

How to Make a Life

Florence Reiss Kraut

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How to Make a Life is a sharp historical novel whose panoptic view of family relationships makes its secrets, estrangements, and reconciliations satisfying.

In Florence Reiss Kraut's arresting multigenerational novel *How to Make a Life*, a family of Jewish emigrants experiences trauma.

In 1905, most of Chaya's family is killed in a pogrom. She flees Ukraine and heads to a Brooklyn tenement, renaming herself Ida; her surviving daughters become Bessie and Fanny. When Fanny dies on Bessie's watch, the event provokes guilt. Chapters alternate between the characters from the 1930s through the 2010s, subtle in showing how early events shaped Bessie and her descendants.

The narrative's early sections focus on Bessie and her husband's problems with their eldest daughter, Ruby, a manic depressive. Her frightening episodes impact everyone, including her younger sister, Jenny, who looks after her out of duty, and her brother Morris and sisters Irene and Faye, who feel the emotional fallout. The cruel toll of their caregiving is shared in clear terms. In a noteworthy contrast from the otherwise omnisciently narrated text, Ruby's own account of her illness is visceral and intimate.

As their clear passions and sometimes misguided intentions are revealed, the Weissman clan emerges as an average family whose elders impart stories and whose children claim their own ways, as occurs when a daughter announces that her future husband is Catholic and feels "that she had betrayed something." Period details of wartime and people's dress capture the eras' nostalgia and pain. Milestones, including love, marriage, and death, are used to advance the plot.

Because the large cast includes spouses and children, individual growth is often downplayed in favor of the overarching family saga. The intermittent arrangement of people's stories, wherein swathes of time pass before characters are reintroduced again, results in events that flash by as highlight reels, or that linger unresolved. Normal illnesses and deaths are preserved as sudden and dramatic. The story is most realistic when it comes to handling aging: spouses spare each other harsh truths, and a former policeman protects his wife from a would-be assailant.

Some of the book's individual chapters are so taut, poignant, and well-concluded that they read like independent stories with their own self-contained arcs. These include "Irene 1964," in which an unexpected death makes Irene lose interest in painting, secure new resolve, and form a connection to a young man's suffering; and "Sarah 1969," in which a chance meeting at Woodstock morphs into love. But other chapters are rushed, including one that focuses on three sisters who take a trip to India, exacerbating their frustrations with each other.

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KAREN RIGBY (December 14, 2020)

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