

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, subseq-
quemment, 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 were not religious. My mother, the rebel in her orthodox family, was a cheerful agnostic; my father, once a *yeshiva*¹ student, remained quietly attached to his Judaism but kept it, in effect, in the bureau drawer along with the *tallis* and phylacteries² 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*³ 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 Richardsons, 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 Mocher Sforim and Sholem Asch. 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 my family, I set my foot on the path that led out of the gentile world, back home.

"Jewish Christmas" became the nucleus of a group of stories-memories about the experience of growing up Jewish and alien in the small towns of the Canadian prairies. I called the collection *Raisins and Almonds* after the lovely wistful lullaby my father sang through years of bedtimes. Though I ended the book with what I meant to be an affirmation of my chosen life, a friend who knows me well has since said, "When I read it, I thought you were sending out a call for rescue." In the event, it seems to have worked that way.

Late in 1972 I returned to Durham from a book promotion tour and realized that my marriage had ended. I thought of going back to Canada; I was still emotionally and legally Canadian. But where? Home was no longer Winnipeg or Toronto, and surely not Birch Hills, Saskatchewan. I contemplated an uncertain future.

Then, shortly after my divorce, I received a curious phone call. A voice I had never heard said, "Are you Fredelle Bruser?" No one had called me that—my baby name, my real name—for almost 50 years. "Well," the voice continued, very English, very assured, "I've just read your book. This is Sydney Bacon of Toronto." The manner implied *of course you remember me*. I said, "Who?" Actually I knew. Decades earlier, Sydney Bacon had courted my beautiful older sister; I remembered her account of a dashing, intellectual English Jew. Once she wrote, "Sydney is mad about Pushkin. Tell me everything you know about Pushkin." Of course I wouldn't tell her a thing. In time—maybe because she didn't know about

Pushkin—Sydney Bacon vanished from her life. Now here he was, obviously calling the wrong girl. I explained it was my sister he'd known, and my book he'd read. He didn't hang up. Cautiously we explored new ground. After that, he phoned nightly. One day he said, "If you're ever in Toronto, I'd like to take you to dinner." "I'm not going to Toronto," I said. "What a pity you're never in Durham." "Who says I'm not?" he said. So I invited him to dinner at my house. We met, nervous strangers, at an airport limousine stop. We were both in disguise—I as a gray-haired matron, overweight and stiffly dressed, he as a middle-aged businessman with briefcase. At the dinner table, he politely sampled the gourmet creations I'd laboured over—the paté and stuffed mushrooms, the salmon mousse. He tried the white wine and registered shock. (Much later I discovered he likes a purple grapey flavour—and in food, a peasant heartiness.) He talked about the import business, I talked about writing. Disaster loomed. And then, helping me clear the still-laden dinner plates, Sydney Bacon of Toronto did something extraordinary. He put his hands on my shoulders and said, "I'm puzzled. I heard your voice in the book. The woman I see is different. *Where are you?*" When I began to cry, he reached into his briefcase. As fairy tale heroes always do, he had brought three gifts. A record of the cantor Yossele Rosenblatt singing *Kol Nidre*. A set of Kiddush cups engraved *L'Chaim!* (To Life!) An Israeli music box crowned by the figure of a woman blessing the Sabbath candles. I turned the key and heard an almost forgotten melody: *L'cho dodi likras 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.