



The Sisters Weiss

Naomi Ragen

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In 1950's Brooklyn, sisters Rose and Pearl Weiss grow up in a loving but strict ultra-Orthodox family, never dreaming of defying their parents or their community's unbending and intrusive demands. Then, a chance meeting with a young French immigrant turns Rose's world upside down, its once bearable strictures suddenly tightening like a noose around her neck. In rebellion, she begins to live a secret life – a life that shocks her parents when it is discovered. With nowhere else to turn, and an overwhelming desire to be reconciled with those she loves, Rose tries to bow to her parents' demands that she agree to an arranged marriage. But pushed to the edge, she commits an act so unforgivable, it will exile her forever from her innocent young sister, her family, and all she has ever known.

Forty years later, pious Pearl's sheltered young daughter Rivka suddenly discovers the ugly truth about her Aunt Rose, the outcast, who has moved on to become a renowned photographer. Inspired, but nave and reckless, Rivka sets off on a dangerous adventure that will stir up the ghosts of the past, and alter the future in unimaginable ways for all involved.

Powerful, page-turning and deeply moving, Naomi Ragen's *The Sisters Weiss* is an unforgettable examination of loyalty and betrayal; the differences that can tear a family apart and the invisible bonds that tie them together.

The Sisters Weiss Details

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From Reader Review The Sisters Weiss for online ebook

Agnes (BeaderBubbe) says

Thoroughly enjoyed this book bringing together a religious world and a secular world. The story of the strength of women and their choices. Families that can truly be a family with love, understanding and heart. Only when we truly listen to our heart will we be free. Love Naomi Ragen books. She truly reaches into your heart and mind. This story of an Ultra-Orthodox family where one daughter breaks from tradition and the generations to follow. How Rose's choice affects the people and loves of her life.

Rachel Levy says

The choices we make in life have consequences we must live with. This book portrays this subject from beginning to end. I enjoyed learning about the Hasidic lifestyle, the stringent rules and the love that those who left it still have in their hearts for the family and the foundation of their faith. The characters wanted to escape the strangulation of "no choices" but also revered a part of their faith that they deeply believed in. In the end, everything "wasn't happily ever after," but instead ended with a positive note and a hopeful future.

Jool says

An interesting historical (and current) look at the ultra-orthodox jews and their traditions. The story starts in 1956 with the two sisters, Pearl, 3 years, and Rose, 6 years. The majority of this book focuses on Rose 40 years later - 40 years after she ran away from home the night before her arranged wedding - and did not see her family again after being shunned.

The most interesting part of the book is that while I kept thinking of Amish people, I never realized the Ultra-Orthodox Jews even today are exceptionally more strict than Amish. The women are completely oppressed, and one would think it was a third world country where women were the lesser beings. The women are expected to marry a man of their parents' choosing, then get a job, produce children, keep an immaculate home, raise the children and cook the meals in order to support the husband so that he can spend his days studying the Talmud. MY GOSH!!!! I had no idea this type of thing was still active today. Plus the women have to be covered from wrist to neck to ankle at all times and wear thick ugly stockings and heavy work shoes.

This was an excellent book and not only fascinating in the way of these traditions but in the plot line and lives of the two sisters, Pearl and Rose, and the paths they chose. I highly recommend it.

Reading with Cats says

Liked the first half a lot, but all of the Whiney Daughter angst in the second half was annoying. As was the

out of left field abortion lecture. Not a favorite.

Ellen says

A glimpse into the ultra-orthodox world. Naomi Ragen is back to the novels that I loved - Jephete's Daughter, Sotah and the Sacrifice of Tamar. It's hard to believe that in this day and age that some of our people and after all are we not people of the book, choose to not educate our children. But, in the recent publications of I Am Forbidden and Unorthodox (last year) this disturbing issue has come to light. Naomi also focuses on the loss of choice and the insular world where the mentality is accepted because that is all they know. I stayed up all night to read this new novel. Coming out in fall 2013.

Bonnie says

This novel is a picturesque glimpse into the life of an ultra-orthodox life of Jewish women. The setting is 1950s Brooklyn, New York where Rose Weiss is being raised in a loving, but extremely strict Jewish family. She attends a school that teaches religious practices, never questioning authority until she meets a young French immigrant and begins questioning the strictness of her life. The French girl's father is a photographer and Rose becomes fascinated with books of his containing pictures taken by other photographers. She borrows one of the books and her father and mother find it hidden under her pillow. This becomes a major issue and Rose is sent to live with her grandmother and forced to attend an even stricter school. She lies to her grandmother and secretly meets Michelle and the two girls attend a photography class and is caught by her parents when they surprise her one night. She returns home and a marriage is arranged for her. The night before the wedding, she sneaks away and begins her life, meeting a man who let her stay with him. She becomes pregnant and has a son. She leaves him and meets a photographer who she marries. They have a daughter and he is killed while on a job in Salvador where he is killed. Rose never gets back into contact with her family and becomes famous for her iconic pictures of Jewish women.

Forty years later, her sister Pearl's daughter shows up on her daughter's doorstep and eventually comes to live with Rose. Inspired, but naïve and reckless, Rivka follows in her aunt's footsteps, leaving her family and striving for independence. The Sisters Weiss is an unforgettable examination of loyalty and betrayal and a first-hand account of the rigors of the ultra-conservative Jewish way of life.

Maggie Anton says

I know enough about Haredi life so that the depiction here wasn't new for me, but I appreciate that Ragen didn't romanticize it but showed the difficulties it creates for women. I was impressed by how Ragen moved back and forth between decades without losing the story line; it takes an experienced author to do that well. Though the ending was pat and tied things up a little too easily, I admit to liking a happy ending. I actually wish Ragen had developed the last part of the novel as deeply as she did the beginning. [spoiler alert: I had to read the epilogue carefully to see that Hannah finally married Adler].

Susan Kaplan says

I was expecting a lot more from this book. While it provides some insight into the life of the strict Orthodox Jews in the 20th and 21st century, it is nothing new. The story is formulaic - unhappy woman runs away from her wedding and starts a new life, and is cut off from her family (or, it might be said, cuts herself off out of fear) and a generation later, her sister's daughter follows in her path. While the setting is the constraints placed upon women in some American Orthodox Jewish sects, the story could be told about any woman in any situation in which she is not happy. Unorthodox, a true story, is a far more compelling look at the strict Orthodox sects of American Jewry.

I found the characters to be flat and not terribly interesting, and the plot twists and turns somewhat forced. Naomi Ragen has written several books, but I don't plan to read any others. After reading Dara Horn's recent book, The Guide for the Perplexed, which I adored, I hoped that this book would be as mesmerizing. It wasn't.

Jaline says

This book slowed me down into reflection mode – and that isn't a bad thing from time to time. A brief summary could perhaps best be described by the following quote:

“A Jewish woman must stifle her feelings a thousand times . . . whereas a Gentile woman is capable of drawing near to that which she loves [the Jewish woman] must sacrifice her soul and her freedom.”

One of the characters in the book was studying female Jewish writers and this quote was attributed to a Jewish woman writer in czarist Russia (19th century) named Hava Shapiro.

The Sisters Weiss takes place from the early 1950's and ends in the last couple of years of the first decade this century. It was difficult to imagine that the strictness and restrictions of those practicing the orthodox Jewish faith have remained so structured and are observed so completely by even younger generations in our modern world. The world I was reading about and the world I have lived in required me to stop and ponder several times.

There was a bit of awkwardness in moving the plot along in this story; a few times where it felt like the wrong piece of a jigsaw puzzle had been trimmed a bit to fit. However, this did not affect the over-riding message of the book.

For me, it was about young women (still in their mid to late teens) attempting to break out of the strict bonds of their families to be themselves, long before they know who those selves really are yet. This thought came up during an argument between a daughter and her father; the fact that an argument even happened underlined how serious the issue had already become. At the same time these young women had strong feelings that they weren't ready to be married off yet and made choices naively hoping (when, or if they thought about it) that someone would be there to catch them if they tripped and fell.

This book was interesting and informative of an aspect of our global culture that I knew very little about. I have a feeling I will still be reflecting on some of the pieces in this book for some time to come.

Chana Billet says

While the masses are loving this book, I did not. Parts of the novel were enjoyable but, overall, this wasn't one of my favorite books. Unlike "Chains Around The Grass," "The Saturday Wife," "The Covenant" and "Jephte's Daughter," all of which I've read multiple times, this does not beget a second reading.

As always, Ragen has a perfect eye when it comes to depicting the nuances haredi life.

Unfortunately, there was something about how the book was constructed that made me feel like an outsider. I was observing her characters, not living with them or rooting for them.

For me, the biggest harbinger that prevented me from connecting with the characters was in the timing of the novel, which takes place over forty years. As so many decades pass, people change. Crafting a novel to be spaced over multiple decades is a challenge, for how can one possibly depict all the changes a person goes through in a limited number of pages to really make the characters come to life?

Had Ragen limited the setting not to span over so many years, perhaps I would have been able to connect with the characters in a meaningful way and understood how they changed and developed.

Melinda says

I received a ARC through Goodreads.

This book took me on a journey and introduced me to the inner world of an ultra-Orthodox family. It was enlightening and interesting to read the struggles, responsibilities and choices that the Weiss females make, which ultimately affect the other in some ways or another.

It's always the quiet ones that are the troublemaker ;) Who would have guessed that obedient and understanding Rose would be the one to start off the traditional path and end up cleaving a path of her own and ultimately cause Rivka to go done a similar path.

It was interesting to read how much Rose and Rivka are like mirror images of each other through the choices that they make. However there were major differences, whereas Rose went one route, Rivka almost ended up being completely dependent on others (and I say almost because of what could have been).

I felt like it was an interesting and almost coming of age read. It shows the struggles and responsibilities that comes with 'freedom' for each and every choice that each ladies made, while keeping it grounded and realistic. While there were moments that had me struggle to understand the ultra strict world the Weiss sisters and family grew up with, but that only just goes to show you how descriptive and persuasive the author is at explaining their community and life.

My only critique would be that I wish we got to know and hear more of Pearl's story.

The Badger says

This is a work in progress. It's never taken me this long to bust through a book before. So far, halfway through, I'm like, "OMFG! THIS is the scandal? The female Greek Orthodox members of my family who were in the US at the time of "the scandal" of this book were busy "visiting relatives" (i.e., too many 1, 2, 3, and 4 o'clock cocktail hours), "going to bingo" (i.e., Yiayia's lover's house), "sending the kids to the family farm for the summer" (i.e., someone's mom is in rehab again), and talking behind "that Bitch" Helen's back because she didn't use pure Crisco in her kataifi. Also, my grandmother didn't set foot IN church unless someone died. Otherwise, she managed post-church coffee hour like Mussolini. When I went on my first date at 16, Yiayia told me not to let the guy "get fresh" with me, and then handed me a handful of Valium. The rest of the Valium she gave to my aunt who taught Sunday School, and who needed it because a CERTAIN niece kept questioning the qualifications of the authors of the Bible, asking why there weren't citations and references, and especially why the Bible wasn't written in APA style.

Obviously, the Greek Orthodox of that time period are either in or on their way to hell (where there is presumably dancing, ouzo, Valium, loud men with louder women, and plenty of Crisco), while the Jewish Orthodox of that time are going to heaven (where there's a lot of rules, ugly stockings, and women who presumably LISTEN to what the men say). This is why, at Greek marriage ceremonies (in Greece), when the priest reads the part about the wife "obeying," the bride steps on the groom's foot. Newer footwear now allows stilettos to be slowly ground into the groom's most sensitive tendons, as the bride beams (FYI is the best time for the wedding photographer to get an honest picture of the beaming bride).

Obviously I'm not fond of patriarchal societies. My Papou (who never came to the US) saw his entire village executed by the Germans, and still went on to fight and become a POW twice. When the war was over, he went back to his olive trees and fig trees, despite the shrapnel embedded in his bones from being beat with sheet metal at the POW camp. And yet, my Yiayia would often walk by us, muttering, "What are you talking to him for--he'll probably be dead soon." (Papou just rolled his eyes, wondering how he got stuck with such a DRAMATIC wife, and probably wished he'd die soon to get a head start on an escape...).

As I said, this is a work in progress. I'll continue my assessment as I read on. It just sucks that I actually PAID for this book.

Ok, now that I'm finally done with this book, I honestly see few differences between strict Jewish Orthodoxy and what we so like to term "radical" Islam, "fundamental" Baptists, or "basic" Polygamy, etc. No arguments. Even Buddha was a mysoginistic ass and wouldn't let women in his temple unless it was to serve the men! My Dad used to say, "All my friends told me I was lucky to have girls because I'd always have someone to serve me." Finally, after hearing this a million times, I asked, "Why? Are you planning on loosing your legs?" Now, if I'm in town, Dad cooks, and I'll do dishes. If I cook--nevermind...we'll stick to reality here.

Exactly where in history the man became the dominant force of the family puzzles me. We come from so many matriarchal cultures that suddenly did a complete 180. These cultures revered women because only a woman has the power to bring life into the world. Look at the matriarchal Minoan culture (before it's destruction by the Santorini volcano and ensuing earthquakes and fires)--they worshiped their priestesses, and it has been speculated that King Minos was actually QUEEN Minos. This was a peaceful agricultural society (the double ax was symbolic as an agricultural implement, not an instrument of war). Bees were also

revered, as their lives mimicked the Minoan culture--a complex social system revolving around its queen.

Enter the patriarchal, war loving Mycenaeans (on the heels of the natural destruction, or else the Minoan priestesses would've poisoned them to death), and the Aegean goes to hell. And how about the female Pharaohs of Egypt whose images were ordered destroyed by following male Pharaohs? Don't you love how Tut is always portrayed as strong, tall, and virile when he was actually crippled--stooped over and had a club foot, and would never have been able to ride a chariot as was displayed on the frescoes and carvings.

Back to my original point... Let's not demonize Muslim women for covering their hair. Orthodox Jewish women still wear wigs after marriage. Women of both faiths brought up in "radical" families are treated like possessions and subject to the most severe punishments (yes, death) for dishonoring the family. But again, this also happens in every religion that gets too wrapped up in itself. And if you're thinking, not in any good old US religion, maybe look up murders of same sex couples, and before that, mixed-race couples.

Then think about this: why do uber religious have the mindset that the females of the family are the "morality meters" and the males are the "pride and joy so we'll look the other way as long as they don't leave their heroin needles on the kitchen counter or fuck TOO many prostitutes"?

And yeah... "Education can only corrupt a woman's mind..." It's interesting that they ALL throw that one in there, isn't it?

BTW, I was not amused at the Pro-Life twist thrown in my face at the end of the book. I drove past Planned Parenthood today so I could flip off the Pro-Life protestors and tell them to stuff their ridiculous signs up their vaginas so the Pro-Choicers could wave THEM around as abortion incentives (all in honor of this book). Usually I just mock them, yelling "Hey, Genius! That's a picture of a squid/pig/African American fetus!" and they all drop their signs and start googling, but today was special.

Sarah says

Judaism fascinates me, particularly as I delve more deeply into Bible study. Therefore, *The Sisters Weiss* was one of those novels I just knew I would enjoy. And it did not disappoint! On the contrary, it kept me captivated from beginning to end. The book spans more than forty years tracing the relationships amongst an ultra-orthodox Jewish family in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. When young Rose makes the decision to leave the confines of her cloistered life the wake that follows profoundly alters the lives of all her family members, especially that of her younger sister, Pearl.

Over forty years later Pearl's own daughter, Rivka's longings echo those of her Aunt Rose. Rivka's actions set in motion a whirlwind of emotions leading Rose back to her family of origin from which she has long been estranged.

The novel excels both at relating the complex dynamics between blood relations and for shinning a light on a sector of society hidden from most of the world.

Sue Seligman says

I waited a very long time for Naomi Ragen to write a new novel. She is a modern Orthodox woman who has lived in Israel for most of her adult life, but was born and raised in New York City. I had read her earlier

novels, as well as her memoir, all of which depict the traditions of Orthodox Judaism within the context of family life, including the positive and negative aspects of the rules and dogma which delineate the roles of individuals. Naomi Ragen is an outspoken critic of the roles of women in the ultra Orthodox community, and her articles and books have won her many enemies as well as supporters. My sister in law and I recently had the privilege to attend her first US lecture promoting this latest book, and it was fascinating to learn about her journey through the world of Judaism and social expectations of this community. Our admiration for this well spoken and committed woman was enhanced by her humor and passion for her craft and for bettering the role of women within the religion that she loves.

The Sisters Weiss is set mostly in Brooklyn, and depicts the atmosphere of the ultra Orthodox vividly and realistically. Many Hebrew expressions are sprinkled throughout the novel, and there is a glossary of definitions in the back. Rose and Pearl Weiss are sisters who are expected to follow a very strict path into adulthood....a modest and circumspect adolescence culminating with an arranged marriage, hopefully to a Talmudic scholar, and continuing the traditions of their insulated community. The novel begins in the late 1950s and ends in the present day. Rose chafes at the restrictions of her community while still in high school, and is punished for the crime of borrowing a photography book. She resents her parents for allowing the rabbi of the community determine her fate, which is to transfer to an extremely strict girls' school, and live away from home with her grandmother. During the ensuing year, Rose sinks further into what her family perceives as the world of sin, and finally agrees to adhere to the strict rules of the community since she wasn't ready to break from the family. Finally, on the eve of her wedding, she makes the ultimate break from the family, causing consequences for her parents, her sister, and herself, which could never be undone. It is evident that Rose's choices would have far reaching repercussions for both herself, her family, and future generations.

I enjoyed this book because the characters were realistic and empathetic and the depiction of this Jewish community was intriguing and thoughtful. I have always been interested in Jewish themed novels, and Naomi Ragen's latest did not disappoint me. I also really loved the cover art of the book, depicted a scene in Williamsburg, Brooklyn of the 1950s. Book cover art is an important facet of attracting fans to pick up a novel; unfortunately, it may be lessening in importance due to the prevalence of the e-books. The ending of the novel was a little disappointing (no spoilers), but maybe there is room for a sequel. All in all, I enjoyed this book which is more closely resembling Ragen's earlier works, and I wish her much success.

Liisi says

I don't normally find the time to write long reviews about books now a days. However, this one requires that I write a review. Why? Because I finished it in 1 day. Granted I stayed up until 2am to finish it. IT WAS THAT GOOD!

At first I thought this was a true story, but it is historical fiction. However, the lives unveiled are so real that you honestly feel like you need to sit down at the computer and google them when you're done reading. The Author Naomi Ragen is truly a talented, gifted, inspired writer. I have read many historical fiction novels that got me thinking about my own life, and got me wishing that I could do more to help other cultures, other people, and give the world more peace and happiness.

However, this book got me thinking about what is really important to me. Do I, in my life right now, feel like I'm on the path to reach my full potential? Do I feel like what my passions for life are, are going to help others? Do I feel that my faith, my belief are strong enough to keep me going? Now, for those of you who don't consider yourselves religious, or of a certain faith, I honestly feel like you would enjoy reading this book. Not to say "Whew that's why I don't believe in a God, or that's why I don't go to church!", but rather to

see that you do believe in something, yourself! People who are religious and have faith can also believe in themselves. That's what this book is about. That's what Rose Weiss teaches us.

Each person has to go through their own struggles in life to learn how to believe in themselves, even when it is really hard. I believe in God, I honestly feel that He is leading my life, and is helping me realize my true and full potential. Because when I try to do things without Him, everything crumbles apart. But that's just me, and that's how I feel Pearl Weiss was as an adult.

Though my heart broke for what these sweet, innocent women went through, I am grateful for how my life has turned out...and that I don't have their struggles and trials. They if they were real would probably not want my struggles and trials either.

I would buy this book and read it like once a year it's that good!

Dana says

Today I finished *The Sisters Weiss*, by Naomi Ragen. This is a story of familial love, choices, losses and hope. The author is an American Jew who has lived in Israel for more than 40 years, but the book is set in the States. I found it fascinating, sad, beautiful, uplifting, heartbreaking and, ultimately, life affirming. The most extreme Orthodox Jews live lives as foreign to me (a secular, non religious Jew), as any extremist religion or cult, though they are not out to harm anyone, or to inflict their beliefs and rituals on others the way some extreme religions do. I could relate to the Yiddish being spoken by parents and grandparents, and I know about the shabbos dinners, and the mikvah (the ritual baths of Orthodox women to make themselves clean and pure each month at the end of their cycle and before their wedding day). What is foreign to me is how the young girls are married off very early in life, most by 17, to a boy chosen by their family with the help of a matchmaker. This is done even today. Women must keep their hair hidden, so many shave their heads and wear wigs! They have large numbers of babies, and live quite well, shopping at the finest department stores, though they dress conservatively. In the novel, which starts in the early 1950s, when I, too, was a child, 2 little girls are being raised with many siblings in Brooklyn, in an Orthodox neighborhood. Older sister Rose adores her little sister Pearl, but Rose wants more from life than to be married off at 17. She wants to go to college, to study photography and see the world. To leave an Orthodox family is an unforgivable sin, and the fallout is always felt by all who are left behind and by future generations. Rose leaves, and that is where the story really takes off. The first 100 pages are the early years, growing up together. After that, when Rose refused to marry the boy chosen by her parents, the book jumps ahead to 2007 and we find Pearl a mother and grandmother, married to a man chosen by her parents, but for whom she does care. They have a teenaged daughter, Rivka, who also wants to make something of her life.....I could not stop reading from that point on. Rivka's adventures, and flashbacks of Rose's life, and that of her daughter, Hannah, come together for quite a story!

I don't think this story is for everyone. I loved it, but am not sure I would have felt the same way if I didn't have the background I do. There were a lot of Yiddish terms used (of course they were defined) but I could hear them said in the accent of my grandmother, which made it more real to me. The intonations and inflections are all part of it, making the story seem very real. The book was so well written. I wept during two very emotional scenes, and that, for me, is always a sign of a great book! I would love to hear what other people think, and whether or not you agree that something is lost when read by people have no background at all in Judaism, though I must point out that I have never been one to practice religion at all. For me, it is a heritage and culture, but I could taste the rugelach (as made by my Russian granny) and picture the described settings, which someone of a different religion probably could not do.

Marie desJardins says

I liked the overall story, and the glimpse into ultra-orthodox Hasidic lives. But the "confrontation" scenes between the various sisters/mothers/daughters all felt too pat and simplistic -- the characters kept saying and thinking things that didn't seem to jibe with the complex characters that had been emerged from the interior scenes and sequences, and so every one of the confrontation scenes just jarred and irritated me. Hannah in particular comes across as an ENORMOUS spoiled brat who is completely thoughtless and inconsiderate in everything she says and does. It drove me bats, especially since the rest of the book was so readable.

DJ Sakata says

I received a free ARC copy of Naomi Ragen's The Sisters Weiss as a Goodreads first reader. The book had a painful first quarter for me, I did not like Rose's family, I did not like how she was treated, I was frustrated by their choice to continue to live in ignorance in a modern city. I know it was/is typical of the time and of their ultra-Orthodox religion, and the writing was superb, but it hurt my heart. So I had to put it down and read something else for a few weeks. I came back to it and was able to consume it whole - and loved it. Ms. Ragen captures the emotion and holds you there while the character is working through it... happy or sad, embarrassed or thrilled, elated or deeply depressed. I could almost taste the meals, as well as the bitterness and tears. Rose's harsh disappointments and pain became mine. I was simultaneously repelled and fascinated. The liberal sprinkling of Yiddish words used throughout was a bit distracting and not always self-explanatory in the passages, but a helpful glossary was provided in the back that covered most. I finished it several days ago and though I even started a different book, I continue to ponder these characters and their story, and expect I will continue to do so for quite some time.

Stephanie Steinberg says

The very beginning story about the aunt that took place in the 50's felt real and believable but all the present day stuff was highly unrealistic. Lots of eye rolling moments!

Catherine says

I am a bit conflicted on my feelings about Naomi Ragen's The Sisters Weiss. I enjoyed the overall premise for the story: the conflict between religion, tradition, and aspects of a modern secular life, especially for females. Ms. Ragen does a strong job of portraying both the beauty and the struggles of life for a female in an American orthodox Jewish home. The glimpse she provides into the lives of these women was very well done and I learned some new things. But, I didn't care about the characters. Some were even unlikable to me, primarily because I felt as if I didn't know, or understand, the motivation behind some of their actions. Why was Hannah so bitter toward Rose? It is hinted that she took a backseat to Rose's career, but this is never fleshed out, and because I didn't understand Hannah, I didn't like the portions of the book involving her. She is not the only character that I didn't feel i understood. I also found some of the tense conversations/arguments between characters to be stiff and hard to read. Overall, a good read, but I feel it

had potential to be much more.
