Amy Levy is now living a second life. Essentially “lost” to literary scholars for over eighty years after her death in 1889, this Anglo-Jewish writer has undergone a remarkable critical resurgence. Since the early 1990s, an anthology of her writing, a critical biography and new editions of specific works have all helped to define her place in the literary history of late nineteenth-century England. This new collection of essays on her life and work strengthens her claim to our attention. As Hetherington and Valman note in their introduction, contemporary scholars are drawn to Levy’s “multiplicity of identities as an intellectual Jewish woman, a feminist and a lesbian” (2). And, as Meri-Jane Rochelson notes in the useful afterword, this volume “acknowledges the ways in which [Levy’s] centrality resides in her marginal position” (223). Collectively, these essays demonstrate that Levy was fully engaged in dominant discourses around politics, feminism, aesthetics and Jewish identity of her day. For undergraduates and advanced scholars of Levy’s work and historical moment, therefore, this volume will prove an invaluable resource.

Framed by an Introduction and Afterword that outline Levy’s life, works and critical history, the essays furnish new historical contexts and the results of new research. Elizabeth Evans, for instance, links Levy’s novel Romance of a Shop
(1888) to the history of the “shop girl,” and Nadia Valman ties Levy’s representation of the Jewess to other contemporary discourses on that figure. Susan Bernstein and T.D Olverson place Levy within discourses on larger cultural topics: “Jewish vulgarity” and “Victorian Hellenism,” respectively. Other essays in the volume place her in larger communities of writers. Emma Francis explores her relationship to the feminist socialist writers with whom she often associated but with whom, as Francis argues, Levy may not have fully shared a political vision. Naomi Hetherington productively examines her literary relationship with Israel Zangwill, and Lyssa Randolph treats her in relation to New Woman poets. Finally, two essays seek to define her contributions to particular genres. Gail Cunningham probes “issues of confession and self-revelation” in an original and rich exploration of Levy’s short stories, and Alex Goody offers compelling readings of Levy’s late “urban” poems in relation to notions of “passing” and Anglo-Jewish identity.

Since Levy killed herself at age 28, at what some might argue was the height of her literary career, she left us a relatively small body of work. These limits to textual and biographical sources might seem to pose constraints on what more can be said about Levy. The oft cited biography by Linda Hunt Beckman, *Amy Levy: Her Life and Letters* (2000) and Susan Bernstein’s more recent Broadview editions of her novels have seemingly given us as full and rich a picture of Levy as we can get without new sources. But no writer worth re-reading can ever be definitively explicated. The job of literary critics in each generation is to show how their own critical perspectives can enliven a writer’s work and generate new questions about
it—as well as about the writer’s life. However limited the texts and biographical materials it examines, this volume succeeds in re-animating them.

Only occasionally did this collection give me a slight claustrophobia. Certain previous critical perspectives or studies (including my own, for full disclosure) are cited a bit too often without being challenged or developed. The methodological focus remains primarily historical. Given the focus on multiple identities in the literary scholarship of our own era, it seems time for critics to consider Levy’s writing in contexts outside of her specific historical moment and within new kinds of critical narratives. Such work would push beyond the boundaries of this particular volume, which reads Levy almost exclusively—albeit very successfully—within her specific historical moment. Goody’s essay does make a start in this direction through comparisons to Nella Larson, an American writer of the Harlem Renaissance whose work first appeared in the 1920s. It seems likely that looking at Levy through the lenses of later lesbian and Jewish feminist writers in the 20th and 21st centuries might also reap interesting rewards for future scholars.

Additionally, since the world of Levy scholarship sometimes appears to comprise a very small clique of scholars, I would have welcomed more newcomers and more essays in this volume. But it should be noted that scholars like Bernstein, Francis, Hetherington and Valman have been crucial in constructing earlier versions of Levy’s critical history and each contributes important readings and insights here. Additionally, this collection offers some exciting new voices—especially in the essays by Randolph, Cunningham and Evans—so that Levy “regulars” are well
balanced by Levy newcomers. By articulating some exciting new directions for the study of Levy and her work, the volume will stimulate further critical exploration.

Given the weight of attention this volume pays to the literary and political contexts of Levy’s prose, I was particularly pleased to see some new essays on her poetry. Reading the dramatic poems “Medea” and ‘Xantippe” in the context of Victorian Hellenism, Olverson argues Levy “combine[d] classical erudition with subversive intent, as Levy knew that the only way to demythologize is to remythologize” (130); this important point seems to encapsulate Levy’s literary strategy and approach to canonized texts. Goody explores a number of Levy’s poems that have received little or no critical attention, like the important lyric “A Village Garden.” Randolph sheds new light on Levy’s suicide by reading it in the scientific context of her time and against the suicide of her contemporary, the poet Constance Naden, advancing the rich conversation on the discourse around women poets in this period.

This volume, then, clearly helps to advance Levy scholarship and keep her works relevant for our classrooms and scholarship. I often tell my students that while working on Amy Levy during my dissertation phase, I felt the exhilaration of re-discovering a “lost writer,” bringing her works to critical life after nearly a century of neglect. But I also discovered that I was not alone. In 1995, when I was asked to speak on a panel at a groundbreaking conference on “Rethinking Women’s Poetry” run by Birkbeck College in London, I thought I would be the only expert on Amy Levy. Instead I found a roomful of scholars—several of them contributors to this volume—who not only shared my passion for Levy but had also done as much
research into her life and work as I had—or more. It was a humbling moment in my trajectory as a critic, but more importantly, it taught me that when a writer draws critical attention from many sources, she comes to life in a far richer way than any one critic or historian or theoretical school could imagine. At the conference of 1995, a group of scholars sharing their perspectives on Amy Levy’s writing created palpable electricity; fifteen years later, this volume of essays clearly demonstrates the continued power of her work.

Cynthia Scheinberg, a Professor of English at Mills College, has published widely on Amy Levy and other nineteenth century women writers, poetry and religious identity in Victorian England.