

I came back to the gentiles I was living with and the man said, So many Nazis, I bet they are going to kill off those Jews. That was the day they were going to take the rest of them to Treblinka. I knew about this place. I went to my bed. I say to myself, I don't have a mother now. I didn't eat. The gentiles said, Helena what's the matter with you? I say, I don't feel good. I couldn't tell them that I had lost everything, my mother, all my family.

I ask myself, Was I born from a stone? Do I still speak Jewish? Does Jewish still exist? I try to say the words to myself. Maybe somebody should hear me. I try to picture a face. My mother's face. If I could draw, I would draw her. Just to bring her back to my eyes.



Lily (Amy's Bubbe) grieves the death of her family.
From *Flying Couch: A Graphic Memoir*

Culture

BOOKS

'I Feel Jewish . . .': Roots and Reflections in *Flying Couch: A Graphic Memoir*

BY HANNAH BAKER SALTMARSH

MANY MEMOIRS advertise an impossible upgrade from impulsive self-sabotage to equally impulsive self-help, and still remain the most accessible literary genre. Graphic memoirs, although they entice readers with a seemingly naïve aesthetic or confessional narrative voice, aren't the work of amateurs: if anyone can write a memoir, hardly anyone can draw one.

A compelling graphic memoir such as Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch* evokes personal and cultural memory by way of gestures, poses, angles, text written sideways, poetic fragments, and arrow-flung words imitating perception itself. Each pencil mark of Kurzweil's reminds you that the book is handmade, and is meant to be held, pored over; Kurzweil's graphic memoir reminds you that all books aspire to be as artful.

The obsessively layered density of creative expression page-by-page in *Flying Couch* attests to the fullness of life scrawled upon the templates of desk surfaces, computer screens, open suitcases, purses, windows, and couches. Words are images and vice versa: photo captions, computer filenames, Post-it notes, thought bubbles, nightmares, and book titles on shelves feel imagistic like memory, functioning beyond language. The sharp lineation of birds, roots, branches, couches, and windows are transformed into a way of speaking.

The title of Kurzweil's debut graphic novel encapsulates the way Jewish womanhood is passed from generation to generation on the sofa in the living room where women hold court, sit with each other, laugh, dream, or wander to other worlds in therapy and in books—except, notably, couches are not heirloom furniture in Kurzweil's work, but like Wordsworth's "Spots of Time," Coleridge's "Winged Thought," or Woolf's "Room of One's Own," they are the furniture of self-telling.

The book itself, and the author's role in creating a graphic memoir with three central characters and voices is a response to the distances we sense between the people we love the most. What woman has not thought about a beloved matriarch? "I think about my grandmother all the time . . .

although actually talking to her is a different story." Kurzweil perfectly handles the tension in female relationships when she reflects upon her arguments with her mother: "I never really know exactly what we're fighting about, but it usually has something to do with leaving each other." Yet these women, though living in the Midwest, New England, and New York, clearly remain the most important people in each other's lives. What Kurzweil's Bubbe says of her own mother, "Sometimes, a world is one person," resonates with the bonds between grandmother, mother, and daughter.

Kurzweil portrays her mother and grandmother as women "with certain stories to tell," women who can articulate exactly who they are, while she is still trying to sort out where their lives end and where hers can begin. In the first chapter of the book, Kurzweil portrays herself as a child imitating her mother who is typing up psychological research. One page, the background of which is a blueprint of the Kurzweil family home, shows Kurzweil working in her bedroom on a different psychological study involving the effect of one pet hamster's death upon the other, brothers Sugar and Spice—a study conducted in crayon. Kurzweil playfully undermines scientific authority while also exploring the myriad ways in which girls imitate their mothers: the open window and the crayon bucket seem to offer women the chance to escape the merely rational. In Kurzweil's case, maternal imitation means aspiration, not only towards scientific conclusions, but also towards the dream-work of composing.

When Bubbe says, "I wish I could draw her," referring to her own mother murdered in the camps, Kurzweil joins Bubbe in "making the invisible visible" by illustrating and narrating a multi-generational family history. The women in Kurzweil's family, each in her own way, value empathy, independence, and reflectiveness. What gives this arresting graphic memoir its historical and cultural poignancy is not only the story of Kurzweil's grandmother, Lily Fenster, who escapes from the Warsaw Ghetto and evades rape, capture, and death. Kurzweil's mother, Sonya, a psychotherapist, embodies the way



At an imagined college "identity" fair, Amy considers several Jewish identities.

children of survivors bridge the gap between worlds of pain and of progress, for themselves and for their own children. What is left unknown in most Holocaust literature is how the next two generations respond to and carry the imprints of the past; what is unheard of until Kurzweil's brave, heartfelt book is how a Millennial Jewish-American woman finds a sense of belonging that transcends a traumatic history.

Throughout *Flying Couch*, Kurzweil has a love-hate relationship with the potential selves encapsulated not only by the women in her family, but also by her alma mater, Stanford. When Kurzweil the student tries to engage earnestly with every volume of Jewish political, cultural, and religious thought, she is attacked on all sides by Freud, Harvey Pekar, Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, the biblical Jacob, and Theodore Herzl, who, like the monsters in her childhood nightmares, create chaos and crisis, arguing even with each other, filling her with anxiety and self-doubt. Kurzweil blurts out, almost as a surprise to herself, "But I just want to draw pictures," whereupon she flees the hyper masculine, judgmental apparitions, and abandoning also the stereotype of "the Expert Educated Jew." By the last chapter, Kurzweil has accumulated graphic novels by Jewish women, a subtle reclaiming of identity and community.

For a writer and cartoonist who has published work in *The New Yorker*, *Blackbird*, *Shenandoah*, and others, Kurzweil's modesty is refreshing. She laughs at her first attempts to write this book initially as her college thesis, presenting to her family over dinner a comic featuring trees of maternal attachment, charts of 100-degree fears, and a stick-figure Bubbe who's wearing rollers in her hair and a superhero cape, and stomping on a Nazi. Bubbe exudes with pride: "Ohh! My Stories! Tree times I read your book. I say, my granddaughter, she listen, all dis time she listen! My stories are not in vain!" and, in the next breath, to the server, "Vaitress! Bring me some vater please—you know I survived from HITLER!"

Each woman sees herself as the protagonist of Kurzweil's multi-generational story, and while Bubbe is honored, Sonya offers some edits, which reveals how she has rewritten her own life story, refusing to be locked into a traumatic past. Sonya suggests to her daughter, "And you should make me sexier. I mean, more dynamic. I'm not just a therapist you know. I write poems. I care about the environment. I'm in a book club. I love to dance. I'm a lecturer at a prestigious medical school. I lead a multifaceted and fulfilling life. I just don't want to seem like some . . . victim of history." Sonya's comment is representative of how the different generations relate to collective and personal pasts.

Kurzweil, for her part, researches and dwells upon Bubbe's stories in search of a family identity; "in the tradition of curious and dutiful sons and daughters before me," Kurzweil shares that she aims to "polish and publish [Bubbe's] history, immortalize it." Kurzweil recreates Bubbe as a teenager, having lost almost her entire family to starvation or the camps,

alone, in disguise as a Christian orphan. Bubbe wonders "Am I even Jewish?" as she takes communion or struggles to "speak Jewish" to herself. Yet, Bubbe shows she is "Jewish in [her] heart" in the act of sneaking freshly baked bread to a man she suspects is Jewish. This story comes closest to Kurzweil's original, poignant definition of what it means to be Jewish, beyond all the identity politics. This definition is embodied in Bubbe's words and the tremendous courage of her empathy: "I gave that bread like a secret. I was so scared, but I gave it."

Weaving together Bubbe and Sonya's immigration to New York from Germany with her own coming-of-age in New York, Kurzweil scrawls a sign that welcomes immigrants and recent grads alike. By the book's end, Kurzweil patches together a life in Brooklyn, teaching dance, comics, and writing in after-school programs so far apart she spends most of her life on public transportation. She depicts her entire generation through an adaptation of *Chutes and Ladders* for twenty-somethings, with ecstasies like adopting a cat, finding a good apartment, falling in love, finding cheap furniture, and getting into grad school. Alternatively, the pitfalls of this age include getting mugged, breaking up, finding bedbugs, coming home to your dead cat, or waking up hung over. This set-piece is just one instance of Kurzweil's skill in selection and tone, and her ability to evoke through each woman depicted, a generation.

Kurzweil's college notes reveal that she first attempted to write *Flying Couch* with a "post-feminist lens" even as she questioned what that lens was, and depicted life stories that challenged all ideologies. In the portrayal of Bubbe fending off a Nazi from raping her, Bubbe's oral testimony appears in typescript, "He was strong. I was stronger," reclaiming some dignity within an unimaginable context. Kurzweil's *Flying Couch* reflects the post-racial, post-feminist identity politics of Millennial artists breaking traditional codes of storytelling. Kurzweil's work more than passes the Bechdel test, created by a fellow cartoonist, Alison Bechdel, which stipulates that a creative work that is truly feminist must "feature at least two women who talk to each other about something other than a man" and that these women be named, it soars past it.

Beneath the metaphor of the flying couch, of the tangled, invisible roots of diasporic peoples, of the flights to various homelands, the attempts to fill in family trees, is a question of the artist's making: how to create a home of one's own out of Target furniture, a drafting desk, a bequeathed couch, a handwritten card from a student gushing "Dear Amy, U are my favorite teacher!," a mother's face on the iPhone's caller ID, and a grandmother's voice between the silences where Kurzweil can't bring herself to tell Bubbe what she means to her. Rewriting the notion of a solely traumatic past, Kurzweil reveals ways in which women bond across generations in their deepest desires to be known and to share stories. ■