What really was the first Jewish novel? What is Jewish literature? What is a Jewish novel?
This seminar will revel in such elusive and shadowy questions.

In the wake of the Haskalah, a new body of Jewish fiction arises, one that is based on the German notion of Bildung. This corpus reflects a transformation in Jewish culture where Goethe and the German classics became for some German-Jews synonymous with Jewishness. We will begin our investigation by first examining the transformation that German Jewry undergoes during the age of emancipation. Crucial to our foundational knowledge is how the German notion of Bildung came to eclipse Judaism as a source of identity. From Joseph Perl's magnificent Megallé Temirin and the shaping of Haskalah, we will read Berthold Auerbach's immensely popular Spinoza alongside Heinrich Heine's unfinished piece from the same year The Rabbi of Bacharach. From there we will widen our scope to the English writings of Grace Aguilar and Meïr Aaron Goldschmidt's Danish classic A Jew. We will end the class with one of the strangely compelling “novels of Jewish identity,” George Elliot's Daniel Deronda. Questions to be raised concern the role of folklore in literature, the history of reading, and the possibility of assimilation.