

Mommy Nearest

HOW MANY JEWISH MOTHERS does it take to change a light bulb? “None—I’ll just sit here in the dark.” How does a Jewish mother call for help in an emergency? “Help—my son the doctor is drowning!” These kinds of jokes are so familiar that it’s easy to overlook how odd it is that this particular ethnic stereotype continues to hold sway in American culture. Is the Jewish mother really more inclined to guiltmongering, more relentless in her ambitions for her children, than other mothers? And if not, why do the jokes seem so funny?

In *You Never Call! You Never Write!* gags and punch lines form part of a much-needed fuller portrait of the real Jewish mother and of the social and cultural pressures—above all, those related to immigration—that produced a century’s worth of shifting comic stereotypes. In the new country, fathers’ earning power was often markedly diminished, while mothers’ authority, which increased at home, also grew more important to family success in the larger society. Rigid, ineffectual fathers contrasted with supportive, better-adapted mothers who bolstered their sons’ transition to American life in such early depictions as the Al Jolson film *The Jazz Singer* (1927). But the intensity of the mother-son bond provoked vicious portrayals, too, such as Clifford Odets’s Bessie in his 1935 play *Awake and Sing!*

Soon, Jewish comics addressing Jewish audiences at Catskills resorts were getting endless mileage out of jokes about doting, nagging, overbearing mothers. These jokes, Antler suggests, tapped into persistent communal anxieties over assimilation versus tradition and family solidarity versus American-style autonomy. From the Catskills, a training ground for comics generally, the caricature spread to the culture at large.

Antler, a professor of history and culture at Brandeis University, is particularly good on the disconnect between actual Jewish mothers and

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Jewish Mother.

By Joyce Antler.
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the popular parody. In 1959, the American Mothers Committee picked as “American Mother of the Year” Jewish jurist and mother Jennie Loitman Barron, who had just become the first female justice of the Massachusetts Superior Court. Yet in the decade that followed, Antler points out, American fiction was cementing the image of the Jewish mother through characters such as the monstrous, overprotective Sophie Portnoy of *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969).

Antler herself is the Jewish mother of two grown daughters, and cannot resist interrupting her scholarly narrative now and then with good-humored self-justifications. When, for example, her husband teases her for handing their high school-age daughter a bag lunch, toast, and orange juice every morning as she walks out the door, Antler protests, “Providing adequate nutrition is a dietary mandate, essential to our children’s vitality and a protection from lurking dangers.” It’s a little incongruous to hear the stock figure speak for itself.

Near the end of the book, however, Antler’s own experience merges seamlessly with her analysis. She notes that many young feminist comic performers, among them her own daughter, still fall back upon jokes about their mothers during their routines. Why? Maybe, Antler speculates, young feminists, like Jews in the mid-20th century, still find protection in self-mockery, or maybe “mothers are inherently laughable.”

Though Antler worries about such jokes’ continuing corrosive effect on Jewish female self-images, she sees progress. The stereotype changes as women take it up, and even those still in its grip can freshen it with a dash of modernity. She quotes Wendy Wasserstein, the playwright and humorist who died last year, on her admonition to her own young daughter when the two gazed on the Hope Diamond in Washington, D.C. Wasserstein initially found herself speaking to the child in her own mother’s voice: “Darling, when you grow up you meet somebody nice to get you something like that.” But she recovered quickly, adding, “Or, you can buy it for yourself.”

—Amy E. Schwartz