

Portnoy's Daughters

Ruth Andrew Ellenson
The Modern Jewish Girl's Guide to Guilt

Penguin Group, 2005, 310 pages.

Reviewed by Heather Schwedel

I call my mom to tell her I'm reading a book about Jewish guilt.

She lets out an obligatory "Oy" as I start to wonder aloud whether guilt has played quite as big a role in my life as it has for the authors of *The Modern Jewish Girl's Guide to Guilt*.

"Heather," she says, "I think you feel guilty for not having enough Jewish guilt," and I wonder if maybe she's on to something.

We've all felt it at some point—that nagging feeling in our stomachs, that ever-present cultural trope: Jewish guilt. Whether it's guilt over not feeling enough guilt, guilt over not understanding half the Yiddish words peppered throughout the book,

guilt over the State of Israel's actions, or guilt about skipping Yom Kippur services for a manicure (as one author in the book does), it's guilt all the same, and we can't seem to let go of it.

The Modern Jewish Girl's Guide to Guilt, edited by journalist Ruth Andrew Ellenson, is a collection of essays addressing Jewish guilt in various ways. Because the primary prototypes of "Jewishness" in popular culture have been male-dominated for years, from that of serious Philip Roth to that of nebbishy Woody Allen, Ellenson decided there was room, and what's more, need, for The Jew Luck Club: a female take on what it means to be Jewish in this day and age. And in a marketplace where chick lit has spawned subgenres like "mommy lit" and "church lit," why not "chai lit" or "not-shiksa lit"?

Despite its title, the book isn't a

self-help guide, and it won't rid you of your guilt. By approaching guilt from a variety of angles, the book instead might make things seem even more complicated than they already were. Trying to find the perfect Jewish husband? So are the women featured in the book. Want to balance your career with pleasing your parents by mothering the next generation of well-behaved Jews? The authors wish you luck, because they still haven't figured it out. The point is, at least now you know you're not alone.

Many of the stories provide readers with a veritable catalogue of Jewish anti-role models. Readers will find themselves vowing not to become the compulsive JDater (Amy Klein), the daughter who marries the wrong man to please her parents (Elisa Albert), the woman who allows a fear of saying no to reduce her sense of self into oblivion (Susan Shapiro). The book conjectures, though, that most women inevitably will suffer or inflict guilt at some point: like dark, curly hair, guilt might be in Jewish women's genes.

One word that appears throughout

the book is "Jewess." The Oxford English Dictionary defines "Jewess" as simply "a female Jew; a Jewish woman," but its connotation is a bit more coarse, a bit more apt to make you shudder and wish that that meaning could be achieved with a less conspicuous word. In one of the book's best essays, *The Monica Metaphor*, Lauren Grodstein offers a dead-on dissection of why, despite its lexicographical accuracy, being called a Jewess can be a rather unpleasant experience. Grodstein spent 1998 in France, fending off Parisians who called her Monica Lewinsky, not because she resembled the then-ubiquitous White House intern, but because she "looked Jewish." A French friend told her, "You have that Jewish face, that body. Very, very sexy. Very beautiful. But it is the face and body of... a Jewess."

Somehow, those six letters seem to encapsulate every contradiction of being a Jewish woman. Big hips are good for bearing Jewish babies, but they're also harder to squeeze into designer jeans. And dark hair can be alluring, but it's also, well, so Jewish. Grodstein ruminates: "A Jewess

sounds juicy and slightly dirty, like a lot of the other words that end in -ess—mistress, seductress, stewardess. And Jewish women, as far as I can tell, are the only females of a particular religious group to be designated with that voluptuous suffix. You never hear of the Mormoness, the Presbyterianess, the Buddhess.” The suffix singles us out, which is fine sometimes, but at other times makes it impossible for us to hide our identities when we don’t feel like French people taunting us and calling us “Mon-ee-ka!” Because when it comes to being a Jewess, Jewish women, Monica included, don’t seem to have a choice in the matter: their hips, their hair, their noses and their last names betray them. Grodstein bemoans this inevitability, calling on Jewish women to look beyond the Jewess factor, and to not identify with Monica just because she’s one too. For Grodstein, being a Jewess is great, but it doesn’t mean she’s not a person first.

Perhaps the book could have benefited from a wider range of viewpoints. The featured authors range from Orthodox to wholly

secular in their practice of Judaism, but a disproportionate number of them seem to be freelance journalists who went to Columbia and now live in the most moneyed neighborhoods of New York City. We only get to hear from the token Midwesterner, the token immigrant, the token lesbian. The similarities in the backgrounds of many of the authors tend to reinforce stereotypes that do not reflect the complete Jewish-American experience. Simply put, being Jewish means more than eating bagels, playing *dreidel* while secretly coveting Christmas trees, and occasionally inserting Yiddish words into one’s vocabulary.

Being Jewish also means more than feeling Jewish guilt. And Jewish people can’t be the only group that endures guilt—since when did we corner the guilt market? Who’s to say that Asian or WASP guilt can’t be, in its own way, just as chronically aggravating and all-consuming? Many problems with which the essays grapple, like balancing careers and family, are concerns for women of all backgrounds. In Rebecca Goldstein’s essay *Philosophers with Wombs*, for

example, she discusses her struggle to stay productive in her academic career while caring for her two children at home. The essay is poignant, elegantly written, and deals with a significant topic. But there's nothing particularly Jewish about the problem or the essay, other than that it's the author's religion. Jewish women can be feminists without being "Jewish Feminists." (And similarly, they can be against feminism without being "Jewish Anti-Feminists.") True, Jews do deal with their own unique set of issues, but by focusing on Jewish female guilt, the stuff of avoiding *bubbes* and hunting for the proverbial Jewish dreamboat husband, the book in some ways supports the very stereotypes it aims to defy. If Jewish women's experiences are so varied, why does it so often seem to come back to a disapproving

mother and insecurities over looking too Jewish? Just where do we draw the line between "Jewish guilt" and plain old anxiety disorders?

Still, the value of this collection lies in its ability to raise such issues and to be a much-needed forum for modern Jewish girls. It's the year 2006, and we've got more options than any generation before us, but this freedom only brings more questions, often of how to reconcile the gap between what we want to be and what we feel we *should* be. In other words: guilt. My mother's not here, so I'll say it for her: Oy.

Heather Schwedel is a sophomore in the College of Arts and Sciences planning to major in English and Communication. She is a reporter for The Daily Pennsylvanian.