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Reflections of a Jewish, Lesbian Author*

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Abstract: In this essay, Jewish lesbian author Lesléa Newman speaks of the importance of finding one's own identity reflected in works of literature, citing examples of her own work, and recommending the writings of other Jewish lesbian authors of merit.

Looking for Lesbian Characters in Books

I have always been a Jew. I don't know if I've always been a lesbian or not. I became conscious of the fact that I preferred the companionship of women when I was 27 years old. I believe that one of the reasons it took me so long to figure out who I am is that I had never read a book with a lesbian character, let alone a Jewish lesbian character, in it. And bear in mind that I was a child who spent *hours* in libraries, both the school library and the public library; the latter was a half-mile walk from my home. I was the type of child, teenager, and adult who *devoured* books by the dozens. I would read almost anything except cookbooks. And I never found mention of lesbians in any novel, poem, or short story I read until I made a conscious effort to look for them. Had I encountered lesbian characters in books, I might have been spared years of unnecessary confusion and pain.

So naturally when I first came out, I headed for the nearest women's bookstore. Incidentally, Liza Goldberg, the Jewish protagonist in my first novel, *Good Enough to Eat* (1986), does the same thing. [See "Books by Lesléa Newman," following the References to this paper—Ed.] Both Liza and I knew better than to go to the library or to the conventional

bookstore in town to find the books we needed. And both Liza and I were lucky enough to live in a town that contained a feminist women's bookstore.

The summer I turned 27 (1982), I read all the lesbian fiction I could find. I do not read much nonfiction; I seem to get the most out of reading fictional stories about other people's lives. So I read dozens of books, some of which I bought and some of which were lent to me by my new lesbian friends. I did not find one Jewish lesbian character in any of these books, which was strange since all the new women I was becoming friends with were Jewish lesbians. One of the things we talked about frequently on Friday nights, over bowls of matzo-ball soup, was how coming out as a lesbian freed us to be "other"—not conforming to society's norms—and that freedom allowed us to embrace our Judaism as never before. For many of us, coming home to our sexuality was accompanied by a longing to come home to being all of ourselves, and a big part of that was being Jewish. We celebrated Shabbat together, we traded our bubbes' recipes, we orchestrated huge, elaborate seders . . . but where were our books?

Landmark Books about Jewish Lesbians

Finally, I began to find what I was looking for in the poetry of Irena Klepfisz and Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz. Kaye/Kantrowitz published a book called *We Speak in Code* (1980), and Klepfisz published *Periods of Stress* (1975). As far as I know, neither of these books is currently available. Some of the poems in each book were about being Jewish, and some of the poems were about being lesbian. And at the time, that was enough for me.

The landmark book, *Nice Jewish Girls*, edited by Evelyn Torton Beck (1982; reissued 1989), is a must for any Jewish library. This collection of essays, stories, poems, and photographs by and about Jewish lesbians was on my nightstand for over a year. At last, I could see women just like me writing about their lives. I can-

not express how important it is to see one's life reflected in literature. How validating it is. How inspiring. How comforting.

I had the experience when I was a child, even though I grew up in Brooklyn, NY, of reading books about children sitting on Santa Claus's lap and hunting for Easter eggs. I never came across a book about a little girl with curly brown hair eating matzo-ball soup with her bubbe on a Friday night. I never saw my life in a book or a movie or a TV show, and I often asked my parents why we couldn't have a Christmas tree. When I was 22, in a bookstore, I came across a children's book called *Mrs. Moskowitz and the Sabbath Candlesticks*, by Amy Schwartz (1983), and I was moved to tears. As a child, I could not articulate the need I had to see families like my own reflected in the media, but as an adult I am very conscious of that need.

Books and Stories by the Author

We need to see ourselves in books about Jews, about lesbians, about Jewish lesbians. When I couldn't find these books, I realized I'd have to write them. My first novel, *Good Enough to Eat* (1986), is about a Jewish woman with an eating disorder. When she begins to heal her relationship with food and her body, she also begins to discover her lesbian sexuality. When I wrote that book, I was just coming out and coming home to my Jewishness, and I was surprised at how Jewishly identified the main character of my novel was.

My next book, *A Letter to Harvey Milk* (1988), was written as a conscious effort to explore what it means to hold the two identities of lesbian and Jew. Each short story in the collection focuses on a different Jewish lesbian character. Some of the stories are taken directly from my own experience; others are not. I am pleased that two of these stories have appeared in mainstream Jewish anthologies. The title story, "A Letter to Harvey Milk," was published in *America and I: Short Stories by Jewish American Women Writers*, edited by Joyce Antler (1990), and another story,

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"The Gift," was published in *Shaking Eve's Tree*, edited by Sharon Niederman (1990).

It is very important that short stories by Jewish lesbians are included in anthologies such as these, to show that we are part of a strong lineage of Jewish writers. Having my work appear in that context made me feel more a part of the Jewish community, and I can imagine that other Jewish lesbians who came across a Jewish lesbian story in such mainstream anthologies would feel a sense of welcome and belonging as well. It is very alienating to always have the lesbian books separated, as if we don't belong. Conversely, the short story "A Letter to Harvey Milk" was included in *Women on Women*, a lesbian short-story anthology edited by Joan Nestle and Naomi Holoch (1990). It was one of two short stories with Jewish lesbian characters in the collection.

In 1989, I edited a book called *Bubbe Meisehs by Shayneh Maidelers: An Anthology of Poetry by Jewish Granddaughters about our Grandmothers*. The book was a gift and a testimony for my grand-mother, Ruth Levin, who died at the age of 99, two weeks before the book rolled off the presses. Though not a lesbian book by any means, there is a lesbian presence in the book.

My next novel, *In Every Laugh A Tear* (1992), concerns itself with a 30-year-old Jewish lesbian named Shayna, and her relationship with her grandmother, whom she loves with all her heart. Because Tzeydl, a 99-year-old European immigrant, is one of the main characters, there is a lot of Yiddish in the book. This made it very hard to publish. Mainstream houses that were looking for lesbian novels said they loved it but it was "too Jewish." I did not try Jewish presses, because I assumed the book would be "too lesbian" for them. So my publisher turned out to be a small feminist press that had never published a Jewish book before. I hope the reader is beginning to see how being a Jewish lesbian makes it impossible for one to feel that she belongs anywhere.

Some Recommended Works

I would like to mention a few other books that are important to me personally, and that I think should be on Judaica library shelves. *Speaking for Ourselves*, edited by Irene Zahava (1990), is an anthology of short stories by Jewish lesbians. *My Jewish Face*, by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz (1990), is a collection of short stories. *Running Fiercely Toward a High Thin*

Sound, by Judith Katz (1992), is a novel that received a Lambda Literary Award. *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue and Dreams of an Insomniac*, both by Irena Klepfisz (1990), are companion volumes—the former a book of poetry and the latter a book of essays. *The Worry Girl*, by Andrea Freud Loewenstein (1992), is the memoir of a Jewish lesbian. And lastly, *Cancer in Two Voices*, by Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum (1991), is a nonfiction account of two Jewish lesbians who are partners for many years, and what happens when one of them becomes ill with breast cancer.

I believe it is vital for all Jewish libraries in this country to have these books on their shelves. We are your daughters, your sisters, your neighbors, your friends, the women sitting next to you in *shul*. We need to read about ourselves, and just as importantly, our heterosexual friends and acquaintances and relatives need to read about us, too. We need to know about each other's lives. We are all Jews. And that bond should bridge any gap, any disagreement, any difference among us, because as Jews we all need each other to survive.

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Beck, Evelyn Torton, ed. *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989 (Originally published: Watertown, MA: Persephone, 1982).

Butler, Sandra; Rosenblum, Barbara. *Cancer in Two Voices*. San Francisco: Spinsters Book Co., 1991.

Katz, Judith. *Running Fiercely Toward a High Thin Sound*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1992.

Kaye, Melanie. *We Speak In Code*. Pittsburgh: Motherroot Publications, 1980.

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Klepfisz, Irena. *Periods of Stress*. Brooklyn, NY: Out & Out Books, 1975.

Loewenstein, Andrea Freud. *The Worry Girl*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1992.

Nestle, Joan; Holoch, Naomi, eds. *Women on Women*. New York: Plume (Penguin USA), 1990.

Niederman, Sharon, ed. *Shaking Eve's Tree: Short Stories of Jewish Women*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990.

Schwartz, Amy. *Mrs. Moskowitz and the Sabbath Candlesticks*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983.

Zahava, Irene, ed. *Speaking for Ourselves: Short Stories by Jewish Lesbians*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1990.

Books by Lesléa Newman

Novels

Good Enough to Eat. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1986; London, England: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1986.

In Every Laugh A Tear. Norwich, VT: New Victoria Publishers, 1992.

Short Stories

A Letter to Harvey Milk. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988.

Secrets. Norwich, VT: New Victoria Publishers, 1990.

Every Woman's Dream. Norwich, VT: New Victoria Publishers, 1994.

Poetry

Just Looking For My Shoes. Seattle, WA: Back Door Press, 1980.

Love Me Like You Mean It. Santa Cruz, CA: HerBooks, 1987; San Diego, CA: Clothespin Fever Press, 1993.

Sweet Dark Places. Santa Cruz, CA: HerBooks, 1991.

Nonfiction

SomeBody To Love: A Guide To Loving The Body You Have. Chicago, IL: Third Side Press, 1991.

Writing From The Heart: Inspiration & Exercises For Women Who Want To Write. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1993.

Young Adult Novels

Fat Chance. New York: Putnam, 1994; London, England: Women's Press, forthcoming, 1995.

Children's Books

Heather Has Two Mommies. Northampton, MA: In Other Words Publishing, 1989. Boston, MA: Alyson Publications, 1990.

Gloria Goes To Gay Pride. Boston, MA: Alyson Publications, 1991.

Belinda's Bouquet. Boston, MA: Alyson Publications, 1991.

Saturday is Pattyday. Toronto, Canada: Women's Educational Press; Norwich, VT: New Victoria Publishers, 1993.

Felicia's Favorite Story. Boston, MA: Alyson Publications, forthcoming 1995.

Too Far Away To Touch. New York: Clarion Books, forthcoming 1995.

Remember That. New York: Clarion Books, forthcoming 1996.

Matzo Ball Moon. New York: Clarion Books, forthcoming 1996.

Anthologies

Bubbe Meisehs by Shayneh Maidelehs: An Anthology of Poetry by Jewish Granddaughters about Our Grandmothers. Santa Cruz, CA: HerBooks, 1989.

Eating Our Hearts Out: Personal Accounts of Women's Relationship to Food. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1993.

Bearing the Unbearable: Stories of Losing Loved Ones To AIDS. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, forthcoming 1995.

The Femme Mystique. Boston, MA: Alyson Publications, forthcoming 1995.

Lesléa Newman is widely recognized as an author who specializes in women's subjects and in expressing the gay and lesbian experience. The short film A Letter to Harvey Milk, based upon her original short story with the same title, won several awards, and she has won awards for her work in poetry, short story, and children's literature. Ms. Newman has designed and taught many creative writing workshops at colleges, universities, and conferences across the United States. Her interest in creative writing and human services is apparent in some of her therapeutic writing workshops.

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