

just entertainment

Gifts from experience

Lesléa Newman writes undeniably Jewish stories — punchy with the rhythm of her grandmothers' speech

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

A Letter to Harvey Milk — Short Stories by Lesléa Newman (Firebrand Books, 1988).

An epigraph by poet Muriel Rukeyser opens the first story in Lesléa Newman's new collection: "To be a Jew in the twentieth century/Is to be offered a gift . . ." In these stories, Newman offers us the gift of Jewish

Books

lesbian experience, sometimes painful, sometimes wry, sometimes clogged with joy. Her mistake is in trying to make it a pretty package.

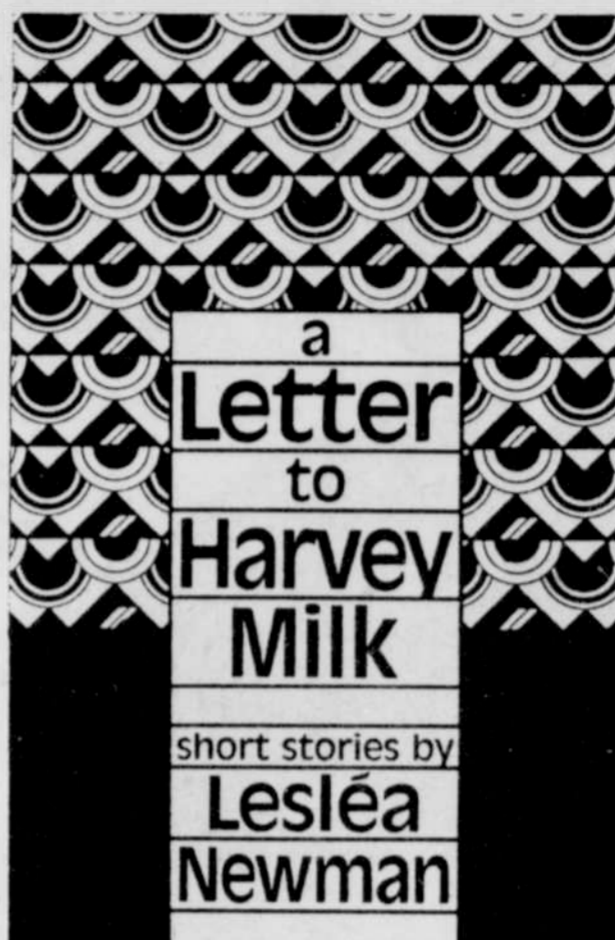
Newman's subjects are tough, grim ones — incest, AIDS, the Holocaust, homophobia. In her stories, a Jewish woman reaches self-knowledge only after years of subtle discrimination; a lesbian couple grapples with one partner's childhood sexual abuse; a student haunted by the Holocaust believes the Nazis are back and hides in her apartment for days; a woman discovers that her college buddy has died from AIDS after spotting his name on a panel of the Names Project quilt. There are moments of truth in these stories, instants of irony, clarity and humor. But with the exception of two stand-out pieces, Newman clutters these moments

with stale imagery, clichéd language and tidy endings that numb the stories' impact.

Newman writes undeniably Jewish stories — punchy with the rhythm of her grandmothers' speech and sprinkled heavily with Yiddish phrases. (A back-of-the-book glossary helps with less familiar words.) In rare, strong moments, Newman's prose is spare and salty, full of the rock and gulp and richness of her roots.

In the opening story, "The Gift," eight-year-old Rachel is furious that her family can't celebrate Christmas. "Rachel is so mad right now that she hates everything about her mother — her scuffy white slippers, her baggy stockings, her flowered housedress, her yellow apron, the shmate on her head, even the knaydlach she is rolling into a perfect ball between her two small hands," Newman writes. She sees with clarity and freshness through the eyes of her child-protagonist. This story, a series of vignettes spotting Rachel at 5, at 14, at 25, at 29, tells a hard truth in hushed, simple tones. It may be autobiographical, but it rings of shared experience — the pain of EveryJewishLesbian in a mostly Protestant, mostly heterosexual society. Rachel suffers discrimination in all its subtle forms, and the story follows her response, from childhood petulance to assimilation and finally to a devoted embrace of her own tradition.

In one scene, a Hispanic man flirts with a 17-year-old Rachel in a gift shop. "No, you don't understand," Rachel says to him. "I'm not Spanish, I'm Jewish."



"No, you are no Jewish," the man answers. "You are too pretty for Jewish. You speak Spanish, yes?"

At the age of 20, Rachel attempts to fit in with her college roommates by telling them she only "used to be" Jewish. In one of the most expressive and tangible moments of the story, she locks herself in a dormitory bathroom with three potato latkes given to her by a Jewish shopkeeper. "Rachel eats the latkes ravenously, then licks her fingers greedily, searching the tin foil for any stray crumbs she may have left behind." In this single line, Newman gets at the heart of Rachel's struggle to assimilate — she is starved for Jewish tradition and desperate to hide that hunger from the world.

By the story's end, Rachel has flourished into the full meaning of Rukeyser's epigraph: in the synagogue, on Rosh Hashana, she "feels her heart swelling inside her chest . . . Rachel has come home." The story leaves us with a fitting emotional foreground for the book — the joy, warmth and sense of homecoming Newman conveys simply by writing as who she is, from what she knows.

Ironically, the best piece of the collection is the title story, in which Newman's own voice remains hidden. "A Letter to Harvey Milk," narrated by a retired Jewish butcher, shows Newman's grasp of truth not as a neatly wrapped package, but as a complex, crotchety thing, which answers our questions only with deeper questions.

The narrator of this story, Harry Weinberg, lives in San Francisco. He used to own a butcher shop in the Castro, where Harvey Milk had his camera shop and launched his political career. Weinberg and Milk became friends. Now Milk is dead, and Weinberg attends a writing class at the local senior center. The teacher, a Jewish lesbian of about 30, urges her elderly students to write about their lives. But Weinberg shows that telling the stories, unearthing the past, is a mixed gift. His memory is clear, his writing blunt and vivid; he is able to tell stories he can no longer bear to hear.

"These stories are like a knife in my heart," he writes. "Teacher, I want you should have my notebook. It doesn't have nice stories in it. . . . A bestseller it ain't, I guarantee. Maybe you'll put it in a book someday, the world shouldn't forget."

"A Letter to Harvey Milk" won second place in the 1987 Raymond Carver Short Story Contest. It stands out as an example of how good Newman's prose can be when she shows detail not through cliché but through specific images and allows the truth to be as thorny, complex and unattractive as it truly is.

In short stories, each word bears a critical weight. To carry clout in 20 pages or less, short stories must have a taut, wound-up rhythm, clear pacing and judicious use of detail. In Newman's stories, details often distract rather than notching the piece together. Sometimes, close to a moment of originality or insight, she tosses in a cliché that blocks our clear view, muddies the epiphany. A closeted lesbian teacher "stuck out like a sore thumb"; a young girl wishes for "rose-colored glasses" to relieve the grayness of her grandmother's life. Worn phrases like these can't tell us anything new.

A story called "Only a Phase" has a promising premise — that the life of a lesbian who is just coming out and the life of her angry, shocked mother hold surprising parallels. But Newman uses the trick until we're numb from it, exploiting the gimmick to predictable ends. Mom talks to her dog in the same way daughter talks to her cat. Mom fixes coffee and, with parallel pacing and language, daughter brews a cup of herbal tea. By the end, the technique speaks louder than the characters.

Two of the most interesting characters, Gloria and Ellen, enact "The Best Revenge," a story that appeared in different form in *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*. Gloria is an obsessive list-maker, scribbling in her journal at every spare moment. Her partner, Ellen, is an incest survivor, a karate blue-belt who never cries if she can help it. But Newman treats the incest theme too lightly, giving the story sit-com pacing and an ending as neat as new shoes. Her characters, and the reader, deserve a less tidy, more realistic send-off.

It's clear that Newman wants us not to feel defeated by life's traumas and inequities, to see that her characters — and, by implication, our friends and ourselves — can triumph finally with their fierce love for each other, for their heritage, for life itself. This is the message of the final story, "The World to Come," an allegorical scene of camaraderie and peace. It is intended to be a bookend for the collection, a vision of the future just as "The Gift," the first story, traced its protagonist's past. But "The World to Come" leaves an image that feels shallow rather than hopeful.

The narrator, dreaming of a circle of Jewish heroines, surrounded in reality by a circle of friends in her apartment, says, "As I slowly recognized the smiling faces of my friends, I realized the world to come and the world we live in are not always so different after all."

It's a nice thought. But if we have read Newman's stories with our eyes open to the injustice as well as the joy, we are not convinced.

GALAXY ENTERTAINMENT PRESENTS

SWEET HONEY IN THE ROCK

with CHATA ADDY & KPUNI ADDY
african dance and drumming

September 9 • 8PM • Silva Theatre, Hult Center, Eugene

TICKETS \$14.00

available at: all Hult Center ticket outlets, Mother Kali's, Eugene

Women's Place Bookstore, Portland

A BENEFIT FOR L.C.P.

For information call 476-7603

