



Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All of Its Moods

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A delightful excursion through the Yiddish language, the culture it defines and serves, and the fine art of complaint

Throughout history, Jews around the world have had plenty of reasons to lament. And for a thousand years, they've had the perfect language for it. Rich in color, expressiveness, and complexity, Yiddish has proven incredibly useful and durable. Its wonderful phrases and idioms impeccably reflect the mind-set that has enabled the Jews of Europe to survive a millennium of unrelenting persecution . . . and enables them to *kvetch* about it!

Michael Wex—professor, scholar, translator, novelist, and performer—takes a serious yet unceasingly fun and funny look at this remarkable kvetch-full tongue that has both shaped and has been shaped by those who speak it. Featuring chapters on curse words, food, sex, and even death, he allows his lively wit and scholarship to roam freely from Sholem Aleichem to Chaucer to Elvis.

Perhaps only a *khokhem be-layle* (a fool, literally a "sage at night," when there's no one around to see) would care to pass up this endearing and enriching treasure trove of linguistics, sociology, history, and folklore—an intriguing appreciation of a unique and enduring language and an equally fascinating culture.

Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All of Its Moods Details

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Daniel Polansky says

very much admire the sort of person who is able to start a book, realize they don't like it, and not finish it. I'm not that sort of person. Even back when I was the sort of person who didn't finish every book that they started I never seemed to give up for good reasons like I didn't like the book, but rather for bad reasons, like the book was too hard, or I had impulse purchased another one. A friend gave this one to me intending an unexpected kindness, but in fact it just exhausted time that might have been better spent on other things. Thanks a bunch, Andy. Thanks loads.

Anyway, there's nothing really wrong with this other than that I am the world's worst language student and so most of the text, dealing with peculiar aspects of the Yiddish language, was largely lost on me. I found bits of it interesting in the abstract -- the pessimistic soul of Yiddish, its naked tribal allegiance, its curse construction -- but this was tempered by the author's Borscht Belt humor, with a lot of random pop cultural references in lieu of actual jokes, like being cornered by your least favorite uncle at a Bar Mitzvah. Still, I have found myself greeting strangers with 'Vos Macht a Yid' lately, so that's something at least.

Paige says

I didn't really "like" this book so much, but I am glad for the new information it gave me, and I'd probably actually give it 3.5 stars, but I really didn't enjoy reading it all that much, so three stars it gets.

As someone with hardly any knowledge of Yiddish, parts of it were pretty boring and useless. Although all of the cultural aspects were fun to read about, sometimes it seems like pages and pages of a phrase in Yiddish followed by its English translation. All of that went "into my left earlock," as they'd say, and never even lodged itself into my brain; it was just wasted time. Some phrases (or the translation of those phrases, since I guess I can't really judge the original) were nice to read about, but I would've given a higher rating if most of the time spent with them had been instead dedicated to explaining the people and the culture rather than just the language they used. Yes, he did a very good job at explaining how they are intertwined, but translated phrase after translated phrase is just not that interesting.

Sarah Hayes says

Actual rating: 3.5 out of 5 stars. A bit of a lengthy read - I took a four year break (!!!) because the first time I tried to read it, it was too dense for me - but definitely a delightful look at Yiddish and a good taste of future reads in the same vein.

Lucy says

I read this with my book club at Temple. It is one of the few books that everyone didn't kvetch about a lot. Usually we pick a book and then spend about 1/4 of the time complaining about why we don't like it. But this one seemed to be pretty well liked. It wasn't as funny as I expected from the online summaries and reviews I had read. But it was very interesting. A lot of Jewish culture comes along with Yiddish and we had some good discussions about that. I was frustrated with not being able to remember all of the phrases I liked (especially the curses). I know a few more now than the ones I grew up hearing but not as much as I would like to know.

Steven Williams says

This book is about the Yiddish language, giving its origins and history through life events and occasions. Starting out with the origins of Yiddish, the author provides some examples and various dialects. He emphasizes the importance of religion, which to him is the key to understanding the Yiddish language, borrowing from both the Torah and the Talmud. From here he examines the Yiddish culture on evil and what goes wrong in life, the environment, food, of course, the life cycle, very important in Judaism, sex, and death. He also provides a glossary of some of the terms used in the book.

The book manages to be interesting for the most part. Some places became a little droopy, but my overall impression of the book was good. I did find a lot of his arguments were based on the suspect history of the Bible, but being that it is sacred history or mythology it still carries weight when looked at through the lens of the Yiddish language. One thing that comes across fairly plain is that Judaism is super sexist, but most religions are, especially Islam and Christianity. True, the liberal branches in these three religions today have managed to over come a lot of this sexism.

I could recommend this book to just about anyone who enjoys reading about language or is curious about the Yiddish language in particular.

Jake says

Born to Kvetch is about Yiddish. Specifically, it's a combination history and cultural study, filtered through the study of a language. Wex does a very nice job of explicating not only how Yiddish evolved, but how the very character of the language is uniquely Jewish, and indeed, uniquely Diaspora Jewish. Along the way, he also traces the development of the language, including how it split into various sub-types, where certain words and phrase came from, and how the language and culture deal with topics like birth, sex, and death.

There's some very interesting stuff in here, most of it having to do with Jewish culture in general. Little things, like the fact that Orthodox Jews love...Paul, I think...one of the saints, for making sure that there was a very clear delineation between Judaism and Christianity. Or how the very nature of Yiddish is intricately tied to Jewish ghetto culture, and trying to separate the two is like trying to separate...I don't know. Two things very hard to separate. You get my point.

Unfortunately, there's some stuff in here that I found deliriously boring, most of it consisting of sections that are just little descriptions of a Yiddish phrase, followed by it's meaning, and then it's real meaning. One chapter, devoted entirely to explaining the differences between two diverse branches of Yiddish, is

particularly hard to follow, especially if you don't speak any version of Yiddish at all.

Which really is the problem with this book; Wex is clearly a native Yiddish speaker, and there's a fair amount of material in here that will only make sense, or be interesting, if you have some familiarity with Yiddish. The less you know, the harder it is to follow. Since my Yiddish is limited to Oy, Kanahore (which I now know the meaning of, thanks to this book), Schmutz, and a few other curses, it was fairly tough.

The book is well-written, and interesting, but linguistic evolution isn't my big thing. If this sort of thing interests you, it's worth the read. If you're looking for just a random, fun, non-fiction book to read, I'd look elsewhere.

Ushan says

The Yiddish language is alive and well in Kiryas Joel, New York, materially the poorest but presumably spiritually the richest town in the United States, where the Satmar Hasidic residents' pious lifestyle is subsidized by the impure Gentile United States via food stamps and Medicaid. It survives in a few more similar places: from Williamsburg in Brooklyn to Stamford Hill in London to Mea Shearim in Jerusalem. Millions of descendants of Ashkenazi Jews in the United States have switched to American English a few generations ago (a statistician former coworker of mine once told me that her mother-in-law's parents spoke Yiddish to her as a child, but she replied in English); those in Israel have switched to Modern Israeli Hebrew and those in the Soviet Union have switched to Russian. I suspect that had the Second World War and the Holocaust not taken place, there would be another few million assimilated Jewish speakers of Russian and Polish. Other than the Hasidic Jews, and old Jews born in interwar Eastern Europe, of whom there are fewer each year, the language has a few hundred enthusiasts around the world, not all of them Jewish. The author is such a person; he admits that most Yiddish speakers under 40 who are not Hasidic Jews have learned the language at a university, in the form of an artificial dialect that corresponds to no authentic one, sometimes from teachers who themselves have learned it at a university; unlike them, he actually learned it from his family, which is the last surviving branch of a rabbinic dynasty. Possessing such unique knowledge, Wex decided to spread it.

This is a book on the world of Yiddish as revealed through its idioms, proverbs and folklore. Wex does not want to have anything to do with the secular Yiddish culture of the late XIX and the early XX century, such as the writings of Sholem Aleichem and Isaac Leib Peretz (Isaac Bashevis Singer was writing in a language that he knew was moribund). Nor does he care about the Yiddish into which Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* was translated in 1913, and Lev Kassil's *The Black Book and Schwambrania* was in 1937. Instead, his Yiddish lives in a timeless imaginary Eastern European shtetl. The physical and mental separation between the Jew and the non-Jew in the world of this book is absolute; one of the idioms Wex cites is "yevonische toyre": Greek, i.e. non-Jewish, or Ivan's Torah - i.e. the Russian filthy language. I know for a fact that such separation existed but it was not absolute: there were many Ukrainian-Yiddish bilinguals, for one. One of the chapters protests against the popular notion that Yiddish cares little about nature. Of course a tavernkeeper or a shoemaker cares less about nature than a peasant or a husbandryman (yes, there were Jewish peasants and husbandrymen, but proportionately fewer of them than among their Slavic neighbors). However, as befits the language of a minority specializing in services, unlike its agriculturalist neighbors, Yiddish cares a lot about the human mind. One lovely idiom in the book is "khokhem be-layle": "a sage at night", when no one is looking, which is to say an idiot during the day.

The book cites what is probably hundreds of sayings and idioms about birth, childhood, courtship and

marriage, sex and death, food, poverty, and luck. A great one is "Zolst vaksn vi a tsibele, mitn kop in dr'erd": "You should grow like an onion, with your head in the ground." To a much greater extent than modern Israeli secular culture, this was a Jewish culture, rooted in the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. "Sheyne moyshe ve-arendlekh" means "nice breasts": Song of Songs 4:5 talks about a woman's two breasts, and a Midrashic interpretation says that this verse refers to Moses and Aaron. In Numbers 33:26 the Children of Israel pitch their tents at Tahath, a Hebrew word that means "under", which is pronounced "tukhes" in Yiddish and means "buttocks"; "kush mir vu di yidn hobn gerut", "kiss me where the Jews rested" means "kiss my ass."

The book was on The New York Times bestseller list, presumably selling well among American Jews who want to discover their roots in an imaginary stetl. The cover depicts a scowling boy with long sidelocks in a black jacket and a black hat. It is possible that the boy speaks the language the book is about very well, and the language of the book itself less well; however, the boy probably won't read the book in his lifetime. This vexing contradiction is at the center of the book.

Mattie says

Oy, did I love this book! Serious exploration of how Jewish culture, particularly Ashkenzic Jewish culture, is reflected in the Yiddish language. The scholarly stuff is good. But what makes this book for me Wex's writing. His presentation of the material is funny, and wry and fabulous. Here are a few examples :

On Yiddish reflecting the Jewish condition of exile: "Judaism is defined by exile, and exile without complaint is tourism, not deportation."

On a phrase that translates as "lying in the ground baking bagels": "The phrase is both kvetch and mission statement, a perfect prologue to any other complaint. . . . [It's] as if being dead isn't bad enough, you've got to spend all of eternity in hellishly hot bakery conditions, baking bagels that, being dead, you have no need to eat; that, being dead, you've got no one to whom you can sell them; that being dead, you don't even know anyone except other dead people, who also don't need to eat and who also don't have any money and who are all busy baking their own lousy bagels that they can't get rid f either."

On non-Kosher (treyf) food: " [T]reyf originally referred to animals that would otherwise have been kosher, and was the biblical equivalent of 'roadkill.'" ... "[S]o for as Jewish culture is concerned, the pig exists only to provide gentiles with food and Jews with idioms."

Also, there is a selection of post script essays, one of which is entitled "Enough Already: Five Yiddish Words Frequently Misused in English." I'll share one: "Knish. I've heard this pronounced with a silent 'k' on more than one occasion. Please remember that nothing can be silent in Yiddish." Yep.

Petra X says

I really wanted to like this book and like the curate's egg, it was good in parts. Wex tells us early on that Yiddish is the language of complaint and sets out to prove that statement the entire rest of the book. The

book is very scholarly and much of it is of interest but still, towards the end I was so depressed it was a struggle to finish it. Yiddish may be the language of complaint but its complaints turned humorous in possibly the most onomatopoeic language in the world. (Does schmuck sound anything but a stupid person? Does a schloff not sound like the nap you need after too big a lunch?)

Jewish humour is a very strong strand in the humour of the US. Where the prevailing paradigm is to be on the side of the winner, always to have great self-esteem and to look good in the eyes of the world, the humour is the opposite: the small man who triumphs despite the odds. Two of the most well-known proponents of this are Woody Allen and Mel Brooks and where would they be without their joyous use of Yiddish? Indeed where would New Yorkers be if all the yiddish words were taken from their slang?

The book would be best enjoyed by dipping into it now and again, no point in being heroic and finishing it straight through. A good book, a worthy book, but enjoyable - hmmm?

Erica Verrillo says

I can't kvetch about this book because it was great. (In spite of all the dated pop culture references.) Michael Wex does an excellent job of describing Yiddish and conveying the underpinnings of the culture that gave it birth. He does so with profound insight, with an impressive breadth of scholarship, and with an occasional one-liner that will have you laughing out loud. (My favorite was "The kvetch is a living nightmare; the curse, a dream deferred.")

Wex does not spare his readers the sociolinguistic and etymological details, which means non-linguists may find parts of this book hard going. My advice is to ramble on through those sections that discuss the more esoteric aspects of Yiddish, until you get to something you can really sink your teeth into. (Patience! Those delights will come!) Even if you are not up to tackling vowel shifts in the different dialects, there will be curses! food! sex! beatings! and death-defying irony!

Although my primary interest in reading this book was linguistic, what I learned was much more than the ins and outs of Yiddish. I learned a bit about my own history. On every page I heard the voice of my grandmother, and...I think...I finally understand what she was saying. (Apparently, "a khalerya af dir" does not mean "come to dinner".) Even if you don't speak Yiddish, that most expressive of languages, you will come away from this book enlightened.

Pamela_b_lawrencemsn.com says

4 Stars - lots of fun if interested. A rollicking trip through the history of Yiddish and its speakers. I skimmed the more scholarly bits, not too many, not because I'm not interested, just knew I wouldn't remember. The joy of the book is in the author's trenchant observations about Jewish culture and tradition, the derivations and connotations, of various terms, and the best situations for the use of each juicy term. For added richness, read the material at the end - an interview with the author in which he explains his reasons for writing the book, mostly that there is very little popular knowledge of the language, and a riff on everyday misuse of Yiddish terms from the mouths of non-speakers. (I haven't read Rosten's *The Joys of Yiddish*, so I don't know how the two overlap, or don't)

Carrie O'Dell says

I love this book, but I also have an unnatural facination with all things Yiddish, considering I'm a lapsed Prebyterian of Irish extraction who grew up in Tennessee. Wex takes his own sweet time explaining a variety of Yiddish expressions and obscure idioms as well as Yiddish the goys use daily (hint- schmuck is a much nastier name for someone in Yiddish proper). He digs into the cultural roots of a variety of idioms while explaining the development of the language. Reading may take some patience, but you'll come out with a whole list of new curses, insults, and names for your genitalia.

Karyl says

I really, really wanted to like this book. I've always been fascinated by language, and I wanted to learn more about the Yiddish I have heard bits and pieces of throughout my childhood. What I have learned from this book is that I don't know ANY Yiddish.

The book starts out well, explaining the mindset that gave rise to a language like Yiddish that has no homeland. However, Wex quickly turned the rest of the book into a litany of definitions. Without knowing any Yiddish at all, or even how it's constructed, I had a very difficult time following along. Those who know Yiddish or any of its parent languages, especially German, could probably follow along a lot easier. For me, I was interested to learn the whys and wherefores of a particular turn of phrase, but Wex sort of just threw a phrase and its definition out there, then moved on to the next phrase.

Another issue I had with Wex is his vocabulary. I myself have an extremely large vocabulary, but even in his English he was unnecessarily sesquipedalian (did you see what I just did there?). It was annoying to have to look up a word at least once a chapter because there was no way I could pick up the definition from context. I also didn't enjoy his references; they seemed to be a bit constrained in their appeal. Not having grown up as a Jew in Canada in the 1960s, I couldn't follow his references very well at all.

I also had a major issue with the end of the book. I appreciate that Wex ended his book with death (what else would one end with?), but there was no conclusion that wrapped it all up. The book just... ended. I felt a bit cheated.

I would recommend this book if one knows a lot of Yiddish, or if one has heard it all of his life and would like to know more about it. This is certainly not a book for a novice.

Hester says

This is a demanding but very funny read that is unlike any other book I have ever read. It gives an over view of Yiddish (mainly its idioms), structured by the phases of Jewish life (in the shtetl). I cannot conceive of a similar book covering Russian, Spanish, or French. I can imagine such a book for Mayan; maybe books like this are only possible for rare languages associated with a lost world.

The world Wex describes is alien to me. After reading this, I understood why my ancestors were so proud to

be reform, German-speaking Jews. I am not excusing their snobbery, but my great grandmother was one of Europe's first female doctors and there was no room for dybbuks in her world view. I think this book would be very confusing to non-Jews. At least I am familiar with the concept of sheytl, even if I am find them crazy. I don't know if gentiles would find this book bewildering, or if they would enjoy unencumbered by emotional baggage.

Elyse Walters says

Somewhat interesting...

Occasionally funny...

Sloggy & Dry at times

To understand Yiddish, one must understand the Yid and the deep tie to Torah and observance. Author Michael Wex gives us history - explanations - and interpretations of the Yiddish language -from ancient roots to present day kibitzing.

When looking at Yiddish Heritage from the Eastern European Jews,Wex covers a wide range of topics and themes:

Marriage & sex, money, disease, literature, cursing, nature, births, deaths, Kosher foods, shikses and goys,often describing phonetic changes in Yiddish [I was ready to take a nap through these parts], --- and an overview of Ashkenazi life.

I'll be discussing this book in further detail with my local Jewish book club soon!

Liked some of it....wanted to sleep during parts too!
