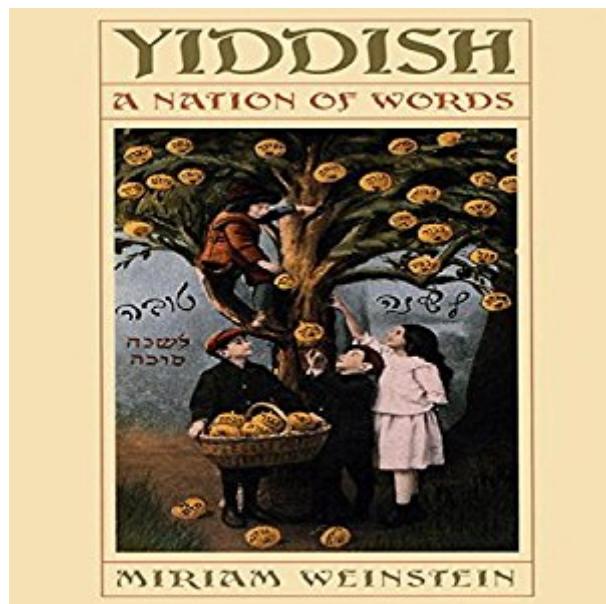


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Yiddish: A Nation Of Words



Synopsis

About a thousand years ago, European Jews began speaking a language that was quite different from the various tongues and dialects that swirled around them. It included Hebrew, a touch of the Romance and Slavic languages, and a large helping of German. In a world of earthly wandering, this pungent, witty, and infinitely nuanced speech, full of jokes, puns, and ironies, became the linguistic home of the Jews, the bond that held a people together. Here is the remarkable story of how this humble language took vigorous root in Eastern European shtetls and in the Jewish quarters of cities across Europe; how it achieved a rich literary flowering between the wars in Europe and America; how it was rejected by emancipated Jews; and how it fell victim to the Holocaust. And also how, in yet another twist of destiny, Yiddish today is becoming the darling of academia. Yiddish is a history as story, a tale of flesh-and-blood people with manic humor, visionary courage, brilliant causes, and glorious flaws. It will delight everyone who cares about language, literature, and culture.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A wonderful book, engaging, humorous, warm, and moving, that tells the compelling story of a culture's survival against all odds. The Jewish people, living at the edge of other cultures and nations, kept itself alive through a shared language full of wit, wisdom, irony, compassion, and spiritual resonance. *Yiddish: A Nation of Words* is less about a religion than it is about the way any group or ethnic culture finds its deep identity, and its common strength, in the bond of words. The

book is full of proverbs and bits of poetry--you get a real feel for the language, its sly shrug of humorous resignation, and its emotional pathos. The book also has portraits of unforgettable characters--people like Eliezer Perlman, who turned himself into Ben Yehuda, the architect of modern Hebrew; Esther Frumkin, a Yiddish activist who tangled with Communist Russia; Peretz Markish, the 'heartthrob Yiddish poet'; and Isaac Bashevis Singer, Nobel laureate. Even the Holocaust is dealt with in a way that salvages meaning and hope from the ashes. Weinstein tells her stories with heart and humor -- a great read, that makes you laugh and cry at the same time, and teaches ways of living in a world of threat and change.

I admit to being surprised by this book, knowing that it was the first effort from a former journalist. (I have found that most writers coming from the worlds of journalism or academia lack the ability to communicate on the same level as those of us outside of the twin ivory towers.) But here is an utterly delightful, at times moving, history of one of the most unique languages on the planet. Part history, part memoir, part dictionary and phrasebook, this book could not have been put together with greater love and craft. I especially loved the frequent garnishment of Yiddish proverbs and "Sprichworte" throughout the narrative. Some additional thoughts: 1. Especially moving to me are the chapters on the early history of Yiddish in Germany and the nations of Eastern Europe. One of the great tragedies of history is the unique and fateful relationship between the German people and the Jews. Born linguistically from German, Yiddish took on a life of its own in the kitchens and shtetls of the Jews. The author's account of the manner in which moderate Jews turned their backs on Yiddish in Germany in the 18th and 19th centuries is an ironic chapter in the history of Germano-Judaic relations. (I have in my possession a German translation of the Tanakh published in Berlin in 1876, which I read now with a more wiser understanding.) 2. Having both lived in Germany for two years and studied Hebrew on the University level, I can understand much of written and spoken Yiddish. 3. For those who believe in the literal fulfillment of prophetic statements in the Tanakh, the gradual disappearance of Yiddish as a primary spoken language makes absolute sense, as the Jews are restored to their ancient homelands accompanied by the simultaneous "restoration of all things." Though it may fade as a spoken tongue, I for one hope that the rich literary tradition of Yiddish never fades.

You don't have to be Jewish (or conversant in Yiddish) to enjoy this engaging book that features a language as its central character and reads with the warmth of a biography. Writing with clarity, insight, and humor, the author leads the reader along a meandering and dramatic path from the

shtetls of Poland and Eastern Europe, to the Russian-Chinese border, and finally to North America and Israel, where Yiddish surrenders its life to the more modern Hebrew. For a people of exile, it was a language that took the place of a nation, and miraculously, many of its rich cultural remnants and memories still survive to tell the tale. A lively read that, as a bonus, also happens to be a terrific history lesson.

Yiddish: A Nation of Words is the kind of book you don't want to put down once you've started. Weinstein has the perfect touch for getting across the facts about this almost lost language, neither weighing the reader down with the terrible sadness of the story nor degrading the story with humorous cliches. The research the book is based on is thorough and trustworthy. You will learn a lot about the Jewish diaspora, about Europe and the Middle East, about America in the last century--and enjoy doing it. Anyone from an immigrant family is going to resonate to the pressures that eventually saw the end of American Yiddish--and to the wisdom that is still preserved in the words. Jeanne Guillemin Cambridge

I found the book too dense and more like a crazy text book than an informative read. The book bounces around in time so much that, just when you think you know where it is going, you are back in another century. Although there are facts in the book that were surprising and worth knowing, the book itself was not an easy read.

I found this book to be a beautifully written, well-researched history of the Yiddish language. The language was more than words; it was the spirit of a landless people, too often unappreciated, but alive with emotion and wisdom. And it is a language that may be dying with the generation that spoke it and appreciated it. "Yiddish: A Nation of Words" would be enjoyed by those who have experience with the flavor of the language, and those who would like to know more about how a common language can bring a nation without borders together, and sustain and strengthen those who had survived the hardships and the near destruction of its speakers.

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