



TREYF: My Life as an Unorthodox Outlaw

Elissa Altman

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From the Washington Post columnist and James Beard Award-winning author of *Poor Man's Feast* comes a story of seeking truth, acceptance, and self in a world of contradiction...

Treyf: According to Leviticus, unkosher and prohibited, like lobster, shrimp, pork, fish without scales, the mixing of meat and dairy. Also, imperfect, intolerable, offensive, undesirable, unclean, improper, broken, forbidden, illicit.

A person can eat treyf; a person can be treyf.

In this kaleidoscopic, universal memoir of time and place, Elissa Altman explores the tradition, religion, family expectation, and the forbidden that were the fixed points in her 1970s Queens, New York, childhood. Every part of Altman's youth was laced with contradiction and hope, betrayal and the yearning for acceptance: synagogue on Saturday and Chinese pork ribs on Sunday; Bat Mitzvahs followed by shrimp-in-lobster-sauce luncheons; her old-country grandparents, whose kindness and love were tied to unspoken rage, and her bell-bottomed neighbors, whose adoring affection hid dark secrets.

While the suburban promise of *The Brady Bunch* blared on television, Altman searched for peace and meaning in a world teeming with faith, violence, sex, and paradox. Spanning from 1940s wartime Brooklyn to 1960s and '70s Queens to present-day rural New England, *Treyf* captures the collision of youthful cravings and grown-up identities; it is a vivid tale of what it means to come to yourself both in spite of and in honor to your past.

TREYF: My Life as an Unorthodox Outlaw Details

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From Reader Review TREYF: My Life as an Unorthodox Outlaw for online ebook

Lindsey says

One of the reasons I wanted to read this memoir was because I read Elissa Altman's Poor Man's Feast and absolutely adored it. It's one of the best food/cooking books released in recent years. So I was anxious to read her memoir and I was not disappointed. The book was well-written and contains the kind of intimate revelations that make the reader feel a connection to the author. I usually judge memoirs by whether I develop a friend-crush on the author after I finish reading. I went into this book already with a feeling of kinship with Elissa Altman and her story only strengthened that feeling. I want to cook with her and hold her hand and tell her she's perfect exactly how she is and laugh with her. She's brilliant. Even if you aren't familiar with her going in you will walk away from this book with a desire to know her better.

I received an ARC of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Cindy Dyson Eitelman says

I fully expected to love this and I disappointed myself. I can't think of reasons to blame the author for my lack of love, but I can think of reasons in myself. First and foremost is, I'm not so interested in reading such a personal memoir right now. I'm in the mood for some big-bang travel writing; or some meaty nonfiction. Like *Before the Dawn*.

Maybe trying to stick to a book to-read list is a stupid thing. You put things on it when they appeal to you, but you soon build up a 70-book backlog and the next one up is always the book you wanted to read eight months ago. I can rearrange the list, I guess, but then I suspect I'll simply keep moving books to the end and building up a larger and larger list.

But this book survived at least three "culls" and I still didn't like it. A lot of it was about the family of the author, not the author herself, and sometimes it was so journalistic that it fell flat. Example:

The afternoon before I leave [for summer camp], my mother packs my lunch in a brown paper bag as directed by the camp's ten-point list of instructions. She wants to make me the usual water-packed tuna with mayonnaise on untoasted diet white that she sends me to school with almost every day; I want Underwood Deviled Ham.

"Where did you hear of such a thing?" Gaga asks, looking up from her ironing. [Gaga is her grandmother]

"On television," I say.

"You don't even know what deviled ham is," my mother says, sighing.

"Neither do you," Gaga answers her, folding my camp shorts. "Come to think of it," she murmurs, "neither do I."

But because no Jewish mother or grandmother has ever said no to a food request made by her child, Gaga

shuts off the iron, grabs her purse, and marches down Austin Street to the Associated grocery store. She returns ten minutes later, with a kosher pumpernickel raisin loaf and a single paper-wrapped can of Underwood Deviled ham.

[Then her mother makes the sandwich with the entire can of ham and wraps it in tinfoil." It sits in the fridge overnight where the meat congeals into salty, porky spackle. At lunchtime, Elissa daintily eats the ham while her friend eats peanut butter and jelly.]

I pat the corners of my mouth with my napkin, roll up my bag, and am instantly and violently ill.

Possibly Ms. Altman was taught to show a story, not tell it. And that's what she did, with clarity and detail. But I failed to connect--I was just watching and never feeling. I can imagine other people loving it; I did not.

John says

Review to come.

Jill Meyer says

Food writer Elissa Altman's memoir, "Treyf", is a look at her life through the food she ate and the meals she cooked. She was the only child of a mismatched couple who divorced when their daughter was in her teens; life with both parents was often emotionally at odds with what Elissa saw around her. Her grandparents on both sides were from immigrant Jewish backgrounds and the foods both grandmothers cooked were kosher, while her parents both ate "treyf" (or non-kosher foods like pork and shellfish) in their own home.

I read half of Altman's book not knowing who she was until I looked her up on Wiki and read that she was a food writer. All of a sudden, the emphasis on food - kosher OR treyf - made sense. She was trying to make sense of her relationships through the food consumed when she was with each friend or relative. That's not a bad way to look back on your life and I thought Altman did a great job with her memoir.

I received this memoir from Net Galley and my review has no quid pro quo with the privilege of reading it. I will probably write a longer review when I review it for Amazon after it's publication.

Kathleen Harold says

I loved this book almost as much as I loved Poor Mans Feast. I'm not Jewish, I live on the West Coast but I am a lesbian who had a difficult relationship with a nervous self involved mother. And I share the authors love of feeding others. I want to see the movie or Netflix series based on this authors books.

David says

I found this rich in both detail and reflection, insight. Its world is highly particular, but it reaches out well to

the universal sense of both belonging and not belonging. Nicely done.

Cat says

Nope. Another not my kind of book. The title intrigued me and I was curious about forbidden foods, behaviors, etc in the jewish community. This covers it all. But the book is more a growing up in my family memoir. Sounds like most families. They are what they are. Meh. Still, I am sure Jews will find it entertaining and connecting. It is well written and has some moments, but not enough to keep me interested.

I received an advance copy from the publisher in exchange for a fair review.

Alex says

I liked this memoir a lot. It's a little hard to classify -- it is a story about food and eating, Judaism, Queens, family, and sexuality. I thought some parts worked better than others and it was occasionally overwritten. But overall I really enjoyed a visit into this world.

KarnagesMistress says

I received this book for free through Goodreads Giveaways. It is an uncorrected proof (galley).

Juliahoney Kamenker says

interesting knew so many of her references which made it interesting

Teddie says

This is a tasty bite of a book. I loved the people in the book. And learning about things.

Patrice says

this book started off slow but got better and better as i came to know the characters. its the story, the modern story, of one jewish woman from Queens who grew up between her old world family and America. its a story of assimilation. of things gained and things lost.

while relatable and well written, as a memoir, its the story of a particular time and place. while i enjoyed reading the book i am left wanting more. i didn't get any huge insight or universal truth. maybe its unfair to expect that. but what i did get was a sad feeling about the direction of our society. assimilation to what?

Julia says

His book wasn't at all what I expected from the subtitle, but I'm so glad I read it. More than anything, this is the story of the generation Altman's parents belonged to, the assimilation generation of American Jews torn between modernity and the traumas of the past.

There is an overwhelming sadness suffused throughout this book: Neither the author's grandparents nor parents really had the lives they wanted, with the pull of tradition taking them one way and the almost-promise of assimilation in the other. Elissa is the one who is finally free to break with tradition, expectation, and convention - but it comes at a price as she never truly feels loved or accepted until she leaves New York City and meets her wife from an entirely different background. For each generation, food is a vehicle for love, but it's a bundle of contradictions and negotiations. Every transgression of kashrut, from Chinese restaurant pork to shrimp cocktail, tells the story of what people want to preserve of the past while making their own way in a society that will never truly see them as "normal."

If you are familiar with Forest Hills and Rego Park in Queens, you'll recognize several places: Tung Shing closed down almost a decade ago and Ben's Best Deli recently served its last sandwich, but London Lennie's is still on Woodhaven Boulevard.

The writing suffered a bit from repetition and might have benefitted from tighter editing but it was such a pleasant surprise to find this book.

Gail says

I like her column, Feeding my Mother, in the WaPo but I think I should have read Poor Man's Feast instead of this. I'm not sure why she wrote a second memoir. Don't know if I'll try PMF now, this was pretty bad.

Laurel says

Treyf is a Yiddish word for food that's not kosher, i.e. "flesh torn by beasts." Other adjectives that come to mind are a bit more strong – unclean, forbidden, unfit. And while Elissa Altman's memoir, *Treyf*, does spend a lot of time (A LOT OF TIME) referencing pork products, shellfish and the mixing of meat and dairy, the real message, one I think is lost in the oft-repeated discussions of forbidden meals, is the pull of family and what holds that family together through years of upheaval, strife, and often tough love, tradition. Ms. Altman, an outsider in her own family, is torn between its pull and her own growing sense of identity. I think her book would have been richer if she would have focused more on this side of her story. She didn't give it the attention or the depth it deserved.
