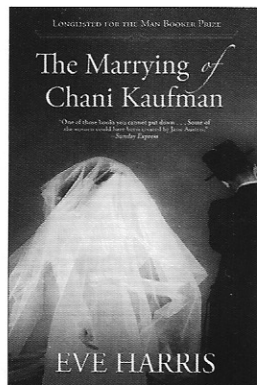


Sects and Sex in Religious London

This debut novel by Eve Harris, *The Marrying of Chani Kaufman* (Grove, \$12), climaxes on the wedding night of an innocent young couple, though it's set not on Chesil Beach in the sixties but in the frum community of London's Golders Green neighborhood in 2008. Here 19-year-old Chani Kaufman stands "like a pillar of salt, rigid under layers of itchy petticoats" awaiting her equally chaste and untried groom Baruch Levy, whom she has met just four times on dates arranged by



and hilarious scenes, the neighborhood women rush to cover Rivka's head as she lies on the stretcher bleeding: They can't bear the thought that the reb-betzin's hair is uncovered in public, but the medics are equally horrified that they are pulling a sheet over the head of a woman who is still very much alive! Flashing back to her own courtship in Jerusalem of the 1980s, when Rebecca-turned-Rivka fell in love with her husband and with Orthodox Judaism simultaneously, the

A girl has trouble meeting the right man because of her "liveliness."

their matchmaker and their mothers. Like McEwan's newlyweds, both are ignorant about the facts of life, and their wedding night is nearly a disaster.

But in this compulsively readable novel, we don't get to the wedding night until 300 pages later, because Harris brilliantly circles back to the circumstances of Chani and Baruch's courtship, weaving in the story of the peripheral characters who serve as foils to the young match. Chani is the fifth of eight daughters in a poor rabbinic family, a girl who has had trouble meeting the right man because of her "liveliness"; Baruch, born into a rich and illustrious family, is bound for a prestigious Jerusalem yeshiva. Baruch's mother, the formidable Mrs. Levy, cannot bear the thought of her son marrying a girl beneath his station and stops at nothing to thwart the marriage, even ambushing her future daughter-in-law in a non-kosher café. Meanwhile, Chani is under the tutelage of the rabbi's wife, Rivka Zilberman, whose own marriage is falling apart in the wake of a devastating miscarriage—in one of the novel's most tragic

novel explores the pull of religious faith and its sometimes frightfully fleeting hold—not just on the rabbi's wife, but also on her son Avromi, who attends university against his father's wishes and falls into bed with a half-Nigerian girl named (not Shula but) Shola.

Harris is a master at blending humor and pathos, innocence and daredevil spunk. She does not shirk away from tackling some of life's greatest challenges headlong in her prose: the death of a toddler, a crisis of faith, a collapsing marriage. Though set in a similar world as Naomi Alderman's *Disobedience* and Francesca Segal's *The Innocents*, *The Marrying of Chani Kaufman* offers a more engrossing, ambitious, and sophisticated glimpse into the dating scene in religious London, where marriage and money, sects and sex, and religion and rebellion are inextricably intertwined.

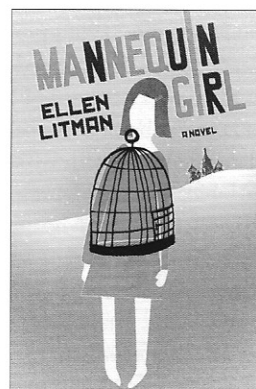
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A Grade-School Heroine in Soviet Russia

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of *Mannequin Girl* (Norton, \$25.95) by Ellen Litman is the novel's setting in Soviet Russia of the 1980s, where Kat Knopman is diagnosed with scoliosis the summer before first grade and sent to a special school sanatorium instead of to the prestigious Soviet school where her parents, Jewish intellectuals and bohemians who dabble in political radicalism, teach Russian literature and run the drama club. The doctor who diagnoses Kat accuses her mother of crippling her daughter, and Kat begins to think of herself as a blight on her family and an embarrassment to her parents, whom she regards as "brilliant, daring, the kind of parents who'd risk anything for truth," whereas she herself is "disheveled, hunched over, and lurching to the left. A gnome. A scarecrow," and soon confined to a brace "like the carcass of a prehistoric animal." Litman's descriptions are masterful, as is her ability to capture the shifting alliances and cruel antics of grade school children, particularly those marginalized by their family and society. To her surprise, Kat finds herself increasingly at home in school and adrift from her family, especially her mother, who is devastated by a series of debilitating miscarriages and she struggles for a normal, healthy child unlike Kat. But when her parents join the faculty of Kat's sanatorium, Kat's worlds collide, and she is forced to find a place for herself independent of her parents, whom she

realizes may also—in spite of their perfect posture—have flaws of their own.

The novel, a coming-of-age story, follows Kat from 1980–1988, through her final year at the school sanatorium. We witness as she becomes close with the boy who tortured her dur-

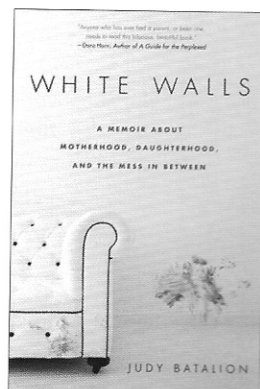


ing her first year, as she falls in love and discovers her sexuality, as she becomes increasingly aware of the anti-Semitism that further marginalizes and stigmatizes her. She also discovers her own passion for theater, and at the novel's end her parents—in a rare recognition of her talents—encourage her to apply for theater school and to be the “mannequin girl” that the doctor who fitted her for her brace at age seven promised she'd one day become. But Kat has arrived at her own sense of what she wants for her life. She no longer wants to stand out because “being exceptional is nothing but a trap. It makes you obsessed with your own significance, and also, it riddles you with doubt. You do harsh things when you believe yourself one of a kind. You push away those who love you and sneer at those you deem not good enough. She's seen it up close. She's done it herself all her life—believing that she had some sort of promise.” By the end of the novel, though her spine may still be twisted and the road ahead of her still bumpy, there is no doubt in the reader's mind that this heroine has learned to stand tall.

I.K.

Living Inside a Russian Doll

White Walls: A Memoir About Motherhood, Daughterhood, and the Mess in Between by Judy Batalion (NAL, \$16) is reminiscent of those nested Russian dolls. First there is Bubbie, Batalion's maternal grandmother, a Polish Holocaust survivor who swam the Vistula with her sisters. Nested inside is her mother, a hoarder who raised Judy and her younger brother Eli in a Zionist-socialist home lined with tuna cans, magazines, and cereal boxes and who refused to leave home for years on end. Then there is Batalion herself, our narrator, who escapes the clutter of her



upbringing first to Harvard and then to London, where she completes a Ph.D. in theories of domestic representation and ultimately marries a fellow child-of-a-hoarder. And finally we meet Batalion's daughter Zelda (named for Bubbie), an opinionated and strong-willed toddler with her own sense of how to decorate and fill her space. The memoir traces Judy's pregnancy with Zelda while interweaving flashbacks to her Montreal childhood and her coming-of-age, providing context for her anxieties and ambivalence about becoming a mother: “Would my baby be a rebirth of my mother: needy and unhinged? Is parenting a child the same as parenting a parent?”

This is not a light book—the author chronicles her efforts to convince her father of the reality of her mother's illness and commit her mother to a psychiatric ward—but it is leavened by Batalion's energy and humor: She refers to her baby's internal kicking as “domestic abuse,” marvels at a special room for Jewish neuroses in a high-end NYC baby store where pre-purchased items are stored until after the baby is born—for superstitious parents; and describes a “Babies and Pets” workshop for expecting couples, where she and her husband are surprised to discover that they are the only couple more concerned about how their pet will adjust to the baby than vice versa. While living in England, she tried to make it as a stand-up comic, and even wrote her own one-woman show in which she played both her grandmother and her imagined daughter. “Judaleh,” she continues to hear

her grandmother speaking to her long after her death; even though the voice she hears more often is that of her mother, whose suicidal phone calls send her running back home time and time again.

Batalion's story is most engaging and compelling once she finds herself—when she meets and marries her husband,

navigates matters of Jewish identity and shared space with him, and when they raise their daughter together. The book would have been tighter with one or two fewer ex-boyfriends thrown into the mix; but then again, isn't it true of life itself that some clutter is inevitable? Ultimately, this is the lesson that Batalion learns as well: No matter how much she tidies, she cannot control the disorder of motherhood. And that if she is so focused on removing the clutter, she will not have time to look at her daughter: “In my desperate attempt to not-be my mother, I ended up only repeating her behavior. She'd tried to make up for her childhood by filling her home with objects; I tried to make up for my childhood by ridding them. Both of us could be blind when it came to our children.”

I.K.

Danger and Opportunity in the Esther Narrative

A young Jewish girl is ripped from her hut by the king's brutish warriors and forced to march across blistering, scorched earth to the capitol city. Trapped for months in the splendid cage of the royal palace, she must avoid the ire of the king's many concubines and eunuchs all while preparing for her one night with the monarch. Soon the fated night arrives, and she does everything in her power to captivate the king and become his queen. Her name is Esther, and Rebecca Kanner has brought her memorably to life in this retelling of the Biblical story, *Esther: a Novel* (Howard Books, \$15.99).

Kanner's Esther learns that wearing the crown brings with it a fresh set of dangers. When a ruthless man plies the king's ear with whispers of genocide, it is up to the young queen to prevent the extermination of the Jews. She must find the strength to violate the king's law, risk her life, and save her people. What did Kanner do to make the ancient text feel new again?

(Continued on page 43.)