



Bread Givers: A Novel by Anzia Yezierska

In My Mother's House by Kim Chernin

Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language
by Eva Hoffman

The Mind-Body Problem: A Novel
by Rebecca Goldstein

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

Living in America, Jewish women have the opportunity to redefine their traditional roles and the foundations of their identities. As Americans, Jewish women embark on individual projects of determining their own goals, values, and ambitions, both independent from and in relation to family, community, and nation. As both Jews and Americans, they often possess the “double vision” of diverse cultural experiences. Although the process of self-reflection and self-definition often brings Jewish women into conflict with their traditional economic, religious, and familial roles, it also allows them to reassess their heritage and infuse it with new meaning.

In these novels and memoirs, we witness Jewish women trying to understand their own worth, as women, as Jews, and as Americans. For some, such as Sara Smolinsky in Yeziarska’s *Bread Givers*, this process entails a search for education and economic autonomy. For others, such as Rose Chernin in Kim Chernin’s *In My Mother’s House*, serving as a community activist provides the deepest sense of self-worth. Renee Feuer, in Goldstein’s *The Mind-Body Problem*, wonders whether her intelligence or her physical nature constitutes her real self. For many women, such as Kim Chernin and Eva Hoffman, storytelling – the construction of a self through language and narrative – proves an essential tool in the process of self-conception.

The search for self is a modern project, and those seeking personal fulfillment and self-understanding have often faced bafflement and resentment from “Old World” parents. In America, Jewish women are no longer solely defined in relation to their families (though romantic relationships continue to play an important role in women’s self-conceptions, as Goldstein’s *The Mind-Body Problem* attests). Modern Jewish women may choose to reject or to reinterpret their heritage. The attempt

to reconcile different, often competing, ideals can be frustrating and frightening. Yet the struggle itself – and these women’s willingness to explore it publicly through writing – speaks to the courage of Jewish women and to their commitment to leaving a lasting and influential legacy.

BREAD GIVERS: A NOVEL (1925)

BY ANZIA YEZIERSKA

Depicting the culture of immigrant Jews in New York in the early 20th century, Anzia Yezierska’s novel traces the efforts of iron-willed Sara Smolinsky to “make herself for a person.” Disgusted by her father’s traditional and tyrannical ways, Sara leaves home and pursues her dream of becoming a teacher. Lonely but determined, she works her way through college and returns to New York, where she re-encounters her father and must decide whether or not to make peace with him and with her roots.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What role does work play in this novel? Does the meaning of work change over the course of the story?
- What does it mean to Sara to “make herself for a person”? How does her definition of personhood differ from the definitions of those around her?
- In what ways is Sara different from her father? In what ways is she similar to him?
- In what ways is Sara different from her mother? In what ways is she similar to her?
- What does it mean to Sara to be an American, in

contrast to the view of her Old World parents? What distinction does she draw between herself and the “real American people” she meets at college?

- What role does love/romance play in Sara’s search for fulfillment?
- Why is it so important to Sara to be alone? Do you think loneliness is necessary to her success?
- What hopes does Sarah pin on education and knowledge? Does going to college fulfill these desires?
- Do you agree with the dean of Sara’s college that “all pioneers have to get hard to survive”? Are there stories of pioneers in your family?
- How do you interpret the end of the novel? What does it mean that Sara still has the weight of generations upon her? Is her search for an independent self compromised by her relationship with her father or completed by making peace with him?

IN MY MOTHER'S HOUSE (1983)

BY KIM CHERNIN

In this memoir, Kim Chernin weaves her mother's stories with her own to present a multi-generational tapestry of Jewish women's lives. From the shtetl to Los Angeles, Communist activism to poetry, Chernin captures the changes, conflicts, and shared gifts of three generations of women, all determined to explore their own paths but finding themselves inevitably tied to their mothers' legacies.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How does Rose try to distinguish herself from her mother's experiences? What does it mean to Rose not to be like her mother? Does she succeed in this effort?
- How does Kim try to distinguish herself from her mother? What does it mean to Kim not to be like her mother?
- What does Rose regret about the decisions she made in pursuing her own goals? Do you think she should/could have done anything differently?
- Why does the conflict between politics and poetry become the central theme in Kim's clashes with her mother? Do you think commitment to politics and to poetry are mutually exclusive?
- How is Kim's feminism different from her mother's?
- What legacy does Kim inherit from her mother? What legacy do you think Kim gives to Larissa?
- How would you describe Rose's Jewish identity? How would you describe Kim's?
- What does it mean to Kim to become the storyteller, the

bearer of her mother's tales? How does this role change her relationship with Rose?

- What is the role of dreams in this book?
- How would you compare Rose's experience of becoming an American with that of Sara Smolinsky in *Bread Givers*?

LOST IN TRANSLATION: A LIFE IN A NEW LANGUAGE (1989)

BY EVA HOFFMAN

In this memoir, Hoffman recounts her childhood in post-war Poland and the trauma of immigration with her family to Canada at age 13. Feeling alien in her new surroundings, Hoffman loses the sense of self she brought with her from Poland. Later, she moves to the United States to attend college and ends up living in New York. Through language, relationships, and intellectual life, she struggles to create a bicultural identity that integrates her Polish roots and her North American present.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How does Hoffman depict her life in Poland? What makes this life so idyllic? Are you surprised by her description?
- What does being Jewish mean to Hoffman? In what ways is this a Jewish story?
- How does speaking in a new language affect Hoffman's sense of self?
- How is Hoffman's Polish self different from her American self?
- What does it mean to Hoffman to become an American woman? How is the American definition of womanhood/femininity different from the Polish?
- What are the "blessings and terrors of multiplicity," according to Hoffman? When does she enjoy her otherness? When does she find it a burden?

- Hoffman comes of age in the 1960s, an era of exploration, boundary-crossing, and alienation. How is her experience marked by these trends? Is her experience of the 1960s different from that of her American peers?
- What does it mean to Hoffman when she starts dreaming in English?
- How does telling her story help Hoffman accept her bicultural identity?

THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM: A NOVEL (1983)

BY REBECCA GOLDSTEIN

Rebecca Goldstein describes the humorous and poignant struggle of a brilliant and beautiful philosophy graduate student to define her own self-worth. Renee Feuer has left her Orthodox roots and embarked on an exploration of mind and body. When graduate school proves disappointing, she marries the mathematical genius Noam Himmel. But being the wife of a genius only leads Renee to further questions about the nature of intelligence and of physical connection.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What does being Jewish mean to Renee? Is it an essential part of her identity?
- Why is Renee unhappy at Princeton?
- Ava accuses Renee of thinking that “the male sexual organ is the brain.” What does she mean? What complications does this assumption lead to?
- Why does Renee declare that every person is alone in his or her own world? Do you agree with her analysis?
- Ava explains that while she feels she must choose between regarding herself as a woman and regarding herself as a physicist, men are not forced to make such choices between mind and body. Do you agree?
- Why does Renee embark on affairs? What does she hope to get out of these relationships? Does she succeed?
- How does Renee’s experience of her body and sexuality change over the course of the novel?

- How does Noam's loss of his mathematical insight change him? How do you think this change will affect his relationship with Renee?
- Renee concludes that "people don't need justifications. They're people and that's enough." How does this realization affect her sense of self? Do you agree with this statement?

The Jewish Women's Archive is a national non-profit organization dedicated to uncovering, chronicling and transmitting the rich historical legacy of American Jewish women. Founded in Boston, Massachusetts in 1995, JWA was one of the first Jewish organizations to stake a claim on the new frontier of the internet, and continues to innovate in its use of the virtual world for academic, cultural, archival and educational purposes. JWA's award-winning website has the most extensive collection of material on American Jewish women on the web. JWA has become a leading advocate of and educational resource for Jewish women's history.

For more information, visit the Jewish Women's Archive website at jwa.org.

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