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Holy Unexpected: My New Life As A Jew



Synopsis

Raised a born-again agnostic, Robin Chotzinoff had no interest in religion and practically no experience in it; until she turned forty. When she suddenly discovered a belief in God, she had no idea what to do next. In *Holy Unexpected* she describes her journey from a privileged New York childhood through years of unhappiness, drugs, and drift. She investigates what she believed in before she believed in God (the healing power of junk food, music, psychopharmacology), and how a happy marriage impelled her toward a higher power. When she discovers that Judaism embraces arguing with God, hot sex, and acts as opposed to beliefs, she embarks on a journey to reconstruct her Jewish heritage and forge a relationship with her faith. Robin wrestles with the meaning of Torah, discovers how to keep the Sabbath and still go to Walmart for duct tape, and learns to pray while snowboarding. But her real education in the meaning of Judaism occurs as she rides the ups and downs of day-to-day life, and prepares both for her bat mitzvah and for her father's death. Writing with enormous humor and intimacy, Chotzinoff takes readers on an unexpected religious journey lit by humor and grace.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. The cadence of every conversion narrative is one of lost-and-found, and this edgy memoir by Chotzinoff, a freelance writer and convert to Judaism, does not disappoint. We learn of her rarefied and decidedly secular New York childhood, where music and free-flowing liquor framed intellectual discussions late into the night. This led to a wandering adolescence and young

adulthood marked by drugs, sexual promiscuity, depression and binge eating. But Chotzinoff's conversion narrative eschews the traditional sudden epiphany for a gradual, postmodern transformation; when she discovers Judaism at an eclectic Denver synagogue, the change comes across less as a bolt of lightning than a long-desired and tentative homecoming. Her story is also refreshingly devoid of the usual convert's fervor—she considers herself observant, but does not strive to keep every jot and tittle of halakah. As she learns to quilt, make latkes (the low-fat version just won't cut it, she discovers) and keep Shabbat, Chotzinoff uncovers herself anew in the rigors of an ancient faith. Her writing is acerbically funny and generally devoid of sentimentality, which makes the memoir's more powerful moments—such as the haunting beauty of her daughter's bat mitzvah—unexpectedly emotional. (Aug.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Chotzinoff was born a Jew in a nonobservant--no, an atheist--family whose credo (imagine a sarcastic shrug) was, "Religion--who needs it?" Apparently, the award-winning Denver columnist did, and here is her engaging, enjoyable account of the transformation involved. At 40, Chotzinoff found in a happy marriage the path to a higher power and embraced Judaism. After a hippie-ish life of drugs and booze--interviewing Frank Zappa along the way and playing keyboards with some Denver bands--she sought stability and married a carpenter, "bought a house, grew tomatoes." The birth of a daughter, a divorce, and a second marriage followed, and she finally found a congregation in the Yellow Pages. In the wake of a four-hour service that left her butt numb but her brain alert, she became engrossed in the concept of the Jewish New Year and the paradox that no two Jews agree on how to conduct the 10-day interval until Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. However, "I was sitting among my own people for a change." Whitney ScottCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

I picked up this book because I was attracted by the cover. I don't read a lot of "narratives" but Robin was able to combine a juicy story and lots of factual information about Judaism, Denver, and her life so it kept all the areas of my brain highly entertained. She skips around a lot and goes on tangents in the chapters - but in a way that's highly enjoyable and keeps you focused on her thought process. I liked that she didn't continuously focus on herself, she would jump out of her own story and go on a tangent about another interesting individual. I'm a slow reader, but I couldn't put this down. I knocked it off much quicker than other books I've read lately. I loved that I had no idea where the book was going and what was going to happen. I wish I had have read this before my trip

to Denver two weeks ago, otherwise I would have tried to find the places (Judaica stores) she talks about. Oh, and I found a few editorial mistakes. Sometimes she would explain things twice, like how Rabbi Jamie was highed at the new Rabbi for her shul, it was sort of like having a conversation with an Alzheimer's patient, I just smiled and kept reading. But other than that, it was very well written.

Religious awakening as the basis of a memoir presents certain difficulties, particularly in our New Age world corrupted by trendy enlightenment and celebrity seers. But Robin Chotzinoff avoids any touchy-feely riffs in this witty, engaging account of how she, the product of a quirky and privileged yet ultimately dysfunctional upbringing in New York, embraced the spirituality underpinning her Jewish heritage. Her journey, punctuated by forays into sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll (not to mention binging on Oreos and the occasional obsessive romance), brings her to a synagogue in a Colorado mountain town, where first her daughter and then she adopt Judaism at their respective bat mitzvahs. Guided in her training by fellow author and congregant Joanne Greenberg ("I Never Promised You a Rose Garden"), whose practical wisdom is neatly juxtaposed with the wisecracks of Chotzinoff's ailing father (a onetime journalist and lifelong atheist and bon vivant), Chotzinoff delivers her tale of conversion in a funny, self-deprecating, yet thoroughly self-aware manner that takes faith off a pedestal and puts it -- where else? -- on the Sabbath table, in the conjugal bed, and, finally and triumphantly, in the author's weary yet resilient heart.

Nobody plans to stumble across God in an unexpected place, least of all someone who doesn't believe in God at all. But when writer Robin Chotzinoff realized 40 years into her life that she simply wasn't a very convincing atheist, there were no thunderclaps, just a warm winter rain, no cyclone but a soft Chinook wind. God was inside her, where she least expected to find him. Chotzinoff's "Holy Unexpected: My New Life as a Jew" is one woman's religious journey, but without the proselytizing or solemn moralizing. In fact, it's just about what you might expect from the daughter of a Catholic mother and a Jewish father who didn't put much stock in God: Not irreverent, but certainly not somber. It's a story about a journey as much as a destination. Chotzinoff's mid-life spiritual awakening is alternately tender and surprisingly funny. A gifted writer, reporter and dreamer with two previous nonfiction books and numerous articles, she gracefully draws meaning from simple moments. A childhood debate over the relative importance of being Hercules vs. Jesus. The propriety of praying while snowboarding. How to observe the Sabbath on Saturday but still go to Wal-Mart for duct tape. Resting her head on her dead father's arm moments after his last breath. You needn't speak Yiddish to understand exactly what's in her heart. "Holy Unexpected" is also

populated with unique characters from the author's life who illustrate the kaleidoscopic spectrum of religious exploration, from faithless to faithful. It's a memoir, but there's little arrogance or ego on display. The sensitivity of this memoir is in its cast as much as its poetic rendering of an ancient faith, race, culture or whatever you believe Judaism to be. And at a time when Jewishness lies deep in the heart of the heart of a great conflict that's not-so-casually been labeled World War III, "Holy Unexpected" slices through the frustrating dialectics, obscure and misinterpreted ideologies, the wailing walls of prejudice, and fanatic manifestos fired like Katyushas from an increasingly radicalized Middle East. Chotzinoff's personal story is a different kind of exodus, a journey from rootlessness to belonging that many of us - Jewish, Christian or Muslim - make in our lives.

If you have not yet read any of Chotzinoff's books, you should. She tells a serious story (religious transformation) with wit and makes any reader comfortable to read it. My father, like Robin's, is a 'devout atheist.' I connected with this book. She writes about tracing her Jewish ancestry, watching her daughters and husband become Jewish, and watching her father die, all the while letting us in on her inner thoughts of why she is converting. She's humble about this journey and doesn't make the reader feel like they have to conform. But, by the end of it, you'll be leaning more towards Judaism than you were before. Great book and smooth read.

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