

Keeping history at bay: absent presences in
three recent Jewish American novels.

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Keeping History at Bay: Absent Presences in Three Recent Jewish American Novels

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Abstract

This essay discusses the impact of the Holocaust on three novels written by third-generation Jewish American authors: Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated and Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, and Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love*. Each novel, it is argued, carries Derridean traces of the Holocaust and its victims: the bombing of the Ukrainian village of Trachimbrod, the Jewish victim Simon Goldberg, and the Jewish Polish author Bruno Schulz haunt these texts as absent presences that allow the characters—and the authors—to keep history at bay.



**KEEPING HISTORY AT BAY:
ABSENT PRESENCES IN THREE
RECENT JEWISH AMERICAN
NOVELS**

Philippe Codde

The origin of a story is always an absence.

—Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*

Born into a family started by the children of survivors, we talked about life. What came before was not so much unspoken as it was relegated to all that was past. And yet somehow, despite this, I cannot recall a time when I did not understand in my blood, that above all else the one thing I must do was remember. But remember what?

—Nicole Krauss, "On Forgetting"

As a watershed event in human history, the painful ramifications of the Holocaust extend well beyond the generations that actually lived through it or perished because of it. Much groundbreaking research has already been done on the psychological condition of the children of Holocaust survivors—the so-called "2Gs" (members of the second generation) in the words of Melvin Jules Bukiet.¹ However, what few commentators have considered so far is the impact of the Holocaust on the later generations—those who were not directly affected by the event, but who nevertheless seem to carry the burden of this trau-

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