
Reviewed by Shayna Sheinfeld, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec Canada

“Is there such a thing as a ‘Jewish mother?’ If so, what are our characteristics and how are these similar or different from all mothers? And what was it that spun our image from adored sentimentality – to neurotic interlopers?” (xi) These are the questions that drive Marnie Winston-Macauley in her book Yiddishe Mamas: The Truth about the Jewish Mother. While the book isn’t teeming with academic research, Winston-Macauley’s use of interviews, anecdotes and humor is entertaining and draws the reader into her quest to define the Jewish mother through ethnography.

The first three chapters of the book are an attempt to address the questions above directly; they focus on the definition of the Jewish mother, the movement of the Jewish mother from a loving, protective shtetl figure to the overbearing mom found in the media, and the often offensive humor directed at Jewish mothers portrayed in comedy today. The second half of the book seems to be more a surplus of ethnographic material than a furthering of the stated goal – it is filled with brief, engaging sections arranged thematically (i.e. Coming to America, Nakhes (Pride), Feminism and Activism, The Holocaust) or by personality (i.e. Albert Einstein, Sarah Bernhardt, Vera Nabokov).

When Winston-Macauley initially began her research, she found that while the people she interviewed had many things to say about the Jewish mother, they were fearful of “stereotyping” her. In order to overcome this problem, Winston-Macauley creates a new phrase which she calls “ethno-typing,” which “…allows us to treasure our uniqueness as a group and as individuals without falling into the trap of carbon copying all Jewish mothers. It also carries with it no positive or negative judgment.” Winston-Macauley uses the phrase “ethno-typing” throughout the book, in any place where one might normally write “stereotype.” It is a surprisingly effective undertaking: the negative connotations usually associated with the word “stereotype” are avoided, and she is able to explore what makes a Jewish mother without preconception.

Through her interviews, Winston-Macauley concludes at the end of the first chapter that the Jewish mother is “…loving, nurturing, sacrificing, child-centered, bossy, verbal, tribal, overfeeding, hilarious, protective, ‘out there,’ an activist – a woman whose background has been molded by religion, tradition, unbearable hardship and loss, and hope.” (28) While this definition is in no way comprehensive – nor is it meant to be – it serves as the basis for the next two chapters, which further explore the definition of the Jewish mother by tracing her image through the media and humor. The transition from a positive to negative image, Winston-Macauley argues, happened because of assimilation: As the mother clung to the tradition of her ancestors, her Americanized children “…wanted to fly and grab a piece of the American Dream and status, which was hard to reconcile with their Jewishness, and their mothers’ expectations.” (35) It was this atmosphere that, according to Winston-Macauley, created the negative image of the
“Yiddishe Mamas:” The Truth about the Jewish Mother

Jewish mother in the media – specifically television. This “mama-bashing” eventually became the universal stereotype of all mothers, not just the Jewish ones, in the media.

This negative stereotype is further perpetuated through Jewish Mother jokes. Winston-Macauley spends an entire chapter exploring the history of the Jewish joke and its extension into the topic of motherhood. She reminds her readers that the first recorded laugh is in the book of Genesis, where Sarah laughs when she hears that she will become pregnant. The Jewish mother joke is most often unpleasant (even if it might be true), and many take offense. An example:

Q: What’s the difference between a Rottweiler and a Jewish mother?
A: Eventually the Rottweiler lets go.

However, even when they are distasteful, at least to some, Winston-Macauley points out that many Jewish comedians who joke about their mother are doing so based on a “truth that comes from personal experience.” (73)

It is at this point in the book where the book breaks off from its initial exploration of the definition of the Jewish mother and moves into the personal stories from Winston-Macauley’s interviews. While this material is very interesting and engaging, it seems to lack coherence with the first half of the book: I often found myself forgetting the focus of the book as I became engaged in each short story. The stories themselves are interesting accounts of the Jewish mother, as told by the mother herself or her relations (children, grandchildren, spouse, etc.). So while they do not necessarily support a unified book, they do enrich the book and the topic. Winston-Macauley would have done better to provide her readers with a brief introduction at the beginning of chapter 4, explaining the shift of focus, rather than her random comments throughout the four chapters that attempt to tie the stories into the first half of the book.

Winston-Macauley’s endeavor to explore and define – without stereotype – the Jewish mother makes an interesting and entertaining read. Even the appendices contain a touch of humor: The first one is the “Aleph-baiz of Jewish Mother Humor” and includes an A through Z listing of funny stories. Her attempt is not intended to be fully comedic, however, and she takes her topic seriously. She writes “Our protectiveness, sacrifice, and raw courage in the face of [persecution] is, without question, rooted in our ethno-type. It provides an understanding of who we are, and deserves enormous respect when pitted against the comic images we’re fed.” (277) Winston-Macauley takes her topic seriously, and states in the epilogue that her “fervent hope is that this book has, in some measure, restored some balance, providing a deeper understanding of the sensibility and range of the Jewish mother against the simplest, often offensive, and ignorant stereotype.” (318)

Indeed, it has.