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

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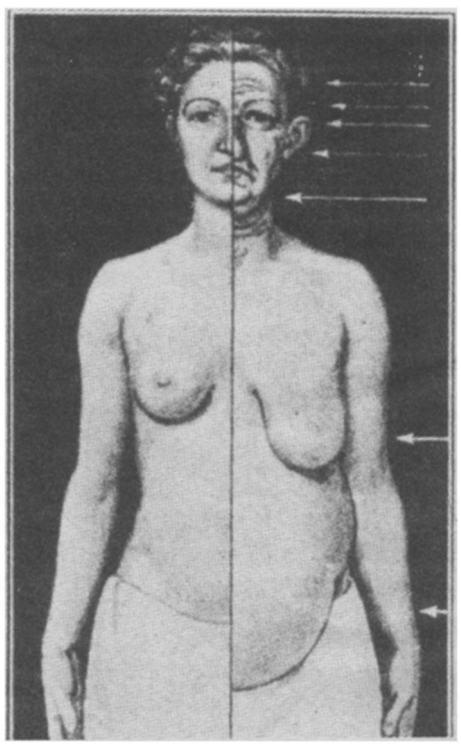

**Plastic surgeon Jacob Sarnoff's vision of total transformation, 1936. From *Venus Envy*.**

> making brighter futures for thousands of girls and women. The matron with too many crows feet around the eyes will have new hope and faith because of plastic surgery on wounded veterans. (p.137)

Aging—in middle-class, middle-aged women—became the target of all these surgeons apparently otherwise unoccupied. One contemporary writer called cosmetic surgery the quintessential product of postwar prosperity.

THAT THERE IS NO SELF-IMAGE created outside a social context is probably the most important lesson the reader learns, though not for the first time, from *Venus Envy*. To paraphrase one surgeon, the way we think we look is reason enough to want to look different. The nut of Haiken's historical analysis is that the culture we live in shapes those thoughts, and her research—documented in nearly forty pages of notes so intriguing that they are worth reading in their own right—is most compelling when she examines cosmetic surgery motivated by race, ethnicity and aging.

Many Jews, especially after World War Two, sought rhinoplasty (nose job), either to avoid the assumptions and prejudices they felt an obvious Semitic nose would attract, or, reflecting their own self-loathing, to confound stereotypes. These are the same reasons for which non-Jews sought to fix their large noses and, fifty years earlier, people with congenital saddle-noses sought repair, lest their collapsed bridge be mistaken for a symptom of advanced syphilis.

An African American woman's response to a friend's accusation that she was trying to "look" Caucasian with her surgically narrowed nose—"Why couldn't you feel that I wanted my nose to be like a sister whose nose was straighter than mine?"—captures the convoluted politics and psychology of stereotyping by the observer and the observed. Were there "over large" noses in a European shtetl? Are there noses too flat in Africa? Eyes too slanted in Thailand, or breasts too small in Vietnam (that is, before American military men began paying more for bar girls with breast implants)?

In the 1990s we stare at some faces and bodies because their radical transformations, not their beauty, interest and repulse us—like the disappearance of race and gender in the cadaverous face of Michael Jackson, the now unfamiliar visage of Cher (heralded in 1988 on the pages of *Ms.* as a feminist hero), the plastic-wrap face of Joan Rivers, or Jane Fonda's enlarged breasts. Yet it is ordinary people, mostly female, paying cash, who keep cosmetic surgeons busy. As expensive as it is, only 30 percent of patients come from families earning under $25,000, and another 35 percent earn between $25,000 and $50,000.

These statistics support Haiken's conclusion that cosmetic surgery has been democratized. What is also apparent is that this 65 percent of barely middle-income cosmetic surgery consumers are credulous, receptive to popular media messages extolling the newest, most painless surgical techniques and vulnerable to the promises inherent in physical transformation. To attract love, obtain a better job, to move ahead in America, Haiken believes "the surgical solution has allowed us to hold on to an idealized self-image:...we are realists, pragmatists...bent on creating and recreating ourselves in the most modern of all possible ways."

Haiken definitely has an opinion of her own about all of this. She is disappointed that women, especially, turn cultural politics inward, abandoning collective action for self-improvement:

> In the 1970s, women insisted that the personal is political; they defined appearance and beauty as social issues rather than individual problems. A decade later...popular conceptions of feminism began to reflect the same emphasis on individual achievement and fulfillment that swept through the larger culture. (p. 275)

Feminism, then, hasn't at all deflated the desire to look better (or better than you think you look). Haiken might well recognize that depoliticized feminism was created by the many incredibly insulting and silly women's magazines she has mined so successfully to bolster her thesis—that the American movement toward individualism has resulted in a conformity to standards of beauty that are as impermanent as the next consumer rage. Fashion prevails even in flesh: large breasts were needed to fill out the bodices of 1940s and 50s dresses, the pert upturned nose job of those decades has been replaced by the (politically correct) straight, assertive nose.

To appear unremarkable is paradoxical in a culture where individualism is a fetish. Yet who would deny someone the right to "civil inattention" by correcting a defect or feature that attracts curious stares? Can we also understand the wish to lift an aging face to reflect mid-life vitality? Are we sympathetic when Jews and African Americans undergo rhinoplasty, or Asians seek eye surgery?

The culture of self was not created by cosmetic surgeons; the altering of face and body is, if anything, a shortcut to years of psychotherapy. There's nothing so alarming here to send us to the barricades. For every feminist who would like to see positive media images of aging women, there's another praising cosmetic surgery as an act of self-esteem, an echo of the surgeons who equated vanity with mental well-being.

*Venus Envy* is a Ph.D. thesis in search of a readership beyond an academic audience, but despite that aspiration, it is most likely to appeal to academics in women's studies, psychology and sociology. Many non-academic readers interested in this subject are actually looking for consumer guides. Others, however, including feminists and amateur fans of medical history, like me, will be fascinated and horrified by this book, and perhaps better prepared after reading it to debate with the increasing number of our surgically altered comrades.

# More nice Jewish girls

*by Meryl Altman*

**Beyond the Pale**, by Elana Dykewomon. Vancouver, BC: Press Gang Publishers, 1997, 403 pp., $15.95 paper.
**The Escape Artist**, by Judith Katz. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1997, 283 pp., $12.95 paper.

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 real-life history, a drive to name specific, often ethnic, experience, to touch the ground where women have walked, whether in strength or in 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 were 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, possibility. 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.

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**Judith Katz.**

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

member that for each person the experience of watching your parents die comes as a personal experience, an individual outrage; if the stories often sound similar, it is the Tsar and the anti-Semites we must blame, not the writers. Dykewomon and Katz fulfill a Passover-like obligation to tell these stories over and over and to tell them in a new way, so that we will not become used to them, will not slip into finding them routine or merely legendary.

*THE ESCAPE ARTIST* introduces a history that was new to me: the Jewish communities of turn-of-the-century Argentina, which apparently included a respectable bourgeoisie and a Zionist agrarian 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 whisks 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 reluctant pleasures of [her] own body." Finally she is rescued by "Hankus" (really Hannah) Lubarsky, the escape artist of the title and the girl of her dreams.

"Sweet Hankus" is not only a dazzling juggler, a circus conjuror extraordinaire, a Houdini on the brink of professional fame. She has also managed her own flight: first from the pogrom that destroyed her family and her whole village to Cracow, where a pair of lovable gay men who run a kosher restaurant feed her up and teach her to cross-dress; and then, threatened with induction into the Tsar's army, to the New World.

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 members can do to one another met some hysterically funny caricatures of both lesbian and Jewish modern life. *The Escape Artist* 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-paced, with ever-more extravagant costumes, characters, subplots, motivations, wisecracks; and yet the underside is here too: 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 Cracow.

I found Katz' management of these two strands a bit less surefooted than in the earlier novel; sometimes I found myself giggling with delight over some clever absurdity, then had to remind myself how grim the contours of the prostitutes' lives really were. I feel some unresolved ambivalence about the criminals and gangsters: on the one hand, they're so much more interesting and lively and genuine than the respectable people; on the other hand, they treat one another appallingly. I'm not sure whether this was Katz' ambivalence or my own, and it's a reasonable thing to be brought to think about; but the shifts in tone made it hard to keep my emotional equilibrium.

I was also sorry not to hear Hannah/Hankus' voice more clearly. Having Sophia as single narrator works brilliantly in one sense—we see Hannah as beautiful, wonderful, magically desirable, in a fully realized way. (The sex scenes are lovely.) By the standards of Poland and the brothel, the couple's final escape is to a lesbian (and a Jewish) utopia; but Hannah's magical energies do not find much of a place there. Would she really have been happy giving up the stage and the world? But that very question reveals that Katz has succeeded in making me think of these as real people, which in itself is no mean conjuring trick.

*BEYOND THE PALE*, set at the turn of the century, goes over a terrain that may at first seem more familiar. In the town of Kishinev within the Russian Pale, we are introduced to the midwife Gutke, of the steady hands and the wise heart, a better rabbi than the rabbi and a better doctor than any doctor, who has discovered in the *mikveh* that she is not the only woman-loving woman in the world. We also meet Chava, the restless and impulsive daughter of a rather limited but revered rabbi and his rather brilliant but undervalued Miriam. Gifted or cursed with second sight, Gutke can see a child's future at the moment of birth. Often she sees a vast ocean; at first she's not sure why. But after one devastating pogrom too many, there we are in the nauseating steerage, the humiliation of Ellis Island, the cramped and filthy apartment on the Lower East Side, with the now-orphaned Chava, her gentler (and rounder) cousin Rose, who becomes her lover, and Rose's once-prosperous family, now penniless greenhorns learning to survive however they may.

Plot summary inevitably makes this sound like yet another generational saga, and indeed there is a drive toward the encyclopedic—in the old country, one of Chava's brothers becomes a Zionist, the other a socialist printer; in America, one cousin becomes a policeman, the other a contractor dreaming of owning his own sweatshop. And through the eyes of Chava and Rose (who works in the needle trades) we encounter seemingly every major event and political nuance of the labor history of


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**Elana Dykewomon.**

the period, every heroine of the Women's Trade Union League.

What such summary cannot convey, what I most admire, is the smooth, emotionally persuasive way all these familiar elements are drawn together. The precise and enormous achievement of the book is to take these facts, witness to them and make them round and real. The book has the texture of a memoir, though it tells much that most memoirs leave out, and it seems completely right that the cover shows both a real map and an individual dreaming face.

*Beyond the Pale* has its funny and delightful moments, its lovely scenes where women discover each other's bodies and their own. A particular delight is the cadence of Gutke's voice, recognizably and authentically Yiddische and yet filled with her individual vision. "Sometimes it just goes that way. You start walking around in your mother's big shoes and the next time you look down, your feet are all swollen and sore, the shoes barely fit. Then it's too late to say you were just pretending, am I right?" Dykewomon's language catches the cadence, not just the mannerisms, of these women (and there are many more) who approach archetype without becoming stereotype. As in her first book, the lesbian classic *Riverfinger Woman*, the writing has a poetic quality which occasionally here breaks out as an actual poem, at moments of tragic stress or when she needs to give voice to a woman beyond the two main narrators, Gutke and Chava. The eroticism is very powerful, perhaps because there is no dependency, no loss of self; and, again as in *Riverfinger Woman*, parts of the story are almost unbearably sad, but in an honest way.

THE JUDAISM IN WHICH both these books are rooted is distinctly woman's religion—the table, not the synagogue, is the center of ritual life; the mother's candlesticks matter more than the scrolls of the Torah. Gutke learns from the older midwife, Milcah the Thorny, to fear but also to use her own visions, her connection through her daily work with the powers of birth and death, with what Milcah calls the "bat kol." Both *The Escape Artist* and *Beyond the Pale* criticize patriarchal aspects of traditional Jewish culture: Sophia's father accidentally sells her into prostitution, but he would have sold her into marriage in any case, and the same fate hangs over many of the women of *Beyond the Pale*, especially in the old world. Gutke can see visions, but she is not permitted to say Kaddish at her mother's funeral.

Dykewomon's multiple points of focus enable a kind of not-deciding about God and Judaism. Chava won't believe in a God who could let her parents die; her religion is the struggle for a better world for women and workers. Gutke, though sceptical of male ritual, finds unbelief incomprehensible—her belief in God is inextricable from her belief in herself and her love for women. I don't usually find this kind of spiritual talk convincing, but in the event I had no difficulty lending myself to what Gutke saw. Perhaps because her own conviction seemed so rooted and so strong, perhaps because her strongest visions are visions of blood, and we know from history the blood was there.

Along with the meditation about Jewish identity, *Beyond the Pale* is a meditation about politics, a call to resistance and to commitment in the form of a reminder that we have not always been victims only. But it never cheats or oversimplifies. Chava is a fighter. But Rose and her mother are in search of daily life, even in search of pleasure. Certain specific historical points are being argued, among them the importance of the European Jewish experience to the birth of the American labor movement; the importance of lesbian activists to all feminist social movements, even before "lesbian" could be named as a political identity; the importance of ordinary workers and everyday life to social struggle.

Kishinev and Essex Street are real places, the pogroms and the strikes happened as the book says. Oddly, some of the most utopian and novelistic moments turn out to be drawn from life: the children's spontaneous strike at the box factory; the housewives' rent strike growing out of the working girls' idyllic summer camp on the Palisades; tiny seamstress Clara Lemlich standing up and overruling cautious male leaders to call for a general strike... But just as there is no romance of Jewish identity here (Jewish girls die in sweatshop fires, as they did in real life, because equally Jewish owners locked the doors), conflicts within the radical movements are not glossed over. Readers who want to know more about these issues may want to turn as I did to Annelise Orleck's (1995) *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, a non-fiction account which is also a great read. (She tells what happened to some of these same women later; by the end of the novel, you will want to know.)

I did have one "difficulty" in reviewing *Beyond the Pale*—I kept having to put the book down to cry. Was I crying over history? Maybe, but I can also still get a good cry out of *Riverfinger Woman*, an important book of my young youth, which does not have the Triangle shirtwaist fire in it, or pogroms. Maybe Dykewomon has always had this talent for conveying a special kind of absolute loss that contains in it the unbearable and naive hope that everything could be rescued and become totally better—and that illogically preserves the seeds of future hope in the ashes of absolute disappointment over what the world does to dreamers and lovers. I closed the book with the same feeling as at the end of Tillie Olsen's "Tell Me a Riddle." "Still you believed? These things shall be?"

History is a space of possibility, since we know about it but we don't know everything about it. But it is not a space for pure fantasy, as both these writers know. Jewish history particularly involves an obligation, a duty to remember. Suddenly the choice of "magic realism" makes more sense to me. But the best examples of this genre (*Song of Solomon*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) make clear that the magic is only as magic as the realism is rooted and real. Especially if, like me, you tend to get your history (and/ or your Judaism) mainly from novels, you could not do better than these two serious and enjoyable new books.