

A hatchet job and the Holocaust

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Despite Irene Nemirovsky, author of *Suite Française*, having died in Auschwitz, the left have turned her into a self-hating Jew.

Nemirovsky had been arrested in France in 1942, being a foreign Jew, and deported to Auschwitz where she died of typhus. Her final book, written in the shadow of the Holocaust, survived in manuscript and was recently 'discovered' by her daughter. The book has become an international best-seller. Nemirovsky's other books, long out of print, are now being republished and translated into English. *Suite Française* consists of two novellas set during the invasion of France and early days of the WWII occupation. It is a charming, poignant read that explores the lives of people living in extraordinary circumstances. It is well worth reading irrespective of any other consideration.

In a recent *The New Republic* article 'Scandale Française' Ruth Franklin describes the background story to the book as spin and 'worse, it was a fraud'. Franklin's article has been republished in both the *Australian Financial Review* and the *Weekend Australian*. It is an ugly piece that spends too much time judging Nemirovsky's motives rather than her literature. Franklin's usage of the word 'fraud' invites us to believe that perhaps Nemirovsky didn't die in Auschwitz, or perhaps someone else wrote the novel more recently, and so on. But the background story to *Suite Française* is not a literary hoax. Rather, we're told, Nemirovsky is 'the very definition of a self-hating Jew'. Franklin, however, provides no examples of self-hating Christians for comparative pur-

poses. Nemirovsky is a 'fraud' because she published in right wing journals, and had right wing friends, because she assimilated into the French mainstream and even converted to Catholicism. It seems Franklin is outraged that such an unworthy person had the gall to die in Auschwitz. Frankly, this is the worst form of snobbery imaginable. Franklin gives new meaning to the word 'irony' when she writes:

In an irony that could have come directly from her own fiction, Nemirovsky would die alone in an eastern country, far from her family, and leave behind a fortune in manuscripts—'thus fulfilling till the end the incomprehensible destiny of every good Jew on this earth'.

Much of Franklin's criticism revolves around Nemirovsky's first major success, *David Golder*. This novel is not in the same class as *Suite Française*. *Golder* is a Jewish banker with no redeeming features. Bankers, Jewish or otherwise, are not much loved characters in literature. The opening scene sees him destroying his business partner. He is gruff and money obsessed. *Golder*, however, is not a one-dimensional caricature. He is surrounded by sponges, and is manipulated by the women in his life—his wife Gloria and daughter Joyce. He sacrifices his health to provide for his family, particularly Joyce. When he dies, alone and unloved, he has nothing to show for his life. Nemirovsky peels away the layers of his character to reveal a very different person to his public persona. To the extent that this novel can be described as anti-Semitic, it is a subtle form of subversion.

Suite Française has no Jewish characters at all. Franklin opines that Ne-



mirovsky might have been incapable of creating sympathetic Jewish characters, but chastises her for creating sympathetic German characters. Franklin argues that Nemirovsky herself was friendly with the Germans occupying the French town where she had taken refuge. Of course, this says more about the average German and about Franklin's own prejudice than it does about Nemirovsky. Franklin manages to sneer at Nemirovsky's June 25, 1941 diary entry, 'I am resolving now never to hold rancor, however justified it might be, toward a group of people, whatever their race, religion, conviction, prejudices, errors'. Franklin should reflect on that statement and its sentiment.

It is possible to read and enjoy *Suite Française* without any knowledge of the author and her life story. This would be surprising to many reviewers, especially post-modernists. Readers who continually look for the missing voice, the missing perspective, or the dispossessed are imposing their own values and prejudices on literature.

Good literature that explores the human condition need not always be written by saints. It is too easy to look back in moral indignation and find individuals wanting. It is lazy thinking and lazy writing.



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