, with his grandfather serving as a rabbi. Small attends a yeshiva, a traditional religious school, during his youth. (Kemelman 1964, 169–70; 1973, 216; 1985, 125). Daniel Winter appears to come from a religious home. Ben Maimon's father has a checkered past as a lawbreaker; however, Ben grew up in his maternal grandparents' house. His grandfather was a well-known rabbi and scholar. In contrast, neither Galyan's David Cohen nor Schneider's Aviva Cohen have rabbinic parents. In *Yom Killer* (2016), Aviva Cohen implies that her parents' synagogue affiliation was more social or cultural than religious. David Cohen's father is a concentration camp survivor, and Cohen grapples with his father's anger and depression. His sister disparages both his profession and his belief in God (Galyan 2013, 61, 196–97, 254–55). Gabrielle Lewyn is raised in a secular family; although her parents belong to a synagogue, they disapprove of her decision to become a rabbi (Herst 2016b, 27).

Another point of diversity is the rabbis' marital statuses. David Small and David Cohen are both married with children. Daniel Winter, a widower, marries a psychologist with a PhD who works for the Los Angeles Police Department and is a divorcée with a teenage daughter. Aviva Cohen is twice divorced and childless, though her first husband reappears in all three volumes. Like Daniel Winter, Ben Maimon is also a childless widower. By the second book, he is romantically involved, with wedding plans featured in the fourth book. Gabby Lewyn is initially unmarried and all too aware of the dating challenges faced by a single woman rabbi. She remarks: "People don't understand the tradeoffs for being in this line of work. Meeting eligible men isn't easy. Dating is a nightmare. . . . People always assumed she has a million dates when the reality was quite different" (Herst 2016a, 27, 30). She marries at the close of the third novel, *Rabbi Gabrielle's Defiance* (2016c); her husband, a highly successful Korean-born internet entrepreneur, converts to Judaism.

The rabbis' spouses, fiancées, or former partners play important roles in several of the novels (Zucker 2020; 2021).¹⁵ As in real life, fictional characters who interact with the rabbi or the rabbi's spouse often experience anger, disappointment, frustration, or sadness

15. As the "good little wife/rebbetzin who knows her place and supports her husband," Miriam Small is somewhat of an anachronism. This portrayal probably says more about the author Harry Kemelman and his personal views on a woman's/rebbetzin's role, considering that female rabbinic spouses were much more outspoken and some had their own careers by the 1990s. See Cohen Selavan 1977–78; Zucker 2020, 153–76.

related to their own personal lives, such as issues with spouses/partners, children, parents, jobs, economic status, or similar challenges—none of which have anything to do with the rabbi, much less the rabbi’s spouse. Yet, as in real life, both fictional rabbis and their spouses/partners frequently become the targets of their congregants’ misplaced frustration or pique. The Cohens struggle with both the demands of the rabbinate and Sara’s ambivalence about her role. David’s efforts to make more personal time for his family often feel Sisyphean. His family repeatedly suffers from his absence and his prioritization of the congregation’s needs over their own. Sara informs him that if he were to leave their congregation to become an academic: “being the *rebbetzin* [rabbi’s wife] is a role I’d gladly leave behind,” yet she remains conflicted about what she truly wants (Galyan 2013, 23). Her desire for a more active, greater role within the congregation forms a significant subplot in the novel.¹⁶ Rabbi Winter’s congregation appears to respect his wife as a professional in her own right, rather than expecting her to conform to the traditional role of the *rebbetzin*. Similarly, no expectations are expressed regarding the synagogue attendance of Rabbi Gabrielle’s husband. Like Sara Cohen, Gabrielle’s husband voices concerns over the constant demands the synagogue places on her time. By the fourth novel in the series, even as they remain committed to one another, the issue has become a major source of friction in their marriage: “Are you ever going to get a life for yourself Gabrielle? . . . Everyone wants a piece of you. . . . Ohav Shalom [her synagogue] is eating you up, morsel by morsel.” Gabby subsequently acknowledges: “The truth is . . . I love to be needed by others” (Herst 2016b, 147, 160). The incessant time demands of the rabbinate and the difficulty in achieving work-life balance are issues often faced by real-life women rabbis. While these themes are explored in some novels featuring women rabbis, they are not a major subtheme in the rabbi-sleuth genre (Zucker 2021).

David Small is the most scholarly of the six fictional rabbi-sleuths, frequently referencing ancient Jewish texts and hermeneutical rules to solve his mysteries:

Then, as his voice took on a Talmudic singsong, his forefinger made circles in the air in time to the rhythm of his discourse . . . “then *al achas cammo v’cammo*” That Hebrew phrase, a common one in Talmudic arguments means—er—“how much more.” (Kemelman 1966, 146)¹⁷

Likewise, Telushkin’s Daniel Winter often consults traditional Jewish sources, while Wolf’s Ben Maimon occasionally employs Talmudic reasoning and *pilpul* (2017a, 271). Galyan’s David Cohen relies more on his psychological training, having been “one semester and a dissertation short of a doctorate” (2013, 111) before transferring to rabbinical school. Although he refers to Jewish tradition, his understanding of the human psyche regularly informs his approach. This reliance on secular learning, rather than on

16. The “reluctant *rebbetzin*” trope occurs in a number of novels—not necessarily rabbi-sleuth mysteries. The prime example may be Silvia Tennenbaum’s *Rachel, the Rabbi’s Wife* (1978). A study conducted in the 1970s evinces that nearly half the wives (*sic*) reported they would not want their husbands to become rabbis if given the choice to relive their lives; see Zucker 2019, 156. The experiences of male rabbinic spouses differ greatly from those of their female counterparts; see Zucker 2020, 153–76.

17. See also Kemelman 1964, 23; Wolf 2017a, 271.

traditional Jewish texts, also characterizes Herst's Gabrielle Lewyn and Schneider's Aviva Cohen. Curious, intuitive, and skilled at interpreting clues, Aviva resembles Miss Marple more than a Talmudic scholar, and she leverages her role as a rabbi-counselor to gather information from people in a manner reminiscent of Father Brown. As Schneider notes:

I sometimes wonder if the plots of my books could still be written in the same way if Rabbi Aviva Cohen were Father Sean Donohue or a college professor or a supermarket cashier, if the setting were a Puritan town in Vermont or in the Midwest. It might be difficult—after all, people don't confide in a supermarket cashier the way they do in a rabbi—but, yes, with modifications, the basic plots could be the same even if there were no Jews among the characters. (2020)

Rabbi Cohen *is* the protagonist, however, and many—if not most—of the individuals she encounters, whether virtuous or vile, are also Jewish. She comes into contact with them precisely because of her rabbinic position, which also shapes the way they interact with her. This dynamic is similarly true of the other rabbi-sleuths under discussion.

THE RABBI-SLEUTH AS AN *OUTSIDER WITHIN*

As discussed earlier, the rabbi-sleuths are portrayed in the novels as “outsiders within.” This term was coined by Patricia Hill Collins to “describe the location of people who no longer belong to any one group . . . [and] to describe individuals who found themselves in marginal locations between groups of varying power” (1998, 5). She also adds that “the outsider-within location describes a particular knowledge/power relationship, one of gaining knowledge about or of a dominant group without gaining the full power accorded to members of that group” (1998, 6). Further, Victoria Aarons claims that contemporary American Jewish fiction, particularly that written by Jewish women, can be considered as an outsider within—situated within American literature yet “marked by a certain outsider status,” since these works “continue to be faced with issues of ethnic identity and self-definition” (1987, 380). This idea of Jewish fiction as an outsider within becomes even more obvious when the principal character is a rabbi, as exemplified by Howard Fast's rabbi protagonist in his novel *The Outsider* (1984).¹⁸

The American Jewish fiction novels discussed in this analysis also portray their protagonists as outsiders within. As employees of their congregations, they are both part of their communities and apart from them. As Rabbi Jack H. Bloom expounds in his classic work, *The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar*, “Being a rabbi means being set apart, lonely, and subject to unreasonable expectations from all sides” (2002, 135). Furthermore, the rabbi-sleuths serve as intermediaries between their Jewish communities and the broader society. And they may elucidate aspects of Judaism to their own people and to non-Jews, for they can see and criticize the faults of both.

18. Fast's Rabbi David Hartman thinks to himself: “He felt that he had come into this room as an outsider; he felt that he came into the Jewish homes of his congregants as an outsider; and he even felt at times that he stood in the synagogue as an outsider” (1984, 91).

EXPLAINING JUDAISM OR WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH

Through their rabbi-sleuth characters, the authors try to explain Judaism, or at least some of its prominent features, to a general audience of both Jewish and non-Jewish readers. Real-life Conservative Rabbi Elliot Gertel praises the Kemelman books as “an articulate, sympathetic and unapologetic depiction of American Conservative Judaism. . . . Many people, both Jews and non-Jews learn about Judaism in general and Conservative Judaism in particular from Rabbi David Small” (1981). In fact, all six rabbi-sleuths comment on what it means to be Jewish, explicate forms of Jewish practice or thought, and explain Hebrew and Yiddish terms.

David Small frequently takes the opportunity to engage in teaching moments. Early in *Friday the Rabbi Slept Late*, he suggests a traditional method—namely a “Din Torah”—for resolving a dispute over the care and use of an automobile.

“What’s that?” asked Schwartz.

“A hearing, a judgment,” the rabbi answered. . . .

“How did he [the judge] make his decisions?” asked Schwartz.

“Like any judge, he would hear the case, sometimes alone, sometimes in conjunction with a pair of learned men. . . . He would ask questions, examine witnesses if necessary, and then on the basis of the Talmud, he would give his verdict.”

“ . . . I’m sure the Talmud doesn’t deal with automobile cases.”

“The Talmud deals with everything,” said the rabbi flatly.

“But automobiles?”

“The Talmud doesn’t mention automobiles, of course, but it does deal with such things as damages and responsibility. Particular situations differ from age to age, but the general principles remain the same.” (1964, 12)

In the Kemelman novels, Small’s traditional religious education—his Talmudic training—frames the way he asks questions, debates the clues and facts, and enables him to solve the mysteries at hand. Telushkin’s Daniel Winter similarly articulates Jewish views on matters pertinent to the plot. Telushkin’s third novel, *An Eye for an Eye*, refers to the *lex talionis* in Exodus 21:23–24 and Deuteronomy 19:21: “The penalty shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” Winter explains that the rabbinic sages understood this as referring to monetary payment rather than literal measure for measure (1992, 273–75).¹⁹

While Small and Winter are depicted as Jewish scholars, the other rabbi-sleuths also discuss Jewish terms. Schneider’s Aviva Cohen series, which are based on Jewish holidays (Chanukah, Passover, and the High Holy Days, specifically Yom Kippur), explain different terms connected to them (for example, what is a *chanukiah* in *Chanukah Guilt*, 2007, 82–83). She also speaks about diverse customs pertaining to *shiva* (memorial days and prayers following a funeral), wedding ceremonies, laws of *kashrut*, and so forth, in the various novels. Wolf’s Rabbi Ben also comments on various aspects of Judaism in the

19. The novel concludes with an addendum of sorts—“Excerpts from Daniel Winter’s Article, ‘An Eye for an Eye: Some Twentieth Century Reflections.’” Herein, he refers to the Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Qamma* 83b–84a). See also N. Sarna 1991, 126.

novels. For example, he explains the difference between kosher style and kosher (2017a, 235) and the meaning of *mamzer*, a child born out of incest or by a married woman's relationship with another man (294).

The novels also shed light on how a Jewish congregation is formed. In *A Tale of Two Rabbis*, Rabbi Ben Maimon encourages a group of men and women to work together in order to create a formal synagogue (Wolf 2017b, 163–70). In Galyan's novel *Strength to Stand*, a character advocates for adult programming that is not "family-centered" on the grounds that it would appeal to single young adults and college or graduate students who may then want to join the synagogue (2015, 2–3, 160–63).²⁰ Congregations can also be formed because their members share a common approach to Jewish tradition. In *Unleavened Dead*, Rabbi Aviva Cohen explains this when she mentions that Temple B'rith Abraham was established

when a group of members left my congregation, Mishkan Or, in protest over my being hired. They might enjoy shrimp scampi when they went out to eat, but they weren't going to allow a woman to be their rabbi. B'rith Abraham was a "Conservadox" synagogue, one that would be Orthodox except they allowed men and women to sit together in services and drive to *shul* on Shabbat. (Schneider 2012, 9)

Additionally, David Small, who befriends the local Chief of Police, the Irish Catholic Hugh Lanigan, takes numerous opportunities to present Judaism in ways accessible to non-Jews. In *Wednesday the Rabbi Got Wet*, for example, he discusses the topic of autopsies from a Jewish perspective:

We don't approve of autopsy unless there is a clear indication that from the examination of the remains, that someone else's life can be saved or that something specific can be learned. Man is made in the image of God, so to cut up the body is to desecrate the image. . . . The aversion to cutting up the body, or to cremating it for that matter, is bound up with the idea that some Jews have of the resurrection that will take place when the Messiah comes. They mean resurrection of the body as well as of the spirit. So it's important that the whole body be there in the grave, ready to spring back to life. (Kemelman 1976, 105)

When Lanigan observes: "That seems kind of hard on those who died some time ago . . . or those who lost limbs in battle," Rabbi Small concedes the truth of this statement: "It does, rather."

In *Tuesday the Rabbi Saw Red*, Small takes on Jewish election in a collegiate religious studies class, opining that "chosenness" is

not confined to the Jews. The Greeks had it; the Romans, too. Nearer our own time, the English felt it their duty to assume the white man's burden; the Russians and the

20. In *Rabbi Gabrielle's Scandal*, one of the board members claims: "We're a family-oriented organization, with over twelve families for each single congregant. The vast majority of members are young families with children in our religious school and Bar/Bat Mitzvah program. Half of these have young girls. These families expect their daughters to enter the work force as professionals, but they also expect them to become mothers of their grandchildren. And that's important. A single woman as Senior Rabbi is a superb role model in one respect, and yet a bad one in another" (Herst 2016a, 26).

Chinese both feel obliged to convert the world to Marxism; while our own country feels it must prevent the spread of Marxism and indoctrinate the whole world in democracy. (Kemelman 1973, 139)

A little later, he explains *halakhab* (Jewish law) to an assistant district attorney: “You mean this Talmud deals with civil law?’ ‘Oh yes,’ said the rabbi. ‘And criminal law, and religious law—all the laws by which we are governed. We don’t separate them in our religion” (160). The idea of looking to the Talmud for guidance is characteristic of Orthodoxy. While this is congruent with Rabbi Small’s orientation, it is not a prevalent Conservative position—much less a non-Orthodox or Progressive one.

In *Bride of Finkelstein*, Rabbi Ben expounds on Judaism’s denominational trait to two non-Jewish FBI agents:

There are four “streams” of Judaism today. The Orthodox, who seek to preserve intact the customs, practices and societal mores of early 20th Century Judaism, which were pretty much the same as 18th Century Judaism. The Reform Movement seeks to reconcile Jewish worship, practices, and customs with the reality of the modern world that we live in. The Conservative Movement, which . . . seeks to strike a balance between these two extremes. Finally, Reconstructionist Judaism grew out of the Conservative Movement and seeks a somewhat different path of dealing with the modern world. (Wolf 2020, 33)²¹

In addition to explaining Judaism’s life-cycle rituals, some of the novels address broader philosophical and theological themes. The Kemelman series frequently explores theological issues. Although David Small practices as a right-wing Conservative, he occasionally adopts a surprisingly progressive theology—the notable exception being his opposition to women’s participation in the synagogue (Kemelman 1978, 43). In *Monday the Rabbi Took Off*, Small suggests that Judaism places more emphasis on one’s actual deeds rather than on the nature of one’s faith. He notes that the question of whether he believes in God is difficult to answer because it depends on several variables: Does it refer to the “I” of today, yesterday, or several years ago? Does “belief” mean certainty as in “two and two make four? Or the way that I believe that light travels a certain number of miles per second, which I myself have never seen demonstrated but which has been demonstrated by people whose competence and integrity I have been taught to trust?” Does God signify an ineffable presence, a being aware of our existence and responsive to our call, or a transcendent deity far beyond human understanding? Small concludes, “I suppose I have the feeling of belief and certainty some times and lack it at others” (Kemelman 1972, 198).

In a conversation with a Roman Catholic priest, Small points out that faith is not a requirement for Jews. Citing the prophet Micah’s dictum—“Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God” (Micah 6:8)—he asserts that this is achievable even amid doubts about God’s existence (“After all, you can’t always control your thoughts”). He observes that faith is not a “requirement of our religion. . . . I suspect

21. Gabby describes the writing of a Torah scroll to two non-Jewish FBI agents (Herst 2016b, 60).

it's a kind of special talent that some have to a greater degree than others" (Kemelman 1969, 58; 1992, 140).

Gabrielle Lewyn acknowledges that her God is more a philosophical concept than a personal being. Comparing herself to her predecessor, Rabbi Dr. Seth Greer, she remarks:

To use jargon from our profession, he is a Theist and I am a Deist. He conceives of God as an omnipotent judge, and I as remote cause. His notion leads to personal relationships; mine, to philosophical concepts. (Herst 2016a, 74)

In the second book, she describes envisioning God as "a creative force in Nature" (Herst 2021, 29). Later in the same book, however, it is mentioned that she "silently recited her personal evening prayers" (117). In a moment of life-threatening danger, when she believes she is about to be murdered, she chants "the sacred words of the *Shema*, her declaration of unity with God" (2016a, 140–41).

In contrast to David Small, Daniel Winter, Gabrielle Lewyn, David Cohen, and Ben Maimon, Rabbi Aviva Cohen is "an agnostic and a cynic." She comments privately to a colleague:

Don't you ever feel as though you're acting, though? I know I do when I have to visit a particularly unpleasant congregant or ungrateful family. And I hate using platitudes, especially when someone is dying—she's going to a better place or he's at peace now—but it's what the families and patients want to hear. (Schneider 2016, 99)

Elsewhere she admits to herself:

I'm not a particularly spiritual person—I define my spirituality through my connection with nature rather than the divine—and I am very much a cynic and a skeptic, but there is still a comfort in the mystery of ritual. Once a year, [on Yom Kippur/the Day of Atonement] I can give myself to it . . . [I feel] the need to join a community in prayer, even if I look at prayer as the fulfillment of the psychological need humans have to give thanks or to give voice to their wishes rather than as homage to a deity. I was feeling a definite psychological need. Or maybe, if I were honest, a spiritual one, too. (198)

Galyan's David Cohen controversially argues that God allowed the Shoah (Holocaust) to occur: "Nobody really knows. One theory is that because of God's hiddenness, and because God chooses not to interfere in people's free will, God couldn't or wouldn't intervene directly. God was perhaps present in the victories of the Allies. I don't know for sure" (2013, 83). This view aligns with Conservative tenets as articulated by Elliot Dorff:

The Holocaust is undoubtedly a most egregious example of the depths to which humans can sink, but it does not, despite the arguments suggested to the contrary, pose a philosophical problem for Judaism different from other examples of human depravity. For free will to mean anything, bad uses of it must be made possible. . . . I ache for victims of natural and human evil, and I need to work to eliminate them both. (1996, 30)

While the Holocaust and the destruction of European Jewry form a subplot in Herst's *Rabbi Gabrielle Commits a Felony* (fourth in the Rabbi Gabrielle series), besides Galyan's

Rabbi Cohen, none of the rabbi-sleuth characters dwell on God's role during this tragedy.²²

During the decades covered by these novels, North American Jewish life experienced evolving attitudes and strategies regarding outmarriage (Jews marrying non-Jews), a trend that significantly influenced synagogue life. Conversion to Judaism is mentioned in Kemelman's *Friday the Rabbi Slept Late* (1964) and forms a key theme in *Conversations with Rabbi Small* (1981); Wolf's *A Tale of Two Rabbis* (2017b) also addresses the topic. The question of "Who is a Jew?" and the matter of patrilineal descent are explored in Telushkin's *An Eye For An Eye* (1992, 43–48). The inclusion of queer identities in later novels further reflects the growing openness toward such matters characteristic of our day; Rabbi Cohen's lesbian niece and her family constitute a recurring subplot in the Schneider novels, while Rabbi Ben Maimon interacts with a biracial lesbian couple in Wolf's *A Tale of Two Rabbis* (2017b).

Through their rabbi-protagonists, the authors illuminate the diverse aspects of Judaism, both practical and spiritual, thereby making it accessible to their readers.

SOCIAL CRITIQUE OF AMERICAN JEWS AND AMERICAN VALUES

As outsiders within, the rabbi-sleuths critically observe both the broader society and the Jewish community. Kemelman's Rabbi Small frequently critiques both. In *Friday the Rabbi Slept Late*, for instance, Kemelman hints at his disapproval of the congregation's values when, at the end of the novel, they seem to appreciate their rabbi not for helping to catch a murderer but for his cost-saving suggestion to install a gate in the synagogue parking lot instead of lights. The Kemelman novels, set over a span of more than three decades (ca. 1964–1996)—a period encompassing not only the Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars, but also the evolving relationship between rabbi and congregants (Elazar and Geffen Monson 1982; Wertheimer 2005)—engage with controversial issues, which can be interpreted as criticism.²³ For example, the question of the increasing role of women in congregational life is addressed in *Thursday the Rabbi Walked Out*, where women serve on the board of directors and seek active participation in services (1978, 14–16, 43–46). These issues, however, persisted even after women entered the rabbinate, as reflected in the women rabbi-sleuth novels (Prell 2007; Fishman 2009; Nadell 2009). We suggest that the emergence of women rabbi-sleuths is connected to two key developments: first, the entry of the feminist detective in the late 1980s, which led to the broader proliferation of female detectives in fiction (DellaCava and Engel 2002; Irons 1995); and second, the ordination of the first woman rabbi in America in 1972, followed by hundreds more (Nadell 2005, 2007; Maher 2007). The challenges faced by women rabbis are covered in many of the novels discussed here. At the start of Telushkin's *The Unorthodox Murder of Rabbi Wahl*, Rabbi Wahl berates her synagogue for being "singularly unliberated" after

22. For the role of the Holocaust in American fiction, see for example, Lemberger 2015.

23. For the changes in the Jewish community, see for example: J. Sarna 2004; Kaplan 2009; Wertheimer 2018. For a paper that studies a number of factors in the changing characteristics of American Jewry nowadays, see Windmueller 2017.

she learns that her contract as assistant rabbi will not be renewed because she is too political, which she understands as too feminist (1987, 25). Even the protagonist, Rabbi Winter, regards her a radical (15). In the Rabbi Aviva Cohen series, as mentioned earlier, a breakaway congregation is formed in protest against having a woman rabbi (Schneider 2012, 9; 88). In Herst's *Rabbi Gabrielle's Scandal*, the first novel in the series, Rabbi Gabrielle thinks that the board hesitates to choose her as their new rabbi primarily because of her gender (2016a, 25). The diverse attitudes expressed toward women's roles in congregational life and later, as rabbis, serve as critiques voiced by the authors through their rabbi protagonists.

The real-life conflict between rabbis and their lay leadership is a recurring theme in the novels, which serves as critical commentary on the structure of American Jewish organizational life. Congregational rabbis typically have a contractual relationship with their synagogue, with the threat of dismissal by the board of directors perpetually looming over their shoulders. This dynamic makes David Small's long tenure particularly remarkable. Both Telushkin's Daniel Winter and Galyan's David Cohen clash with their synagogue presidents, who raise the possibility of terminating their contracts (Telushkin 1992, 171; Galyan 2013, 167). In Roger Herst's first Rabbi Gabby novel, she is asked to step in as an interim for the senior rabbi following his abrupt resignation. As a single, childless woman, however, she is not the board's first choice for a permanent appointment (2016a, 25–26).²⁴ Schneider's Aviva Cohen critiques several aspects of rabbinic employment, such as low wages (2007, 143) and ageism that favors younger rabbis (2012, 18–19). Moreover, most novels portray synagogue boards frequently engaging in petty criticisms of their rabbis, in line with the "tradition" of censuring one's rabbi (Telushkin 1992, 167–72; Schneider 2012, 72–73; Galyan 2013, 163–67).

While the examples of criticism above are primarily directed at the Jewish community, some can also be interpreted as critiques of broader American society, such as the preference for younger over older employees or the unjustified fear of HIV carriers mentioned in the Wolf novels. However, as detective fiction is a genre of popular literature aimed at a wide readership, rabbi-sleuth novels generally avoid being controversial or contentious, and criticism of the general audience is minimal.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Although Jewish characters have appeared in detective fiction almost since the genre's inception in the nineteenth century, they are virtually non-existent as detectives in works by non-Jewish authors.²⁵ As Diane Arbin Ben-Merre notes, "It was not until the 1960s, with the success of Harry Kemelman's Rabbi Small series, that Jewish

24. In *A Kiss for Rabbi Gabrielle* (2021, 192), Gabby remarks that rabbis must be politically astute to work with the synagogue board of directors.

25. For a general overview, see Koplowitz-Breier (2020). For Jews in detective fiction, see Ludewig (2012, 9–24). For Jews in British detective fiction, see Turnbull (1998).

figures began to enter the traditional mystery [stories] as significant characters” (1998, 57). This article has demonstrated that Kemelman’s Rabbi Small appreciably influenced the authors of the rabbi-sleuth series discussed. These rabbis not only solve mysteries but also elucidate Judaism and what it means to be Jewish. They serve as spokespersons for their communities to the non-Jewish world. And, as outsiders within, they act as vehicles for social critique of both American Jews and broader American values.

The credibility of these fictional rabbis as representatives of real-life rabbis largely depends upon the writer’s craft. Words per se do not make a fictional rabbi plausible, just as words alone do not make a real-life rabbi authentic. Readers typically accept or reject a character as credible based on their own experiences: Does the fictional rabbi resemble a real rabbi they have known or could reasonably imagine? Are the rabbi’s actions believable within the given context? Accepting a figure’s credibility, however, is distinct from approving of their actions. For instance, in fiction as in the real world, a rabbi may be convincing yet unprincipled, or compassionate and kind yet unconvincing in their sincerity. Furthermore, a work of fiction does not need to be scientifically, sociologically, or statistically accurate. It usually presents only a snapshot of a particular event, as providing full context is nearly impossible. Authors also often place their characters in dramatic, or occasionally melodramatic, situations. As Wendy Zierler notes, Rabbi Gabrielle Lewyn’s portrayal in the first book is “problematic,” with her “sleuth-like” actions unfolding in a plot that is “nothing short of incredible” (2016, 719). In subsequent volumes, her feats further stretch the limits of plausibility. While leading a congregation of three thousands family units with just one associate rabbi, she also finds time to uncover an illicit arms operation, consider running for Congress, transport radioactive materials across state lines, and almost become a professional tennis player! Similarly, Marvin Wolf’s Rabbi Ben Maimon at times resembles a comic book superhero performing implausible feats. David Small’s rigid and uncompromising nature makes it difficult to imagine him being a long-term leader of his congregation. In contrast, Sheyna Galyan’s Rabbi David Cohen series provides the most consistent and realistic depiction of rabbinic life, with all its stresses and strains.

As Robert Paul observes, the “points at which the detective story touches theology are those at which it shows how the writer . . . think[s] about the universe, the order by which it is governed, and what this means for the human condition” (1991, 14). Writers who create clergy detectives often reflect (on) concrete theological and religious aspects; Jewish writers, such as Kemelman, are thus expected to “present a Jewish viewpoint, Roman Catholic writers like G. K. Chesterton, Msgr. Ronald Knox, and Ralph McInerny to offer a Roman Catholic stance, and liberal Protestants like Charles Merrill Smith to illustrate the presuppositions of liberal Protestantism” (13). This argument is substantiated by the rabbi-sleuths discussed herein. David Small, Daniel Winter, David Cohen, Aviva Cohen, Gabrielle Lewyn, and Ben Maimon consistently find opportunities to educate their fellow Jews, interested lay people, and often law enforcement personnel about Jewish beliefs, rituals, and traditions.

Several factors can explain the choice of rabbis/clergypersons as sleuths in fiction. Charmaine Mosby elaborates on this, stating:

The training in theology and counseling that members of the clergy receive helps them to see the weaknesses and strengths of their parishioners. They thus presumably also possess special talent in analyzing the character of others. Moreover, their synagogues and churches constitute the kinds of limited social groups required in cozy mysteries. (2008, 2136)

Talmudic scholars are trained to ask questions and seek answers, and rabbinic studies include psychological and social studies training. This combination uniquely equips rabbi-sleuths to unravel the mysteries that come their way.

Besides, as noted earlier, rabbis possess the dual advantage of being both a part of their congregations and apart from them. As outsiders within, they have an intrinsic understanding of the Jewish community while also maintaining an extrinsic perspective. Representing the Jewish world to the broader society, they likewise mediate between the non-Jewish entities, particularly the police, and Jewish communities. These dynamics, evident throughout the novels analyzed, ensure the success of their protagonists not only as sleuths but, more significantly, as rabbi-sleuths—a novel idea indeed. ■

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