

A Reader's Companion  
for  
Jamie Wendt's  
*Laughing in Yiddish*  
(Broadstone Books, 2025)

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## Biographical Note

Born in 1987 in the suburbs of Chicago, Jamie Wendt earned a BA in English and a BS in Secondary Education from Drake University and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Nebraska Omaha.

Wendt is the author of *Laughing in Yiddish* (Broadstone Books, 2025), which was a finalist for the 2022 Philip Levine Prize in Poetry. Her debut collection, *Fruit of the Earth* (Main Street Rag, 2018), won the 2019 National Federation of Press Women Book Award in Poetry. Her poems and essays have been published in various literary journals and anthologies, including *Feminine Rising*, *Catamaran*, *Lilith*, *Jet Fuel Review*, *Consequence*, *Atlanta Review*, the *Forward*, *After Hours*, and others. She won third prize in the 2024 Reuben Rose Poetry Competition and won second prize for the 2024 Holloway Free Verse Award through the Illinois State Poetry Society. Wendt has received a Pushcart Prize Honorable Mention and was nominated for Best Spiritual Literature.

She contributes book reviews to the Jewish Book Council among other journals and organizations and is a Poetry Reader for *The Good Life Review*. Wendt is a middle school Humanities teacher and lives in Chicago with her husband and two kids.

## Critical Praise

### *On Laughing in Yiddish*

“In these deeply felt and painstakingly crafted poems, a woman grapples with centuries of Jewish persecution and diaspora. A visitation of ‘[w]inged angels – my ancestors’ opens the book, and it closes with a vow to keep telling the stories of ‘a wound bigger than the humid sky.’ The poems span geography and time, from Wendt’s ancestral roots in Russia to her family’s more recent life in Chicago, passing through pogroms and flight to ‘poverty and perseverance.’ Here you will find an insistence on history and an unflinching gaze on its horrors, held in equipoise with the blessings of family, faith, and tradition. Along the way you’ll hear stories told by Wendt’s grandfather and others, featuring everyday women and men struggling to survive, and more than a few golems. Throughout these poems, Yiddish words and phrases leaven writing that engages with formal tradition—pantoum, ghazal, triolet, ekphrasis—in order to ‘read and wrestle the past.’ *Laughing in Yiddish* is a comfort and a *tikkun olam*, offering a way to endure and remember, remember and endure.”

—**Rebecca Foust**, author of *ONLY* and Marin County Poet Laureate emerita

“Jerusalem, Ancient Egypt, Lithuania, Chicago. Wendt’s striking poems conflate Jewish history, ancestral anecdotes, and contemporary experience. Laden with surprising and pleasurable leaps, *Laughing in Yiddish* movingly reminds us that the past haunts and enriches the present while the present preserves and sweetens the past. This is a luminous book!”

—**Yehoshua November**, author of *The Concealment of Endless Light*

“Drawing on the history of the Jewish people, stories passed down from family to family, the work of Jewish artists (painters, photographers) and personal experience, Jamie Wendt has written a riveting and moving collection of poems. In persona, personal, and ekphrastic poems, Wendt creates a rich portrait of the Jewish people, both in their homelands of eastern Europe and in their displacement to the West, most specifically the city of Chicago. These beautifully crafted poems move from lyric to narrative to Whitmanesque revelations of the people—their work, their rearing of children, the rituals of their faith that hold their communities together, the horrors of war and persecution, their resilience. Wendt manages to deftly reveal the details of these lives and deaths, while at the same time opening our minds and hearts to the big picture. A rare and beautiful book, and just maybe, in these perilous times of rising antisemitism and autocracy, a necessary one.”

—**Jim Peterson**, author of *Towheaded Stone Thrower*

“As a translator from Yiddish, I was thrilled to discover Jamie Wendt’s *Laughing in Yiddish*, a poignant collection of poems that beautifully bridges the vast expanse from the bustling streets of U.S. cities to the historic shtetls of the Pale of Settlement. Delving deep into Jewish history, weaving tales of joy and sorrow, *Laughing in Yiddish* juxtaposes lifestyles that are worlds apart, one where ‘In English, we learned words like tenement, factory, merchandise’ with one where ‘Jews were shot point-blank at Babi Yar.’ Wendt’s evocative verses make us reflect on the

resilience and spirit of the Jewish people, particularly women, bearing witness to suffering and atrocities, yet retaining a constant spark of hope ‘in order to sing, to rise, to hallelujah.’”

—**Rose Waldman**, Yiddish translator of *Pioneers: The First Breach* by S. An-Sky

“Wendt’s language is lyrical and visceral, an ongoing dialogue between past and present... Throughout the collection, we meet a cast of family members and historical figures whose stories are preserved through lyric and prose poems. Ekphrastic works further enrich the collection’s narrative depth, imagistically holding historical moments in time.”

—**Lizzy Itkin**, from her book review of *Laughing in Yiddish* published in *Tupelo Quarterly*

“*Laughing in Yiddish*... brings an entire world of immigrant history vividly to life. Wendt uses sure-footed lyricism and deeply evocative imagery to tell the story of Jews living in a vibrant Russian shtetl, enduring pogroms and massacres and finally escaping to a new life in Chicago. She gives us, generously, the very real stories of street peddlers, grandparents, and great-grandparents, the sounds of early Chicago, the urban renewal that remade Chicago, and through it all the people finding strength through tradition and memory to make a new life after loss. Wendt uses a variety of formal and informal poetic forms to carry contemporary and historical voices, threading together the present and its past. The poems take risks, using ekphrastic poems, ghazals, pantoums, an ode, and even a triolet to build a nuanced and compelling history. They navigate that history from women working in a cigarette factory or at a spinning wheel, to the pogroms and massacres that the poet’s own ancestors survived in Lithuania, to a contemporary mother interrogating the past in order to build a world for her children.”

—**Rebecca Ellis**, from her book review of *Laughing in Yiddish* published in *Sugar House Review*

“Jamie Wendt’s second collection of poetry, *Laughing in Yiddish*, maintains a delicate balance of earnestness and subtlety. The subtlety comes from attention to music and form: often pantoums, ghazals, and triolets, but an especially inventive deployment of those forms, including a ghazal mixed with interview, interview with bracketed commentary, and persona poems where the Eisenhower Expressway speaks, among other monologues dramatic, ekphrastic, and ethnographic. The earnestness comes from scope and content: rooted in family and community history, in the Midwest and Eastern Europe. Wendt is speaking for many when she writes, as in a kind of mission statement, ‘They were not supposed to talk about it./No one did./So, I fill in the blanks —’ and in the last poem, ‘I will record your voice here.’”

—**Joshua Gottlieb-Miller**, from his book review of *Laughing in Yiddish* published by the Jewish Book Council

## On *Fruit of the Earth*

“Jamie Wendt considers place and displacement from both a personal and cultural viewpoint. Indeed, it can be challenging to observe with an outsider’s acute eye when one has the thoughtful heart of an insider. But it’s just this ability that makes these poems of tradition, ritual, family and selfhood exceptional. Her descriptions delight, but I’m most impressed with her ability to distill images into statements that enlighten and so beautifully express the complexities of longing.”

—**Teri Youmans Grimm**, author of *Becoming Lyla Dore*

“In *Fruit of the Earth*, Jamie Wendt brings us to ‘each side of the invisible border’ between the Old Country and the Promised Land. She receives both the jewels and atrocities of her rich Jewish heritage and tries to change the direction of the future while praying in the Women’s Section at The Wall and helping deprived Sudanese refugee children in Tel-Aviv. These are exquisite poems of lament and of praise, ‘the laughter loud despite everything.’”

—**Dina Elenbogen**, author of *Shore*

“I love Jamie Wendt’s remarkable debut collection *Fruit of the Earth*. Her book is magnificent, lyric, intelligent; it is an ode and praise and elegy to the things of this world and the heart of the spiritual world. Her work is masterful, subtle yet complex, full of love and life. Read this book now!”

—**Elizabeth A. I. Powell**, author of *Atomizer*

“In *Fruit of the Earth*, Wendt constantly looks around to ask, Where am I? Who am I? How can I make these two things, together, matter? Through answering these questions, she creates a lush, rich world where one’s place and identity are allowed to shift and realign themselves while still remaining true and real.”

—**Elizabeth Deanna Morris Lakes** at the Jewish Book Council

“In this powerful and exquisite collection of poems, Jamie Wendt ... locates the interplay between the material and spiritual inheritance of land and people through themes of place, and displacement. In poems of vivid imagery and a strong, narrative voice, her experiences and questions are lived out while allowing that there is mystery that can only be accessed by the act of choosing, and choosing again, over a lifetime. Central to all is what it means to be a people uprooted and displaced through time while having a communal and religious identity as the locus of permanence even when the search for home—for security, freedom and peace—is an ongoing struggle.”

—**Michelle Everett Wilbert** at *Mom Egg Review*

“Despite numerous tangible references to place, time, and milestones throughout the collection, the author compliments these anchors with her vivid figurative work. Wendt’s lyrical use of language and keen observation of the things around her makes for imagery that activates each of

the senses and enhances their play upon each other. In the reading of each poem, the mind displays a rich palette of images, and the reader develops a capacity to narrate these as a story. There is a harmonious centrality to each poem, where the acute sense of place or time gives way to simplicity of feeling. With her mastery over the temporal, Wendt crafts moments of refuge and suspension in her deeply nostalgic descriptions of memory.”

—**Sarah Plummer** at *Literary Mama*

## Discussion Questions

1. While Yiddish was the language of Eastern European Jewry, Yiddish is also a remnant of a dying culture due to many native speakers perishing in the Holocaust. Many family stories were also lost, as Yiddish was often not passed down to the next generation due to desires for assimilation. Consider the title poem “Laughing in Yiddish” (p. 20) as well as the title of the collection. In what ways is laughter used in this poem? How might laughter be a coping mechanism for Jews during traumatic times? How has the disappearance of Yiddish in the poet’s family impacted the stories that are told and imagined in this collection?
2. Time moves in a non-chronological order throughout this book. Why do you think the poet chose to mix poems from different time periods and place them next to each other instead of ordering the poems chronologically? What effect does the ordering have?
3. Five poems in the book are titled “Interview with Papa” with varying subtitles. How do these poems connect to each other? In what ways do they build upon each other and speak to the surrounding poems about family and ancestors as well as connections to Chicago?
4. There are many ekphrastic poems (poems inspired by art) in *Laughing in Yiddish*, specifically inspired by the woodcuts and paintings by Todros Geller, photography by Solomon Iudovin, and the artwork of Marc Chagall. How do the poems about these works of art help tell the story of Russian pogroms, of emigration to Chicago from Russia, and of the Jewish experience in the nineteenth century? How do the characters and details in the ekphrastic poems expand upon the more familial stories of Wendt’s family members?
5. What can be learned from *Laughing in Yiddish* about life in the Pale of Settlement? While this book is not a history, many poems are based on historical research. How do these poems provide readers with a glimpse into a specific past? How does the past influence the present? Some poems to look back at include “They Screamed Burning,” “Ner Tamid,” “Female Anthropological Types: A Series in Cultural Costume,” “Prophecy,” “Triolets as the Shtetl Dissipated,” “From Their Throats,” “Women Making Cigarettes,” “Spinner, Shepetovka 1912,” “Someone Had to Line Up the Bodies,” “Before Kishinev.”
6. Several poems in the book portray struggles with mothering, which include contemporary poems reflecting the poet’s experience as well as persona poems featuring the perspective of ancestors. What concerns do the mothers in these poems share? How do the women in this book commune with each other across time and space? Some poems to look back at include “The Guests,” “Ghazal of Red Strings,” “Uprooting a Tree,” “Mena, on the Birth of her Seventh Son,” “To Prevent Forgetting,” “Ghosting,” “Book of Life,” “Beach Hazard,” “She Arrived in America Looking for Me.”

## Writing Exercises

1. “Yocheved” (p. 5) is a persona poem in the voice of the mother of the prophet Moses: Yocheved. This poem provides background and a new perspective of her, for not much is revealed about Yocheved in the Torah. Choose another biblical character whose story is either very briefly told in the bible or a biblical character who is not given a voice. Write a persona poem from this character’s perspective to shed light on their experience and to give voice to an untold story.
2. “Triolets as the Shtetl Dissipated” (p. 32-33) is a series of four triolets. A triolet is a short poetic form that includes eight lines and has a specific line scheme and rhyme repetition. The first line is repeated in the fourth and seventh lines, and the second line is repeated in the final line. There are two rhyming patterns: the end words in the second, sixth, and eighth lines rhyme, and the end words in the first, third, fourth, fifth, and seventh lines rhyme. Write a poem that includes 3-5 triolets, each as its own stanza or section. Due to the triolet’s repetitive nature, consider writing your poem about something cyclical or obsessive to help the form fit the content.
3. “Lone Man” (p. 37) is an ekphrastic poem inspired by the painting “Street Scene with Man, 1942” by Todros Geller. In her poem, Wendt describes and interprets this painting while also considering what or who is not in the painting (i.e., women). Write an ekphrastic poem in response to a painting that you connect with. You can go to a local art museum or browse art collections through art museums’ websites. When writing your ekphrastic poem, consider what is *not* in the painting. Who or what is missing? Focus on an absence toward the middle or end of your poem.
4. In the persona poems “The Eisenhower Expressway Speaks, 1949” (p. 41-42) and “The Eisenhower Expressway Speaks, 1951” (p. 48-49), the unique voice of the expressway first shares plans for its creation and then details its construction process and people who interact with it or are displaced by it. Write a series of at least two persona poems from the point of view of an object or place at two different moments in time. What has changed from one moment or year to the next? How does the voice of this object or place witness new experience through the passage of time and through people interacting with it?
5. “Why We Need the Golem” (p. 68) includes many stanzas that begin with “because” that attempt to answer the question, “Why do we need the golem?” Write a poem with a title that begins, “Why We Need \_\_\_\_\_.” Then throughout the poem, provide reasons why we need the thing mentioned in your title with phrases that begin with “because.” Consider using a mix of imagery, abstract reasoning, and concrete reasoning.



## Contact

Please consider booking Jamie Wendt for an event, including but not limited to the following:

- Poetry Reading & Discussion with Book Signing
- Generative Poetry Workshop for Adults
- Panel Discussion
- Podcast
- Interview
- Writing Workshop & Discussion for Secondary Students
- Book Club Discussion and Q&A

**Email:** jkwendt7@gmail.com

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**Instagram:** @jamiewendtpoet

### **Bookstores & Libraries:**

For wholesale purchase orders, complete the online form:

<https://www.broadstonebooks.com/wholesale>

### **Readers:**

To purchase *Laughing in Yiddish*: <https://www.broadstonebooks.com/shop/p/laughing-in-yiddish-poetry-by-jamie-wendt>

To purchase *Fruit of the Earth*: <https://mainstreetragbookstore.com/product/fruit-of-the-earth-jamie-wendt/>