

Samoa. Along the way, he acquired (in 1880) a wife 10 years his senior and two stepchildren nearly old enough to be his siblings, an education in lighthouse engineering (the profession of his ancestors), a law degree, and a gigantic literary reputation. Tall and gaunt, an eccentric dresser and an endless talker, he seemed to Henry Adams "an insane stork."

Writing in bed, usually in poor health, Stevenson produced essays, novels, children's books, poetry, political journalism, plays, short stories, and mysteries. Not until *Treasure Island* (1883) did he earn enough to support himself and his family. Then came *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Kidnapped*, both bestsellers in 1886, and lucrative contracts in journalism, including \$10,000 annually for a weekly column in the *New York World*.

Always unsure of his own literary worth, Stevenson once described himself as the

"author of a vast quantity of little books." After his death, from a stroke, in Samoa, the accolades were unanimous. No less a light than Henry James acclaimed Stevenson "an exquisite literary talent." By the early 20th century, however, many critics had soured on him, dismissing him as a mere children's writer.

What is to be made of Stevenson's career? "Given all that he had to overcome to achieve what he did," says Epstein, who teaches at Northwestern, "there is simply no setting aside his life." And yet, he concludes, Stevenson "was the literary equivalent of the decathlon athlete: competing in 10 difficult events yet holding world records in none." Writing in various genres, he developed so many different styles that he "finally left no fingerprints of his own." What Stevenson might have accomplished if he had lived another 30 years, writes Epstein, is a question "too sad to pursue."

## Making It

"American-Jewish Writers: On Edge Once More" by Ted Solotaroff, in *The New York Times Book Review* (Dec. 18, 1988), Times Square, New York, N.Y. 10036.

Twenty-five years ago, American-Jewish writers—novelist Saul Bellow, playwright Arthur Miller, poet Delmore Schwartz, essayist Alfred Kazin, and other luminaries—were often lumped together by critics as exemplifying "marginality."

That is, says Solotaroff, a New York book editor, they were outsiders in both the American and post-immigrant urban Jewish communities. Hence, they could see more keenly "what more accustomed eyes would miss at a faculty meeting in Oregon or on the screen of a Western or in Jewish dietary laws."

The result was some brilliant literature. But, according to Solotaroff, individual success and assimilation eroded the artists' Jewish distinctiveness: "The special angle of vision has blurred, and Jewish identity [in America] as a subject with a moral edge has tended generally to decline."

In America, being a Jew was soon "no longer a fate, as it had been so recently

and completely [in Hitler's Europe], but rather more like a fact, and not necessarily the central one, about oneself." The American-Jewish writer soon recognized that he was "less marginally American than marginally Jewish." What, then, did being Jewish mean?

In Solotaroff's view, a new focus for American-Jewish writers may be the relations between American Jews and the state of Israel. Since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, he says, the survival of Israel has probably been the "paramount source of Jewish identity" in America—and a promising source of personal tension and literary inspiration.

Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* (1987) points the way, with its examination of Israel, a land of "saintly" weakness and "heroic" force, as "the very image of the confused desires of American Jews." In this confusion, says Solotaroff, "the seeds of a new fiction are waiting to sprout."