Review of *An Obsession with Anne Frank: Meyer Levin and the Diary* by Lawrence Graver

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In a diary entry dated June 21, 1942, Anne Frank gleefully records her effect on the opposite sex:

> I expect you will be rather surprised at the fact that I should talk of boy friends at my age. Alas, one simply can't seem to avoid it at our school. As soon as a boy asks if he may bicycle home with me and we get into conversation, nine times out of ten times I can be sure that he will fall head over heels in love immediately and simply won’t allow me out of his sight. After a while it cools down of course, especially as I take little notice of his ardent looks and pedal blithely on.¹

Despite (or because of) her death at Bergen-Belsen, in the spring of 1945, Anne Frank’s charisma remains intact—but her charms have become more complicated, mired in the politics of representation, history, and identity. Lawrence Graver’s meticulously researched new book, *An Obsession with Anne Frank*, traces the curious history of a semi-successful novelist, Meyer Levin, and his disastrous and self-absorbed “love affair” with the dead girl’s *Diary*.

In 1945, Levin became one of the first American witnesses to the car-

nage at Bergen-Belsen. "My comprehension," he wrote later of the scene, "seemed to me like an electrical instrument whose needle has only a limited range, while the charge goes far beyond" (8-9). He did not feel equipped to represent the Holocaust, he insisted, but he hoped that "someday a teller would arise" from among the dead themselves. When Levin read the French edition of Anne’s Diary, in the summer of 1950, he felt that a teller had indeed arisen: “As I read, I must have gazed down on the body of this young girl…the voice reached me from the pit” (15). Anne’s Diary had not yet been translated into English; Levin immediately contacted Anne’s father, Otto Frank, and offered to help him bring the book to America.

Levin’s image of Anne Frank, then, was of a corpse speaking “from the pit” and representing all of the Jews who died in the Holocaust. Levin entered into an informal partnership with Otto Frank, secured a publishing contract with Doubleday, and even wrote a glowing review of Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl in the New York Times Book Review without revealing his personal investment in the book’s success. Levin’s partnership with Otto Frank began to unravel, however, when Broadway and Hollywood came knocking: Levin wanted exclusive permission to adapt the Diary for stage and screen, while Otto Frank and his editors at Doubleday wanted to shop around for other writers. Graver delivers the (often dry) details of this dispute with a detachment that never entirely sides with either Frank or Levin—a feat, considering the depths to which Levin eventually sank.

In a spectacularly bad P.R. move, Levin eventually brought a lawsuit against Otto Frank, charging “fraud, breach of contract, and wrongful appropriation of ideas” (120). Levin’s legal complaints were that the writers who had been chosen to dramatize Anne’s Diary, Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, had stolen his ideas; that Otto Frank had given him the implicit rights to the Diary; and that his artistic freedoms were being violated because Frank and his attorneys refused to allow Levin to stage his version of it. However, Levin bolstered his essentially personal vendetta with a broader claim that—however self-serving—nonetheless made a valid point: he argued that, in adapting Anne Frank’s story for the stage, Goodrich and Hackett—with Otto Frank’s approval—deliberately downplayed the Franks’s Jewishness and the specific historical context of anti-Semitism.

Graver’s assembled evidence—quietly amassed and displayed, without much analysis—shows that the Franks’s Jewish identity was not very central to their everyday lives until Hitler made it central. After the war, Otto Frank chose to adopt a universalist interpretation of his family’s suffering, emphasizing Anne’s personal courage rather than her courage as a
Jew. In a letter to Levin, for instance, Frank insists that “Anne’s book is not a war book. War is the background. It is not a Jewish book either, though Jewish sphere, sentiment, and surrounding is the background” (54). Frank was understandably committed to remembering his daughter as a living individual, not as a representative Jewish corpse speaking “from the pit.” And yet there are dangers to universalism; as Levin put it, presciently, “To take out ‘Jewish suffering’ and to put in ‘all people suffer’ is to equalize the Holocaust with any kind of disaster. If you do this, you unhook the search for meaning, you unhook the wrong to the Jews. Then you go on over the years with statements like, ‘There weren’t six million. There were four million. There were two million. There were a lot of Russians and Poles who were killed in the camps. So the Jews are just exaggerating’” (90).

In *An Obsession with Anne Frank*, Graver is at his best when he sticks to the court reports, letters, and publicity surrounding Levin’s painful fight to have his version of the *Diary* recognized and produced. These sections raise thought-provoking questions about the ownership of symbols (and of children), the limits of both universalism and identity politics, and even the nature of evil. Unfortunately, Graver is also a literary critic, and Levin was a novelist. The least interesting parts of *An Obsession with Anne Frank* are the extended analyses of Levin’s okay-but-not-great novels like *The Stronghold* (1965) and *The Settlers* (1972). These give us more insight into Levin—a rather unpleasantly self-dramatizing individual—than we want or need. Levin becomes interesting and complicated only in relation to his obsession: the interesting and complicated Anne Frank.

As *An Obsession with Anne Frank* shows, Levin was his own worst enemy: in his efforts to promote Anne Frank as the “teller” of a specifically Jewish story, he undermined himself by launching badly-timed and badly-worded public attacks against Otto Frank. By contrast, Graver’s book does what Levin wanted (but failed) to do: it politicizes Anne Frank, elegantly placing her at the center of a debate that is still worth debating. Most Americans encounter the *Diary* in primary or secondary school. However, like the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Anne Frank can be deeply satisfying to those who return to it in adulthood. Lawrence Graver’s book sent me back to Anne Frank’s book, and although Anne Frank herself is full of adolescent chat about the difficulty and the importance of being Anne Frank, *An Obsession with Anne Frank* explains exactly why “Anne Frank” continues to be a difficult and important—and contested—identity.

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