Kraut, Florence Reiss. *How to Make a Life: A Novel*. N.P.: She Writes Press, 2020.

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How to Make a Life: A Novel is Florence Reiss Kraut's debut novel. It traces a multi-generational story of the Weissman family: their bloody eviction from Kotovka, near Odessa, Ukraine, arrival in America, their struggles, frustrations, disputes, and reconcilements. In short, readers learn about both their life as individuals and their life as a family. The Weismans are members of a religious group, sharing a consciousness of their own past and, sometimes of, their own future. Kraut makes certain that this awareness of the Weismans' otherness does not contradict the mainstream narrative, regarding American exceptionalism where groups and individuals from all over the world find a refuge in America. Hard work and perseverance give immigrants the chance to rebuild shattered selves, something they do not even start to imagine if they chose to stay back in the old country, Europe.

The story takes place mostly in Brooklyn, New York where Chaya Amdur, now Ida Amdur, settles after she and her two little daughters survive the decimation of the family in the pogrom of 1905. Here readers follow the fate of the Jewish family, and by extension the same readers are able to see the larger outline how America become a haven for those persecuted and discriminated against. In the hustle of procuring basic necessities and acclimatizing to the resettling, the youngest daughter died in a house accident barely a year after arrival, and now Ida is left with only Bessie. Eventually, Bessie marries Abe and gave birth to five children: Ruby, Morris, Erin, Jenny and Faye. Ruby is eccentric and this obliges extra care and attention initially from Ida but later all sisters and nieces are involved. Ruby's sensitivity makes her more intuitive, wherein she starts speaking quickly, translating an inner voice against which she exercises little, if any, control. Kraut makes certain that Ruby's affliction is a feature which all the

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Weissmans share, in the sense that not a small number of the descendants suffer from, only that the affliction manifests rather extremely with Ruby. That eccentricity is actually what makes them human since the strangeness materializes in situations where little transparency or serious compromises are reached: marriages, presents, betrayals. It is often when a moral code is breached that Ruby becomes peculiar to herself and everyone else.

Nevertheless, it is through such eccentric outbursts that the readers get to know the characters best and empathize with them. Privileged with these characters' inner voices, coming in italics in the text, the reader is now in a position to connect intimately with their perspectives and that which is profoundly offending them. In the meanwhile, and through its twenty-one chapters, the reader gains a view how America too has evolved from the beginning of the twentieth century to the early twenty first. There is a social record of the country with periods such as the Depression Years of the 1930s, the Second World War, the Vietnam War, the 1973 Israeli War with its Arab neighbors. The final chapter is set in 2012 and celebrates Victor's hundredth birthday. Victor is a refugee from Hitler's Germany; he is Ruby's husband and Jenny's lover. Attending the birthday by all living members of the clan is a testimony to the fact that Ida's refuge in America has been a thrilling experience. The birthday itself serves a happy reunion and a sure reminder that Europe's refugees are finally home and are meant to stay: all members of the family are part of the very American social fabric: engineers, artists, and doctors. Victor had not seen his daughter Sarah in a long time, and he has doubts she would make it to the birthday. Not only did she make it, but the painting she presents for the occasion and wherein Ruby comes alive speaks of the spiritual gift of the entire members of the extended family.

Fully aware that life with Ruby has never been easy, Sarah's aesthetization of her mother in the painting cannot be an ordinary reconciliation with the past or a circumvoluted way of atoning for a wrong doing. Rather, the painting invites readers to be more considerate and less judgmental to that which teases or ails loved ones, and

certainly never to abandon them in times of need. Bessie's mantra: "we never abandon family, simply because they are family" sets the stage as the slogan for communal well-being and thriving. Jenny lives through the slogan and carries out its dictates to the letter, not out of cerebral conviction but with a sense of bodily duty, the fact that she cannot do otherwise even when she thinks she can. Hence, how she lives well into old age (she is ninety in the last chapter) and with a relative confront, inner satisfaction and happiness that sets her apart from the rest of the family. Likewise, her capacity to forgive herself along with the rejection to capitalize on grudges or see them for not what they are is indeed inspiring. In this connection, intuitive confrontations from 'high-spirited' members, which more often than not become registered as insensitive inconsideration, cannot be dispensed with as simply reckless or narcissistic instantiations taking the form of unnecessary squabbles or pathologies. Indeed, what is mistaken as the crazy urge to share literally all of one's possessions with the needy and the unfortunate springs from the primordial instincts of human's communal and communist past, that past which predates both money and religion! Alternatively considered, that urge lies at the heart of what defines people as humans in the first place. Lest one runs the risk of tearing the family apart, toleration of such excesses remains capital in the overall immanence of events.

What is troublesome though is how certain members of the family—for the sake of fairness, not all—capitalize on a calcified notion of their Jewishness, shielding themselves, in the imaginary ghetto of the faith, from the rest of humanity. Embracing the Kantian premise of Enlightenment, Kraut dares to explore on that mental concentration camp, that which keeps certain Jews from celebrating universalism. In Bessie Amdur's reticence from granting approval for Faye's marriage with Angelo becomes more or less understandable, yet certainly never convincing. The memory of the pogrom is still fresh as "even in America one has to be careful of Catholics." Nevertheless, in the case of David (Joseph's Israeli cousin), Jewishness becomes a concentration camp with all the imagined barbered wires intact. This explains why Joseph

reiterates: “Don’t we have to stand for all oppressed people? Especially us? Especially after what happened to our family and no one spoke up?” (p. 163). With Joseph one ceases a historical, not a political, understanding of the holocaust, entailing that unless all humans are free, any thoughtful Jew cannot have the dignity to look at themselves in the mirror. In following an orthodox approach of the faith, Michael (renamed now Moshe) becomes blinded from noting the logic in his elder sister’s—Abby—planning to marry a non-Jew. In constantly waiting for the rabbi’s opinion, Moshe remains forever shut off from the rest of humanity, and always on the defensive.

How to Make a Life easily compares with writings by Arab and Muslim American fiction writings. The comparison will facilitate registering the necessity to bypass the faiths and stop seeing the dogmas as markers of identity. The American context and the fast pace of its rhythm accelerates that clarity of vision towards a less incarcerated, in the sense of less alienated, human beings. In reading Kraut’s novel along with say, Ali Eteraz’s *Native Believer* (2016) or Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), readers will gain the privileged insight to see how faiths, contrary to what is commonly sold, destroy common humanity and impeach the liberating universalism. The three texts, such as the one mentioned here, will be decisive in seeing the faiths not as independent totalities connecting the worldly with the other worldly. Rather, Judaism, Islam and Catholicism start to uncover their true essence: fetishistic objects highlighting social phenomena, ensuring both servitude and alienation for their respective followers. A comparative study of *How to Make a Life* will make it self-evident that one cannot emancipate with a structure that is anti-emancipatory.