Jewish tradition and ritual figure prominently in the novels and documentaries of contemporary Austrian and German Jewish artists. Barbara Honigmann, formerly of East Germany and now living in France, opens her 1991 novel *Eine Liebe aus nichts* [*A Love Made Out of Nothing*] with the funeral of her protagonist’s father. Novelist Vladimir Vertlib centers his 2003 mystery novel *Letzter Wunsch* [*Last Wish*] on the difficulties a son faces in granting his father’s request for proper burial beside his wife. Filmmaker Ruth Beckermann’s documentary *Zorro’s Bar Mitzvah* (2006) celebrates bar and bat mitzvahs in twenty-first-century Vienna. With their insistence on uniting past and future by means of the rituals of death and mourning, the three most recent novels of Austrian writer Anna Mitgutsch (b. 1948) offer post-Holocaust narratives for families lost from the continuity of generations. Known among literary scholars as grand “narratives of memory,” *Haus der Kindheit* [*House of Childhood*] (2000), *Familienfest* [*Family Gathering*] (2003), and *Wenn du wiederkommst* [*When You Return*] (2010), identify the on-going practice of ritual as the dynamic connecting a past remembered to a life fulfilled.

All three of Mitgutsch’s latest novels counter death and loss with narratives of Jewish family tradition and ritual and, incidentally, are set primarily in the United States. In *House of Childhood*, protagonist Max Berman is the youngest son of Jewish immigrants who escaped the fate of their extended family murdered by the National Socialists. Able finally to reclaim and restore his mother’s family home after a lengthy legal battle,
Berman returns to Austria and reestablishes the suppressed history of the Jews by chronicling the individual life stories of members of Jewish families who had lived in the region for over seven centuries. As surrounding novel, House of Childhood forms its own commemorative frame-story to broaden the scope of Max Berman’s “Chronicle of Jewish Life.” As Regina Kecht argues, Mitgutsch’s novel belongs to the tradition of Yizkor Bikher, or memorial books for future generations, which document and describe Jewish communities in Eastern Europe destroyed during the Holocaust.6 Family Gathering, the story of an immigrant family that spans the 20th century, embodies their reenactment of the Pesach Seder and contrasts it with an American Thanksgiving dinner.7 In this novel, Mitgutsch explores how consecutive generations living in the United States perceive and adapt to their evolving sense of a transnational Jewish identity. Central to When You Return are the Jewish rituals of mourning, and this article will focus on how Mitgutsch translates the practice of these rituals into the art of narrative.

When You Return begins in Boston with an April encounter between the European protagonist Michal and her Jewish-American ex-husband Jerome, both well past middle age and exploring the tenuous rebirth of their love. The rest of the novel is devoted to the protagonist’s response to the sudden death of her ex-partner, the father of her only child. In the attempt, written in the first person, to fathom the loss of the most significant person in her adult life, Michal initially realizes that the rupture of death has left her speechless and helpless. Indeed, the novel represents the narrator’s work of mourning or Trauerarbeit, her attempt to process her traumatic loss by writing her way out of the dark silent void into which her beloved friend’s death plunges her.8 Clearly, the work of grieving is by necessity creative work, as Michal continually probes the limits of human understanding, of what can be explained or articulated in the face of death.

In the initial stages of mourning Michal’s approach to the death of her ex-husband Jerome must follow other narratives of death, as her

8 The protagonist manifests the features that Sigmund Freud identifies as central in the grieving work that must be completed if an individual is to reach closure, i.e. for the ego to become free and uninhibited again. (Sigmund Freud, “Trauer und Melancholie (1917),” in Das Ich und das Es: Metapsychologische Schriften. Ed. Alex Holder (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2007): 171-189.
daughter Ilana surmises. The grieving Michal thus places herself implicitly in the role of Orpheus in pursuit of his beloved Eurydice; like Orpheus, she comes to realize that in the face of death both present and future stand foreclosed.

Mourning her beloved, Michal hovers at first in a space beyond reason and language. Struggling to articulate what the death of her dearest friend means, she describes that loss as “inconceivable, the elusive and most alien strangeness . . . [I]n the face of death, words lose their meaning; only silence is appropriate.” She finds, however, that through words she can, to a degree, keep him present by describing spaces they inhabited together: Boston and the park bench where they met for the last time, the events and discussions that make up a lifetime. Photographs and possessions, too, allow her to re-imagine his life and to recall their life together. Ultimately, the novel represents Michal’s process of remembering, indeed reviving, her life partner Jerome, a mode of repeating both their life together and her loss translated and adapted into a literary form. The process of translating, and taming, the past into a literary present allows the narrator space and time to begin to work through and gain what Dominick LaCapra calls “a critical distance . . . to be able to distinguish between the past, present and future.” Michal never truly transcends the traumatic loss of her life partner in the novel, however. The past, too, remains unsettled and incomplete.

The protagonist in When You Return, thus, understands quickly that even without Jerome, she can retell his life and relive their moments together, but these memories will always only be truncated, incomplete. Ultimately, she cannot know or gain entry into his own experiences, “his truth” (210); she cannot bring all of him back. In a series of lectures on

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9 Ilana surmises: “Can we access death, is there a way to approach death that is not already altered by the many stories about death?” (“Gibt es überhaupt einen Zugang zum Tod, einen Weg, sich ihm zu nähern, der nicht von den Geschichten über den Tod verstellen ist?”), (Ibid., 66).

10 In her interview on 3-Sat television broadcast in Germany, she speaks of this as a Orpheus and Euridice adaptation:

11 “[Der Tod] ist das Undenkbare, die uneinholbare, fremdeste Fremdheit… vor dem Tod verlieren die Wörter ihren Sinn, nur das Schweigen ist angemessen” (Mitgutsch, Wenn du wiederkommst, 12-13).

12 See the discussion about the application of Freud’s “acting out” and “working through” theory with regard to trauma in Amos Goldberg, “An Interview with Dominick LaCapra. Cornell University. June 9, 1988, Jerusalem,” taken from Yad Vashem Shoah Resource Center:
poetics, entitled *Erinnern und Erfinden* [Remembering and Inventing],\textsuperscript{13} held at the University of Graz in the winter of 1998-99, Mitgutsch spoke of the complex relationship between memory and fiction. For her, as a writer, memory is crucial to the perception and construction of identity, for it is our internal means of making sense of external events. Yet, she cautions, “[R]egardless of how meticulous our memory might be, it can never bring to light reality, those events that happened; instead it can only reveal our subjective reactions, our feelings, emotions, segments of a whole yet never fully reconstructible reality.”\textsuperscript{14} Michal also recognizes that memory remains a subjective interpretation of her emotional response to past events. Moreover, not only are her memories fragmentary, they are also unfixed and difficult to order. Over time, as her emotions fluctuate, her memories of Jerome drift in and out of a number of stages commonly associated with the mourning process: denial, anger, depression, and, to a certain extent, acceptance. Yet those memories never move beyond or away from Jerome in *When You Return*. The narrative is dedicated entirely to his memory.

Knowing that access to the dead is closed to the living, the protagonist’s daughter Ilana embraces ritual as the only form of mourning that can protect individuals from irrationality and those darker dangers that threaten the bereaved. Interestingly, it is the daughter who instructs her mother in how to cope with traumatic loss and leads her to the observance of Jewish ritual. Ilana tells her mother: “[M]ourning is perhaps not possible except in ritualized forms if it is not to become too irrational, even too dangerous.”\textsuperscript{15} Ilana finds solace in reciting the *Kaddish*, the mourner’s prayer, regularly for her father – a way, she tells her mother, to please her father everyday, a way to honor him, to keep him alive in her mind. Although her mother initially claims that “neither God nor rituals can save her”\textsuperscript{16} from the profound confusion of her loss of identity and sense of belonging, the novel remains fixed on the traditional and religious Judaic rituals that seek to comprehend death through bereavement. This “anatomy of mourning,”\textsuperscript{17} as the protagonist-narrator

\textsuperscript{13} Anna Mitgutsch, *Erinnern und Erfinden Grazer Poetik-Vorlesungen* (Graz: Droschl, 1999).

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 7 [“Im besten Fall gibt uns unsere Erinnerung nicht die Wirklichkeit wieder, sondern eine relativ genaue bildliche Interpretation unserer damaligen Gefühlsreaktion”].

\textsuperscript{15} “Vielleicht . . . ist Trauer gar nicht anders möglich als in ritualisierten Formen, sonst wird sie zu maßlos, zu gefährlich” (Mitgutsch, *Wenn du wiederkommst*, 199).

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 199.

\textsuperscript{17} After the first 30 days, the protagonist revisits the old haunts where she and Jerome spent special moments and observes: “I sit here on the bench with a future that has been severed from the past und life appears to me like an
terms her year of intimate monologue, proceeds according to Jewish tradition, for Michal connects her stages of grief and emotional turmoil with her observance and practice of the rituals of Jewish mourning. Michal proceeds to recapitulate chronologically the mourning process from the moment of receiving the news of the death of her life partner; to the gathering of the Chevra Kaddisha (the Jewish burial society) and their preparation of the body, the funeral service and burial; the practice of Krijah, the rending of one’s garment as an expression of grief; the recitations of the Mincha (afternoon prayers) and Kaddish (mourning prayers); and the formal stages of mourning, i.e. aninut (“intense mourning”) and the periods of avelut, the three distinct periods within the first full year of mourning. Chapter three, four, and six of the novel are titled “Shiva,” “Schloshim,” and “Yahrzeit” to mark the observance of rituals on the first seven days, thirty days, and the twelve-month anniversary of death. As Mitgutsch explained in an interview during the 2010 Leipzig Book Fair, religions, including Judaism, acknowledge the pain of loss and provide a space for the long and complex process of mourning. The Jewish rituals of mourning in When You Return provide a structure to house the protagonist’s memories of Jerome, her Jeremia. The lifetime of memories recounted in Michal’s narrative find their proper home during that ritual year of grief and mourning.

Among the mostly positive reviews that accompanied publication of When You Return, some reviewers found the enactment of ritual in When You Return too pronounced. For Sabine Doering, Michal’s descriptions seem like those of an eager convert’s introduction to modern Jewish religion and culture. And for Gudrun Hamböck of the ORF, the rituals in the novel dissolve into a diluted Americanized variant. Mitgutsch does indeed provide her German-speaking readers in all three of her latest novels—House of Childhood, Family Gathering, and When You Return—with a

unfathomable secret sealed by the alien sense of death which makes me shudder. The bench is my stage for the second act which will not take place . . . for this is a one-act play and is called “Anatomy of Mourning.” [Ich sitze auf der Bank mit meiner von der Zukunft abgeschnittenen Vergangenheit, und das Leben erscheint mir wie ein unergründliches, mit der Fremdheit des Todes versiegeltes Geheimnis, vor dem mir schaudert. Die Bank ist meine Bühne für den zweiten Akt, der nicht stattfinden wird . . . es ist ein Ein-Personenstück und heißt: Die Anatomie der Trauer.” (Ibid., 203)]

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18 See footnote 8.
19 See Sabine Doering’s review of Sept. 13, 2010 that appeared in the Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung.
glossary of both Hebrew and Americanized religious and cultural terms. Whether for worse, or perhaps for better, all three novels present the contemporary practice of Jewish ritual within their prescribed American contexts.

Significantly, in Anna Mitgutsch’s elegiac *When You Return*, the poetic translation of the practice of traditional Jewish rituals of mourning is rendered by a woman who remains on the fringes of both the Jewish and the American mainstream, a convert to Judaism. Certainly, the fringes or borderlands signify for Mitgutsch the most productive and promising space for deeper insights into the mysteries of human existence.\(^1\) In *When You Return*, she places Michal within those same margins, including the margin between life and death, thereby “forcing her thoughts like a knife into the invisible fissure of transition between life and death.”\(^2\) Indeed, Mitgutsch situates her protagonist-narrator on the periphery in other contexts throughout the novel as well. As an emigrant to the United States, Michal organizes her life on the continental divide between Europe and America. In her words, “[T]he two continents gravitated away from one another, in opposite directions. But I had set up my life in both and had placed my sense of balance on the fact that I could flee from one to the other at any time.”\(^3\)

As Jerome’s ex-wife, Michal feels displaced by those family members who also mourn his loss. With some bitterness she realizes that although she and Jerome shared 20 years as husband and wife, followed by fifteen years as “Lebenspartner” or “partners in life,” there is no longer a sanctified role for her in his life, no fitting recognition of her life with Jerome beyond their marriage. At his funeral she can find no place for her mourning among his family and friends. Sitting *shiva* at their home in Boston, she feels herself an outsider among the mourners. There is no mention of her in his death notice, and no acknowledgement of their lives

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\(^{22}\) Ibid., 69.

together marks his gravestone. She recognizes that: “In the hierarchy of mourning family members, I do not deserve any consideration, and my grief alienates them.”24 No space belongs to her inside the community of the bereaved.

As a convert to Judaism, Michal’s place among the mourners was always tenuous. Motivated by her wish as a bride to enter the world of her bridegroom, her conversion provided her with a Jewish name – Michal, her only name in the novel. The decision to convert was not a difficult one, she explains, because she had always felt drawn to Judaism. As a German or Austrian convert to Judaism, she accepted the inherited burden of shame that she must bear her life: “I sensed, too, that I would need to prove my legitimacy again and again and that shame would encumber my entire life . . .”25 Nonetheless, she embraces her decision. The day she returns from the mikvah as Michal, she considers the beginning of her union with Jerome. At the funeral, however, her right to partake in Krijah, the rending of garments as an expression of grief, is questioned by family members until her daughter vouches for the sincerity of her mother’s conversion and affirms the absence of a Get, the Jewish document of divorce. (Michal recounts later in the novel that she and Jerome were not married in a synagogue and thus a Get had been unnecessary.)

Michal remembers that Jerome was born into an identity that he embodied unselfconsciously and for which she has always yearned. She heard that identity in the rhythms and patterns of his speech, his Yiddish expressions and irreverent black humor. She saw it in his gestures and body language, and in his Lebensfreude. She found it in “etwas unbenennbar Atmosphärisches,”27 (“something inexpressively atmospheric,”) in his uncompromising sense of justice, and in his ability to empathize. These very aspects identified him to other Jews as “zugehörig” or belonging.28 Yet Jerome, too, understood himself as an outsider among his fellow Jewish peers in Boston. As a secular Jew, he nevertheless appreciated the services in orthodox Schuls because they reminded him of his childhood among Yiddish-speaking East Europeans, even though he could barely master Kaddish, the central prayer in Jewish liturgy. Nonetheless, he always

24 “In der Hierarchie der trauernden Familie,” she recognizes, “verdiene ich keine Rücksichtnahme, und meine Trauer befremdet sie” (Ibid., 74).
26 The mikvah or mikveh is a bath used to gain ritual purification and is part of the traditional procedure for conversion to Judaism.
27 Ibid., 153.
28 Ibid., 153.
found himself highly irritated by the religious fervor displayed by worshippers in the large liberal synagogues.\textsuperscript{29}

Despite both the intellectual and emotional affinity between Michal and Jerome and their shared extraterritorial realm, as they called it,\textsuperscript{30} their cross-cultural romance was doomed to fail, not only because of Jerome’s infidelity and her fear of being unloved, but also because she felt that she could not understand her love for him.\textsuperscript{31} The marriage was bound to fail, she observes, because they were two people for whom even the most perfect day was shrouded in a “veil of melancholia, of unfulfilled longing” (“Schleier von Melancholie, von unerfüllter Sehnsucht”). With its sense of sadness and longing, When You Return follows the pattern of post-Holocaust love stories between Austrian and German Jews and non-Jews who ultimately cannot stay together because they cannot overcome the legacy of their antithetical pasts, the so-called “negative symbiosis,” as Hannah Arendt and, more recently, Dan Diner have called it. The novel nevertheless bears witness to the difficult love between Jerome and Michal, one that endured, albeit outside of the conventions of marriage.

Jerome’s death forces Michal to revaluate her life and her choices of national, cultural, and religious affiliations. She meticulously documents her personal practice of the rituals of mourning so familiar to Jerome in order to celebrate and honor both his memory and his world. In providing a testament of her love for Jerome, she also validates the significance of Jewish ritual within their lives. As narrator, Michal must grapple not only with those aspects of Judaism that she can embrace but also with those she cannot. As protagonist, Michal revisits her conversion to Judaism as the way to a familiar place, Jerome’s home inside the foreign American culture. From her liminal vantage point, she provides a literary Zeitdokument that traces, however briefly, the historical transformation of American Jewish religious and secular culture during the latter half of the twentieth century, and that encompasses the spirit of optimism prevalent among postwar generations, the cultural events organized in the suburban reformed synagogues, and the experience of belonging and fellowship that seemed to dissipate over the course of several decades.\textsuperscript{32} The narration reflects in particular the evolving role of women within American Judaism, for Michal recognizes that her daughter’s reciting Kaddish at her

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{30} The narrator says: “we lived in an extraterritorial realm, and that was our very own country, neither in America nor Europe, yet both in equal parts” (45). [“wir lebten extraterritorial, und es war ganz und gar unser Land, weder Amerika noch Europa, jedoch von beiden etwas, zu fast gleichen Teilen” (Ibid., 45)]
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 267.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 199-200.
father’s orthodox funeral service expands religious convention. In Michal’s first-person account, the New England Jewish community shows itself to be diverse, both secular and non-secular, and continually evolving. Ilana, her daughter with Jerome, personifies the legacy of contemporary Jewishness – namely, “the enthusiasm and thirst for knowledge” from her mother, the convert, and the “deep-felt appreciation for tradition” from her secular Jewish father.33

Michal carries forward the Jewish ritual of mourning in her narration. Thus, as she passes in front of her large living room mirror, which she realizes should be covered, she recalls that Sylvia Plath, too, iterates that rite in the image, “the mirrors are sheated (sic).”34 Although at first Michal finds the shrouding theatrical rather than genuine, during the shiva week (the first seven days of mourning), she feels the symbolic urgency of the custom.35 Later still, on Yahrzeit (the first anniversary Jerome’s death), the narrator sits alone with her daughter at Jerome’s grave. At a loss for words to express her deepest emotions, she finds relief and comfort in imagining a third-person narrative in the style of Isaac Babel, one of Jerome’s favorite writers. The imagined conversations with Jerome and Isaac give her the answers she needs to step finally beyond the debilitating pain of loss.

In conclusion, When You Return articulates universal themes of love and death even as it reflects a contemporary Jewish response to these emotions. From the margins that separate nations, religions, and cultures, and from the no-man’s land that stands between life and death, Mitgutsch’s protagonist, Michal, narrates her own individualized practice of Jewish mourning that helps her bring order and comfort to this story of loss and death. Just as her practice of ritual and remembering recalls and restores Michal’s love for Jerome, the broader reach of Mitgusch’s vision memorializes a son of East European Holocaust survivors, a member of the second generation who, despite his self-proclaimed secularism, has devoted his life to “Zedeka . . . a sense of charity or

33 “den Entdeckungseifer und die Begeisterung” and “Lebensgefühl der Traditionen” Ibid., 200.
34 Ibid., 123.
35 In fact, she observes in a later mourning stage: “To sheet the mirrors and to neglect one’s own body no longer appears to be a commandment for the bereaved but a natural rejection of the world and proximity to the dead.” [“Die Spiegel zu verhängen und den eigenen Körper zu vernachlässigen erscheint mir nicht mehr als ein Gebot der Trauernden, sondern als natürliche Abkehr von der Welt und Nähe zu den Toten.” (Ibid.,187)] Thus, the ritual of sheeting the mirrors and the impulse to refuse acknowledgment of one’s corporality seem intertwined for the narrator in this instance.
justice, as he understood it, for all"\textsuperscript{36} and to become a Lamed Vav,\textsuperscript{37} a righteous man. Thus, Mitgutsch gives to both Michal and Jerome the life that belongs to art.

In his effort to explore a mode of identity that avoids essentialist (and thereby fixed) notions of Jewishness, through which Jewish particularism is not necessarily situated in opposition to universalism (as philosophers from Alain Badiou to the Nouveaux Philosophes have insisted), Klaus Hödl recently suggested a performative approach. This alternative methodology, increasingly prevalent in contemporary Jewish studies and historiography today, emphasizes, according to Hödl, the process of dialogic exchange, i.e. the practices of interaction among Jews and between Jews and non-Jews in the construction of identities.\textsuperscript{38} As a convert positioned on the periphery of her beloved Jerome’s community, Michal’s personalized performance of the rituals of mourning, reenacted in prose, signifies both the affirmation and transformation of these Jewish rituals. Indeed, in approaching Mitgutsch’s most recent literary fiction in terms of performance, one can understand them as Jewish novels written in German that represent narrative reenactments of Jewish ritual in interaction with transnational secular culture and in relation to history and the universal themes of love, family, and death.

Like \textit{House of Childhood}, published ten years earlier in 2000, \textit{When You Return} is also a memory book imagined on a more highly personalized and intimate scale. Similar as well to her 2003 novel \textit{Family Gathering}, \textit{When You Return} describes Jewish tradition and ritual kept and performed in the United States after the Holocaust in a manner that approaches the secular. Historian David Biale has in fact observed in his recent study of the Jewish secular tradition that “we live in a ‘postsecular’ age, meaning an age in which religion and its negation are no longer polar opposites.”\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 244.

\textsuperscript{37} Mitgutsch includes an explanation of this in her glossary at the end of the novel. See 207. “The Lamed Vav are two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Numerically, they represent 36. Legends tell that in this world, there always live thirty-six men who are also called Tzadikim Nistarim, or the Hidden Just Men. They are usually poor, unknown, obscure, and no one guesses that they are the ones who bear all the sorrows and sins of the world. It is for their sake that God does not destroy the world even when sin overwhelms mankind.” Taken from http://www.pantheon.org/articles/l/lamed_vav.html by Ilil Arbel, Ph.D.


\textsuperscript{39} David Biale, \textit{Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought}, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010). Biale speaks, too, of this as a postsecular age, “meaning an age in which religion and its negation are no longer polar opposites. Religion is
Anna Mitgutsch’s three most recent narratives of ritual, the realms of the “religious” and the “secular” are no longer mutually exclusive or fixed. Remarking on this conjunction of separates, Biale concludes that “[s]ecularism can make no promise of continuity or survival, but it does guarantee the freedom to experiment, without which neither continuity nor survival is possible.” One might therefore call Mitgutsch’s novels narrative performances of Jewish ritual for a “postsecular” age, literary experiments that give expression to alternative ways of partaking in Jewish culture, a transforming experience in which religion and the secular enliven one another.