



This Is Not a Love Story

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A razor-sharp, hilarious, and poignant memoir about growing up in the closed world of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community.

The third of six children in a family that harks back to a glorified Hassidic dynasty, Judy Brown grew up with the legacy of centuries of religious teaching, and the faith and lore that sustained her people for generations.

But her carefully constructed world begins to crumble when her "crazy" brother Nachum returns home after a year in Israel living with relatives. Though supposedly "cured," he is still prone to retreating into his own mind or erupting in wordless rages. The adults' inability to make him better - or even to give his affliction a name - forces Judy to ask larger questions: If God could perform miracles for her sainted ancestors, why can't He cure Nachum? And what of the other stories her family treasured?

Judy starts to negotiate with God, swinging from holy tenets to absurdly hilarious conclusions faster than a Talmudic scholar: she goes on a fast to nab coveted earrings; she fights with her siblings at the dinner table for the ultimate badge of honor ("Who will survive the next Holocaust?"); and she adamantly defends her family's reputation when, scandalously, her parents are accused of having fallen in love---which is absolutely not what pious people do.

For all its brutal honesty about this insular community, *This is Not a Love Story* is ultimately a story of a family like so many others, whose fierce love for each other and devotion to their faith pulled them through the darkest time in their lives.

This Is Not a Love Story Details

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From Reader Review This Is Not a Love Story for online ebook

Hallie Cantor says

Absorbing memoir of a Hassidic girl growing up with an autistic brother before the disorder became better known. Ms. Brown describes vividly her insular environment in Brooklyn, attending an ultra-Orthodox girls' school and growing up with a less-than-perfect sibling in a society that equates everything with sin and punishment.

Her family was under special scrutiny, and stigma, because of information Judy had gleaned of her parents, who had apparently married for love. Her mother, scion of a Hassidic dynasty, was expected to accept whoever was either chosen or deemed suitable for her. Judy's father, a sort of maverick, came from an impoverished family in Jerusalem. Although at different socioeconomic ends, the two "fell in love," and Judy's father willingly took on the customs of her mother's Hassidic group upon marriage. Nevertheless, their relationship, innocent by secular standards, was considered brazen and "cursed" -- ergo the reason for their son's autism.

As the sibling of someone (now deceased) with "special needs," though not autism, I can relate to the terrible stress, and the challenges, of living with someone whose behavior is unpredictable, if not embarrassing. Ms. Brown describes one scene in particular at a kosher pizza shop, where Nachum goes into full-blown meltdown. Unfortunately, like many disabled children, Nachum affected the family dynamic, causing frequent quarrels between his parents.

I couldn't help wondering if all of this even influenced the author's later decision to leave the fold -- along with the issue of sexual abuse in the Orthodox community, which was highlighted in her novel HUSH. Her parents' "outcast" status seemed reflected even in their physical surroundings, as the author grew up straddling two worlds -- modern Flatbush and shtetl Boro Park -- and occupying the margins of both. Her family even had Gentile tenants -- highly uncommon for a Hassidic family, which usually tries to avoid such contacts. Hers was unconventional in more ways than one, and perhaps Ms. Brown long ago had one foot out the door. The book, in fact, might have benefited from more positive Jewish content; the author's depiction of her religion was far too cynical, leaving me cold.

For Nachum, there is sort of a happy ending: he is eventually sent to a new, special school in Israel, where he actually blossomed to a certain degree. Apparently the author feels that the change of environment allowed him to find expression. They even developed a warm relationship. This book may provide some kind of guidance for those who on the one hand are desperately seeking proper treatment for their children on the spectrum while on the other feeling guilty over "abandonment." Sadly, however, the author's rejection of her heritage will probably drive Orthodox readers away.

Maxine says

I'm not entirely sure how I feel about this memoir....

On the one hand - it is a very honest depiction of a young girl and her thoughts about her autistic brother. And on the other - it's a brutal description of a community that lacks resources, and more importantly, lacks empathy, for anyone that is slightly different from them.

I do need to give Brown kudos for writing this with such truth. It must have been hard to put some of this to paper. Her thoughts about Nachum, and the rest of her family, are not always the most charitable (to say the least). Yet, more than just a little girl's opinion this memoir stands as an indictment of an entire community and their response to a child that doesn't fit in.

It's fairly obvious from the start that Nachum is on the autism spectrum, and I find it hard to believe that even in the late 80's in New York City there were no resources, doctors or medical professionals who could help or diagnose him. I could be wrong on this - I don't know what the medical community was like for kids like this in the 80's.

But what really stands out in this is the response of the Chassidic community to a child like Nachum. For a community that is so steeped in ethics, morality, and religion, there is a decided lack of empathy towards Nachum and his family. Reasons ranged from assuming the family was being punished by god with a curse, to trying to ward off the evil eye, to Judy assuming it was a punishment from god because her parents fell in love before they were married. It seems to me that everyone here talked a good game about "higher souls" and being kind, yet nothing was actually done in reality.

This was an easy to read memoir that deals with a tough topic. More info on the actual community and how they dealt with Nachum (instead of everything being from a 10 year olds perspective) would not have been amiss, and more info from Judy's perspective when she was older would have been great to read.

Moira-ji says

trigger warnings if you're autistic.

a girl growing up in a prominent Chassidic family struggles with the fact that her brother is (called a lot of very demeaning things, but is actually) autistic. along with everyone else in the community, she scrutinizes her parents' history to find out why they are being punished and what this means for her future.

this is a very honest memoir. I have not been such a sibling, but the scenes she describes resonate with my own memories (of being and raising an autistic child)(esp in a religiously conservative community), and they are disturbing and unflattering to say the least. many readers assume I mean the scenes her brother made, but the same passages describe how her brother was treated and regarded by everyone around him. the eight-year-old perspective from which Judy Brown wrote describes her world and herself with unrelenting candor.

"The people on my side of the chasm saw what my brother had as a frightful disease. They feared it, and I absorbed the fear. They loathed it, and so did I. They called it a curse because they did not have the words to explain it, and where there are no words, there is always fear." pg 300

this is a coming of age story about a girl, her brother, and their family that was very interesting for a goy to read, and which had some hard truths about cure and acceptance. It was utterly hillarious in moments as well, even though parts were painful to read as an autistic.

Spider the Doof Warrior says

I can't even deal with this book anymore. It's making me too angry. I swear non autistic people should be banned from writing about autism until they've talked to autistic people, read blogs by autistic people, read books written by autistic people who don't believe the crap Autism Speaks puts out about autistic people.

The sheer amount of ableism and hatred towards this autistic little boy is making it impossible for me to wade through. There's some interesting stuff about Jewish culture and history and then suddenly WHAM! The writer hopes her little brother eats poisonous berries and dies. Or POW the writer says her brother is cursed and can't love or feel and I'm just like, stab me in my autistic heart, why don't you?

This is torture to get through! Why do so many things have to be in the perspective of siblings or parents or experts who are still stuck in the Freudian days of Psychology and they can't even bother to listen to one autistic person who would say that we do feel and that sometimes the world is too loud and hurts too much for us and it doesn't help to just get smacked with non stop ableism like this!

And of course, I'll probably try again to finish this damn book, but just leafing through it is telling me this is a bad life decision. That I should just finish playing Dream Daddy and write some books about autism than won't make autistic people feel like they're getting kicked in the face.

But of course we don't have feelings and can't love, huh? Avoid this book, especially if you're autistic.

Nope. still not going to finish. I never hated a child more than I hate the narrator. Why was she like this? She had chances to learn about autism and refused to! Then, the poor brother gets his autism trained away and now he's more acceptable? man. no more of this book.

Lisa says

Hmm, I'd say 3 1/2 stars. The first part of this memoir was really interesting. An ultra-orthodox family is dealing with a very troubled son. No one knows what his problem is or what to do about him, and they eventually send him to live in Jerusalem with family to be "cured." Once he comes back home to Brooklyn, he is still causing troubles, so back to Jerusalem he goes. I skimmed several chapters - old stories and fables that were unnecessary to the story - but the last few chapters were very good. When the boy's older sister, who narrates the story, goes to Jerusalem to visit her brother for the first time in years, she's amazed to find how much better he is, and she gives the best explanation of autism I've ever read.

Lois R. Gross says

The author of this book previously wrote about sexual abuse in the NY Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. Now she tackles another tough subject, focusing on her own family. Brown's younger brother, Nachum, was considered "crazy" by his family and friends. To any contemporary reader, it is clear that Nachum was actually on the Autism Spectrum and severely impaired. He lacked language and communication skills; acted out, violently; and was so self-destructive that he put his head through a wall of his yeshiva. Lacking the current resources to treat him, and tethered by the lack of knowledge and superstitions of a fundamentalist community, Brown's mother finally sent Nachum to stay with relatives in Israel where treatment and schools were already in existence. Through years of treatment, Nachum became verbal and socially functioning, and this part of the story is reassuring.

However, this is also the story of Nachum's siblings and how they dealt with their disabled brother, and with Brown's parents who were torn by their child's disability. Israeli immigrants and already unconventional because they married late and for love, the father has written his son off, at least in part. The mother runs from doctor to doctor seeking a cure and refusing to give up on her child. Meanwhile, her daughter bargains with G-d to fix or discard her brother who draws all the parents' attention and is an embarrassment in their insular community. More importantly, the presence of a mentally disabled sibling impacts all the siblings future marriage prospects because no one will marry into a family with the potential for a genetic disorder. In the course of the book, the author touches on how this is circumvented by lying to the matchmaker and future marriage partners.

Not a page-turner, but a heartfelt remembrance of how far we have come in the treatment and acceptance of individuals on the autism spectrum and how families and siblings need to be supported when dealing with a disabled child.

Eli Mandel says

This book does not overlap Hush at all. There's no Devoiry and Gittel became Menucha. But the lovable upstairs neighbor Kathy still lives upstairs with her very goyishe husband.

We are thrust directly into the large, yet tiny, world that Brown's family inhabits. What's it like for the second generation after the holocaust, being raised by the children of deeply scarred holocaust survivors? There are Nazis lurking everywhere, and the upstairs neighbor, a goy, might save you when the next holocaust came, and that is the only reason you're allowed to be friends with her.

The scenes of poverty Brown paints in Jerusalem were as vivid and emotive to me as those in Angela's Ashes.

Judy Brown lives in a decidedly binary world. There are Jews and non-Jews. The former are good, the latter are bad, the former are going to heaven, the latter are going to hell. There are also secular Jews, but they're just like non-Jews, they're bad and they will go to hell.

There are two sides in Jerusalem, the rich and the poor side.

There are the royal rabbinic dynasties and there are milkmen.

There is falling in love and touching, which is disgusting and is reserved for goyim, and there is never touching your spouse and just barely liking them.

There is normal and there is crazy.

There is Borough Park which has no goyim, but only righteous Jews, and there's Flatbush which has Ku Klux Klan cross-burning parties at night.

But her family occupies a middle zone. Her parents may have fallen in love before marriage and they may now live outside Jewish-dominated Borough Park among the goyim of Flatbush, but they are still devoutly religious. They may not live near their hasidic sect's shul, but her father still puts his shtreimel on of a Friday evening and walks to the local shul with his sons in tow.

How to make sense of this confusing space her family occupies? This is Judy Brown's growing up story.

I do think the book could have stood to have some of its water boiled out in the middle, but it picks up steam again at the end and closes with a satisfying whistle.

Hermien says

A treasure. Amazing how the writer captured the logic and innocence of a young child. And also an important message about accepting people who are different.

Russell Sanders says

When I received an e-mail from the Hatchett Book Group touting Judy Brown's *This Is Not a Love Story* as "a razor sharp, hilarious, and poignant memoir about growing up in the closed world of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community," I ordered the book immediately. I've long been a student of anything Jewish, particularly anything Chasidic. I must say, however, that I was a bit disappointed in Brown's book. It was that word "hilarious" that tripped me up. I expected full-out belly laughs throughout my reading, and while there was humor, the "poignant" overruled everything. Brown's voice as her eight-year-old self is spot on, and there is humor in her reminiscences as she tells of dealing with her younger brother, a special needs child. The memoir is heartfelt and poignant, and it does offer an insight into the world of dealing with a sibling who is different in a major way. But, even though her family is indeed Chasidic, that is not dwelt upon. Their story could be that of most any family of most any religion. Yes, there are special considerations here because they do practice Chasidism, but I didn't feel it overrode the story. I guess my biggest disappointment was not even a part of the memoir. The book jacket blurb says the author no longer practices Chasidism. I wanted to know why and hoped her book would at least explain that a bit. Alas, it didn't, thus I feel cheated. Her childhood feelings are so tied to her religion, and she doesn't seem uncomfortable with it at all. So one has to wonder why she abandoned it.

Maggie Anton says

Another excellent read from the author of *Hush*. Again written mostly from a child's POV & again dealing with a taboo subject for the ultra-Orthodox, this time autism. Actually this is a love story; ultimately the love of a mother for her "damaged/cursed" son and her determination to cure him, not institutionalize him.

Sweet Selena says

This Is Not A Love Story: A Memoir by Judy Brown! I loved this book! The family faces challenges, their love and faith gets them through it ultimately. I found this book honest, inspiring, funny at times, heartbreakingly and extremely heart warming. A young girl growing up in the Ultra Orthodox Hasidic community. This is the 1980' and '90s, when autism is not fully understood, diagnosed, or dealt with.

Ines says

i have to confess that i had hard time in the very first part of the book, i truly could not believe how a little

girl could consider in such way her brother nothing more than a wart to cut out and hidden away.....

i was near to leave the book.....but i was curious about a possible twist...-.. that came....

the second parte of the book was a for me a complete page turner....the possibility that in any circumstances and situation there is allways a way to change in better, the beauty and the positive could find a place to shine

(i an not english native, sorry for my grammar and syntax)

Christina Dudley says

This was an honest, moving, sometimes funny memoir about growing up ultraorthodox Jewish with an autistic younger brother. I appreciated how Judy Brown unapologetically tells the first part of the story from her sub-third-grade POV: her brother is crazy, embarrassing, tearing the family apart, the product (her friends tell her) of a family curse. She just wishes God would fix him or make him go away. Brown's ability to remember what it's like to be a kid, understanding the adult world only in part and wanting the universe to operate along simple, transactional lines, make her parents' struggles and choices that much more powerful.

I was reminded at times of Haven Kimmel's memoir, at others of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. And I highlighted this passage:

"Some miracles take a long time. Some need more than forty days and nights; they take perhaps years of work and dedication. Some miracles unfold over time in stunning acts of transformation--a rock sculpted by wind and water, a seed turned into an oak, a mountain range pushed up, a canyon carved out. They're formed over years and centuries in stretched-out, slow-motion magic. Maybe you can't see it happening, but it is still a miracle.

"I'd been an idiot, I told God from within the murmuring crowd. Because five years on, I finally realized that He had never said no. He had only said 'Wait.'"

Lisa Jablonsky says

A memoir of a young girl growing up in the Ultra Orthodox Hassidic community that has a brother who has severe autism before the condition even had a name.

An excellent portrayal of the challenges this family faced, and the love and faith that got them through it ultimately.

The book is described as hilarious. Not to me. It was moving poignant sad inspiring, even funny at times, but never hilarious.

How a young girl is able to synthesize this rigid world she lives in with the blame and repercussions her brother brings to the familys life seem very real. She has an interesting take on it all. The girl is able to quote the Talmud and this sects beliefs to explain how 'her crazy brother' is ruining her life and her family. For example her parents married for love! This is a crime to Hassids so clearly her family has been cursed with

her crazy brother. Or too bad he doesn't have cancer, because God demands compassion for the sickly. Crazy is not sick. Etc. Cute, realistic, not hilarious. Please don't read it for hilarity. Read it to empathize, to be amazed, to be informed.

We follow the family for 2 decades which is a long time for a new medical diagnosis to emerge, for communities to evolve, for a boy to bloom, for a girl to grow up, for a mother to never give up on an outcast child, and a family to forge itself in love.

Jessica says

When Judy Brown was growing up she was constantly embarrassed by her younger brother Nachum. Their family was ultraorthodox Chassidic Jews and in the late 1980's autism wasn't really on many people's radars, but especially in this insular community. Nachum couldn't speak and would freak out over loud noises or if touched. Judy constantly prayed that God would fix her brother or at least take him away. Their mother devotes her life to getting Nachum help finally sending him to live in Israel with family and that is where after years he is finally diagnosed as autistic and gets the therapy and help he needs. Within a few years of his diagnosis he can read and write and speak. After being away from her brother for 6 years when Judy first goes to visit him she "...realized that He [God] had never said no. He had only said, 'Wait.'"(p. 295) Judy starts to develop a real relationship with Nachum and begins to see their childhood in a different light now that she understands more about autism. The book kind of dragged on in the middle when she was SO caught up in being embarrassed by her brother, but the end made the whole book. The relationship they have and her love for him shines through. Growing up with a severely autistic sibling would be hard for anyone, but I think it was even harder because of their ultraorthodox community where the common practice was to send away any "imperfect" children. The fact that their parents didn't do that says a lot about them.

In the info about her in the back of the book it says that she left Chassidism after being revealed as the author of a controversial book. I'm curious to know about that experience and maybe she'll write another book about that journey.
