

Barbara Kay: Herman Wouk's work didn't just speak to me, it sang

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Mathematicians' creativity, I often hear, peaks before age 30, and that of historians before 40. Artists are luckier, some remaining creative into old age. Even so, American writer Herman Wouk, who died last week at 103, was uniquely blessed, having written his first book in 1947, and his last in 2015.

Paradoxically, his name will likely produce instant recognition only amongst my own generation, whose coming of age coincided with his most celebrated books, *The Caine Mutiny* (made into a gripping 1954 film starring Humphrey Bogart as the tormented and tormenting Captain Queeg), and *Marjorie Morningstar* (portrayed by Natalie Wood in the 1958 film).

The latter novel, which was published to instant sensation in 1955 was, in today's parlance, one of the most "relatable" books of my impressionable late teen years. Commentary magazine's Norman Podhoretz critiqued *Marjorie Morningstar* heavily for its simplistic conflict between bourgeois conformity and Bohemian rebellion, but conceded it was "the first novel to treat American Jews intimately as Jews without making them seem exotic." But I am witness that it certainly spoke to my generation of Jewish girls. Indeed, it didn't just speak to me; it sang.

Wouk's trajectory was unusual for its eclecticism

Perhaps I was a bit simplistic myself, but I tended to see my future like *Marjorie*, through a binary lens: nice, bourgeois Jewish girl cocooned in privilege, with a small talent for stage comedy, and friendly to the world, because why not, she had never known unfriendliness from it (think of a less talented Marvellous Mrs. Maizel, only in a Forest Hill house, not a New York apartment), and having to choose between a near-replication of that life and the uncharted waters of the entertainment world, riddled with charismatic, but non-committal egoists. How I suffered with *Marjorie*!

In this and other novels, Wouk introduced readers to Judaism as a lived religion by fully integrated, middle-class Jews with full consciousness of, and gratitude for, their luck in the immigration draw, and as well to the complicated social culture produced by the marriage of traditional American ideals with the weighty demands of traditional Hebraic morality. (I remember my mother reading Wouk's 1959 apologia for Orthodox Judaism, *This is My God* — still in print — with reverence.) Neither of these cultural strains has been in vogue for decades, of course. America's ideals are of less interest to cultural elites than their nation's manifold failings, and Hebraic morality is of interest only to Orthodox Jews and cultural archeologists.

Wouk's trajectory was unusual for its eclecticism. At Columbia University, a knack for witty writing announced itself, and he became editor of the campus humour magazine, which he later parlayed into a lucrative job writing gags for famous radio comedian Fred Allen. That gave him insights into the narcissism running rampant in the world of entertainment, effectively deployed in his novels (including *The Lawgiver*, a light-hearted epistolary take on Hollywood's treatment of the life of Moses, written when Wouk was 97!).

When the fun of gag-writing palled, he concentrated more on the observant Jewish lifestyle he had temporarily abandoned. Then Pearl Harbor propelled him into Navy service in the Pacific as an officer on destroyers. His tenure gave him experience in eight invasions, which provided him several battle stars, and creative fodder for *The Caine Mutiny*, his one novel to win a Pulitzer Prize.

By early middle age Judaism and American patriotism had established themselves as the twin lodestars of his writing life.

In time his sweeping novels of the Second World War and the Holocaust, *The Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance* — considered by some critics to be the finest reader-friendly histories of their kind — were made into enormously successful TV mini-series. In 1945 Wouk married a civilian Navy employee, Betty Sarah Brown, who converted to Judaism and became Wouk's literary agent as well as mother to their three sons (one of whom died in a swimming accident in 1951). He was financially and domestically secure for life, and a cultural star, by the mid-1950s. Wouk was conservative by temperament and inheritance, his father having been a Russian immigrant "haunted by yearning for America." From his prolific oeuvre, I recommend his highly entertaining book, *Inside Outside*, for any new reader curious to understand Wouk's personal journey. In this densely plotted, comedic 1985 novel, the narrator/protagonist, a lawyer working as a speech writer for Richard Nixon in the season of Watergate, tells us, "Most of my friends are dyed-in-the-wool eastern liberals content to sit up nights hating the president and wishing that he would

drop dead.” (Plus ça change ...)

Codes of conduct — religion, the military, gender relations, politics, Hollywood — were grist to his creative mill. Most of those Wouk upheld, however, passed out of general use before he died. New codes govern our culture now. Ironically enough, Wouk is pronounced “woke.”