



The House of Twenty Thousand Books

Sasha Abramsky

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The House of Twenty Thousand Books is the story of Chimen Abramsky, an extraordinary polymath and bibliophile who amassed a vast collection of socialist literature and Jewish history. For more than 50 years, Chimen and his wife, Miriam, hosted epic gatherings in their house of books that brought together many of the age's greatest thinkers.

The atheist son of one of the century's most important rabbis, Chimen was born in 1916 near Minsk, spent his early teenage years in Moscow while his father served time in a Siberian labor camp for religious proselytizing, and then immigrated to London, where he discovered the writings of Karl Marx and became involved in left-wing politics. He briefly attended the newly established Hebrew University in Jerusalem, until World War II interrupted his studies.

Back in England, he married, and for many years he and Miriam ran a respected Jewish bookshop in London's East End. When the Nazis invaded Russia in June 1941, Chimen joined the Communist Party, becoming a leading figure in the party's National Jewish Committee. He remained a member until 1958, when, shockingly late in the day, he finally acknowledged the atrocities committed by Stalin. In middle age, Chimen reinvented himself once more, this time as a liberal thinker, humanist, professor, and manuscript expert for Sotheby's auction house.

Journalist Sasha Abramsky re-creates here a lost world, bringing to life the people, the books, and the ideas that filled his grandparents' house, from gatherings that included Eric Hobsbawm and Isaiah Berlin to books with Marx's handwritten notes, William Morris manuscripts and woodcuts, an early 16th-century Bomberg Bible, and a first edition of Descartes' *Meditations*. *The House of Twenty Thousand Books* is a wondrous journey through our times, from the vanished worlds of Eastern European Jewry to the cacophonous politics of modernity.

The House of Twenty Thousand Books Details

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From Reader Review *The House of Twenty Thousand Books* for online ebook

Kevin Murray says

Sasha Abramsky had known for years that he was going to write a biography of his grandparents, but he probably didn't know that he would achieve this via a room-by-room profile of the house they occupied in London. But that's what he did and, to my surprise, Sasha's approach worked for me. In telling the story of Chimen and Mimi Abramsky, he provides a window on the tragic and inspiring experience of European Jewry in the twentieth century.

Abramsky may have set out to write a biography of both his grandparents, but he ended up with a biography of Chimen, with special attention to Chimen's relationship with his lifelong partner, Mimi. She deserves her own biography, which would probably focus less on the amount of time and effort she put into cooking for Chimen and the constant stream of visitors to 5 Hillway.

Chimen grew up in the Soviet Union, in what is now Belarus, the son of a prominent Rabbi. In large part due to his spiritual and intellectual leadership of the Jewish community, Chimen's father faced persecution at the hands of the Stalin. He was dispatched to Siberia for three years and eventually received a death sentence, but before that sentence was carried out, Chimen's father managed to secure a travel visa to leave the Soviet Union with his family. They ended up in London, alongside no small number of people with similar experiences.

Given his family background and experience, Chimen might well have become a religious Jew with strongly anti-communist sentiments. He could certainly have followed his father's footsteps (and his grandfather's and his great grandfather's) into the rabbinate, but his life took another path.

In the pre-war political ferment of London, Chimen became an unlikely Communist and eventually joined the Communist Party. His father could not have approved of his son's path, but Chimen had internalized enough of the culture of Orthodox Judaism to prevent a complete break with his father. He met Mimi, began to develop an interest in collecting books and ephemera and moved into the house at 5 Hillway, a short distance from the resting place of Karl Marx. There begins the story that occupies the majority of Sasha Abramsky's attention in this book.

Chimen's interest in history and its expression via the written word becomes a vocation, and then an obsession. Under the tutelage of some of London's premier book collectors and sellers, Chimen is able to earn a modest living for his family as a buyer and seller of rare materials. The house fills with the fruits of his obsession.

Chimen's fascination with the written word dovetails nicely with immersion in Communist politics. He moves in lock-step with his fellow Communists as they first oppose war against Germany and then do a complete 180-degree reversal when Hitler attacks the Soviet Union. When it becomes clear that the repression faced by his own father has reached millions across the Soviet Republics, Chimen is quite willing to join his Party friends in looking the other way. He never forgives himself for this complete surrender of his critical faculties.

The author tells this story by taking the reader on a tour of Chimen and Mimi's Hillway home, as he remembers it. The house tour eventually follows Chimen through a rejection of Communism, the resulting

loss of connection with his entire social network, and the discovery of a totally new network through an immersion in Judaica and Jewish history, and a kind of reconciliation with his father and his own Jewish heritage.

Sasha Abramsky became a writer, and a fine one at that. While I don't believe his partner would tolerate twenty thousand books in their home, I expect that Sasha's children did not grow up strangers to books. Sasha probably left out a great deal about Chimen and Mimi in pursuing his focus on Chimen's politics and his accompanying fascination with history as represented in words. But regardless of what was left out of the book, what went in makes for a marvelous and compelling story for one who grew up in a house without books, but developed his own book obsession through his own immersion in the politics of social change and elusive utopias. For this, I am highly appreciative of the tremendous labor of love that is this book.

Dina says

ABANDONO

Janette McMahon says

An amazing book collection and an interesting Collector. This biography of a Jewish man who collected rare and special books is a lesson in what we read at different times of our lives and the ideals in which we hold dear.

Adam says

The concept of writing a biography of his grandfather, through his collection of 20,000 books and the rooms of the home they occupied, is a marvelous idea. Reading Sasha Abramsky's book, we learn that his grandfather, Chimen, once owned one of the largest collections of Judaica and Marxism. Sasha takes us, literally room by room, through the life of Chimen and the book collectors, Jewish scholars, and fellow-travelling Marxists that spent time there. This is a clever approach to biography, but it also can become repetitive. We are reminded over and over again of Chimen and his wife's inexhaustible hospitality; we often return to the themes of Chimen's strained relationship with his father and the enthusiastic cooking of his wife. This is my main complaint of an otherwise engrossing book.

Abramsky is generous when he takes us into important historical context of the books and their subjects. For a layman like me, I finished the book feeling informed of Jewish world history, particularly in relation to Russian history and the rise of communism. The bad faith and delusion of the British Communist Party is particularly saddening.

Much of the story of Chimen Abramasky is his surprising conversion to the Soviet communism (given the persecution of Jews like his prominent rabbi father), his long tenure as host of prominent British party members like Eric Hobsbawn in his book-stuffed home, and his eventual abandonment of the party, following the indisputable facts of its murderous and anti-semitic nature.

There is an interesting parallel between Chimen's rabbi father's religious orthodoxy and Chimen's communist orthodoxy. Sasha quotes from historian Arie Dubnov who posits that "modern ideologies were essentially a translation of old religious yearnings into secular and political frameworks," a theory that casts light on Chimen's life (273).

One Goodreads reviewer writes that the book illustrates how changing one's philosophy can be sorrowful and liberating. Sasha goes to great lengths both criticizing and attempting to understand Chimen's long-time dedication to Soviet Communism, clinging to it even after Stalin's crimes were widely known. His eventual abandonment was certainly sorrowful and mostly liberating. But he never quite recovered. He embraced a sort of liberalism, but reading the book, we are not left with the impression that it really took the same kind of hold that communism once had. Chimen was already old, he was still reeling from the emotional toll of losing the faith, and he was suffering the social consequences of unforgiving comrades still clinging to the blind ideology and rejecting his company. Ultimately, the experience seems to have largely de-politicized him altogether. For me, this book serves as a warning of the power of orthodoxy that can sustain wishful thinking and intellectual dissonance.

Dawn says

I've been reading this book all year long! As I turned each page, I came to know Chimen Abramsky, the Jewish historian and socialist scholar who held court at his home to a vast array of the finest intellectual minds of the 20th century. A Russian Jew whose family fled to England just before the outbreak of the War, Chimen stepped away from his destiny - to to become a rabbi - and instead chose a more secular career as an intellectual and a book collector, a communist party member during the heyday of British communism, and finally a much-sought after Jewish scholar. The story is fascinating. Part biography, part history of the Jewish people, part history of British communism and socialism and part avid book connoisseur with a taste, if not a budget, for fine ancient texts and Marxist literature, when I finally arrived at Chimen's death, I genuinely grieved for the loss and the knowledge that I would never be able to go to Hillside to see his amazing book collection, sup at his table nor ask him the many, many questions that formed as I read his life story. His grandson, Sasha Abramsky tells the story with reverence and deep affection. It is clear that Chimen was an extraordinary man and, while reading this book has taken me months, it is because it's hero is a character so complex, so multifaceted, that it required close and careful attention. It's a book, and a life, to savor. Well done Sasha for this beautiful tribute to your grandfather. Good read!

Kressel Housman says

Of all the books I've read this year, this one really hit me where I live. So here comes a longish, personal review, a little like the one I wrote for *Excellent Sheep* last year. You've been forewarned.

The book is journalist Sasha Abramsky's tribute to his late grandfather, Chimen (Shimon) Abramsky, a collector and dealer in rare books and Judaica. Both the right and left are represented in his collection and in his life. He became a Communist as a teenager and stuck with it years past World War Two, eventually abandoning it in bitter disillusionment after Stalin's crimes were exposed in the 1950's. But till that time, he was considered the world's greatest living authority on leftist philosophy and activism, particularly as practiced by Jews like himself. That interested me because, I too considered myself a communist when I was a teenager. But of much greater interest to me was this: Chimen was the son of Rav Yechezkel Abramsky,

who was the leading rabbi of 20th century Europe, basically, England's equivalent of Rav Moshe Feinstein. (I learned, not from this book but in discussing it with someone, that when Rav Moshe received a phone call from Rav Yechezkel, he stood up throughout the conversation to honor him.)

What the book makes clear over and over again is that Chimen inherited his father's erudition, but applied it to history rather than Talmud. It also makes clear just how Jewish his values were. He and his wife Mimi kept an open home that exemplified *hachnossas orchim* (hosting guests) on a very high level. But instead of talking in Torah at the table, the guests talked leftist ideology. The food, I should add, was all kosher. Mimi may not have had as illustrious a lineage as Chimen, but she came from a *frum* home and knew how to keep the responsibilities of a traditional Jewish woman.

But here's what really knocks my socks off: Rav Chatzkel never severed ties with his communist son, and Chimen always honored his father. For those of you who don't know, the Ultra-Orthodox world is undergoing a crisis parallel to what happened in Chimen's generation: great numbers of kids raised Orthodox are leaving. As I've mentioned before, my son is one of them, so I belong to a support group for mothers like me. And now that I've read this book, I want to give it out to all my friends in the support group to show them, "Look! Let's follow Rav Chatzkel's shining example in maintaining relationships with our irreligious kids!" Honestly, I think this book needs to be rewritten for the Ultra-Orthodox world, just focusing on the relationship between father and son. It's a lesson we sorely need, and who better to give it than one of the *gedolim* of the previous *dor*.

I doubt a non-Jew would have as passionate a reaction to this book as I have. But to a Jew, especially one who's lived on both the right and the left as I have, this was an absolute gem. Thank you, Bentley, Teri, and the History Book Club, for choosing it.

Ann says

This book uses the format of a family memoir to examine an era and a vanished subculture. The author's grandfather, Chimen Abramsky, is the central figure of this book, and his story is well worth reading. Born in Russia as the son of a very well-respected rabbi who was imprisoned by the Soviet regime, Chimen later fled to the West, and after a while in Palestine (Israel didn't exist yet), he ended up in London. He married into a family that owned a bookstore, and settled into life in the Jewish world around Hampstead Heath. His job in the bookstore led him to the collecting of books, pamphlets and other printed matter regarding his greatest passion : the Marxist revolution that was surely going to happen soon. His house became a sort of salon for exiled Jews from Eastern Europe, as well as revolutionaries of the communist persuasion. This went on for about two decades - the Communist Party (with a capital letter) had replaced religion as the driving force in the lives of Chimen and his wife Miri. Totally committed to the Cause, it took him until 1958, and until after repeated exposures of the horrors of the Stalinist regime, to abandon the Party. This was more than a mere political decision - it was considered a schism, an abandonment, treason even, and many of his former comrades shunned him as an apostate. So then Chimen started to turn his prodigious memory and voracious appetite for historical knowledge (no matter how trivial) to books about Jewish history. Entirely an autodidact, he managed to obtain a University post in the 1960s and spent a couple of decades as a type of roving lecturer on Jewish history. And so the house in London, decrepit and neglected, contained 20,000 books about Marxist theory and Jewish history, including some treasures that came close to achieving an importance equivalent to those of relics in the Medieval Catholic faith. The original membership card of Karl Marx in the Internationale was a specially treasured possession.

The book fascinated me because it described a world I can only imagine : a book-crammed house in London in the 1940s and 1950s where dozens of friends and acquaintances would constantly stop by for long discussions about Marxist theory - followed by a couple of decades where the discussions would be about Judaism, Zionism, the Holocaust and related topics. I know nothing about these topics, and it seems that the author feels more familiar with the latter topic, treating us to some quick introductions to a slew of Jewish rabbis and philosophers. I can only imagine the scenes in that house : long passionate debates about the theories of various schools of communism, while Chimen's wife, Miri, cooked endless meals. Discussions in Russian, German, Yiddish, Hebrew and English - and topics that one can't imagine anyone getting excited about today. A vanished era, a forgotten type of passion, dusty dreams of revolution.

The author uses the structure of going through the house room-by-room to describe his grandfather's life. That is an original approach, but it has the drawback that it leads to repetition. Chimen and his friends/co-revolutionaries argued about Marx in the living room, in the drawing room, in the front room, in the kitchen... at some point the story about people talking and drinking tea became repetitive, as did his description of his grandmother cooking for an endless stream of visitors and guests. One wonders what she thought of it all, since her taste in literature tended to run to detective mysteries and her preferred entertainment was watching a British soap opera.

Although this book is a celebration of Chimen's life, I found it fundamentally a sad life. The first source of sadness is probably the desolation of the emigrant, the refugee, who can never recreate in his adoptive country what he left behind in the mother country. The second source was the fact that Chimen, having lost his faith as a young man, went through some fairly elaborate charades to spare the feelings of his father, a famous but rather rigid Rabbi. I noticed that Chimen's household was strictly kosher and Passover and other Jewish holidays were celebrated, despite his atheism. I guess this compares to lapsed Catholics putting a creche under the Christmas tree. The third source of sadness was of course the loss of faith in the Communist regime in Moscow, which seems to have been extremely traumatic. The term "loss of faith" are not exaggerated, because the blind, absolute loyalty to Moscow (despite mounting evidence as to its anti-Semitism and internal purges) can only be compared to a religious conviction that formed the underpinning of Chimen's entire world view. All of this happens decades before the author's birth and so he has only indirect evidence for this - he does mention that he wanted to gag when he unearthed some of the obsequious Communist propaganda written by Chimen. Finally, I think there is something sad in the idea of this man, a self-educated intellectual, having his head full of arcane knowledge but being essentially unable to put it all on paper in an organized manner. He wrote only one full-length book, and that was probably beaten into shape by his co-author. After that, he never seemed able to organize that teeming mass of detail in his head into a coherent story. So he left letters, articles and some lectures, but no major works of history or biography.

As I mentioned above, I found the book stimulating because I know nothing about Marxism or Jewish history - but I can always sympathize with anyone who stuffs his house full of books.

In my review I did subtract one star because the author felt it necessary to cite several dreams he had, all with convenient symbolic meanings. Sorry, Sasha, I find that trite and cheap.

Israel Montoya Baquero says

Excelente crónica, expuesta en base a la disposición de las habitaciones de una casa, de la situación que vivieron muchos de los judíos exiliados (los más afortunados) de la URSS a lo largo del siglo XX. La figura de Chimen Abramsky se hace enorme según vamos leyendo los distintos episodios que

conformaron su apasionante vida, y en los cuales se nos da un fiel reflejo de la sociedad político-intelectual de la Inglaterra judía pre y post Segunda Guerra Mundial: desde una ferviente (y algo cerril) defensa de la Rusia de Stalin, pasando por el desencanto político aparejado a los horrores del comunismo, hasta una suerte de mezcla ideológico-religiosa que es la que defendió Chimen en los últimos años de su vida; una vida siempre circunscrita a su casa, la Casa de los Libros, lugar de reunión de diversos intelectuales (políticos, periodistas, historiadores, estudiantes, etc) que acoge en su interior los veinte mil libros (o quizá quince mil, o quizá no importa el número) que dan lugar al título. Veinte mil libros que son, ni más ni menos, que el resultado de una pulsión coleccionista, de una pasión por la letra impresa y escrita y, al fin y al cabo, el reflejo físico de toda una vida.

Ryan says

This was the most moving book I've ever read. It also consoled me, in my middle age, that changing one's philosophical platform late in life can be sorrowful and liberating at the same time. Sorrowful because of the loss of one's past, but liberating in opening up new pathways to new ideas.

Melora says

A personal library is a funny sort of thing. The key word being “personal.” A person who loves reading, doesn't, generally, love reading *everything*. Similarly, one person's absolutely fabulous library may be of little interest to another, even another very enthusiastic reader. My point here is that, delightful as a “house of twenty thousand books” sounds, most of the actual, highly specialized collection described here would have been beyond my ability to appreciate, even if Chimen Abramsky had invited me in to explore.

Sasha Abramsky's grandfather's collection's main concentration was on socialist/communist literature, with an emphasis on Marx, and a lesser focus on Jewish intellectual history and religious literature. He was a serious collector, an expert and a professional bookman, taking pride in owning one of the finest collections of both socialist literature and Judaica in the world in his time. Pretty esoteric stuff. That said, some of the books had remarkable historical significance (not to mention the art, which even I could appreciate!), and I think most book lovers will appreciate the sensual appeal of the vellum pages, soft leather bindings, one-of-a-kind 16th and 17th century manuscripts, etc. that Abramsky lovingly describes.

Chimen's library, however, is not really the real subject of this book. Chimen himself, whose life was inextricably intertwined with his fabulous collection, is. Chimen Abramsky, a Russian (Atheist) Jew, who emigrated to England in the early 1930's, and his wife, Mimi, are at the center of his grandson's book. Through his stories of their early involvement in the Communist party, and their eventual disillusionment with communism, when they shifted to liberal politics and a passion for Israel, he offers insights into the motivations of many young idealists in the period between and immediately after the world wars. Reacting against Fascism and religious conservatism, Abramsky's grandparents were actively involved in the English Communist community, their home becoming a “salon” in which lively political discussion and debates were regularly conducted around Mimi's well-stocked table. In the later 1950's and beyond, after they could no longer avoid recognizing the crimes of Soviet Communism, their politics changed, but the passionate intellectual gatherings continued, with some alterations in the guest list. Abramsky clearly recognizes that many of his readers will find his grandfather's years of enthusiasm for Stalin either disconcerting or dull (or both), and, unfortunately, his “apologies” become almost as wearisome as the topic itself.

The room by room organizational structure is clever, and I very much appreciated the photos of the library and of the various rare books. Pictures of "Beauty and the Beast" type libraries in mansions are all very well, but I really enjoyed reading here about the way the Abramsky family lived in a fairly ordinary sized home with their enormous collection. Different rooms house different subjects, and Abramsky uses these divisions to organize the tale of his grandparents' lives. Regrettably, there gets to be a certain sameness about the story. His grandfather collects books for and with other enthusiasts, he travels and lectures, he and Mimi host gatherings at which friends and family talk and argue about politics, and Mimi cooks rich, delicious meals. And Chimen eventually repents his astonishingly lengthy support for Stalin. Move to a new room and repeat, with slight variations.

Despite a long "3 star" section halfway through, this was mostly a 3 ½ star book for me and I'm rounding it up. Abramsky's love and admiration for his grandparents shine from the pages, and they were clearly kind, passionate, idealistic people. The portrait here, of a family and their community, deeply engaged in intellectual debate and surrounded by books, is memorable and appealing. My only qualification is that I've had enjoyed it even more with some of the repetitiveness eliminated.

yexxo says

Chimen Abramsky war ein bemerkenswerter Mann. Klein an Statur, dafür umso größer an Wissen und Gelehrsamkeit. Geboren Anfang des letzten Jahrhunderts in Minsk, erlebte er als Sohn des berühmten Rabbis Yehezkel die Verwerfungen des letzten Jahrhunderts besonders deutlich. Als sein Vater in eines von Stalins Arbeitslagern deportiert wurde, flüchtete die Familie nach London, wo sie nach der Haftzeit wieder zusammenfanden. Yehezkel wurde Vorsitzender des Londoner Rabbinatsgerichtes (Beit Din), einer sehr konservativ ausgerichteten Institution, während Chimen eines der führenden Mitglieder der Kommunistischen Partei Englands wurde, trotz der Erfahrungen in seiner Familie. Doch in den 60er Jahren gelingt es auch ihm nicht mehr, über die Greuelthaten und den Antisemitismus der Sowjetunion hinwegzusehen. Er verlässt die Partei schweren Herzens und der neue Schwerpunkt seines Interesses ist nunmehr die Judaica und die jüdische Geschichte.

In dieser gesamten Zeit, also fast sein ganzes Leben, las Chimen nicht nur Alles, was er zu diesen Themengebieten finden konnte, er sammelte auch sämtliche Ausgaben, Manuskripte und Dokumente, deren er habhaft werden konnte. Das Haus von ihm und Mimi, seiner Ehefrau, quoll über von Gedrucktem - und dennoch war immer Platz für Gäste, die jeden Abend zahlreich erschienen und von Mimi verköstigt wurden; Gäste, die von der Aussicht auf geistreiche Diskussionen und Streitgespräche angelockt wurden, aber auch von Mimis guter Küche.

Ein wirklich außergewöhnlicher Mensch, über den sein Enkel Sasha Abramsky, der Autor, dieses Buch geschrieben hat. Es ist keine chronologische Erzählung, stattdessen durchschreitet Sasha A. das Haus Zimmer für Zimmer und berichtet, welche Bücher dort verwahrt wurden. Doch für eine Biographie wäre das etwas wenig und so werden anhand der jeweiligen Bücher Situationen und Abschnitte aus Chimens abenteuerlichem Leben erzählt.

Sasha A. hat einen wirklich schönen Schreibstil, es ist eine Freude seine Worte und Sätze zu lesen. Doch was das Vergnügen deutlich trübt, sind diese endlosen Namen, Fremdwörter und Geschehnisse, die teilweise wie Perlen an einer Kette aufgereiht werden. Beispielsweise auf Seite 143: In 15 Zeilen werden 12 Personen namentlich aufgeführt, von denen 10 nicht wieder im Buch erscheinen. Oder Seite 165: Jarmulkes, Haggadot, Seder. Irgendwo weiter vorne wurden die Begriffe kurz erklärt, aber bei der Vielzahl konnte ich sie mir leider nicht merken. Zudem liebt es der Autor, thematisch hin- und herzuspringen: Von privaten zu geschichtlichen Ereignissen, von kulturellen zu politischen Erklärungen - und das teilweise mit einer solchen Menge von Namen und Jahreszahlen, dass ich die betreffenden Passagen nur noch quer gelesen habe.

Schade, denn so empfinde ich dieses Buch über diesen wirklich interessanten Menschen als lediglich durchschnittlich. Sein Enkel hätte mehr über ihn als beispielsweise über den Kommunismus schreiben sollen ;-)

Alejandro Orradre says

Últimamente vengo leyendo bastante acerca de la Unión Soviética y todo lo que supuso para sus habitantes, tanto los que la apoyaban como los que la sufrían.

En *La casa de los veinte mil libros* se habla de ese segundo grupo, el de los sufridores; además, por si fuera poco, los protagonistas eran judíos que tuvieron que huir de las purgas de Stalin, recalando en Inglaterra. La historia principal la protagoniza Chimen Abramsky, el abuelo de **Sasha Abramsky**, que es quien escribe a modo de memorias un relato que además de ser familiar es el de toda una comunidad, la judía, durante toda la segunda mitad del siglo XX.

Además, es también una suerte de ensayo acerca de la literatura judía desde la Edad Media, que a través de la afición de Chimen se explora en la descripción de obras, ediciones y ejemplares extraños de libros relacionados con la *Torá*, el *Talmud* y otros textos sagrados del judaísmo.

Si te gusta la historia, es un documento más que interesante acerca de una época y unos tiempos que por desgracia a veces tengo la sensación que volveremos a vivir. La literatura como diversión y aprendizaje es muy valiosa, pero debería serlo más como recordatorio de los errores del pasado y así no volverlos a repetir jamás.

John Baw says

One of the most interesting books I've read in a while. A truly fascinating intellectual journey through a 'cathedral of the mind' that was the late Chimen Abramsky.

Pouting Always says

This wasn't a bad book but one that wasn't for me. It may be cold to say so but I don't care about someone's dead grandfather. My interests don't happen to include rare books, extensive socialist theory, or judaistic history and ideology. I know there are people who may enjoy those things but since my own interests don't line up I felt bored the whole time I was reading this book. It's always nice to read about people working hard and achieving success and knowledge so Chimen story is one that may be inspiring for others. People with leftist views are always okay with me as well because I'm biased and I'm not even going to pretend otherwise and so I like Chimen from what we read about him. Liking him wasn't enough for me to enjoy reading 300+ pages about the other things plus someone's life and how great they were though, sorry. Again I'm sure someone else would enjoy this more, someone familiar with the topics I mentioned that the book covers since Chimen seemed to be pretty involved with them.

Lisa says

This was a great idea for framing an overview of Jewish/socialist physical and cultural history, family lore, and musings on the power of the written word—not so much a tour through a library as a series of Venn diagrams highlighting the macro and micro worlds of Abramsky's grandfather. I'm using it as an anchor for an essay I'm writing on dealing with my mother's library when I had to pack it up, and it was definitely the right choice—a lot to think about in terms of family, aspiration, and Jewishness.

I thought the first part of this was a bit on the recursive side, circling back heavy-handedly to the emphasize the political, cultural, and family history more than Abramsky really needed to (or maybe just more than I needed him to). I do understand how much he wanted to establish that base of knowledge in the reader, and I think once he hit what he imagined that point to be, the book hit its groove and was a really fascinating intersection of all those histories, and a great ode to bookishness in a non-precious or readers-are-superior-beings way, which always bothers me when it crops up. This is a very *Jewish* book, in an entirely good and holistic way, and definitely recommended for anyone with an interest in that side of 20th-century arts and letters.

Maxy.kai says

I loved this book. It's a biography of Chimen Abramsky, a Marxist Jew in London with an unparalleled library of Judaica and Socialist texts. Pretty much my ideal book. Although the subject matter was fascinating I found some of the commentary a little pat. I also thought it was in need of a good editor, there is a lot of unnecessary repetition.

Maphead says

Not just a book about books, but also a history of modern Judaism, Communism and the British Left. Belongs to be included among the ranks of my favorite books on Jewish history.

Martin says

I don't think I've read a book that resonated so deeply with me on a personal level. It wasn't just an eye-opener into the life of a man I never knew, who I now treasured. It wasn't just the loving details, and the welcome and richly explanatory doses of philosophy and politics.

It was this:

I, too, am drafting the history of my own grandfather.

I, too, have begun this project 3 years following his death.

He, too, was the son of a man of high royal bearing.

He, too, like my wife's late grandfather, exulted in his academic existence late in life, and wore ties and shirt to the beach in Bournemouth, and spent the latter half of his life in London, and by golly, I just checked a map. They lived not even 5 miles apart from each other!

My book, too, contains lines of descent in the closing pages.

I, too, remember my grandfather fondly, and honor him when and how I can, and believe that a book is the best, most possibly everlasting name and memorial.

I read the book slowly, so I could savor it, and fall in love with it, and admire the author for creating it. It is an inspiration to me, and is one of those literary masterpieces which will dominate my thoughts all the while as I exist.

It is a blessed work, and I place a blessing on the head of Sasha Abramsky for bringing it into the world.

Cheryl says

I read this book to learn how/why such a large collection had been gathered. I hadn't expected the Marxist/Jewish connection. Such an erudite man.

Edward Sullivan says

Abramsky's admiring and affectionate biography of his grandfather is told through his vast personal collection of rare and specialized books and the rooms that contained them. A vivid and moving celebration of the intellect, history, books, and love.
