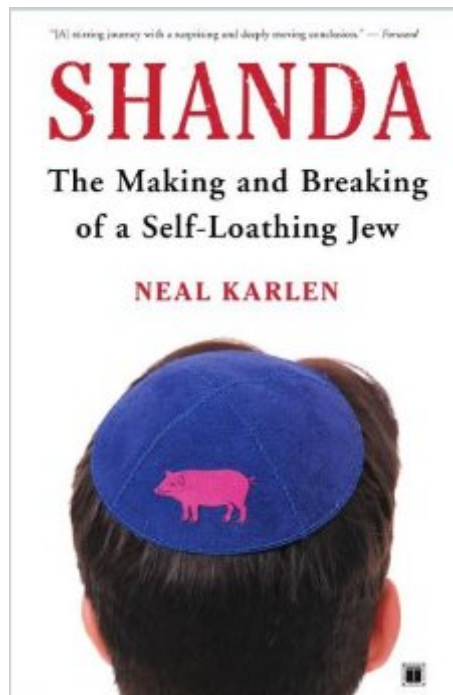


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Shanda: The Making And Breaking Of A Self-Loathing Jew



Synopsis

Early in his memoir, Neal Karlen confesses, "I love Judaism. It's Jews I can't stand." What he means is that he hates the parochialism, the whole Seinfeld of the Jews he knows from New York to Los Angeles, and he can't stand the thought of being identified as one of them. Frustrated and embarrassed, Karlen stops looking for the Jewish enclave that fits him, and he simply rejects Judaism. And then one day, he goes too far: he marries a WASP. The marriage is doomed. Shanda -- the Yiddish word for "shame" -- is the story of Karlen's journey back to his Jewish roots, his faith, and his own self. His guide is an unlikely one: Rabbi Manis Friedman, the renowned Hasidic scholar. With Rabbi Friedman's tutelage and friendship, Karlen rekindles his Jewish spirit and begins to ask the questions that so many modern, assimilated Jews grapple with: How do we bring meaning to our Jewish practice? Where is the line between Jewish and too Jewish? Can you believe in Judaism even if you don't believe in God? As Karlen is led up the mountain to find these answers, Shanda offers a stunning and illuminating view from the top.

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Customer Reviews

I've never read anything like "Shanda." Is it meta-memoir, spiritual quest by way of Socrates, bittersweet sketch of Minneapolis' inner life, updated Lenny Bruce routine, erudite Jewish-American history (Sandy Koufax, Philip Roth, Abbie Hoffman, and all), or essential guidebook for anyone alienated from his family, city, and faith -- not to mention himself? All of the above, which is quite a feat on Neal Karlen's part. Karlen has covered plenty of subjects in his long journalism career, from

Henny Youngman to punk rock to Prince to Bill Murray and the St. Paul Saints. Now it seems as though all those years of observation of other conflicted characters were leading up to this: a searingly honest self-examination -- which somehow avoids becoming maudlin or self-indulgent -- in the vein of the classical philosophers. Or, more to the point, of the rabbis Karlen consults (and befriends) in his hunger for religious meaning and a release from his paralyzing doubt about Jewishness and masculinity. Given the serious subject, it helps a lot that Karlen's endlessly inventive wit is on display here, but the book isn't "Seinfeld," for all its riffs. This is the machine of a soul at work, and it took guts and skill to show it to us so transparently. Karlen is an immensely appealing character who gives up insulting himself for a humility he can live with -- one that's reverent yet still quirkily skeptical. And when he does break through in moments of delighted pride, the reader will be delighted in turn. Highly recommended for everyone who's still searching, whatever your religion.

Any book which starts with a pork sandwich binge and ends with a Bat Mitzvah has got to be good! All kidding aside, Mr. Karlen knows from contradictions, and they are all here: his interfaith marriage, good laughter versus schtick, learning to listen instead of talk, limitations of the Torah and the gifts, obsession with history while living in modern America, honoring his parents and rebelling against them, and so on. Mr. Karlen speaks of longing to attain a 'Yiddishe hartz', a warm Jewish heart. And this is exactly what he achieves through struggle, study and sometimes outrageous humor. Whether he was ever really a 'shanda' could be debated, but by the end of this book he is all the mensch he could ever have hoped to be, good to his friends, his family, Rabbi Friedman and himself. I found this book a pleasure to read and a perfect gift for family members (especially younger ones) who are compelled but confused about Judaism. Mr. Karlen doesn't preach or pretend to be perfect but tells an honest story that's very entertaining into the bargain.

"Shanda" as Neal Karlin explains in his fascinating, irreverent, humorous and touchingly poignant new book of the same name means 'shame' as in 'you're a shanda to the Jewish people.' It is Karlin's own deeply rooted and misplaced shame at being a Jew that forms the backdrop for the book in which he deftly takes the reader with him on his odyssey of transformation from self-loathing to self-discovery. Karlin's metamorphosis is hugely aided and abetted by Rabbi Manis Friedman, an unlikely Merlin, with his chest length white beard, long black frock and black hat; the self described "Hasid that everyone likes." When we first meet Karlin, who grew up in a traditional Conservative Jewish home in Minneapolis, he has rejected all the tenets of Judaism, right down to marrying the

proverbial "shiksa", the blonde, gentile girl who is "every Jewish mother's nightmare." The marriage is a non-starter and quickly ends in divorce, leaving Karlin with the uneasy feeling that he brought shame on his family for naught. "It was a shanda for me. By exiling myself from my own tribe and lusting to be anyone, anything else at all, I'd in fact become nothing." It is at this point in Karlin's downward spiral that he has a chance encounter with Rabbi Friedman on a flight from Los Angeles to Minneapolis; although he would later learn that in Judaism there are no 'chance' encounters, there is only Divine Providence. "When I sat down next to a Hasidic rabbi, I did not know at the time that I would have one of the most mind-quaking revelations of my life. I didn't see G-d, but I began, for the first time in memory to see myself. Do the Hasidim believe in reincarnation? I asked. He looked at me and smiled. I believe you can be reincarnated in your own lifetime." And thus began the relationship between the 'odd couple' - the Jew who was obsessed with the horrors of the Holocaust, but refused to identify with the joy of Judaism and the kindly, wise, witty and reticent Hasidic rabbi who only talked when it was necessary to jolt Karlin's neshama, his Jewish soul, into high gear. Karlin is a gifted writer who never talks down to his readers even when employing the dozens of Yiddishisms that are disbursed throughout the book like so many juicy tidbits that make the reading of it ever more delightful. "A mentsch is nebekh nit mer vi a mentsch, un amol, dos oykh nit." A person is only a person -and sometimes not even that. Peppered also throughout the book is the author's prodigious repertoire of Henny Youngman one-liners; self deprecating jokes that are Karlin's trademark and his nemesis. "Why do Jewish men die before their wives? Because they want to." The book is written over the course of a year, during which Karlin and Rabbi Friedman meet regularly for schmoozing, learning and noshing. Friedman seems to spin a mystical web, drawing Karlin inexorably closer to his father, his grandfather and his people until at long last he is comfortable in his own skin. "The purpose of life" Friedman says, is "the absolute conviction that when G-d creates human beings, He doesn't do it in masses. The point is that we are individuals, and that we are able to do the Mitzvot, (commandments) for G-d in our own way, the best we can." And that's a message everyone can take to heart.

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