

Book Review

Meyer, Kurt. *They Called Her Jewgirl: a novel*. Pentland Press, 1999.

In the midst of this fictional chronicle of a young woman's life of excessive cruelty and emotional scarring, the author writes "the human spirit is at times wondrously resilient" (p. 93). The reader pauses, thankful for that belief, returns to the reading and, at the novel's end, asks, "Tell me again—what does this resilience serve?"

Here is a story that cannot be read for its delight, its writing, its wisdom. It is a despairing and cruel recounting of the way in which a child of the Holocaust grows to young womanhood—each major portal of her life introducing her to new torture and agony.

Kitty, starting out as a prodigal pianist and pet of her father, is first the victim of her jealous mother's physical and emotional abuse. Kitty's misery at home is only overshadowed when, at eight years of age, she witnesses—then represses the memory of—her father's murder by her mother. Like the proverbial "Jack's house" or the broadening circles of "*Had Gadya*," she next met repeated sexual abuse by two Nazi Youth; then came a group raping by Nazi guards in Dachau, which obliterated the memory of the evil young boys; then came the brutal murder of the Jewish boy who would not publicly amuse himself with Kitty; then came her father-in-law's sexual abuse of his privilege as protector; *inter alia*, we learn of an abortion; a suicide attempt; a brief therapy; a court confrontation with the abuser; a bedside confrontation with her evil mother; and, ultimately, Kitty's descent into engulfing mental illness and successful suicide.

Now Kitty had a doting father who died too soon, a loving, loyal husband, and three children, and, here and there, in her too short life, a friendly encounter. Kitty had a talent for musical performance that is described as deeply moving. But none of these alone or together could save poor Kitty.

Heartsick, I put down the book and recalled the note I had taken little cognizance of when I began, that the author is a psychologist and counselor for whom this book is a first effort at fiction. Fiction? It would appear to be the mix and matching of case studies whose cumulative horror can have no triumph.

In between the gory details come the diagnostic explications: childhood powerlessness that turns abuse into self-imposed shame and guilt that turn what could be developmental maturation into repetitive recapitulation of the original sin in various versions of victimhood. A girl forbidden life becomes a woman unable to deal with life.

The readers of this journal might want to know of the book's connection to Jewish womanhood. In that Kitty is a "Jewgirl," she is every young Jewish woman in a hostile, alien society. Without a sense of her religious identity, though, poor Kitty has nothing to strengthen or comfort her in her battering. In that her overbearing, cruel mother and her self-centered older sister are also Jewish women, we who would like some saving grace for our toppled images, find none. In this

short life, the men brutalize physically, the women emotionally, and anyone, of either sex, who does neither is pictured as weak and/or limited in the capacity to help.

This is neither fiction nor literature; this is a mental model, not a novel. As such I can only recommend it as textbook "case" for practicing caseworkers or students of the roots of neuroses and psychoses, and even here it would be more effective if it had the analysis provided by such as Alice Miller.

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