



Lily of the Valley: An American Jewish Journey

Xianna Michaels

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Lily of the Valley is an elegantly bound poetic volume that celebrates the varied inheritances of Jewish American women with poignancy.

Lily of the Valley is Xianna Michaels's graceful and affecting poetic saga, the story of five generations of Jewish American women navigating the promises of the New World.

The volume opens on a pogrom that rips through a shtetl, rending families irrevocably. Young Laili is sent with her sister Basya to New York, with the hope that they'll be able to enjoy more freedoms there. Laili's name is anglicized by Ellis Island officials; now known as "Lily," she finds work in a sweatshop sewing clothing. As she sews, she dreams of an easier life for her children, preferably in the golden valleys of the West.

Though tragedies continue to fall upon her family—a shop fire kills one matriarch; a son abandons his tradition and family to pursue life on his own; a daughter returns to Europe, too near to the Holocaust for safety—so, too, do the generations that follow Lily find their fortunes in America increasing. They become business owners, college graduates, parents, and the pursuers of old family dreams. Their Judaism ebbs and flows in proportion to the challenges they face—work on Shabbat gives way to the avoidance of the mikveh, compromises are made with the observance of mitzvot, especially around kashrut. Yet through it all, they maintain a sense of connection to their tradition, and to the family members who sacrificed so much to provide them with opportunities.

Lily of the Valley is written in English sestet form, a rhyme scheme that initially requires some getting used to; the violence of the opening pogrom fits uneasily with the apparent jauntiness of the poetic formula. Conjunctions are employed a bit too freely, and not every end rhyme is a comfortable fit. Related misgivings give way beneath the charm of Michaels's verses, though. These lines breathe life into the women they focus on: the first Lily is a determined dreamer, her daughter Molly a believer, *her* daughter Lily a stylish girl who dusts off family aspirations. Each woman, in the limited lines allotted to her, is fleshed out well, particularly in relation to the decisions she makes around religious observance.

The intrafamily loyalty and support conveyed throughout *Lily of the Valley* is inspirational without being cloying, and the book moves from generation to generation with significant emotional prowess. This book is impressive for the balances it strikes: managing to be feminist, even as Lily's great-granddaughter moves back toward observance, to the surprised delight of her nonobservant family; achieving a well-rounded picture of Jewish American history, though in the span of a few stanzas each on just fifty pages. The end result is a project certain to woo readers with its loveliness. Its beautiful, classic packaging, paired with the delicate, scene-setting illustrations that run throughout, make the project an all the more likely candidate for family treasure status.

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MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (February 10, 2016)

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