Introduction to the New Edition of
Raisins and Almonds

by Fredelle Bruser Maynard

L'auteure discute des expériences qui ont joué un rôle dans la formation de son identité en tant que femme juive et, subéquemment, de l'influence de ces expériences sur son écriture.

The Jewishness which I was expected to cherish consisted of a sentimental amalgam—the figures of my bubeh and zaydeh, Sholem Aleichem's stories, blintzes and knishes, a roster of great-men-who-were-Jewish, and a vague sense of specialness.

This book changed my life. Everything I had written about in Raisins and Almonds led me irresistibly to confront the mystery that haunts us all: Who am I? In my case, the focus narrowed to a question I had often pondered and as often set aside: What is it, to be a Jew?

In the small towns of western Canada during the 1920s and 1930s Jewishness imposed, if not a burden, at least a considerable constraint. I felt excluded from the world of playmates, their Sunday schools and family celebrations, their lusty singing of "Onward Christian Soldiers," and their prayers to gentle Jesus meek and mild. Furthermore, my Jewishness had little positive content. My friend Bernice, child of Lutheran parents, knew very well what it meant to be a Christian; she attended church regularly and belonged to a solid, coherent religious community. My parents, not religious. My mother, the rebel in her orthodoxy family, was a cheerful agnostic; my father, once a yeshiva student, remained quietly attached to his Judaism but kept it, in effect, in the bureau drawer along with the tallis and phylacteries which accompanied our wandering across the prairies. I knew nothing of the Hebrew religion. Apart from a few prayers and the Aleph Beis Gimel, the alphabet, I knew no Hebrew; I possessed a smattering of Yiddish, fragmentary and ungrammatical. As for the religious rituals and celebrations of Jewish life, those I experienced chiefly on visits with observing relatives. As a child I never attended a bar mitzvah, never saw a succah. I first heard Kol Nidre sung in a synagogue when I was 50. So the Jewishness which I was expected to cherish consisted largely of a sentimental amalgam—the figures of my bubeh and zaydeh (grandmother/grandfather) in their old country clothes, Sholem Aleichem's stories, blintzes and knishes, a roster of great-men-who-were-Jewish (Einstein, Menuhin, Horowitz), and a vague sense of specialness. Jews, I gathered, were smarter, more sensitive, more talented, morally superior. But they certainly had a hard time on the playground.

Even academically my Jewishness proved a liability. Weeks before grade eleven commencement exercises the principal called me in to discuss, delicately but firmly, the matter of prizes. "Let's see, now," he said. "Strictly speaking—I mean as far as marks go—you've won the English prize and the French and Latin prize and the math prize. "That's right," I said, implacable, having just an uneasy sense of where this conversation was headed. "Well," he said, "I think it would be a good idea for you to relinquish the math prize to John Hill. You don't need it. You're going on in English. He's taking math." "But I won it," I said. "Fredelle, we've got half a dozen Jews in a school of eight hundred," Mr. Jewitt said. "If a Jew takes all the prizes, that's bound to create ... bad feeling. Do you see my point?" John Hill got his prize.

Winnipeg in 1938, the year I entered the University of Manitoba, was not hospitable to Jews. The dominant culture was Anglo-Scots; the doings of the Richardsosns, Sellerses, and Chowns filled the Free Press. Jews and gentiles had separate fraternities and sororities. Jews were not admitted to the prestigious Winter Club, and were refused cottages at Grand Beach. They could not work in banks or trust companies or in the major department stores; they could not rent offices in the Medical Arts Building. The medical school maintained a strict Jewish quota. Some resorts posted signs that read GENTILES ONLY or, rather less friendly, NO JEWS OR DOGS ALLOWED. When I graduated from the University of Manitoba and applied to Toronto, I asked several of my old teachers to write letters of recommendation on my behalf. "Though she is Jewish," one letter ended, "she is quite refined and presents a good appearance."

Treatment like this was hard on all Jews, no question. But it must have been less crushing to those of my friends whose Jewishness was an active, positive force—the Peretz school graduates, the Zionists, the sons and daughters of Rosh Pina members. For me, so ambiguous, so ill-defined a Jew, anti-Semitism was peculiarly painful. I enjoyed all the disadvantages of Jewishness without, I felt, compensating advantages.

I had grown up in schoolrooms presided over by our gracious king, our lovely queen; I knew that Britannia ruled the waves. I lived by language—the language of Shakespeare, not of Peretz and Mendele Moicher Sforim and Sholom Alech. My philosophers were Hume, Ruskin, Pater, Bertrand Russell, Roger Fry. My mythology was Greek, my culture British. So I married the purest possible variety of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant: an Englishman with an upper-class accent, son of missionary parents.
The day after my wedding, I ordered stationery engraved Mrs. Max Singleton Maynard. A foolproof disguise.

At home we stayed clear of dangerous subjects and learned to talk in code. “This food is too rich” (from my husband) meant “You know I don’t like Jewish cooking.” “I’m uncomfortable with those people” (from me) translated as “They’re anti-Semites.” I have thought a lot over the years about the difficulties of intermarriage. It seems to me that the most explosive areas involve style rather than belief. I was not attached to the Jewish religion; my husband was not a believing Christian. But my world view, what I found funny or sad, my tastes in food and dress, my feeling about family, my attitudes toward sex and sports and celebration were all profoundly Jewish. My natural style was earthy, demonstrative, extravagant; Max’s was formal, cool. And these are things you cannot change—or change only at great cost.

Christmas has always been for me a season of mixed emotions. As a child, limited to the comparatively chaste joys of Hanukah, I longed for Christmas; as Mrs. Max Singleton Maynard, with a tree and a wreath on my door, I felt an impostor if not a traitor. “Christmas, when I was a child, was the season of bitterness…” This is how I began to write a story called “Jewish Christmas,” the title a deliberate paradox, and how, recalling my childhood and bedtime, I heard an almost forgotten melody: L’cho dodi liknas kaloh, Welcome to the bride!

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Fredelle Bruser Maynard was a teacher, magazine writer, TV host, and author of child-rearing books. Her two books of memoirs are Raisins and Almonds and The Tree of Life.

1A school of advanced Jewish study.
2Small, square leather boxes containing slips of vellum, on which are written portions of the Mosaic Law, worn one on the head, another on the left arm, by orthodox and conservative Jewish men at prayer.
3The prayer that is sung at the beginning of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, the most sacred day of the Jewish year.