

Oksman, Tahneer. *“How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?” : Women and Jewish American Identity in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs*. New York : Columbia University Press, 2016.

**Reviewed by Steven M. Bergson, UJA Federation of Greater Toronto**

Graphic memoirs written & illustrated by Jewish women are not a new genre, having been pioneered by Aline Kominsky-Crumb in 1972 (38). Nonetheless, this genre has been largely taken for granted by both the popular and academic press. A notable exception is the anthology *Graphic Details* (Lightman), which contains 18 brief chapters, most of them focusing on a single artist. Though *Graphic Details* is a crucial introduction and overview of the subject of Jewish women's graphic memoir, it lacks a central focus to bind all of its essays and interviews together.

With *“How Come Jewish Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?”* Tahneer Oksman ties her critical analyses of seven autobiographical comic artists together by effectively examining how each of them employ both dis-affiliation & postassimilation strategies in their respective narratives. Tahneer defines dis-affiliation as "a visual mapping practice based in rebellions and disorientations but nevertheless resulting in partial affiliations and identifications." (2). Postassimilation refers to the way that the cartoonists are influenced by the effects of assimilation, but do not make those effects central to their narratives (3).

Oksman specifically examines the works of Kominsky-Crumb, Vanessa Davis, Miss Lasko-Gross, Lauren Weinstein, Sarah Glidden, Miriam Libicki, and Liana Finck. Rather than choosing a single framework from which to analyze these stories, Oksman employs a myriad of disciplines: art, literature, journalism, women's studies, Jewish studies, feminist studies, memoir-writing and comics criticism. When relevant, she also introduces related disciplines, such as photography and fashion.

One of the assumptions that most people make when comparing autobiographical comics to superhero comics is that whereas superhero stories involve characters with dual identities, autobiographical narratives simply record the lived experiences of the artists who portray themselves exactly as they are. In fact, cartoonists who write graphic memoirs usually construct a

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distinct persona, deliberately adding or removing details to the story, as well as to the illustrations of themselves, in order to add layers to the narrative and expose truths which might not otherwise be evident.<sup>1</sup> The most obvious examples of constructed personas can be seen in the works of Aline Kominsky Crumb, whose frequent protagonists include Goldie and "The Bunch," both of whom are based on her, but neither of which are her. This presents the potential for confusion when discussing these works, but Oksman is adept at differentiating when she is discussing a persona and when she is talking about the creator and she indicates how she does so in each chapter's endnotes.

Though the narrative styles (e.g. diary entry, travelogue, imaginary conversation) and subject matter varies between the artists, each of them uses both literary and artistic techniques to place themselves within and outside of their communities (as Jews, as women, as artists, etc.). Among these methods are varying the number &/or shapes of panels on a page, limiting the number of people in a panel, using extreme close up, shifting the time periods within the narrative (typical of postmodernism), and drawing customized maps. Reproductions of several comic pages are included, but not all of the ones Oksman discusses are shown. Nonetheless, Oksman meticulously describes each example, providing insight into the ways that each of the cartoonists has used their storytelling skills to represent themselves and other Jewish women. Whether one is a seasoned comics academic or a layperson, the reader can appreciate the ways that Oksman goes beyond a surface reading of the stories to reveal deeper meanings, as well as point out contradictions between how the artists present themselves to others and how they truly feel inside.

I highly recommend "*How Come Jewish Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?*" for both academic and public library collections. In addition to revealing the ways that Jewish artistic women can challenge conventional assumptions and stereotypes (e.g. the JAP, the smothering Jewish mother), Oksman also makes the reader aware of the deficiencies of representations of Jewish women in the mass media (as produced primarily by men). It is hoped that Oksman will continue her research by looking at other stories by these creators (including works currently in

progress), analyzing the works of other cartoonists she references in the endnotes and bibliography (e.g. Phoebe Potts, Sarah Leavitt, Miriam Katin), or deconstructing the autobiographical narratives of lesser-known artists such as Chari Pere, Leslie Stein, Emily Bowen Cohen, and Tatiana Yuditskaya. If so, we can look forward to more books like this, which would make the study of Jewish women's graphic memoirs even richer.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>In *Maus*, Art Spiegelman visually represented the personas in his memoir anthropomorphically almost exclusively. A *New York Times Book Review* editor who used the creative representation to justify classifying *Maus* as fiction was said to have quipped, “Let’s go out to Spiegelman’s house and if a giant mouse answers the door, we’ll move it to the nonfiction side of the list!” (Franklin).

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