

What They Saved

Miller, Nancy K
Jewish Book World
By NDK
Book Review
Vol. 30 No. 1
Spring 2012
Rec'd: July 19, 2012

reviews, occasionally repeats itself or just breaks off. BJF's life, he says in a parenthesis, is all rough edges.

The bedrock of Bruce's luck, as BJF sees it, was a Bronx Jewish boyhood, sleeping next to the kitchen sink in a three-room apartment—but with a dropped living room!—and a mother who always thought he could move up, though for her *up* was toward managing ticket sales, not writing plays or novels. He was launched into *writing* in the Air Force, lucky to be out of harm's way; then propelled into the ad and magazine world, able, as an executive, to manage several publications and to support a young family (that hardly knew him as more than a suburban cliché) by writing on subways and in restaurants. His roster of celebrities (he confesses to being a name-dropper) is breath-taking, but his more significant (if understated) droppings are the titles of books read throughout his up-and-down life. He is more surprised than impressed with having his stories accepted by a dozen of America's most highly regarded literary magazines while himself plotting men's pulps and slicks like *Swank*. This memoir is literary beyond BJF's mingling with novelists, playwrights, directors, actors, the whole crowd at Elaine's, where you can find the men's room by "tak...[ing] a right at Michael Caine." Out of his head came novels like *A Mother's Kisses* and *Stern*, plays like *Scuba Duba* and *Steambath*, and movie plots like *Stir Crazy*, *Splash*, and *The Heartbreak Kid*.

For all this buckshot contact with the powerful and famous, what moves the reader most are the extended portraits in friendship. And from the author of all that "lonely guy" stuff (mostly written after he was warmly ensconced in a three-decade—and counting—romance with his second wife), some portraits of insightful women emerge. Elaine, of the eponymous Manhattan restaurant, not only served hungry guys, but launched partnerships by seating together talents only she might see as compatible—in response to Sidney Zion's famous quip on friendship, "If you had Sinatra you didn't need a friend," BJF remarks, "If you had Elaine, you didn't need Sinatra." The most remarkable friendships are with Joseph Heller and Mario Puzo, the one hard to like but eventually bracing to love, the other, always needing to sink into working-class Italian surroundings, even while giving away piles of money to needy friends and astute gamblers (BJF had hired Puzo for his earliest, pre-*Godfather* magazine work). These two regular dinner partners, authors of two of the most noteworthy American novels of the 20th century, encouraged BJF's own fiction writing. They also helped him stave off economic failure with tips about—and deflations of—work in Hollywood. In New York, you wrote: in Hollywood, you *penned*, which might mean 200 words of a concept for a film that might never get made your way, or at all. But Friedman

upholds his authorial chastity in *Lucky Bruce's* final sentence: a frequent traveler, he always fills in the Occupation blank at Customs "with the single word...writer." AC

Spiritual Envy: An Agnostic's Quest

MICHAEL KRASNY
New World Library, 2010
Hardcover 264 pp. \$22.95 [e]
ISBN: 978-1577319122

Michael Krasny's *Spiritual Envy* is, above all, a book of questions. It is a book about a personal journey from faith to agnosticism, from childhood doubts to adult philosophical struggles. The more Krasny read the more he questioned, not only God, but the commandments as well. Is it possible to accept some commandments but not all of them? Are the commandments absolute? Is it right for someone to be punished for stealing bread in order to survive? Does the commandment not to kill include animals and plants? "I concluded," he writes tongue in cheek, "to be absolutely moral, one had to not eat."

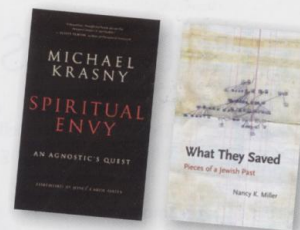
Krasny's intellectual range is impressive. There's a dizzying array of scientists, philosophers, and writers. Darwin, Nietzsche, Hawthorne, Derrida, all make an appearance (to mention a few). Even comedian George Carlin shows up for his riff on the commandments. Krasny's search for God was nothing if not thorough and what drives the search is a deep longing for spirituality.

Krasny searched also in religions other than his own Judaism. He learned about the codes that are central to Hinduism (Laws of Manu) and Buddhism (the Vinaya). In the end he tries to do what we all do: figure out how to live with what he calls a "spiritual smorgasbord stocked by both the East and the West and not necessarily catered by God."

In later chapters Krasny addresses a wide array of religious experiences. He talks about reincarnation, evangelicals, and even the neuroscience of God. The one constant is the search. "I preferred the idea of having such knowledge arrive via my intellect, but I was open to its arrival by means of mystical vision or the miraculous," he writes.

In the end, the book is a wonderful journey for anyone who questions. Krasny's easy prose takes us through literary, religious, and philosophical anecdotes and through refreshingly naughty stories from his own life. Those for whom God is not a question but a non-entity will still find the book rich and rewarding, but they will encounter the same flaw in reasoning that has played out many times over in this discussion. Krasny writes, "What refutes atheism is the simple fact that one cannot prove a negative." But this is akin to saying we can't

nonfiction



prove there is no Diana, goddess of wisdom, so we have to remain agnostic. The more interesting question Krasny asks is, "How do I, or any who seek answers ... to questions of God's existence, create God?" And when God is seen as a metaphor, I might argue that we are all trying to create God.

Among Krasny's powerful parting words: "If no spiritual power is visible behind life's elevations, ... if we doubt the origins of moral or spiritual authority...and if we cannot determine what is worth dying for...then how do we derive purpose, our code, our meaning? The answer appears to be: from whatever sources we choose." AB

What They Saved: Pieces of a Jewish Past

NANCY K. MILLER
University of Nebraska Press, 2011
Hardcover 248 pp. \$24.95
ISBN: 978-0803230019

What They Saved is the very readable, true story of Nancy Miller's quest into a murky past to unravel the mystery of a collection of disparate items found after her father's death and, in so doing, to discover her roots. Tracing minute clues, her journey carries us back in time to areas as diverse as the Ukraine, Kishinev (Moldavia), Memphis, Argentina, the Bronx, and the Lower East Side of New York City.

One overarching question remained: why hadn't her parents ever spoken about these ancestors? Through her journey she discovered, sought out, and met the grandparents and cousins whom she did not know even existed.

This unusual memoir is well worth reading. For one thing, who knows—this book might encourage the reader to discover the source of his or her own mysterious life artifacts. NDK

What They Saved: Pieces of a Jewish Past

NANCY K. MILLER

University of Nebraska Press, 2011

Hardcover 248 pp. \$24.95

ISBN: 978-0803230019

What *They Saved* is the very readable, true story of Nancy Miller's quest into a murky past to unravel the mystery of a collection of disparate items found after her father's death and, in so doing, to discover her roots. Tracing minute clues, her journey carries us back in time to areas as diverse as the Ukraine, Kishinev (Moldavia), Memphis, Argentina, the Bronx, and the Lower East Side of New York City.

One overarching question remained: why hadn't her parents ever spoken about these ancestors? Through her journey she discovered, sought out, and met the grandparents and cousins whom she did not know even existed.

This unusual memoir is well worth reading. For one thing, who knows—this book might encourage the reader to discover the source of his or her own mysterious life artifacts. **NDK**