More Nice Jewish Girls: Review of *Beyond the Pale* by Elana Dykewomon and *The Escape Artist* by Judith Katz.

Meryl Altman  
*DePauw University, maltman@depauw.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarship.depauw.edu/eng_facpubs](http://scholarship.depauw.edu/eng_facpubs)

Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](http://scholarship.depauw.edu/eng_facpubs)

**Recommended Citation**


This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. For more information, please contact bcxx@depauw.edu.
Of the many spirits working their way out in lesbian fiction of the last few decades, let me name two which may appear to be opposite: on the one hand, a pull toward that in which women drive to name specific, often ethnic, experience, to touch the ground where women have walked, whether in the realm of weakness; on the other hand, a utopian movement toward imaginary communities, better worlds, which often involves fantasy scripts or non-realist styles. Lesbians are rooted (we are there, we are here, this is who we are). Lesbians float free (we could be anyone, we could be everywhere).

Apparently opposite, but often we find these two impulses together in Virginia Woolf’s Orlando, in the odd tendency of science fiction futures to resemble earth pasts; in the ways we think about Sappho. In Jeanette Winterson, though she has recently shown a distressing tendency to let go of the readable ground entirely in reaching for the postmodern sky. In the “biomythography” of Zami. And in these two books, both of which marry a concern for detailed historical memory with a commitment to women’s, to Jewish women’s, to lesbian, possibly. Both are gripping and enjoyable, the kind of books you pick up for a minute and suddenly it’s hours later and you forgot to have dinner, so fully have you entered the emotional world imagined there. Both are careful, responsible, educational presentations of Jewish history—Katz lists her sources, Dykewomon provides a Yiddish glossary—and yet also have magical, spiritual, legendary aspects. And both gave me lots to think about.

Both writers are able to make a familiar topos of Jewish fiction and life—the massacre in which the parents are killed—new and nearly horrible. As it happens to new characters we have not met before, we re-

More nice Jewish girls by Meryl Altmann

member that for each person the experi-
ence of watching your parents die comes
das a personal experience, an individual
outrage; if the stories often sound similar,
it is the Tsar and the anti-Semitism we must
blame-not the writers. Despite the reminder
Katz fulfills a Passover-like obligation to
tell these stories over and over and to tell
them in a new way, so that we will not be
able to become used to them. Perhaps read-
ting them routine or merely legendary.

The Eshrat Ayebi introduces a history
that was new to me: the Jewish com-
munities of turn-of-the-century Ar-
gentina, which apparently included a
reprehensible bourgeoisie and a Zionist agrar-
ian utopia as well as the thriving criminal
underground within which the book is
mainly set. We first meet Sofia Teitelbaum
in 1913 Warsaw, where con artist and
"slick weasel" Tutsik Goldenberg tricks
her parents with a promise of prosperous
marriage and whisk her off to his sister's
bordello in Buenos Aires. Sofia encounters
every variety of sexual exploitation—largely at the hands of women—while becoming "wise to some of the re-
luctant pleasures of [her] own body." Fi-
nally she is rescued by "Hankus" (really
Hannah) Lubarsky, the escape artist of the
title, who is also another "sleazy" type.

"Sweet Hankus" is not only a dazzling
juggler, a circus conjurer extraordinaire, a
Houdini-like escape artist, but also a

In Judith Katz' first novel, the highly
 acclaimed Running Fiercely Toward a
High Thin Sound, the bitter realities of
madness and the harm that family mem-
bers can do to one another mete some
hysterically funny caricatures of both
Jewish and Eastern European life. The
characters, almost every one of them,
too weaves together extremes of tone
and feeling. Parts are very, very funny. It's
the sort of book often referred to as a "romp,"
or appropriately enough a circus, fast-
food, with more extravagant costum-
es, characters, subplots, motivations, visions, and sentimentality. There are:
sixteen-year-old Sophia's moments
alone on the ship, the seductions/rapes,
the pogrom in which Hannah/Hankus
loses her whole world, her wanderings as an
animal-like wild child in the streets of
Cra-

T he complexities in which both these
books are rooted is distinctly woman's
religion—the table, not the syna-
gogue, is the center of ritual life; the
mother's candlesticks matter more than the
scrolls of the Torah. Goldie learns from
the older midwife, Millican the Thorny, to
bear her grief in her body, in her own

MOVING? Don't miss an issue!
Get our six to eight weeks' notice of your
change of address. We need your OLD address
(on your mailing label, if possible) as well as your
NEW one. Send the information to: Address
College, Wellesley, MA 02181, or phone toll-
free 888-283-8044/ fax 781-283-3645/ email
nwechsler@wellesley.edu.