

Dear Peg,

In response to your request for an evaluation of David Roskies' *THE LOST ART OF YIDDISH STORYTELLING*, I am pleased to offer you the following.

In my view, Roskies has produced an unusually good book -- learned, well written, colorful, and consistently engaging. It is an authoritative study of its subject and will, I am quite certain, immediately establish itself as the major treatment of its subject. The book is, at one and the same time, a significant contribution to the literary history of the Jews in the modern period (clarifying, as it does, the major traditions of Yiddish storytelling) and, in addition, is an interesting and solid contribution to Jewish cultural history (defining, as it does, many of the main lines and significant moments of Yiddish-speaking popular culture in Russia, Poland, Germany, Israel, and the United States). Inasmuch as it is a book written with a good deal of personal engagement, it is also something of a personal testament. Put these three together and you have a winning book.

Following his first chapter (about which more below) Roskies begins his study proper with an important essay on the origins of Yiddish narrative, which is largely given over to a detailed treatment of the tales of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, and concludes with a chapter on Yiddish storytelling after the Holocaust. In between are comprehensive and often brilliantly clarifying chapters on major and minor figures within the tradition of Yiddish storytelling (he adds one chapter as well on Yiddish popular song). These chapters proceed by interweaving biographical, historical, and cultural material of an exceedingly rich kind. The result is literary scholarship of a high order and cultural criticism of a most compelling kind.

Roskies writes with both knowledge and verve, so that his individual chapters are a pleasure to read, informed as they are by both an intimate connection to Yiddish literary and popular culture and a great affection for much of this culture at its deepest. The prose is almost always clear and is mostly happily unburdened by the trendy catchphrases of current academic jargon. Roskies is learned and carries his learning with ease and without ostentation. He is also a lively writer, who knows how to bring his subject off the page in interesting and often vivacious ways. These qualities should make his book accessible to a broad audience of readers and not restrict its appeal only to specialists. The latter will learn from it, to be sure, for there is a great wealth of knowledge here for professional Yiddishists and a challenging

argument about how Yiddish narrative has been composed, transmitted, and received. But beyond producing a book that is certain to be eagerly taken up and debated by his colleagues in the world of Yiddish literary scholarship, Roskies has succeeded, I believe, in telling a story about Yiddish storytelling that should be of interest to people in Jewish Studies in general, in modern literary studies, and also to some extent in cultural studies. Add to these a potentially sizable number of readers in the educated Jewish community at large, and you should have no trouble winning an appreciative audience for this book.

As much as I like it (and you can tell from the foregoing that I like it a lot), Roskies could make an already excellent book still better if he would reconsider a few things. These are all relatively minor and in no case call for significant rewriting of the manuscript. Here are my few criticisms and suggestions for change:

1. The opening chapter, "The Aleph Bet of Creative Betrayal," is interesting but, in my view, somewhat self-indulgent and not really appropriate for the major scholarly study that follows. Much of it is too topical, even journalistic, and establishes the wrong tone for the chapters that are to come. I would keep the first three pages (up to and including the first full paragraph on p. 3), drop everything that follows on pp. 3-5 (up to the final paragraph on p. 5), pick up with p. 5 at the bottom and continue with the material on pp. 5 (bottom paragraph) - 12, then eliminate pp. 13-36 in their entirety, and conclude with pp. 37-39.

2. I find "creative betrayal" a far less helpful critical concept than Roskies does, and if I were he, I would greatly mute its usage in this book. As I mentioned above, I admire the prose of this study for its lucidity, its expository force, and its general eschewing of academic jargon. The one instance in which the author goes against the attractiveness of his own prose has to do with his penchant for recycling the term "creative betrayal" through his manuscript. In my reading of it, the book's descriptive power and analytical precision are effectively wrought without recourse to jargon phrases like "creative betrayal." I would drop the formula myself or at least refrain from introducing it as often as Roskies does. It's a reductive term and doesn't begin to do justice to the complexities of the author's own thinking and feeling about his subject.

3. While I admire the writing of this book a lot, there are times when the manuscript unfolds at a very leisurely pace and employs a prose that may be a bit too light and loose for a scholarly study. Chapter 2, for instance, begins with several pages about storytelling programs at the 92nd Street Y in New York that are pleasant enough to read but that may be more suitable for magazine writing than for a serious study published by the Harvard University Press. These pages, in my view, could either be cut outright or greatly condensed. There are other similar instances elsewhere. (I am pointing to a minor problem, not a major one by any means; but the manuscript would profit from some cutting here and there.)

4. The book is a rich one and deserves a fuller conclusion than the author provides. I do not necessarily recommend a whole concluding chapter, but the couple of pages at the end of chapter 10 did not give me the sense that the author had brought his study to its natural close.

Apart from these few criticisms and suggestions for change, I have nothing to add but praise. I think THE ART OF YIDDISH STORYTELLING is a wonderful book and will make a great addition to your list. Indeed, I expect it will be recognized as an outstanding contribution to modern Jewish literary and cultural studies and will probably walk off with at least one coveted prize for distinguished scholarship in its field. If, for some reason that I honestly cannot imagine, you decide not to publish the book (but why in the world would you forego the chance?) let me know, and I will be happy to include it immediately on our own list -- proudly and profitably, I expect.