



Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers: An Intimate Journey Among Hasidic Girls

Stephanie Wellen Levine , Carol Gilligan

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From the ardently religious young woman who longs for the life of a male scholar to the young rebel who visits a strip club, smokes pot, and agonizes over her loss of faith to the proud Lubavitcher with a desire for a high-powered career, Stephanie Wellen Levine provides a rare glimpse into the inner worlds and daily lives of these Hasidic girls.

Lubavitcher Hasidists are famous for their efforts to inspire secular Jews to become more observant and for their messianic fervor. Strict followers of Orthodox Judaism, they maintain sharp gender-role distinctions. Levine spent a year living in the Lubavitch community of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, participating in the rhythms of Hasidic girlhood. Drawing on many intimate hours among Hasidism and over 30 in-depth interviews, *Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers* offers rich portraits of individual Hasidic young women and how they deal with the conflicts between the regimented society in which they live and the pull of mainstream American life.

Perhaps counterintuitively for those who envision meek, religious girls confined within very structured roles, Levine finds that on the whole, these young Hasidic women seem more confident and have a greater sense of self than many of their mainstream peers. Levine explores why this might be the case, and what we can learn from their example for girls' positive development more generally. Along the way, she provides a fascinating portrayal of day-to-day life in the Lubavitch community.

This superbly crafted book offers intimate stories from Hasidic teenagers' lives, providing an intriguing twist to a universal theme: the struggle to grow up and define who we are within the context of culture, family, and life-driving beliefs.

Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers: An Intimate Journey Among Hasidic Girls **Details**

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From Reader Review Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers: An Intimate Journey Among Hasidic Girls for online ebook

Pilar Timpone says

I love this book. I read it for a college course on religion and have never forgotten it. An ethnographic look at young women growing up in the Hasid cultures of New York City (Brooklyn and Queens mostly). I enthusiastically recommend this book all the time for anyone interested in the intersection of women's lives, orthodox religious cults, and arranged marriage. Simply a must for anyone studying sociology, Jewish studies, or women's studies, but EVERYONE will enjoy this book and getting to know these funny, sly, beautiful characters as Levine portrays them.

Sara says

I really enjoyed this one. A nice readable slice of life piece, with some interesting insight into Chabad philosophy. There was nothing particularly new in it for me, but if you are totally new to the subject and curious, it's a good start.

Jennifer S. Brown says

This book looks at teenaged girls in the Hasidic Lubavitch community. You could call this book research for my own writing, and while I did enjoy the looks at the individual girls, I found that this book was too much of what I think it was supposed to be--an academic paper. I didn't care so much of the sociological ramifications in a greater community, I just wanted more of the girls. The young women profiled were certainly diverse--people interested in leaving, people who were truly embracing the religion, people who were trying to mix careers in the secular world with the religious life. It would be quite interesting to have more follow-up on these young women. The book was insightful and helpful for me, but was not a gripping read, I'm afraid.

Isa says

this book almost made me cry for the pure and simple fact that i wish there was room in chasidism for women like me.

Lily (WhoLockian) says

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Mystics, Mavericks and Merrymakers by Stephanie Wellen Levine
Reviewed by Moirae the fates book reviews

From the ardently religious young woman who longs for the life of a male scholar to the young rebel who visits a strip club, smokes pot, and agonizes over her loss of faith to the proud Lubavitcher with a desire for a high-powered career, Stephanie Wellen Levine provides a rare glimpse into the inner worlds and daily lives of these Hasidic girls.

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This superbly crafted book offers intimate stories from Hasidic teenagers' lives, providing an intriguing twist to a universal theme: the struggle to grow up and define who we are within the context of culture, family, and life-driving beliefs. (Synopsis provided by Amazon)

I read this one as I have a friend who is Chabad Lubavitch and she is from Crown Heights. I wanted to learn more about her community as Chabad is very different from Messianic.

While reading this book I learned that the extreme kindness is an attribute for the whole group. I have met a few others who are Chabad and every single one of them has been such a genuine and kind person. This book shows how that is a staple in that community.

Each of the ladies in that were interviewed in this book were very different. There was one girl who questioned her community and her religion, I found her story to be the most interesting in its own way, I wanted to know why she had questions why no one would answer the questions. I didn't get all the answers to her story that I wanted sadly.

I did enjoy how Levine describes how she went back to talk to one of the girls to get her to sign a release so that her story could be used. I was interested to see how the more "free" girls of the book had changed so

much.

Of course all of the girls are not called by their actual names in the book to protect their identities. If you are interested in the Chabad community and want to know more I would encourage you to read this book.

Jill says

Not really sure what I think about this book. I got a little tired of the "gee! wow! Hasidic people aren't all exactly alike!" tone, though I thought the girls' stories were fascinating. Because I'm interested in girls' intellectual culture, I was especially intrigued by the girls' spiritual and intellectual lives, especially the girls who were eager to study Torah, and I thought the book could have done a much better job discussing relationships, especially the mashpiah relationship, which Levine mentions several times but never explores in the book. I'm not Jewish, but I was slightly offended by the author referring to herself as a kind of mashpiah; that seemed a little arrogant for an observer.

I did like it that Levine admired the spiritual/intellectual dedication of the Lubavitcher girls, and called for more community among teenagers. It's striking, though, how the bulk of the conclusion focused, however, on the tired old prescription of single-sex education, as if it's a new thing to state that single-sex education/culture builds confidence. I wish the apparently evergreen "girl power" movement would come up with something more sophisticated. It seems like it's becoming very easy to romanticize all-girl environments, pairing that romantic view with the simplistic assumption that adding boys means adding sex. I find that confusing, as personally I've often found all-female environments to be breeding grounds for the "mean girl" behavior the girl-power advocates are positioning themselves as being in a position to prevent. As a girl and as a woman, I've always found relationships with men, especially platonic relationships (gasp!), as a welcome corrective to all-female environments. I'd like to see more nuanced discussions of boy-girl relationships that aren't limited them to sexualized relationships. Spiritual or intellectual bonding -- or the kind of community bonding that Levine mentions -- seem like one possible way to do that.

It's easy to bash Carol Gilligan for fostering a girls-only kind of essentialism, but Gilligan's more recent work (Birth of Pleasure) also focuses sympathetically on the damage inflicted by prescriptive masculinity on boys and men. Maybe someday we'll be able to model more balanced relationships

Sarah says

This was such an interesting book to read. The girls' upbringing was not unlike my Mormon youth in many ways.

Alison says

Most of this book is a moving account of young Lubavitcher women, which is done extremely well. These girls come alive - their passion, their beliefs, their personalities and how those develop within a culture with so many rules, and such high expectations. This part of the book - the bulk of the book - easily deserves 4.5

stars from me.

In particular, unlike other anthropology-style accounts, Levine captures the role of religion and belief in shaping their world view. This is a welcome contrast to many books which treat Hasidism like a lifestyle choice, downplaying the role of belief in making the decision to live like this in favour of analysing the social utility of gender isolation, for example. The focus on unmarried young women also allows Levine into a window of a female world not yet absorbed with the mechanics of child rearing, household management and family income.

Levine herself admits her choice of subjects are not demographically representative - she has chosen subjects who are analytical, striving and reflective, but she does showcase a variety of responses to the world, from rejection of the beliefs, to rebellion within the framework, and devout embracing. She shows the ways in which these young women all shape their worlds.

This is a mostly positive view, without shying away from the severe impact upon those who want a different life. Her focus on girls, she admits, also skips over the issues faced in male-headed households, where women are expected to perform a great deal of domestic work, remain in the private sphere, and are prevented from an equal say in key decisions, such as divorce, and in which family planning of any sense is viewed as a violation of god's law. In that sense, this book is a good accompaniment to another text which examines adult Hasidic life in more detail.

Given how rich this content is, it is a shame that the lengthy essay at the end of the book is so annoying. Levine, apparently deeply affected by her time, attempts to map out ways in which public policy could allow more girls to benefit from what she sees as the strengths of the environment, particularly, she advocates single sex schooling. My main problem with this section is that she fails to establish that she takes it as a given that most adolescent women are timid, competitive and less confident than these girls. This is based almost entirely on her own experiences at high school, and is poorly referenced or melded with a broader academic framework of girlhood. I suspect that any long form study of a year spent with a group of adolescent girls would discover much depth, robustness and strength, more than is remembered from generally unpleasant school days. It is true, admittedly, that I attended a single sex school, but I would honestly say I haven't noticed a big gap in confidence between my peers who attended co-ed schools vs single-sex. I had particular problems with the way Levine characterised adolescent sexuality as at the root of the unnamed problems girls face, and advocates for encouraging students to refrain from romantic/sexual contact. I think this is an extreme reduction of the dynamics that develop between boys and girls and sexism.

My second frustration with this section was that it de-emphasised inevitably the very sense of belief the book had integrated so cohesively. Levine acknowledges this, but given she is hardly likely to suggest we are forced to become Lubavitchers (an ideology, which after all, is based on the idea that only Jewish people are motor forces for good), she resorts to secular imitations of aspects of the lifestyle. It is clear that a large part of these women's self conception is based on an ideology which highly values all Jewish people, and the actions of all Jewish people. This gives each of them a role and a space to play, even if that role and space is ultimately very confining. She also avoids the elements of the theology, which like so many community-cohesive theologies do, sets up a clear insider-outsider dynamic based upon Jewish status. Lubavitchers define themselves as part of a superior minority amid a larger ocean of gentiles, whose world is to be rejected.

But in the end, I'm very glad to have read this book. It proved a real insight into the motivations of a growing group of gender-essentialists, and it introduced me to a delightful cast, whose futures I hope are bright.

Esther says

The author, as part of her doctoral thesis at Harvard, spent a year in Crown Heights, studying Lubovitch girls in high school and beyond, before they married. I'm no Chasid, but I'm Jewish enough to feel uncomfortable with her anthropologist's view of our culture. She describes ritual, behavior, and myth as if she were Margaret Mead among the Samoans. Although the author is Jewish (though non-observant), her year-long stay among the Lubovitchers affects her not at all --she adamantly refuses to take as small a step as lighting Shabbat candles, despite the pleas of her hosts, because, she states, she is afraid that it might be the first step along a journey that takes her away from her beloved pork spare ribs. She keeps an anthropologist's distance throughout, and although she dresses like the natives, in order to get close enough to study them in their natural habitat, she is never at any risk of "going native".

She clearly is most fascinated by the minority of girls who don't fit in with the Lubovitchers, and who leave the community. Since her thesis only concerns girls IN the community, when they drop out of the neighborhood, they drop off the author's radar, and we don't know whatever happens to them.

In all, I was dissatisfied with the book. Although the subtitle calls the book an "Intimate Journey", I got the feeling that no intimacy developed between researcher and subject, and no journey was made -- the author didn't really get anywhere.

Avery says

Lubavitch women are amazing people!!

Daniel Hadley says

A participant-observer's stories about Lubavitcher pariahs and faithful followers of the "once and future messiah," Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

Susan Bazzett-Griffith says

Stephanie Levine's *Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers* is an interesting read, but it could have been better if the author had been a little less concerned with paying proper respect to every mystical element of the Lubavitch Orthodox society. In a way, yes, it was necessary for Levine to use the utmost care in how she handled the girls who are the subjects of this book; however, when it came to evaluating them on an overall level, I find it odd and somewhat of a failing that she never broaches the topic of "What if this isn't the truth?" with them. I also find it disturbing that she doesn't delve into the after effects of growing up with such extreme censorship in all of their art/media/life exposure other than how that lack of outside input seems to increase their bond to Orthodoxy.

On the other hand, Levine is (beyond) complimentary about her subjects. She emphasizes how likable they are, how "normal" despite their Orthodox dress and faith. She is able to get them to genuinely open up to her and show themselves to her, which is admirable, considering how insular most Orthodox communities can be. I enjoyed the interviews and descriptions of her subjects. That said, I suppose my overall impression is

one of disappointment that Levine was so worried about doing a disservice to the girls she included in this book that she ended up doing a disservice to the book itself with her lack of criticism.

Patty says

My class this semester, Women and Judaism has given me a lot to think about and some excellent reading. I have learned about Eve, about how Jewish laws affect women, Jewish women and therapy and now about Hasidic young women. I am impressed that Levine could get permission to interview these girls. Religious communities do not always welcome strangers in their midst.

I am also impressed by Levine's writing. She does a good job of keeping herself out of the portraits of the Hasidic girls. She also tells their stories in such a way that holds the readers interest and made me want to know more.

I think it would be difficult not to interject my own feelings into the chapters. I realize that Levine is Jewish and so she has more in common with the Lubavitcher community than I would. However, I am Christian and my tolerance for right wing fundamental Christians is difficult to maintain. Levine meets her goal of clinically interviewing these young women and giving us a glimpse into their world.

I have encountered Hasidic Jews in my life. Mostly, my encounters were in Israel, but I at least knew something about Orthodox Judaism. It is hard for me to imagine what it would be like to read this book without that knowledge. Levine does define some terms, but the less you know about Judaism, the harder this book may be to understand.

However, if you want to encounter a whole different world through your reading, I highly recommend this book. The Lubavitcher community is a world within New York. They are not closed off from our secular world, but they are not of it either. Like the Amish, they look like they came from some other time.

I recommend this book to readers who like narrative non-fiction, to amateur anthropologists and to those who like to read about women's roles in society.

Miryam-Chavah says

it was "eh"....

not really an eye-opening experience for me, but i don't think i was the target audience for the book (i'm hasidic)... i think it was more written to shock and amaze the general public... presenting several portraits of modern hasidic women to just illustrate (and exploit?) the fact that we are in fact human and have lives rather similar to a lot of other folks "out there"...

Ariellafairie says

I love this book, it must be my third time reading it. The frum world is both spiritually rich and infuriating.

