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JEWISH LITERATURE

Identity and Imagination

YOUR HEART'S DESIRE

Sex and Love in Jewish Literature

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Sex and Love in Jewish Literature

Jeremy Dauber

Jews have been describing the art of love and analyzing the sources of desire since the earliest antiquity. In the book of Genesis, the patriarch Jacob worked seven years for the right to wed his beloved Rachel and then, tricked by her father, worked another seven with hardly a word of complaint. Later books of the *Tanakh*, as the Hebrew Bible is called, feature other, less tender stories of love, such as David's desire for Bathsheba and King Solomon's thousand wives. The apotheosis of romantic literature from the biblical period is probably the Song of Songs, which describes, in a remarkable mix of love, desire, and longing, the connection between Shulamith and her beloved. "Stronger than death is love," the mysterious poet wrote, a sentiment echoed throughout the ages in classic writing from *Romeo and Juliet* to *Tristan and Isolde*.

Despite its beauty and power—or, perhaps, precisely because of it—the rabbis of the Great Assembly sought to hide away the Song of Songs when they established the biblical canon, sometime in the third century c.e. According to the Talmud, the rabbis were reticent to place such a book at the heart of Jewish life and religion. Luckily for us, the work was saved, but only through an act of interpretation that was to influence Jewish romantic literature for almost two millennia: The work was allegorized, redefined as a love story between God and the people of Israel, rather than between two Jerusalemites. With occasional exceptions, such as the wine and love poetry created in Spain's Golden Age, this trend continued in Jewish literature for nearly 2,000 years: Love for the divine was readily discussed, romantic love was not. Deemphasizing romantic love in literature reflected cultural realities. As in many European cultures, marriage among Jews was largely an economic arrangement, often matching women who had dowries with men prized for family connections or their learning in Torah and Talmud.

If marriage was not the culmination of romantic love, then neither was sex, which was closely regulated by Jewish law and seen primarily as an instrument for procreation, part of the codified duties between husband and wife. Of course, human nature does not always adhere to the law, and sublimated sexual impulses expressed themselves in some of the most unlikely places. For example, Jewish mystical texts from the 16th and 17th centuries dwelled on the male and female aspects of the Godhead, portraying their unity in explicitly sexual terms. In the 17th century, the diary of businesswoman Glückel of Hameln revealed how arranged marriages, over decades of struggle and joy, could become deep, loving bonds.



By the 18th century, however, modernity had gripped Jewish culture, transforming relationships by placing a new emphasis on romance as the key to self-determination. Jewish writers began to take up the love story with a vengeance. In the 19th century, Hebrew and Yiddish writers created literature rife with star-crossed lovers, sometimes temporarily thwarted by the strictures of traditional life. Sholem Aleichem, the author of the Yiddish classic *Tevye the Dairyman*, dedicated one of his earliest novels, *Stempenyu*, to exploring whether there could even be such a thing as a Jewish romance. At the same time, questions of romance, marriage, and sex were joined with the “woman’s question,” as advances in classic feminism swept over Eastern European Jewish circles at the end of the 19th century. Writers like Judah Leib Gordon in Hebrew and I.L. Peretz in Yiddish protested traditional society, which they felt viewed women as little more than sexual and economic chattel. (Their protests, however, did not extend to actively helping women to find their own literary voices, and there were very few major women writers in Jewish languages of the period, with the notable exception of the Hebrew writer Dvora Baron.)

But it was Sigmund Freud, a Jewish writer working not in Hebrew or Yiddish but in German, who would most fundamentally reshape how Jews—and the rest of the world—thought about and depicted love and sex. Recent scholarship has emphasized the explicit Jewish features in his writing—for example, the predominance of Jewish jokes in his work on humor, or his exploration of the book of Exodus—but Freud’s most significant contribution to Jewish literature has been his effect on later writers. While some of Freud’s theories have been generally dismissed, it is difficult to imagine a depiction of love and sexuality that does not invoke the concepts of the erotic drive, the id, the Oedipal complex, repression, sublimation, and other theories. From Woody Allen to Erica Jong to Philip Roth, Jewish writers have transformed Freud’s theories into stories, stories that are all the more compelling to modern readers because of the way they are steeped in Freudian conceptions of love and sex that we now take for granted.

One of Freud’s most famous arguments is that the drive for accomplishment—the energy of creation and creativity—results from the sublimation of the erotic impulse. Whether one agrees with this assessment or not, one can certainly argue that the writing of one of the most explosive periods of Jewish literary creativity—America of the 20th century, after the massive influx of Eastern European immigrants—simply bristles with hidden and not-so-hidden eroticism and romantic sensibility. A New World meant new romantic possibilities that even the boundary-pushing daughters of Sholem Aleichem’s *Tevye the Dairyman* never dreamed of. “Real-life” versions of these tales were chronicled in the flourishing Yiddish press, like in the “Bintl briv” advice column of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, and treated more literarily by writers like Anzia Yezierska. In works like these, drawing as heavily on current melodrama and the scenarios of Hollywood as they did on classic novelistic structure, the American story is a story of romance. Acculturation, marriage, and bourgeois domesticity go hand in hand.

But, of course, desire fulfilled and love reciprocated are not the only ways to tell American stories. Some of the great Jewish writers of 20th-century America focus on the other side, on disillusionment, disappointment, and despair; Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the West Coast’s dark mirror to the *Bintl briv*, is one of the more powerful and famous examples of this trend. Sometimes in works such as these romance is the victim of social injustice, as desire



is stifled by the mechanization and automatization of the working class by bosses who know nothing of love, only of rape (metaphorical or, sometimes, otherwise). In the Yiddish playwright H. Leivick's *Shop*, the characters at the end begin to "dance the dance of the machine and the needle," turned into instruments of the factory in which they work.

Even when the narrative of American Jewish history is one of success—as it so often was during the middle decades of the century—somehow the freedom and liberation that came with both this material development and with the increasing sexual openness of the era was met with doubt, ambivalence, and guilt. This reaction was not simply a moral reflex; it was also symptomatic of the American Jews' uncertain sense of themselves. Two examples of many possible ones: In Bruce Jay Friedman's *A Mother's Kisses*, as uncomfortable (and hilarious) a characterization of the Oedipal complex you're likely to find outside of *Portnoy's Complaint*, the protagonist's difficulty in getting rid of his mother has as much to do with his inability to make his home in all-American college society as it does his own sexual hang-ups. And Erica Jong's justly notorious *Fear of Flying* was seen as much as a comment on the way that American women (and American Jewish women in particular) were trying to balance their own sexual freedom and their more traditional desires for marriage as it was an investigation into the character of Isadora Wing.

But if one could describe these characters' sensibilities in the words of the (non-Jewish) protagonist of Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*—"I want, I want, I want"—there is also a strong strand of Jewish writing coming after the first World War (in which so many were literally and metaphorically unmanned) of self-denial, of wanting and not wanting simultaneously. Some of this uprootedness, this unfocused, unromanticized sensibility, can be seen in the stories of Yiddish writers like David Bergelson and Hebrew writers like Y.H. Brenner; in Europe, one could argue that the high point of this trend is in the stories and novels of Franz Kafka, which are suffused with a sexuality and romantic sensibility that rarely develop beyond an undefined feeling; using Kafka's own metaphor, they stand at an open door and never actually go through it.

By contrast, Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose work has drawn significant comparisons to Kafka's (in fact, he titled one of his short story collections *A Friend of Kafka*), has famously said that Jews like their literature to include Torah, sex, and revolution. He made sure to combine all three in his works, joining a modern sensibility with an older voice of authenticity. Singer's example seems to be a powerful one for contemporary writers; many of the best known "Jewish writers" today appear interested in merging contemporary attitudes about love and sexuality with a return to traditional settings or styles of storytelling.

Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*

Alexander Portnoy lives out the Freudian nightmare in its fullest and most concrete form; the whole book is one long *kvetch*, a complaint in more than just the medical sense. From the analyst's couch, Portnoy tells the tale of his libidinous upbringing, railing against a castrating mother, a repressed father, blacks, women, WASPs, and himself. In Portnoy's tumultuous encounter with Willa Jane Reed—nicknamed the Monkey—Roth forthrightly involves us in the ways in which sex itself, divorced from anything else, becomes a subject of discussion, dissection, and obsession.



But is it really so divorced? The earlier romances of Portnoy's life are not so much trailblazing sexual leaps as symbols of the Jew's attempts to become truly American. (It's hardly coincidental that the adolescent Alex's fantasy woman is called Thereal McCoy.) He gives one of his early conquests the nickname the Pilgrim. Their relationship is, in Alex's view, his revenge on the gentile establishment for its anti-Semitic refusal to allow his father to advance. At the same time, Alex falls for the Pumpkin and her family precisely for their genteel, gentile politeness and reserve, so different from the theatrics, the screaming, and the drama he grew up with.

And yet, both these romances fail for reasons apparent in the medical definition of "Portnoy's Complaint" itself: "as a consequence of the patient's 'morality,' however, neither fantasy nor act issues in genuine sexual gratification, but rather in overriding feelings of shame and the dread of retribution, particularly in the form of castration." Much of this shame stems from Alex's mother, the archetypal Jewish Mom, who wants him to live his life just like hers. Here, a different kind of love comes to the fore: the love a boy has for his mother, and the love a mother has for her son. Sometimes sexual (as when young Alex sees his mother in her slip), sometimes romantic (as when she describes Alex as her most fascinating fellow conversationalist), their relationship is always deeply Freudian in the most orthodox of definitions. Portnoy struggles to free himself from this smothering, all-encompassing love—to avoid an end like that of the pathetic Ronald Nimkin, who hangs himself with a note telling his mother about her evening's mah-jongg appointment.

Ultimately, Portnoy's complaint may have no cure. That possibility is explored brilliantly in the book's last sections, which treat another, particularly Jewish, aspect of the late sixties. It was not only the time of the sexual revolution, but also of the Six-Day War: the ultimate presentation of the Jew as masculine soldier, the living rebuff to all those decades of jokes about the effete, castrated diasporic Jewish male. As a result, it somehow seems inevitable that the climax of *Portnoy's Complaint* takes place in the land of Israel, accompanied by Portnoy's beautiful fantasy of Jews being real men—symbolized, in Portnoy's American argot, by playing baseball. Even the Jewish woman, in the form of Naomi, "this mother-substitute," has become manlike. And yet, it also seems inevitable, given the nature of the book, that the climax is, in all senses of the word, anticlimactic.

Grace Paley, *The Little Disturbances of Man*

Grace Paley, a contemporary of Roth, is far too subtle to create love stories that focus on the story of a love: Her tales focus on characters before their romances begin and after they have finished loving. Set among immigrants and the children of immigrants, Paley's work reminds us that romantic longings are also quests to belong on many different levels. In "The Littlest Voice," Bessie Abramowitz's school Christmas play becomes the backdrop for exploring Americanization: If the measurement of successful acculturation is to excel within American institutions, what happens when those institutions are explicitly Christian? "The Contest," on the other hand, deals with the Yiddish press and one of its mainstays, the write-in contest—showing how contemporary Americans react to its message of Jewish pride and insularity, both ethnically and romantically. When Freddy realizes that Dotty Wasserman is hoping to win not only *Morgenlicht's* grand prize but also his heart, he suddenly refuses to play, rejecting both Dotty and her notions of ethnic pride. "No can do," he writes her in a postcard.



Freddy, with his almost Runyonesque way of speaking, is only one of the notable voices in the collection. Paley populates her stories with great talkers, an assortment of hustlers, flim-flammers, wolves, and confidence types, all of whom know it's the head that's the way to the heart (or, at least, to the body). These predatory types are hardly limited to men. The female protagonists of these stories—and they are in a vast majority, female—can be as rapacious and driven as the men, though often for murkier reasons. In “A Woman, Young and Old,” when a French soldier leaves his wife and daughter, they alleviate their abandonment by seducing other men. To make matters more disturbing, the daughter—and the story's narrator—is 13 years old. A knowing, adult sexuality on the part of girls is also the main theme in “An Irrevocable Diameter.” In the face of these desires, the seemingly lustful men are, in a manner of speaking, unmanned: Still sexually able, they become essentially passive, willing to accept life's fate for them.

While Paley sets some of her stories in the fifties, the era that defines many of her characters is decades earlier. Despite their openness to questions of sex and love, many are still making that uneasy transition from immigrant to American, Old World to New, sexual modesty and shame to liberation, even brazenness. Their thoughts about romance are explicitly tied to the ebb and flow of history, both American and Jewish. In “Goodbye and Good Luck,” Aunt Rose finally convinces her beloved actor to marry her, leaving us to judge how tragic a life spent waiting for him has been. “I decided to live for love,” says Aunt Rose, and we marvel at her choice even as we ironically distance ourselves from the slightly maudlin, theatrical sensibility she cloaks her choice in. In “An Interest in Life,” after a long time suffering “the little disturbances of man,” Virginia attains a kind of romantic happiness, not with the man she first loved and married, but with someone quieter, steadier. Paley leaves it to us to decide whether this happiness is itself an illusion, though the story's last line, “we forgot the precautions,” is ominous enough. With the detached eye of the master ironist, Paley records the ways time distorts love and desire, but refuses to judge the results. “Change is a fact of God,” Aunt Rose says, and Paley knows it well.

S.Y. Agnon, *A Simple Story*

Agnon begins *A Simple Story* with all the hallmarks of a classic romance: Hirshl Hurwitz falls in love with his poor orphaned cousin, Blume Nacht, but when his mother discovers the affair, she arranges for him to marry Mina, a wealthy girl from a nearby village. Frustrated and aching for his true love, Hirshl succumbs to madness, and is sent to a sanatorium. Only with the help of Dr. Langsam is Hirshl finally cured. He returns home reconciled with Mina and lives happily ever after.

Agnon's love story, however, may not be so simple after all. Hillel Halkin, the novel's translator, calls *A Simple Story* “an anti-romance”—in some ways a comedy marked by ironic detachment, in other ways a novel about accepting one's conventional role in society. Agnon wrote the novel in 1935, after the depredations of the First World War had devastated the Jewish communities of his native Galicia, and with the shadow of a new war on the horizon. Agnon could hardly have known the magnitude of the horrors ahead, but he was well aware that the twin apotheoses of the 20th century—war and modernity—had brought a world of simplicity and tradition to a sudden end. Certainly, one can read Hirshl's madness not only as a lover's



delusion but also as an analog to contemporary cases of shell shock. (The rumor in town is that Hirshl has feigned madness to prevent being drafted into the Tsar's army.) In his insanity, Hirshl thinks of himself as a rooster and will do nothing at his mental inspection but tell the time. Though this be madness, there is method in it; he is aware that a new, darker age, is dawning, and, while dissatisfied with his own life, he is hardly able to reject it and accept the new one. The cure is more symptomatic than the disease: Dr. Langsam explicitly rejects the modern Freudian approach of "the talking cure," in which the patient talks through his traumas and neuroses. Instead, it is Langsam—his name means "slow" in German—who talks, extolling the values and glories of his traditionalist, premodern hometown.

The most important story of love and desire may not be for Blume, or for Mina, but for the town, for the past, for Jewish tradition. To accept and love Blume Nacht, whose name means "night flower" in Yiddish, is to acknowledge that there is beauty and value in the darker aspects of the world as well. Yet Szybusz, based on Agnon's own town Buczacz, derives its name from the Hebrew word for error, suggesting a return to Szybusz in this modern age is itself a fall into error. The desire at play here is a heady mix of nostalgia and denial, a willful blindness to disturbing or disconcerting facts that is, in fact, eerily akin to love—for what person is not willing to overlook certain things in their beloved? Agnon's suggestion has significant political resonance: the strength of the desire for stability, the love of inertia. People hold fast to illusions, even dangerous ones, if it means avoiding effort, and Hirshl, with his stunted economic ambitions and his limited political affiliations (at the Zionist meetings Hirshl attends, for example, hardly any mention is made of Palestine) is a prime example. An ostensible paean to a world left behind, *A Simple Story* ends up being a savagely ironic critique of that world, hardly simple or tame at all.

A.B. Yehoshua, *The Lover*

In *The Lover*, Adam, an Israeli mechanic, searches obsessively for his wife Asya's lover, Gabriel, who disappears during the first days of the Yom Kippur War. Unbeknownst to Adam, his daughter Dafni has become involved with Naim, an Arab boy whom Adam hired to care for Gabriel's comatose grandmother, Veduchka. Alternating between multiple narrators—a device which obscures as much as it reveals—Yehoshua creates a love story that is as much communal as individual, reflecting the travails of a newly created state as well as of his characters.

One cannot simply blame Asya's infidelity for the chill that has settled over her household; in fact, Adam not only knows about the affair but he was the one who set it in motion. It might be a way to help Asya over the trauma of losing their deaf son Yigal years earlier, a blow from which neither of them has ever recovered; a way of displacing Adam's anger over Asya's failure to acknowledge his success in building his automotive shop, even if it is hardly the kind of intellectual accomplishment she esteems; or simply a way of allowing her to feel something once more, an act of love on its own. But ultimately Adam's behavior is as inexplicable as that of Gabriel, who arrives in Israel after a decade in France and quickly disappears. When he is finally tracked down, he has taken on the mien of a religious Jew. While this may have started out as a means to avoid the war, the disguise takes on meaning, re-forming and deforming his character.



In this sense we see another definition of love: instinct and impulse overriding explicable and planned ideas. Naim's brief affair with Dafī and, more shockingly, Adam's near-rape of his daughter's friend seem to emerge from practically preconscious states. Adam is wise enough to know that there is little of love, only lust in his actions, and that the word "lover" covers a multitude of sins. Naim and Dafī, however, are young, and the last word that is given to Naim, who has returned to his village and moved away from his young lover and the society that had temporarily taken him in, fed him, clothed him, and paid him, only to let him go when he grew too close, is "hope."

Naim, whose name can be taken to mean "pleasant" in Hebrew, thus serves not only as a lover, but, far more important, as the pivot around which Yehoshua weaves his complex and ambivalent attitudes toward the Arab-Israeli issue. Certainly Naim, who can recite lines of the Israeli national poet Hayyim Nachman Bialik by heart, and seems infatuated not only with the young, beautiful Dafī but even the older Israeli culture symbolized by Veduchka, can be seen as the hope for a kind of rapprochement between Jew and Arab.

Yet the larger, more powerful forces at play render such relationships temporary at best. Naim himself squanders a good deal of the reader's goodwill when he abandons Veduchka, or when his brother is revealed to be a suicide bomber. Yehoshua knows the vast gulfs that must be crossed; but, he argues, isn't romance by its very nature the triumph of hope over realistic assessment? In encouraging us to rediscover the slow attraction and revitalizing power of love while simultaneously doubting whether it has any real efficacy, the novel serves both as an allegory for the Middle East conflict and a realistic romance.

Rebecca Goldstein, *The Mind-Body Problem*

The Mind-Body Problem falls within the conventional bounds of the academic satire—petty rivalries, afflictions of self-doubt, rampant egos—but the romantic desires that animate the work and its protagonist, Renee Feuer, seem resistant to mockery. Renee is a philosophy graduate student at Princeton, where she falls in love with, and soon marries, famed mathematician Noam Himmel. But soon Renee discovers that "'wife of a genius' does not in itself define a distinct personality," or, for that matter, a fulfilling relationship, and she winds up looking for love elsewhere.

In a probing, almost Talmudically scholastic fashion, the formerly religious Renee places her ideas and lusts under the microscope, measuring them for logical consistency. The mind-body problem is one of the great questions of philosophy—which one's in charge? Which one should be? Can you ever really separate the two? If you can, how can you describe one without the other? The novel suggests there are actually two mind-body problems, one for men and one for women. Deftly sketching the differences in sexuality between men and women, Goldstein provides an implicit response to Freud and Roth, who consider female sexuality insignificant or uninteresting compared to its male counterpart. Renee's intellectual attraction to Noam somehow becomes physical in her believing she is desired by this genius; Noam, however, never seems to get past her body.

Goldstein also calls into question her book's ostensibly realistic façade by giving many of the characters highly symbolic names. Noam Himmel, for example, has a Hebrew first name meaning "pleasantness," which seems ironic, but also a Yiddish or German last name meaning



"heaven." The ethereality here, the essence of mind, is contrasted with Renee's lover Daniel Korper, whose last name has strong resonances of the corporeal, of the body. Once this is noted, we can't also help noticing that her first lover, Leonard Schmerz, is aptly named as well, with his constant pain and despair threatening to infect Renee and the entire world around him. And Renee's fiery last name echoes her passion and her desire, first academic, then personal. Does this suggest a kind of mind-body problem of its own, that somehow the name makes the individual?

At novel's end, we learn Renee's perception of her entire marriage has been predicated on a false assumption. In one of the odder moments in the novel, the archrationalist Noam Himmel becomes convinced that he has been reincarnated. As in reincarnation, where the soul must again and again take on new physical forms, the mind-body problem, it seems, can never be permanently solved, only temporarily calibrated.

Background Literature

The following scholarly and literary works were referenced in the essay and are recommended for those who would like to explore the themes and subjects discussed in greater depth.

The Book of Genesis

The stories of love and desire found in this earliest of Jewish texts—Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob's efforts to win his beloved Rachel, the tragic fate of his daughter Dinah—have exerted enormous influence over how we think about the subject and how it is treated in Western literature.

The Song of Songs

This romance of two Jerusalemites is one of the most beautiful love poems in Western literature; it has also been read as a telling metaphor for the relationship between a people that seeks its God and a God who longs for a faithful and loving people.

Sholem Aleichem, *Stempenyu: A Novel Without a Romance* (in Neugroschel, ed. *The Shtetl*)

Sholem Aleichem's early novel was an attempt by a reform-minded writer to move Jewish literature away from what he saw as a marked tendency toward sentimentality and melodrama. The story of a melancholy woman and a wandering violinist, the novel can be read either as an anti-romance or as an indictment of a society that tramples on romantic sensibilities.

David Biale, *Eros and the Jews*

In this wide-ranging look at the history of Jewish sexuality, Biale traces the way that Jewish theology and literature have tried to balance sensuality and asceticism, a love of this world and a desire to remove oneself from its temptations.

Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*

In this series of lectures, Freud outlines almost all of the major concepts in the theory of psychoanalysis. Not everyone agrees with Freud's ideas about sexual development and behavior, but his influence on modern literature—both how it is written and how it is read—is undeniable.

Isaac Metzker, ed. *The Bintl Briv*

For Eastern European Jewish immigrants who arrived in America at the beginning of the 20th century, there was one newspaper that helped them navigate an unfamiliar and confusing world. This selection of letters from the "Bintl briv," the advice column of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, shows how questions of romance, among others, were vital expressions of the difficulties of adapting to America.



Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep*

Now recognized as one of the masterpieces of Jewish literature, *Call It Sleep* was published in 1934 to mixed reviews; it languished for another three decades before being hailed by Alfred Kazin as "one of the underground classics of psychological fiction." Charting the Lower East Side through the experiences of a ten-year-old boy, Roth's novel combines Freudian ideas about childhood and desire with bold, modernist language to imbue an immigrant childhood with sexual and psychological depth.

Raymond Scheindlin, ed. *Wine, Women, and Death*

Jewish life, art, and culture flourished under Hispano-Muslim rule, the so-called Golden Age of Spain. This anthology includes some of the most powerful Jewish love poetry of the medieval period, in which love of God takes a backseat to love of the beautiful things of this world.

Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*

This history of Jewish mysticism by one of its most famous investigators includes several chapters on the kabbalistic attempt to understand the nature of God by assigning male and female qualities to God's various aspects. The resulting theology would influence writers as various as Isaac Bashevis Singer and Jorge Luis Borges.

Anzia Yezierska, *Open Cage: An Anzia Yezierska Reader*

If there is one writer who managed to combine the sentimental and melodramatic mode with the classic immigrant story, that writer is Anzia Yezierska. In her stories, novels, and memoirs, she illustrated how new Americans—particularly young, female Americans—had dreams of new worlds and new loves, and how those dreams were often disappointed by reality.

Recommended Reading

The following works of literature also explore the theme of sex and love in Jewish literature and are recommended for those who are interested in continuing to read and discuss books on this theme.

Pearl Abraham, *The Romance Reader*

What happens when your feelings and ideas about sex and love come from books, not personal life and experience? In this novel about a young woman growing up in the Hasidic community, reading is the most romantic and erotic action possible—which creates difficulties when her own arranged marriage begins to loom.

Bruce Jay Friedman, *A Mother's Kisses*

In this black comic novel, a young man can't get rid of his overprotective, overloving mother; she even goes to college with him. A Freudian nightmare gone into overdrive, *A Mother's Kisses* will make you laugh even as it makes you feel uncomfortable.

Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying*

What makes a modern woman truly liberated? Erica Jong's novel offers several answers, the most famous of which can't be printed here. Isadora Wing's search for happiness is one of the most idiosyncratic—and influential—examinations of sex and love to come out of the postwar generation.

I.B. Singer, *Enemies: A Love Story*

Herman Broder has a problem: He has three "wives" who want his time and his attention and who all live in the same city. Singer's examination of the twin forces of sexual desire and moral guilt is never so refined as it is here, in a novel which, remarkably, also serves as an important statement about the Holocaust.

Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*

If the "Bintl briv" lost its innocence and went to the West Coast, it might look something like this: West's portrait of an embittered writer who takes over an advice column in Los Angeles has all the feel of a noir novel combined with the intelligence and emotion of a modern tale of manners.



Jeremy Dauber

Jeremy Dauber is the Atran Assistant Professor of Yiddish Language, Literature, and Culture at Columbia University. He graduated from Harvard College and did his doctoral work at Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. His first book, *Antonio's Devils: Writers of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Jewish Literature*, was published this year by Stanford University Press. He was also the project director of the National Yiddish Book Center's "Great Jewish Books" project and has given lectures on Jewish literature around the country. In addition, he writes an on-line column on television and movies for the Christian Science Monitor, for which he received an award from the National Society of Newspaper Columnists in 2003.



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