Wanted after Mother's Death: More Life

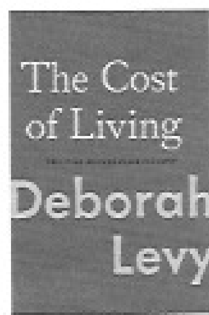
The Cost of Living, by Deborah Levy (Bloomsbury, $20), is at once a memoir of a woman creating a new life after divorce and a collection of insightful musings on femininity, motherhood, and the craft and discipline of writing. The unnamed narrator—who we are told at one point is "an I that is close to myself and yet is not myself," but which it seems fair to refer to as Deborah Levy—has just sold her house and moved into a small flat on the sixth floor of a shabby apartment building atop a hill in North London with her two daughters, one a university student and one still living at home. She finds herself wondering what is left of herself in the wake of this transition, and what this shift signifies for women more broadly: "To strip the wallpaper off the fairy tale of The Family House in which the comfort of men and children have been the priority is to find behind it an unthanked, unloved, neglected, exhausted woman... It is an act of immense generosity to be the architect of everyone else's well-being. This task is still mostly perceived to be women's work."

Levy's work, though, is also to be a writer, which is how she provides for her daughters. (Two of Levy's novels were Man Booker Prize finalists, though you wouldn't know it from this humble and unassuming narrator.) And so we witness as she attempts to work on her novel on the small balcony of their apartment, which is exposed to the elements but is the only space at home for her to write; then we are relieved for her when a "guardian angel" named Celia, a Welsh bookseller in her early eighties, kindly offers to rent her a shed in the back of her garden where she might sit and write undisturbed. Emboldened by the knowledge that she has a place to work, Levy purchases an electronic bike, which she refers to as her e-bike and prizes as a recently-divorced middle-aged man might prize his new red convertible. She whizzes down the hill freely, rides back up carrying far more groceries than she can handle (at one point the chicken she is planning to prepare for dinner flies out of her shopping cart and gets run over by a car; she cooks it anyway and enjoys it heartily), and arrives with leaves in her hair to an important meeting about a possible film option for one of her novels. All the while, she tries to focus her attention elsewhere, because "the writing life is mostly about stamina. To get to the finishing line requires the writing to become more interesting than everyday life, and...everyday life is never boring."

Levy's life is not just her writing, and can never just be her writing—she is no "art monster," to invoke Jenny Offill's *Department of Speculation*, with which this novel has several commonalities. Though

"It is an act of immense generosity to be the architect of everyone else's well-being. This task is still mostly perceived to be women's work."

Levy engages throughout the book with Marguerite Duras, Adrienne Rich, and Simone de Beauvoir, she lives, as she reminds us, in the "Republic of Writing and Children," caring for her daughters and her ailing mother, who dies midway through the book after Levy's desperate and agonized attempts to locate the particular brand of ice lollipop that is all her mother can consume in the final weeks of her life. Levy's mother, we learn, was born and raised in South Africa, where she escaped her upper-class WASP family to marry a penniless Jewish historian; Levy moved from South Africa to England at age nine. When her mother passes away, she comes to appreciate the bravery she modeled, and Levy demands this courage of herself: "When a woman has to find a new way of living and breaks from the societal story that has erased her name, she is expected to be viciously self-hating, crazed with suffering, tearful with remorse. These are the jewels reserved for her in the patriarchy's crown, always there for the taking. There are plenty of tears, but it is better to walk through the black and bluish darkness than to reach for those worthless jewels."



Ultimately Levy finds a way through the darkness. She learns how to navigate her roles as mother and writer, and learns how to live in this world while writing about this world, a task which she describes in terms that are both real and metaphorically suggestive: "I have become a night wanderer without moving from my writing chair. The night is softer than the day, quieter, sadder, calmer, the sound of the wind tapping windows, the hissing of pipes, the entropy that makes floorboards creak, the ghostly night bus that comes and goes—and always in cities, a far-off distant sound that resembles the sea, yet is just life, *more life*. I realized that was what I wanted after my mother's death. More life." By the end of this book the reader, too, wants more from Deborah Levy—and if she does not need to move from her writing chair to find it, we all stand to gain.

A memoir by ILANA KURSHAN, If All the Seas Were Ink, *won the 2018 Sami Rohr Prize in Jewish Literature.*

Slippery Questions about Salvation and Faith

A River Could Be a Tree by Angela Himsel (Fig Tree Books, $23.95) takes its title from her father's cautionary words to the author when she was a young girl: "God created a role for everything in the universe. Just think what would happen if a tree thought it could be a river!" And yet Himsel's personal transformation, chronicled in this candid and insightful memoir, is just as dramatic. She grows up as the seventh of 11 children in an evangelical Christian family in rural Indiana, where her parents, both of German descent, fall under

the sway of a charismatic evangelist preacher named Herbert Armstrong, leader of the Worldwide Church of God. Armstrong convinces them that faith in Jesus, heavy tithing (which, unbeknownst to them, serves primarily to fund Armstrong's private jet, crystal chandeliers, and Thai prostitutes), and a rejection of the evils of American culture will save their souls, which will be raptured to the ancient Jordanian city of Petra upon Jesus's imminent return. When Himsel's younger sister Abby, then nine, becomes so ill with a heart condition that she can no longer attend school, her parents refuse all medical treatment, in keeping with Church doctrine; Abby dies a few years later. "So focused on watching for Jesus' return, I'd had no idea that someone in my own family was soon to depart from the earth," Himsel painfully reflects.

Himsel is a diligent student, but her parents struggle to make ends meet, and no woman in her family has ever attended college. "What I would be when I grew up and where I would live was, however, probably a moot point," she recalls. "The world was going to end in just a few years, in 1975, and I would not have time to get married, have children, travel, or become an adult." But at the prompting of a guidance counselor who recog-

Why I wrote the book

The Long Tail of the Bitch

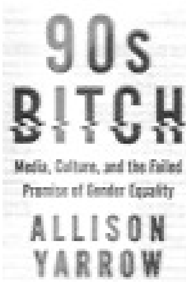
Allison Yarrow on her new book, *90s Bitch: Media, Culture, and the Failed Promise of Gender Equality*

You could say it began with a Buzzfeed quiz. Remember those distractions, now relics from a seemingly cushier time on the internet? This one, in 2015, called "Which 90s Bitch Are You?" grabbed my attention. Soon after, I learned that an inaugural music festival of 90s artists was in the works. And Hillary Clinton, whose seemingly outsized role in the White House had angered voters that decade, was pursuing the presidency. In various forms, the 90s were returning.

When I revisited the stories of 90s women—Anita Hill, Marcia Clark, Tonya Harding, Lorena Bobbitt, and Monica Lewinsky, to name a few—the decade really came into focus for me. Whether women reached for power, were associated with sex or scandal, or simply showed up in public, famous and infamous women during the 90s were bitchified—they were made into bitches in media narratives, and hated on by a deeply sexist society. Thanks to the emergence of the 24-hour news cycle—the new, biggest media stage of all at the time—these stories of women looped constantly. When women made the news they often stayed there for days, weeks, months, and sometimes years. And then they were blamed for overexposure they didn't ask for.

I came of age during this decade, and I internalized these harsh characterizations of women in the 90s. Thus, revisiting the period wasn't just about understanding the era that shaped the millennial generation; it was about reconnecting with my own history. What I saw with distance and context was that girlhood was essentially being poisoned by these portrayals of women. The new research on girlhood during the decade showed that girls were losing their self-esteem thanks to unrealistic demands placed upon them by media and society. Girls in the 90s were sold the specter of the "perfect girl" and encouraged to achieve "Girl Power" by purchasing magazines featuring sex tips, and consuming entertainment that celebrated sexually available girls who placated boys. I recognized the struggles of 90s girls in my own upbringing, and realized that these messages about what women could be seeped into girlhood, and shaped not only our perceptions but also the people we would become.

Today, we're in the middle of another media revolution—social media is as pervasive as it is addictive. And women are still victims—of harassment, abuse, and worse. History has repeated itself again. Maybe we shouldn't be so shocked that we sit squarely in yet another feminist backlash. But there is hope. We must know our history. If we look honestly at the history of the 1990s, and what the decade did to women, we can prevent history from repeating itself again. We can teach our children and ensure that they know how to detect gender and racial bias, and racism and misogyny in media and in society, and call them out. ■



In the introduction, Yarrow lets us know that the term bitch is "a gendered insult with a long history of reducing women to their sexual function," a weapon used "to restrain women and strip them of their power." Despite its resurgence and apparent rehabilitation in terms like "resting bitch face," Yarrow finds hollow this attempt to reclaim the term as a signifier of women's power.

nizes her talent, she applies to Indiana University—"the devil's playground," by the church's standards, but her parents for the most part allow their children the freedom to make their own choices. She considers spending her junior year abroad in Germany and visits the School for Overseas Studies, where a brochure with a photo of the Old City of Jerusalem catches her eye, and she instead spends one year—and then a second year—in Jerusalem in the early 1980s. She falls in love with the city and all it has to offer her: "It felt as if I was in the beating heart of the world, the place where every conflict large and small, political and personal, jostled for attention and demanded to be acknowledged and discussed. I felt alive in a way I never had before."

"The world was going to end in just a few years, in 1975, and I would not have time to get married, have children, travel, or become an adult."

A considerable portion of this memoir is devoted to the two years Himsel spends in Jerusalem, where she is exposed to academic Bible study and begins to think of Jesus less as Savior and more as a First-Century Jewish man. She becomes close friends with an American woman living in the West Bank with her Palestinian Muslim husband, and with a religious Jewish woman who moved to Israel from Brooklyn, both of whom expand her perspective. She learns from the local news about Sadat's assassination and the death of Moshe Dayan, and she finds herself increasingly engaged with her surroundings while questioning many of her most deeply-held assumptions. When she returns to visit her family in the silos and barns and rolling hills of southern Indiana, she cannot wait to run away.

Himsel's memoir is primarily a young woman's spiritual autobiography in the

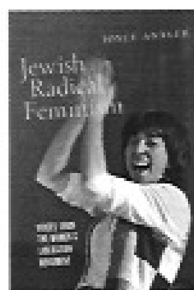
...ome Never Noticed They Were Jewish

...ce Antler on her new book *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*

Reading through Rachel Blau du Plessis and Ann Snitow's anthology *The Feminist Memoir Project* almost a decade ago, I was struck by the essay "Our Gang of Four: ...male Friendship and Women's Liberation," written by Amy ...sselman with Heather Booth, Vivian Rothstein, and Naomi ...eisstein, members of the nation's first women's liberation group. The article posited that friendships like theirs formed a pivotal part of second-wave feminism, becoming the matrix for its revolutionary ideas. Though it included sections on the women's family histories and their involvement in the social movements of the 1960s, it did not mention the women's Jewishness (except in the case of Rothstein, who was the daughter of Holocaust refugees.) Until I contacted the women, in fact, they had never spoken about their Jewish backgrounds to each other! It turned out that this was also true of Jewish women in other collectives that I began to research. Historians of women's liberation were not writing about the significance of Jewish women's participation in the movement either.

As an historian of women and gender focusing on American Jewish women, I have long been interested in telling the story of American Jewish women's activism. Jewish women's contributions to radical feminism are a missing chapter in that story.

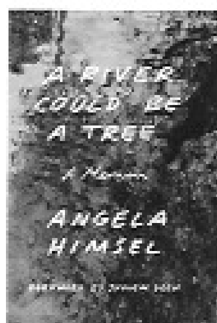
Radical feminism (also known as "women's liberation") began in the late 1960s following by a few years the onset of second-wave' "liberal" (or "equal rights") feminism. Demanding a radical restructuring of culture and society rather than the more piecemeal reforms associated with liberal feminism, it brought us consciousness-raising, "sisterhood is powerful," "the personal is political," and a variety of other organizing tools and perspectives to wage war against male oppressions. But while we now know a great deal about Jewish women's participation in liberal feminism, as well as in the civil rights and labor movements, and other, earlier social justice campaigns, we remain ignorant of their roles in women's liberation. I wrote *Jewish Radical Feminism* to correct this omission and create a more inclusive narrative of both women's history and American Jewish history.



From consciousness-raising groups, to health collectives, to militant lesbians and women standing up to religious patriarchy, historian Antler spends time with the dozens of Jewish personalities of radical feminist movements—women who challenged the structure of society far beyond the reach of laws.

My narrative includes two major groups of radical Jewish feminists that historians usually keep separate. One category is made up of major women's liberationists collectives that did not specifically identify as Jewish, such as the West Side Group in Chicago, Redstockings in New York, Boston's Bread

vein of Lauren Winner's *Girl Meets God* or Danya Ruttenberg's *Surprised by God*, and the book is most engaging when we are privy to the author's religious journey. And so we tag along loyally as she visits relatives in Germany, moves to New York City after graduation, and tries her hand at several entry-level jobs, but her story becomes interesting again when she becomes pregnant while dating Selig, an older man from an Orthodox Jewish family, and wrestles with whether to convert to



Judaism. At this point she has stopped attending church and is already studying Kabbalah at a local synagogue, but conversion classes do not appeal to her: "I wanted answers. And answers to the big questions, like 'What Kind of FAITH is Required for Salvation?' not to questions like why the Bible begins with the letter bet, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, instead of aleph, the first letter."

Still, she proceeds with conversion and struggles to figure out what sort of Jew she is going to become. The end of the book races forwards in time—the birth of three children, the death of her parents years later—and we arrive at the final pages somewhat breathless and struggling to keep up.

And then in one of the book's final chapters, Himsel offers us a moment of comic relief when her young son, on a visit to Indiana, looks at her family's pigpen and mistakes it for a sukkah. It seems Himsel's father was wrong, and not just about Herbert Armstrong. If a pigpen can become a Sukkah, then perhaps a river can become a tree after all.
I.K.

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and Roses, and the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (which created *Our Bodies, Ourselves*). I found that in some of these collectives as many as three-quarters of the participants were Jewish. The Jewishness of these groups was an open secret for some participants, suspected but not explicitly recognized. In other cases, Jewish identity remained invisible, submerged, ignored, or rejected. This is largely because the women prioritized their universalist goals, dreaming of a common sisterhood, and deemphasized their own (and potentially divisive) ethnic or religious origins.

Part Two of the book chronicles the stories of women in self-consciously Jewish-identified collectives, both ones that were religious—like Ezrat Nashim, in New York—and those that were secular, like Chicago's Chutzpah, New York's Brooklyn Bridge, and the lesbian collective that gave itself the Yiddish name Di Vilde Chayes, the wild beasts. Believing that liberation required the overthrow of patriarchal institutions within Jewish culture, these women sought a feminist transformation of Jewish institutions or the creation of new Jewish feminist organizations and enterprises (including Lilith). Sometimes the women were considered as a "friendly" opposition, but they often faced opprobrium from within the Jewish community for their rebellions. Other groups of Jewish feminists came to organize around their Jewishness out of concern over the threat of anti-Semitism within the feminist movement as well as in general society. But in my interviews with dozens of Jewish women's liberationists, no matter whether their Jewishness was front and center or was elided, the deep influence of Jewish background and values clearly emerged, enhancing and helping to motivate feminist activism.

Even among women's liberation and Jewish feminist groups with shared perspectives and common pasts, I found the depth and variety of Jewish backgrounds striking. To represent the range of such diverse lives, I organize the book around "side-by-side" profiles, creating a gallery of individuals and groups rather than a few essential types. Each individual narrative is an amalgam of the woman's heritage, personality, and social and historical location. Together these profiles offer new information about the construction of what we now see as intersectional identities.

I tell the Jewish/feminist stories of over 40 individuals—among them Heather Booth, Shulamith Firestone, Ellen Willis, Alix Kates Shulman, Susan Brownmiller, Meredith Tax, Diane Balser, and six Jewish women of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Among the more Jewish-identified feminists are Martha Ackelsberg, Arlene Agus, Judith Plaskow, Rabbis Rebecca Alpert and Laura Geller, Blu Greenberg, Aviva Cantor, Cheryl Moch, Susan Weidman Schneider, Maralee Gordon, Evelyn Torton Beck, Irena Klepfisz, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, Gloria Greenfield, Adrienne Rich, Marcia Freedman, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Phyllis Chesler, and Galia Golan.

Despite the broad array of opinions and experiences that fill the book's pages, I see and name a set of common characteristics that depict the special nature of twentieth-century American Jewish radical feminism. While the women occupy a historical moment shared with other radical feminists, they are also defined by their unique heritage as Jews. We see that this legacy played a major role in shaping one of the most transformative political and social movements of our era, generating far-reaching changes in all spheres of life and in the understanding of gender. ■