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¹ Jewish artists have been mainstays in the field of cartooning since its inception – from early cartoonists Rube Goldberg and Al Capp; to superhero sires like Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, and Jack Kirby; to Art Spiegelman and others who have turned comics into serious literature.ⁱ But the field is not strictly a boys' club. The current traveling exhibition "Graphic Details: Confessional Comics By Jewish Women" reminds us that women have been on the scene since the '70s, and that a new generation of talented artists like Vanessa Davis, Lauren Weinstein, Miss Lasko-Gross, and Sarah Glidden are continuing the tradition of "raw, revealing autobiographical comics" (Kaminer).

² Like others of this younger generation, Leela Corman takes on Jewish women's intimate experiences, but with a distinct twist – the teenage angst she examines is happening in 1909, on a carefully researched yet richly fictionalized Lower East Side. Her graphic novel *Unterzakhn*, published in book form in 2012 after partial serialization in the *Forward* in 2008, follows twin sisters Esther and Fanya Feinberg as their lives diverge in response to the choices they make in their limited circumstances. The book begins as ten-year-old Fanya witnesses a botched abortion and is sent to fetch the "lady doctor," Bronia. Bronia convinces Fanya's mother to allow her to learn to read and write in English, and Fanya embraces the intellectual while rejecting the physical. She becomes Bronia's apprentice and refuses to marry her childhood sweetheart, Sal, for philosophical reasons. The young Esther, meanwhile, is fascinated by the trappings of femininity she sees in the clients at her mother's corset shop. As she grows up, she becomes the

protégé of Miss Lucille, the proprietor of a vaudeville theater whose dancers work a second shift in a brothel. Esther is cast out of the family, not even allowed to mourn with them when the twins' younger sister is killed in an accident. Yet when Fanya finds herself alone and pregnant, Esther, now wealthy and successful, takes her in. The book not only traces the sisters' separate paths, but also provides an extended flashback to their father's escape from a pogrom in the old country – a flashback that helps both to explain the Feinbergs' family dynamics and to illuminate class and gender concerns across time and space. The book's title, *Unterzakhn*, literally translates as “underthings” and resonates metaphorically with the characters' life in an impoverished underclass as well as the book's revelation of the secrets that lie under the surface of women's lives.

³ Described by novelist Edie Meidav as “the unholy love child of *Love and Rockets* and Isaac Bashevis Singer,” *Unterzakhn* is Corman's third graphic novel. Corman studied painting, printmaking, and illustration at Massachusetts College of Art, and continues her work as an illustrator while creating her own graphic novels. She is married to Tom Hart, a fellow cartoonist. In 2011, they moved from New York City to Gainesville, Florida, where they established the Sequential Artists Workshop, a school for comics artists. In addition to her work in graphic arts, she is a respected performer and teacher of Middle Eastern dance, including belly dance and folk styles from around the region.

⁴ Not long after the publication of *Unterzakhn*, I had the opportunity to talk with Leela Corman about her new book. What follows is the result of a Skype conversation in the summer of 2012, in which we discussed the nature of comics art, the meaning of Jewish identity, the history of the Lower East Side, and the choices that are available in women's lives – plus belly dancing, Yiddish curses, and gefilte fish.

⁵ JC: Let's start out with the “big picture” question of how you characterize yourself and your work. Do you think of yourself primarily as an artist, or an illustrator, or a writer, or something else?

⁶ LC: I think of myself as an illustrator and cartoonist and dancer all kind of equally. Dance and comics are both gutter art forms that nobody respects, that are actually really difficult. Other people see them as lowbrow, but people who do them don't. And they were two things that I never thought I would be capable of, being a cartoonist and being a dancer, and yet I'm somehow doing both.

⁷ JC: The terms “cartoons” and “comics” and “graphic novels” seem to fall in different places on the highbrow/lowbrow scale. Do they mean the same thing to you, or do you have a preference for one over the others?

⁸ LC: I use them interchangeably. I call myself a cartoonist. I'm really impatient with people who are annoyed with the term graphic novel – which I used to hate also, but I was a teenager when I hated that, and now I see the point of it. You've got to have the language you speak to get the general public with you or help them understand something, and then you've got to have the language you speak to your colleagues, and

sometimes those are different things. So maybe it's a kind of code-switching, going from "cartoon" to "graphic novel." But if I tell somebody I draw comics and then they say, "Oh, what kind?" then I say, "Well, generally I write graphic novels," just so that they understand that I don't draw superhero comics or *New Yorker* cartoons. People always think you're a gag cartoonist when you say cartoons.

⁹ JC: What drew you to comics as opposed to any other medium?

¹⁰ LC: I'd always wanted to draw comics, especially since I discovered *Love and Rockets* as a teenager, but I decided that it was probably too hard. So I did other things. I painted and I did printmaking and I made books out of my own hair, stuff like that. You know, it was the '90s. When I was in art school, it was an uphill battle – there were teachers who would refuse to talk to me when they found out I was drawing comics. But then, ironically for a school that wanted to discourage me from drawing comics, Mass Art mounted a traveling show called Comic Power, and it was fantastic. It was a massive survey of comics, of originals. It started with colonial cartoons and illustrations and went all the way through Thomas Nast in the early 20th century to RAW and the Hernandez Brothers and Art Spiegelman. It was great work, but it was also great because that's when I realized you could make mistakes on a page. So that's when it became a reality for me that I could possibly do this. And it became philosophically interesting to me, too. I could force myself into the art world, which I don't think I would do very well in anyway, and have art on a gallery wall that's not really accessible, that very few people are going to see. Or I could publish 300 copies of my art and sell it really cheap, and then lots of people can have it. It's really democratic, and they can shove it in their back pocket, and it doesn't cost me or them a lot. So it was also of a piece with the punk DIY aesthetic and way of living that a lot of us were part of, me and a lot of people that I was involved with. So I started doing that and my life changed completely.

¹¹ JC: Do you see yourself as a Jewish cartoonist? Is that a category that is meaningful to you?

¹² LC: Yes, I guess I am, and it's certainly an honorable place to be. I'd love a seat at that table.

¹³ JC: There's a great tradition of Jewish comics artists. Art Spiegelman has been so influential in the production of ambitious comics that take on serious topics, with *Maus*, and even the creators of the classic superhero comics were Jewish.

¹⁴ LC: There must be something that draws so many of us to this art form. Then again, there's just a lot of Jews in the United States, and we tend to gravitate to a lot of different fields. There's a lot of Jewish doctors and a lot of Jewish lawyers and a lot of Jewish actors. A lot of Jewish comedians and a lot of everything.

¹⁵JC: Does having that tradition give you a sense of authorization for your own work, or do you feel that you have to write against it or fight for your own place at the table?

¹⁶LC: No, there's room for everybody.

¹⁷JC: Who would you say is doing the most interesting work in that scene right now?

¹⁸LC: Lauren Weinstein is a good friend, and we came up around the same time, although we're really different artists. She has this hilarious art aesthetic that I just love. Sarah Glidden is amazing. Her work is always really engaged and beautifully painted and drawn, and also well-written. She's very rigorous. She does a lot of journalistic work. Then there's Vanessa Davis, who's probably the only person doing autobiography that I'm really interested in. I can think of a couple others, but she to me is a really authentic voice and great artist, really fearless in her drawing. Karen Snyder is another one. She's not as well-known. Certainly plenty of other people. It's funny, I think when we're talking about Jews in America who are writers, we're talking about Ashkenazi Jews, mostlyⁱⁱ. Wouldn't you agree?

¹⁹JC: That's true. That's an important point.

²⁰LC: And I don't know a lot about Sephardic literature or culture, either in this country or elsewhere. Or Mizrahi or Azeri Jews, or any Jews from anywhere else. And Ashkenazi tend to be the culturally dominant group of Jews here. So I think when we're talking about being a Jewish cartoonist or being a Jewish author in any medium, in that context, what we're talking about is a specific mindset that comes from Eastern European ancestry. I definitely feel like there's this not always intellectual but very intellectualized way of looking at things. Kind of neurotic, sometimes in a very funny way, almost thinking too much, very analytical. And that's what I think you see in a lot of our work, even if we're working really differently. I'm trying to tell very dense pieces of fiction. Vanessa's doing autobiographical stuff and observations about life, and Sarah is working in a totally different way. But I think the through line with all of us, and with a lot of other people, too, is that we've got this very intense way of thinking about the world. And I'm not sure that Jews from other backgrounds are like that. Maybe they are, I don't know, but I think there's just something about being of Eastern European ancestry, whether you're Jewish or gentile, actually, that makes you a little dark.

²¹JC: How about the French cartoonist Joann Sfar and his book *The Rabbi's Cat*? That's centered on Jews in North Africa.

²²LC: Right. He's Sephardic. So there's one Sephardic creator that I know about. It's a completely different history. I never read an interview with Sfar, so I don't know what his approach is and how he thinks of his identity or his work. But I love it. He's a genius.

²³JC: Beyond cartoonists, are there other Jewish writers you particularly admire who have influenced you?

²⁴LC: I.B. Singer is one of the greatest writers of short stories I can think of. In terms of my own experience, he told the stories that my family wouldn't tell. But mostly, I'm in it for the writing. I think his writing is on fire all the time. He's extremely funny and he has this deep sympathy for the underdog, for the outcast.

²⁵JC: I want to ask you about drawing Jews. At the time period you're representing in the book, cartoons of Jews would focus on stereotypical features – the big nose, and so on. While you were working on the book, did you feel that you had to confront that?

²⁶LC: Oh, no, I was totally celebrating it. I was just drawing something that I find attractive. I always wished I had a nose like that, and I was just never that lucky. No, I was just having fun.

²⁷JC: And then beyond the physical aspects, many Jewish writers have faced pressure to represent the community in a particular way. Philip Roth, for example, was told that his writing should have been published "in Hebrew – in an Israeli magazine or newspaper" (163) so that no one would take it as a stereotype.

²⁸LC: Oh, sure. Airing the dirty laundry in front of the goyim [non-Jews]. You know what, anybody who thinks I'm a good representative of the Jewish community is obviously insane. And anyone who gets on my case about not representing the Jewish community doesn't know anything about me. I'm a New Yorker, I'm a citizen of the world, I'm an international person. I was not raised religious, so I have no authority to represent anybody in that way. And as far as I'm concerned, the world is made up of nothing but dirty laundry, so I really hate all this "let's not talk about fill-in-the-blank." It's a good way to keep people down and hurt ourselves and others by staying silent about things. Also, people are the same, across the board. There's nothing new under the sun. There's no human behavior that is different now than it was a thousand years ago or five thousand years ago, anywhere.

²⁹JC: Since you're not religiously Jewish, then, and since you're not a typical representative – whatever that might be – of the community, what for you does Jewishness consist of? What does that mean to you?

³⁰LC: Gefilte fish. Seriously, everybody I know who comes from an Ashkenazi background loves gefilte fish. No one else likes it. I don't mean to be flippant, but cultural things. I'm very much culturally Jewish, and I'm a pretty strong example of the sort of person who grew up on the Upper West Side at a certain time period. More Buddhist books in my parents' household than Jewish books, that kind of thing.

³¹JC: Which is, in a way, almost a typical Jewish thing, too. There are so many Jewish Buddhists.

³²LC: It's so typical. My father's parents were communists, and my mother's parents were Holocaust survivors, and my mother is a shrink. You can't get more Jewish than that, outside of synagogue. But I don't think religion always is the thing that makes us who we are.

³³JC: One thing that you haven't mentioned about your relationship to Jewishness that I think might be important to you also is Yiddish. What's your relationship to Yiddish?

³⁴LC: Yiddish is like a dead relative I wish I had known better. I wish I could speak it, but that isn't going to happen. And I hope that it stays alive, and I think it probably will in some form or another. I'm also sorry that I missed the flowering, the very very brief flowering, of Yiddish literature. But it's also the language that my grandparents spoke. So it's very homey to me, and when I hear it, especially when I hear Galitzianer Yiddish, I cry.ⁱⁱⁱ It immediately gets me viscerally and brings my grandparents back to me.

³⁵JC: Since you're not fluent in Yiddish, how did you make sure you got it right in the book?

³⁶LC: My editor at Schocken, Altie Karper, knows Yiddish, so she pointed out any discrepancies or even misspellings, mis-transliterations. She was extremely helpful. I asked a lot of people for help with Yiddish while I was working on it. A friend of my mom's from high school gave me a lot of help, but then there were times when her Yiddish was kind of academic.

³⁷JC: In *Born to Kvetch*, Yiddish specialist Michael Wex says that academic Yiddish doesn't always make sense in context. For example, a textbook answer to the question "how are you" is "gants gut," "real good," when a more realistic response might actually be "eh." If you're saying you're "real good" to that question, you're not really speaking Yiddish (114).

³⁸LC: I think also my mother grew up speaking domestic Yiddish. It wasn't like she was going out in the streets and dealing with the entire world in Yiddish, being educated in Yiddish and performing every transaction in Yiddish. Probably there was a little bit of that because of where and when she grew up, but most of the Yiddish my mom learned she learned at home. But she was able to help me a lot too, especially with the kind of Yiddish that people would have spoken informally. For example, I got a really academic phrase for what's going on in the very first pages of the book, when they see the woman tumble out of her doorway, and the mother says, "what's going on?" And my mom said, "No, you can't put that there. That's ridiculous. Nobody would ever say that. She would just say, 'Oy gevalt.'" So my mom was really helpful, my cousin Lucy was really helpful, my uncle Marty was very helpful. And my mom's friend Riva Danzig was really helpful, and so was my editor. And then a lot of the stuff I knew. I know what "vey gehagn" means ["drop dead"]. My grandmother taught me a lot of the curses, and I learned a lot of curses also from this guy who ran a restaurant I used to wait tables in when I lived in Boston. I learned a lot of rather vulgar Yiddish. It's possible that some of my words are really Galitzianer, also. I don't know. That's just the Yiddish that I grew up hearing.

³⁹JC: I understand that the book has already been translated into French and Spanish. And since there are multiple languages already involved in the book, I'm interested in that process.

⁴⁰LC: It's also being translated into Swedish and Dutch. I don't know what other languages it's going to end up in, but what I've told all of my foreign publishers is just, if you see a Yiddish word, don't translate it. Leave it in Yiddish in the text, and you can put a glossary at the end. The guy who did my French translation is my friend Jean-Paul Jennequin, who's an amazing translator. He has an ear for translating colloquialisms, and that will come in handy with a lot of the New York colloquialisms that the kids speak with each other. He translated one of Tom's books into French years ago, and it was so much fun, especially the e-mail that Tom got asking for clarification. He got this list: "What is a do-rag?" "Who or what is a Dolly Parton?"

⁴¹JC: But there's no glossary in the English version. Was that your choice, and if so, what was the thought process behind it?

⁴²LC: One publisher overseas said he was going to put one in, but I'm not sure if he actually did. I haven't seen all of them. One of the things that I really love about *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, by Junot Diaz, is that he throws really heavy-duty Dominican slang into it without explaining it. I still don't know what some of the words mean in that book. And it adds to the experience of reading the book. As much as I love Gilbert Hernandez, I find it distracting when there's an asterisk next to a Spanish word, and then there's a definition of the word on the bottom of the page. It's like an actor turning to the camera. And frankly, also, Americans should know some basic Spanish. I shouldn't need an asterisk. Dominican slang is totally opaque to me, but I know what "adios" means.

⁴³JC: I was curious about how much Yiddish you expected American readers to know. There's so much Yiddish that's been absorbed by English, or that we're familiar with, or that people could figure out. If you didn't know "boychik" you would look at it and figure out what it meant, but then there's a deeper level of Yiddish that might be opaque to a general audience.

⁴⁴LC: I'd like to make the audience work a little. Handing people everything is not what I want to do as a storyteller, just like I don't want to give people a happy ending just because they want it. My American publisher did create a series of Yiddish glossary cards, with her own very funny definitions that she had written, that were really cool. I appreciated that. And there's a Tumblr of those on pantheonbooks.tumblr.com. It's kind of optional. But I don't think there's anything in the book that people can't look up.

⁴⁵J: I did read a comment by one reader on Goodreads.com who mentioned the scene where Minna calls Bronia a "cuzienerka" (36). He had apparently looked up the word and said it "doesn't exist on the internet!"

⁴⁶LC: That word came right from my grandfather. One day, he was in the hospital, and we were talking about this woman in the family, 'H'. I said, "What do you think of H?" and he said, "What I think of H? H is cuzienerka." I said, "Papa, what does that mean?" He said, "What is cuzinerka? Cuzinerka is person who always wants to look and see what's in someone else's pot." To me, it sounds like a Polish loan word that's been Yiddishified. And there are a lot of local loan words in different Yiddish dialects. My grandfather was from southern Poland. So that's how I suspect it entered the language.

⁴⁷JC: In addition to Yiddish, it seems that the Lower East Side is an important part of American Jewish heritage and identity. Even though your family didn't come through the Lower East Side, your book is set there.

⁴⁸LC: It came as part of the package. When the characters arrived, so did the street that they lived on and the neighborhood they lived in. All of the characters and their context came to me very quickly, at least the family at the heart of it, the sisters and their parents. And the story evolved from there.

⁴⁹JC: I'm wondering how you see *Unterzakhn* in relation to other stories that came out of that time and place, such as *The Rise of David Levinsky* by Abraham Cahan or *The Promised Land* by Mary Antin. That moment in Jewish American literature is so focused on upward mobility and assimilation. Did you think about that in relationship to your book? Did you want to tell a version of that story, or to stay away from retelling it?

⁵⁰LC: I think it happened organically because it happened in my own family, so I had ringside seats at how different my grandparents were from their children. That's one of the advantages of telling a story from your own background. None of it was autobiographical, but the experience is kind of universal. I think most immigrants would tell you that they don't always recognize their children. And those immigrants could be from anywhere. American culture is so different from the culture that almost anyone else has come from.

⁵¹JC: In *Unterzakhn*, though, I think it plays out differently. When Bronia teaches Fanya to read, I expected it to turn into a conventional story of education in which she goes to school, works hard, and climbs the ladder of society, when in fact she has a fundamentally different experience. In fact, the book reminds me more of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Carrie, like Esther, moves in with a man she's not married to, becomes an actress, does everything that's supposed to ruin her, but it never really does, and in the end she finds success, if not happiness.

⁵²LC: I've never read *Sister Carrie*, but I'm glad to hear that. As for the Lower East Side literature from that time period, I think that story's been told often enough. And it's so clichéd. It's a moral fable that everyone's supposed to follow, almost like a self-help book: "How To Be a Yiddish Immigrant." When really, human beings are human beings,

and that's always been my first premise as a storyteller. So some of them will assimilate, some of them won't, some of them will get interested in political causes or fascinated with show business, some of them will fail – and there's no shortage of stories of failure. Do you know how many men abandoned their families on the Lower East Side? The wife would get off the boat, no husband. There she is, alone with the kids in the new world. So I think that story of assimilation and success has been told enough. And in a sense they do assimilate, and they do succeed, and they certainly get beyond their origins. I also wanted to make their family a little weird. I wanted to make Minna weird, for sure, not a typical mom.

⁵³JC: It seems that today, many people look back on the Lower East Side with fondness, despite all of the difficulties of life there. Catherine Rottenberg, for example, says that “the negativity with respect to the Lower East Side has all but disappeared; what is left is a sentimentalized nostalgia” (783). Do you share that sense that there's now nostalgia about the neighborhood?

⁵⁴LC: I think there's nostalgia for New Yorkers, period. No matter what. I'm planning to do a series of comics about how every New Yorker has this map of lost New York in their head. And everyone's map is different. I like to say that everybody who moves to New York, or who grows up there, like me, should be issued a copy of *Low Life*, because it proves more than any other thing that I've seen that the city changes every decade or so. And in fact, the Lower East Side that Luc Sante is writing about contemporaneously doesn't exist anymore. He was living on the Lower East Side when he wrote the book. It's not like that anymore. If you had told me when I was growing up that the Bowery would have condos on it and fancy restaurants, I would have told you, get out of here!

⁵⁵JC: What else can you tell me about your research for this project?

⁵⁶LC: I do a lot of visual research. I learned a lot from Tom about research, and one of the really valuable things I learned was the value of taking bad pictures. One of my grandfathers was a professional photographer, and my dad was trained to follow in his footsteps, but ended up doing something else. So there was always this notion in my household that photography is a technical thing that you have to do right. That's certainly true, if you're a pro, but there's another use for photography, which is as reference. When I first met Tom, I noticed that all over his house and all over his notebooks and especially his sketchbooks, there were all these really bad photos. And they were just reference photos. So I walked all over the Lower East Side taking pictures of cornices and doorways and fire escapes. I also had the fortune of picking a neighborhood that was one of the most photographed neighborhoods of its time. So there's a tremendous body of research that's already been done. And people are always writing good scholarly books about New York City, the Lower East Side. I could've spent every cent I made in the Tenement Museum bookstore,

on research books. You find yourself going down weird avenues when you're researching something. You might have to find out something really obscure, like the specific type of corset hook from a certain year. And these are the things you've got to look up. It's really fun.

⁵⁷JC: Can you give me some examples of how that research came to fruition in the book?

⁵⁸LC: The toilet. The common bathroom in the hallway at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. There's a very specific toilet in there. And there was a wire with a newspaper hanging on it. And a pipe running from floor to ceiling. Other than that, almost everything you see in the book. Every item of clothing, every room, every piece of furniture, every street, every fire escape. Every window, every brick. I did draw a goat from memory, surprising even myself! I can't draw a car to save my life, but somehow I can draw a goat without looking at a picture. And I grew up in the city.

⁵⁹JC: So, if someone were to go back in time, the way the main character in Jack Finney's book *Time and Again* visits old New York, could that person actually visit a combination dancing hall/brothel like the one that Esther works in?

⁶⁰LC: I tried to find out. I even asked friends of mine who would know. I have a friend who's a vaudeville historian. I didn't really get a conclusive answer, so I went with something that Myla Goldberg told me years ago. She said, "When in doubt, make stuff up." And Gilbert Hernandez claims to have made up a lot of details of Palomar, which is totally shocking, because people write to him saying, Palomar's exactly like the town where I grew up in Chile, or Mexico, or whatever.^{iv} So I blurred some lines. But until very recently, and also still in a lot of the world, there's basically no distinction between an actress and a dancer and prostitute. And that was definitely true in the United States at that time period and earlier, except for a certain elite. And Esther is definitely not a member of that elite. So I did a lot of looking around. I really wanted to believe that those places would have existed. I did find evidence of a brothel/theater in gold mining territories, somewhere in North Dakota or South Dakota. Eventually I just decided, this is what I want to have in the story, and I think that, as I said, there's nothing new under the sun. If you can think about it, it probably existed at some time or another. I just don't think people are that original. I think that whatever you can imagine, it's happened.

⁶¹JC: Are there any other important additions or omissions or changes to the historical record in your book?

⁶²LC: There are certain details that I kind of elided. I didn't draw the Third Avenue El, and I didn't draw Coney Island. Nobody ever goes to Coney Island in my book, because nobody goes on a date. That's where you would have gone; your beau from the sweatshop would have taken you to Coney Island. And I didn't feel like drawing the Third Avenue El,

so I just kept their lives to this place, and it was kind of natural. Their lives had a certain place, and that's where I drew them.

⁶³JC: It seems like their lives are circumscribed. They really never go to Coney Island, and they really don't have very many options.

⁶⁴LC: Yes, that's exactly right. And circumscribed is the word I was looking for, thank you.

⁶⁵JC: We've talked about the role of Jewish identity in the writing of this book, and I'm also wondering about gender identity, whether or not you feel that you have any privileged position as a woman in telling women's stories.

⁶⁶LC: I did want to tell a story that was specifically about women's lives and women's choices, and I wanted to talk about women not having a choice, about whether or not to carry a child to term, for example, or use birth control. That ended up not being the main focus of the book, but it certainly is a big part of it, and it was important to me to have that be part of the story. I think that I have a more, I don't know if I would say privileged, but more of a right to speak on that than any man does, publically. Certainly not within the context of one's own family – that's different – but in the public sphere, in the public discourse, that is for women to talk about. And I wanted to be one of those women.

⁶⁷JC: The two sisters, Fanya and Esther, seem to be enacting those old dichotomies for women, virgin vs. whore, the pretty one vs. the smart one.

⁶⁸LC: I was thinking of those things, but I was thinking of them more in the ways that families label their kids, less than the way we label women. Actually, the working title for one section of the book was "The Lucky One and the Smart One." You sort of have to guess who's the lucky one and who's the smart one.

⁶⁹JC: It strikes me how much the girls look alike, and it seems like a comment on that dichotomy that one of them is "pretty" and one of them is "smart."

⁷⁰LC: It's funny to imagine that one twin is prettier than the other. And then again, there's that question. Who's the smart one in this couple? The truth is that they're both really smart. But only one of them is really lucky.

⁷¹JC: Did you find in the end that you had more sympathy or approval for one of the sisters?

⁷²LC: I'd like to believe that I didn't. But if I did, it's probably Esther. Sympathy, equal. Approval, I'd rather not approve or disapprove of my characters. But if I knew them both, I would probably want to hang out with Esther more, because she probably wouldn't lecture me. And she might give me a good haircut, and maybe I could borrow her clothes.

⁷³JC: When I first read the book, it seemed that they were both equally trapped in different ways. But when I thought about it further, it seems that – I hesitate to use this word, but that Esther ultimately "wins" in the

end. She's the one who's able to make it in the world. It's similar to the girls' father Isaac and Meyer Birnbaum as they escape from the pogroms. At first, Isaac is the practical one who has to keep Meyer quiet in front of the Russian soldiers so he doesn't get them both killed. But in the end, Isaac wastes away, and Meyer is still standing. And both Meyer and Esther seem to embrace life more.

⁷⁴LC: Maybe they don't judge what their lives were supposed to be, as, as much as the other two characters. I don't know. Esther's still standing, but is it winning when you lose the person you love the most? I don't know. I think that's an open question. She survives. Now the question is, is survival worth it?

⁷⁵JC: At the end of the book, it's such a striking moment when Esther stands in the doorway and tells Fanya's lover, "Fanya doesn't live here anymore." But instead of concluding there, the book gives us a little vignette from their childhood. I wonder if you want to comment on how that, to you, wraps up the book.

⁷⁶LC: I wanted to twist the knife. I wanted to make the reader upset. Because there's nothing worse than losing someone and then constantly thinking back on the most intact memories you have of your life together. And I'm saying that from very raw personal experience. I wanted the reader to get a taste of that. But all of that I wrote before my daughter died.^v In fact, some of it I wrote before I even got pregnant with her. There's stuff in that book that goes back many, many years, and that scene where they're lying on the rooftop splashing water on people is definitely one of those scenes that I envisioned a long time ago. I had this friend when I was growing up who lived on the second floor of an apartment building on 80th and Broadway, this big, grand, crumbling prewar pile. And we decided it would be a great idea to hang out in her bedroom window with water pistols – little ones, not Super Soakers or anything – and shoot people with water pistols, and then duck down and hide. This is the kind of stupid stuff that city kids do. So I was thinking of that. It was some of the most raw, unadulterated fun I ever had, even though it was a terrible prank.

⁷⁷JC: Their younger sister, Feigl, seems so confident in herself. For example, in the scene where she takes a bath, she's totally comfortable with her own body, and when they ask her whose little girl she is, she says "I'm Feigl's!" (28). Do you think that she could have maintained that attitude into adulthood, or would she eventually have had to make a choice like her older sisters?

⁷⁸LC: That's a good question. I can't answer that directly, because Feigl is one of those characters who's more of a device than a character. There's no possibility that she would have grown up. She was designed to die.

⁷⁹JC: That makes sense, because I can't imagine her continuing to have that personality into adolescence and adulthood. That version of her could not continue.

⁸⁰LC: A lot of people have asked me if Feigl had Tay-Sachs, which did not even occur to me. But if she had had a condition like that, and if she had lived to adulthood, I am guessing that Esther – and this is not something I thought about during the creation of the book – I think Esther would've come to get her and would have kept her happy and in comfort.

⁸¹JC: That sounds right. That sounds in character with her.

⁸²LC: Yeah. And that's the thing. You set all these dominos up in a row, and then you have to make them fall in character.

⁸³JC: Most of the comics that have become classics in the academic world are autobiographical – Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. But it seems that you're much more drawn to fiction than to life writing. Is that a conscious choice?

⁸⁴LC: I started out with autobiographical comics. Everybody starts out like that, you know. But it just stopped being interesting to me. It was like a learning tool. When you're first learning to do anything, you start with what's closest to you and what's easy. I just became completely uninterested in the details of my own life. My life is not interesting, and the aspects of my life that are interesting would be more interesting as fiction. I dislike this trend of everybody thinking that their story, unadorned, is so fascinating. I think making something fiction is much more interesting. And then it also allows the story to build and evolve and take on a life of its own. You're not constantly trying to control it and marshal your memories into a neat row, and what's the point of just sharing all of your detail with people, anyway? You better be really interesting. You better have been born someplace really interesting, like Marjane Satrapi, or had parents who went through something really interesting that you want to talk about, like Art Spiegelman. If you just grew up like me, an average New York City kid, then no. I like to read fiction, so I like to create fiction.

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NOTES

- i. Helena Frenkil Schlam highlights these and other key figures in "Contemporary Scribes: Jewish American Cartoonists."
- ii. Here, Corman distinguishes between the Yiddish-speaking people of Central and Eastern Europe, or Ashkenazi Jews, and other Jewish communities from around the world. Two other major groups include Sephardi (descendants of the Ladino-speaking Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492) and Mizrahi (Jews of the Middle East); additional, smaller Jewish communities include those from Azerbaijan (to which Corman refers) and other areas of Asia and Africa.
- iii. Corman refers here to the Yiddish accent distinctive to the Eastern European region of Galicia, an area that includes parts of present-day Poland and Ukraine.
- iv. Hernandez discusses this in an interview with Derek Parker Royal in *MELUS* (228).
- v. Corman's daughter, Rosalie Lightning, died suddenly in 2011, just before her second birthday and two weeks after Corman finished *Unterzakhn*.

ABSTRACTS

This interview with cartoonist Leela Corman took place shortly after the publication of her graphic novel *Unterzakhn*. In the interview, she describes what it means to her to be a Jewish American cartoonist – where her book fits into that tradition, how she approached the task of drawing Jewish noses, and how she incorporated Yiddish into the book. Beyond the personal and family experiences that she drew on for *Unterzakhn*, she conducted detailed research about life on the Lower East Side, and the interview includes a look at that process, how it helped her, and where it failed her. Finally, she discusses her desire to tell a story about women's lives from a female perspective, as well as the ways her characters' lives are circumscribed by gender roles.

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