

# The Canadian Jewish News



## THE PHOEBE MALTZ BOVY READER (VOL. 1)

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# Greetings from Phoebe Maltz Bovy—a new senior editor at The Canadian Jewish News

**M**ontreal 1920: An extroverted Jewish girl is born, the youngest of many children. She went to an elementary school where she learned about Jesus—but she didn't learn French.

As an adult, she met a New Yorker on vacation and married him approximately five minutes later.

She moved to Brooklyn, where she would raise two daughters—my mother one of them—but never acquire American citizenship, because she preferred to remain Canadian.

Was she holding out hope of an eventual return? Baba never repatriated, but things have a way of coming full circle.

I'm not a pushcart peddler like my late grandmother's father was. But I've emigrated to Canada just like he did.

I grew up in Manhattan, and I spent time residing in Chicago and Paris. But having moved to Toronto in 2015, I now live with my husband and two daughters in Roncesvalles Village—home of the recently renamed, then un-renamed, Roncesvalles Polish Festival—where my daughters and I might be the neighbourhood's only Jews. (Prove me wrong!)

As a relative newcomer to Canada, who's spent much of my time here home with small children—much of it during COVID lockdowns—I'm still getting my bearings, beyond having it together enough to have figured out that you need an unfathomably enormous winter coat.

I'm a fan of poodles, of riding the TTC, and of riding the TTC with a poodle during the hours when that's permitted. In my spare time I watch British sitcom reruns and fall asleep. (See: small children.)

And now, to properly (professionally) introduce myself: My name is Phoebe Maltz Bovy and I'm honoured to be a new senior editor at The Canadian Jewish News.

I'm the author of a 2017 book of cultural criticism, *The Perils of "Privilege": Why Injustice Can't Be Solved by Accusing Others of Advantage*—about a phenomenon now popularly known as wokeness.

I've also worked in journalism as a writer, editor, and podcaster, and was once the Sisterhood blog section editor of *The Forward*, the now-digital newspaper based in New York, which was originally published in Yiddish. I've written for numerous outlets on both sides of the border, such as the *Washington Post*, *Tablet* and the *Jewish Review of Books*. And soon, I'll be regularly contributing columns to the *Globe and Mail*. (And I was in one of the final editions of The CJN's now-defunct weekly newspaper, writing about a Dreyfus Affair-themed restaurant in Toronto.)

Along with journalism, I have a background in academia, with a PhD in French and French Studies from New York University. I wrote my doctoral dissertation about French Jews and intermarriage—a research project that involved reading a whole lot of 1840s French-Jewish newspapers. So, my enthusiasm for the Jewish press spans borders and centuries.

All of this is a roundabout way of saying that I am beyond delighted to be part of The CJN.

I'm interested finding the Jewish angle to everything. I'll be writing about people of all ages, ethnicities, political persuasions, and observance levels—doing exciting things, in the community and beyond. History, controversy, cultural events, family life—it's all fair game. And I also define "Canadian" and "Jewish" as broadly as possible. Do you put maple syrup on your matzo brei? Belt out Israeli rock songs while ice skating? I want to hear about it. ■

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## Donald Trump's dinner for schmucks

**W**hat was Donald Trump doing, having dinner with Kanye West and an agitator named Nick Fuentes? I had never heard of Nick Fuentes, but understood that he is not a fan of Jews.

Well, right back at you pal.

What I *am* a fan of, however, is the Wikipedia page for Fuentes. Specifically the section on "Women." It begins by noting that he doesn't think women should have the right to vote. Standard-issue far-right thinking. Also the sort of thing a 24-year-old provocateur might quip to shock. Then it takes... a turn.

"Fuentes identifies as an incel (or 'involuntary celibate'), although some of his supporters have criticized him for being a 'voluntary celibate' after he admitted that he kissed a girl while he was in high school."

Exactly how unpopular this man was while in high school is being litigated. I guess this is part of some subculture among young right-wing men, wherein romantic rejection equals clout. Not how it went in my own distant youth. In any case, if a man who denies the Holocaust and blanket-embraces all the bigotries is unable to find love, this is the system working as it should.

What are Fuentes's beliefs, then, where gender and sexuality are concerned?

"He has attempted to defend himself as an incel by claiming that 'having sex with women is gay.'"

What matters here is not that twerps on the internet are being twerps, which is their wont. Rather it's that the former and potentially future president of the United States wants the likes of him in his inner circle. Is his 2024 campaign going to be antisemitic sorry I mean overtly antisemitic? Is that where things are headed?

And what is Canada's favourite professor Jordan Peterson doing in the mix? Is he being obscure and philosophical or is he angling for a dinner invite of his own? (Assuming beef is on the menu.)

It is at times like these that I'm reminded of that time, what seems like 100 years ago, when I was on the Ivanka beat at a different Jewish publication. Remember Ivanka, Trump's Jewish daughter? Week after week, trying to sort out what it all meant, and reassuring readers that skittishness regarding Ivanka did not extend towards converts to Judaism more generally. We had

to cover Ivanka because she was the nation's highest-profile Jew. And her being Jewish was supposed to matter.

But if ever there were a time for the *lol nothing matters* analysis, this would be it. It's Trump, it doesn't have to make sense! If a Black man and a man who comes by the last name Fuentes the usual way can be white supremacists, then there's no reason to assume he's sitting there thinking, *Gee, maybe I shouldn't dine with Mr. Hater of Jews, given that my daughter is one.*

As for what's actually going through Trump's mind, I have no idea. Maybe he's thinking about how tremendously, flamboyantly gay it is when a man and a woman have sex. ■

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## The end of the self-deprecating nebbishette

Recently I picked up a used copy of the late screenwriter Nora Ephron's 2007 essay collection, *I Feel Bad About My Neck*. A memorable title and, despite being several years away from the age when women apparently begin caring about necks (43, per the *When Harry Met Sally* screenwriter), I imagined I'd find the content relatable.

What it struck me as, rather, was *familiar*. The voice is one I know well, both from Ephron's personal contributions to the culture, and from the stance it represents. It is the voice of the nebbishette, a term I have Googled, only to find references to my own writing, so obscure it is, yet ubiquitous.

Who is—or was, more on that in a moment—the nebbishette? The nebbish but a woman. Woody Allen-like in her self-deprecation, if not in her allure to the opposite sex.

The archetype is Rhoda Morgenstern, on 1970s American sitcom, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Played by non-Jewish actress Valerie Harper, Rhoda was best friend Mary's snarky sidekick. Mary got dates while Rhoda did not. Mary was effortlessly chipper and slim while Rhoda cracked jokes, often at her own expense, and dieted.

Whatever Rhoda was, she was not a *princess* of any kind. She grew up in the Bronx and had street-smarts. Her outer-borough scrappiness was more Woody Allen than *The Nanny*.

Who are the other nebbishettes? Mindy Cohn's character of Natalie Green from *The Facts of Life*. Jennifer Weiner's persona in novels and op-ed columns. And maybe even Fran Drescher as Fran "The Nanny" Fine. To be a nebbishette is not a physical attribute, but rather an attitude. It's being a Daria, but one who uses John Frieda hair products and wants to know if the yogurt is fat-free or merely low fat.

If the nebbish suggests a 1970s Woody Allen, the nebbishette has more of a 1990s or early-2000s vibe. She was never as much of a thing as the nebbish, though, unless you buy into my theory that Lena Dunham's Hannah Horvath on *Girls* was basically a lady-version of George Costanza.

Not every nebbishette has been Jewish. I think of course of Tina Fey, as the frumpy Liz Lemon on *30 Rock*. Also of the late British comedian Victoria Wood, "well known for her down-to-earth and self-deprecating humor."

But the nebbishette is a Jewish form, a Jewish archetype, which is why I took Jewish offence when Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby denounced self-deprecation in her Netflix special, *Nanette*.

But back to Nora Ephron's neck-book. It is, in ways both refreshing and irritating, a throwback to the days when a rich woman could write a book about her everyday life without the use of privilege disclaimers.

Ephron makes casual reference to large expenditures on housing, beauty procedures, and accessories, without, as the kids say, *situating herself*. She writes in a way that presumes her own experience to be a normal one, as though we all contemplate facelifts and Birkin handbags. When we are at the fruit stand wondering whether \$8 is an acceptable price to pay for a container of strawberries, it's a bit much, but I also don't think I'd prefer a version where Ephron solemnly acknowledged that she was living a rarified life. (The fictional character I most identify with is Mrs. Kim from *Kim's Convenience* in the show's opening sequence, for a reason.)

But Ephron, in print, has to be relatable because she is an everywoman, or not even. She was, or her persona is, that of a nebbishette.

Most of the essays are self-deprecatory in terms of age. Past whichever year—43, year of the falling neck, or 34, after which point you're not to wear a two-piece swimsuit (apologies to the fellow participants of our local baby-and-toddler swim classes)—women aren't what they, we, used to be. Ephron was writing from the vantage point of a woman in her 60s, reflecting on decades' worth of invisibility.

But what of a young Ephron? Surely this woman, with her multiple marriages and glamorous career, couldn't have been nebbishy?

There's an essay on how Ephron interned for U.S. President John F. Kennedy, which concludes with her observing, "it has become horribly clear to me that I am probably the only young woman who ever worked in the Kennedy White House that the president did not make a pass at." She speculates, "Perhaps it's because I'm Jewish. Don't laugh; think about it—think about that long, long list of women JFK slept with. Were any of them Jewish? I don't think so."

Ephron's following essay is about another former U.S. president, Bill Clinton, and even mentions Monica Lewinsky, so she doubtless knew there was nothing inherently connected about a woman intern's Jewishness and her interest to a philandering politician. But it is extremely nebbishette, properly on-brand, to be the only young woman not picked by a man who'll have anyone.

By the time I got to the section on hair, I started to think social-justice warriors have a point. Ephron, expert on the subtle distinctions between different, adjacent upscale Manhattan neighbourhoods, makes sweeping generalizations on a continental level. One is negative: "I am never going back to Africa; the last time I was there, in 1972, there were no hairdressers out in the bush, and as far as I was concerned, that was the end of that place." Africa, a continent where no one can do hair, that certainly adds up.

This is followed up shortly with, "I envy all Asian women—I mean, have you ever seen an Asian woman whose hair looks bad? (No, you haven't. Why is this?)" I suspect that this was

intended as a self-deprecating reference to frizz, that plight of the nebbishette. But also, *come on*.

The self-insulting nebbishette act seems to have gone the way of the curmudgeon, where humour is concerned. I'm reminded of The Man Repeller blogger and self-deprecator par excellence Leandra Medine Cohen.

As she presented herself, she was a dorky Jewish girl, dressing in strange ways that would put off men, like a modern-day Rhoda. As she seemed to a wider audience, she was a rich white lady. I will spare you the 40,000 words speculating on why exactly a Jewish woman of Turkish and Iranian ancestry was so readily cast as "white," because the point here is that the nebbishette is no more.

The nebbishette existed in a particular sphere: an all-white world (a world, that is, that tuned everyone else out) where Jewishness was the only plausible form of difference. Where a brunette was racialized. It doesn't resonate, and as such, doesn't always hold up.

But there's a timelessness to the nebbishette stance, and I think she has a future. I have no choice but to think this, as my neck has only a few more good years. ■

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## Wanting in, wanting out: Contemplating the soup of beliefs found in a new book called 'Bad Jews'

**E**mily Tamkin's *Bad Jews* is in a sense two books in one. It's a sweeping explainer—clearly written, and well-sourced with interviews and citations of respected historians—of American Jewish history. It's also an argument-driven case for Jewish pluralism.

From the title, I was anticipating a book about Jewish rebels. Gangsters, maybe, as with *Bad Gays*, or whoever the American equivalent is to Amy Winehouse.

(Nor is it "bad" in the sense of *Bad Feminist*, a book in which Roxane Gay advocated unachievable ideological purity.)

It is instead, more poignantly, about belonging: everyone's someone else's bad Jew—which, for the purposes of this book, means one who is insufficiently or dubiously Jewish.

It took me a while to figure this out. At first I thought the point of the book was that Jews are not a monolith, and that there are many ways to be Jewish, which, while true, didn't seem like a new or important enough point to merit a project of this magnitude. But it's not that. It's about the ways that Jews have challenged one another's membership in the group. It's not a protest against halakhic gatekeeping (and she's clear that religious-line-drawing is not her concern) so much as about the thing where Jewish conservatives see Jewish progressives as traitors.

For the author—an American journalist who spent part of her

childhood in Toronto—the question of authenticity is at once theoretical and personal. She's an intermarried Jew, in a community fixated on getting Jews to marry in.

And yet, is she not part of a Jewish household?

"My husband... joined a synagogue with me; lights Shabbat candles every week with me; hosts Passover seders with me; buys apples and honey for Rosh Hashanah; has his own menorah; watches movies about Jewish history and culture with me; goes to Jewish museums and memorials around the world with me; and agreed while we were still dating to raise our children Jewish."

Tamkin is also, she notes, the daughter of a convert to Judaism, one whose path to acceptance was not always smooth:

"My mom quite literally changed my life by deciding to convert to Judaism and raise us as Jewish kids. She was often not treated warmly by members of the Jewish community. But I'm not writing this for them. I'm writing this for her. Mommy: I'm sorry anybody ever made you feel less than. I hope you know that, to me, you are the best Jew a person can be, because you are the best person a person can be."

This sense of identity made her "worried... that I was not Jewish enough, or not the right kind of Jewish, to write a book on American Jewish history."

*Bad Jews* is a rejection of Jewishness as an exclusionary club. Tamkin argues against a vision of Jewish continuity that centres on in-marriage and suggests, as an alternative, embracing the vibrant Jewish organizing of, in particular, queer Jews and Jews of colour.

She's less enthusiastic about Israel and Zionism, but rightly notes that American Jews of more recent refugee status, who may feel a bit less safe in the world, continue to see the urgency of a Jewish state.

To be a bad Jew, in *Bad Jews*, is to be someone banging on the door of Jewishness, asking to be let in, or at the very least, having your Jewishness questioned. But there's a different use of "bad Jew" that never comes up in the book. It's when Jews use the expression about themselves as a way of reassuring non-Jews that they're not too Jewish. A "bad Jew" as double negative, that is, in situations where Jewishness is likely to be viewed as an impediment. As in, "don't worry, I eat bacon, I'm a bad Jew."

The internal conversation about belonging—where the hoped-for situation is to be considered an authentic Jew—coexists with a broader society that frowns on Jewishness. Just as some Jews have wanted in, others have, for various reasons, wanted out.

I'm thinking about the *Curb Your Enthusiasm* episode where Larry David thinks he comes from a small-town, all-American white Christian family. Or the trope in Holocaust stories of the Jew who survived by passing, because as luck would have it they didn't look Jewish. Jewishness is many things: a religion, a culture, an ethnicity, a people, a community. It is also, as the stories of converts from Judaism throughout history remind, a fate.

Though well-versed in the history of American antisemitism, Tamkin's central preoccupation is with the Jews who want in and are pushed out. There's another whole part of the diaspora Jewish experience that's about wanting out while knowing

that there isn't one.

As with all history books, academic and general-audience, *Bad Jews* is at once about the time discussed and its own current moment. Tamkin uses “Jewish person” throughout, something I found strange until I remembered that in some circles “Jew” is thought to be a slur.

Everybody comes to a topic like this with their own idiosyncratic perspectives. I'm an intermarried, non-observant, liberal Zionist Jew. (And a native New Yorker in Toronto, too.) As far as I know, all my ancestors were Jewish. A lot of what Tamkin writes about the Jewish communal obsession with intermarriage, and specifically with getting Jewish women to have Jewish babies, resonated with me. The parts about wanting in, not so much.

While I've met plenty of people who've disapproved of my politics or life choices, I have never once worried if I was Jewish enough. I've never had to want in. Though nor, clearly (hello!), do I want out. ■

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## In which a pumpkin spice latte is appropriated into a container of hummus

Before reading Samia Madwar's recent feature for *The Walrus* magazine, “Much Ado about Hummus: The Fight for Bragging Rights over a Middle Eastern Dip,” I did not know the full extent of hummus-like abominations.

I'd heard about dessert hummus, mainly from Jews mocking it on Twitter, but had not realized this extended to flavours like “mint-chocolate fudge” and “butterscotch,” off-putting (to me; taste is subjective) even in a more neutral context like ice cream.

Add chickpeas and/or tahini to the mix and you're in the realm not of fusion cuisine so much as of what John Cleese's French waiter offers in the 1983 film *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*, “all mixed up together in a bucket.”

Part of Madwar's article is about exactly this: the tension between the subjectivity of taste (can you judge a chocolate hummus you haven't tried?) and the objective fact of certain food experiments being aesthetically ill-advised. That, and the threshold question of how many tweaks a food item can undergo before being a different thing entirely. (See also: the is-a-hot-dog-a-sandwich wars.)

Part of it is also, however, is about “what we're really fighting about when we fight about hummus.”

Madwar, who grew up in Syria, associates hummus with her childhood. (I grew up in the United States in the 1990s and my madeleine is a Diet Snapple.)

As for what we're really fighting about—if your guess was, Israel, then you would be correct.

As the author points out, while most Jewish Israelis do not have hummus-eaters in their most recent pre-Israel ancestry, some did: “Jewish immigrants to Israel from the Levant



brought their hummus know-how with them, further exposing other citizens to the dish.” This buried fact—buried, that is, as much in this one article as in the wider culinary history—is what allows the cultural appropriation narrative to flourish.

Citing Israeli scholars, Madwar finds that “many Israelis acknowledge that they've only adopted hummus and that the best place to get it is Arab-owned hummusiyahs, or restaurants that specialize in hummus.”

“But, for many Arabs, that acknowledgement doesn't make up for what they see as Israel's co-opting of the dish. While there are plenty of Arab-owned restaurants and brands selling hummus around the world, Israeli companies, primarily, have profited from its industrialization, including several that played a significant role in promoting it worldwide.”

Hummus is a global business, which I guess is meant to sound sinister, even if it's an inexpensive, sustainable, vegan food product. Of all the things that are disseminated by multinationals, it has to be the most innocuous. As for why Israel and not any number of other countries in the region brought hummus to the global masses, maybe it has something to do with a country made up of refugees and emigres from other parts of the world?

The power balance between Israelis and Palestinians—yes, that under-discussed topic—doesn't do much to explain why Jordan or Lebanon didn't come up with the idea of putting hummus-esque products into plastic tubs and selling them to Western suburbanites in search of a wholesome dip.

But this is about *profit*. It's about who controls the means of hummus production.

The thesis of the piece: in a roundabout way, it's the fault of Israel that a white American lady named Makenzie McPher-son invented dessert hummus. A greater war crime was never known.

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Hummus, so mushy, so problematic. The who-gets-to-claim-hummus wars flare up every so often, a symbolic representation of war-wars. And these debates, be they in essays and op-eds; on social media; or in the reviews of hummus joints, often

land on the supposedly profound question of whether Israeli food is even a thing.

The idea that there's no such thing as Israeli food is silly, given that it is an identifiable cuisine, as in, you can see a menu where "Israeli" is the only possible explanation. But the persistence of the claim that no such cuisine exists makes me think I have to go there.

So go there I will: the juxtaposition or fusion of Eastern European and Levantine food, with a kosher influence, exists. It exists because Israel does, which is of course the source of the angst. If you will it away, it goes away, is the thinking, re: the food and the country it comes from. What is it, then? Israeli food is—but is not limited to—the thing where you might see matzo ball soup and falafel on the same menu. It's the food of people who wound up in Israel in the past century, influenced by the available ingredients and yes of course existing cuisine of the region.

What comes up again and again is this idea that Israeli restaurants, cookbooks, etc. need to *credit* the origins of their recipes. This is something frequently requested of recipe writers these days, ever since that time when then-*New York Times* food writer Alison Roman came up with a chickpea recipe that seemed a tad more 'ethnic' than she did. (A topic that could be its own sinkhole, what with Roman describing herself as half-Jewish.)

And maybe professional food writers should include references to where the recipes come from, if only because readers are often interested. But the idea that one cuisine needs to credit another cuisine seems... I mean I hate to pull the does any other country receive this criticism card but, like, does any other country receive this criticism? Do Italian menus include self-flagellating disclaimers about the Asian origins of noodles?

Joint efforts by Israeli and Palestinian chefs are not unheard-of. Most famously, there's star British chef and cookbook author Yotam Ottolenghi's collaboration with Sami Tamimi. More locally, there's The Haifa Room, on the corner of Ossington and Dundas in Toronto, from which yours truly has ordered the occasional takeout baba ganoush.

Such initiatives do not seem to do much to assuage concerns or deflect accusations. Ottolenghi stands accused of being a white chef taking credit for BIPOC cuisine, or something. The hummus purveyors of Ossington inspire musings about how coexistence is an invention of colonialism.

The goal is seemingly not for consumers of hummus to ac-

knowledge that the foodstuff predates the modern-day state of Israel, or that Israelis whose families originate outside the Levant surely ate something different before being expelled from wherever that may have been. No, it's for Israeli cuisine to be declared an invention, a theft. Its very existence—if it indeed existed in the first place, per certain critics—to cease. Sound familiar?

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The Ashkenazi embrace of Israeli food, which extends beyond Israel, and beyond Jews who are rah-rah Israel, is less about cultural appropriation than feelings of cultural inadequacy. It's culinary self-deprecation, but it's not entirely about Jewishness. It's also an extension of the mainstream belief that Mediterranean food is better than Eastern European food, an opinion (a... fact?) it's difficult to attribute to racism regarding the people from the respective locales. (It's not about the relative whiteness of Greeks and Poles, but rather what sort of ingredients grow in which climates.)

But it's also about how things did not entirely work out for us in Eastern Europe. Delicatessen-type food, channeled through a North American vernacular, is ours, but the actual foods of the old country can sometimes feel like they belong to the people who call themselves Polish, rather than the ones who squirm and say something like, *my family lived in what is now Poland*.

Also worth addressing: Israeli food calling itself "Mediterranean." Is this, as sometimes claimed, about a failure to credit Palestinians? It is maybe, quite possibly, more about how if a business (or a couscous) calls itself "Israeli," this leads to a tsunami of one-star Google reviews with political explanations and geniuses online pointing out that actually Arabs are also Semites, so, you know. (We know, *we know*.)

Israeli food, Palestinian food, euphemistically Mediterranean food, whatever, does not translate particularly well to other, chillier, places. Hummus is replicable, but the rest, which you need for the hummus to have a point, not so much. You can chop cucumbers and tomatoes in Canada but the result, except in maybe one week of summer, will be unimpressive.

You can (and I do!) attempt to recreate iced blended coffee in your home blender, putting cold brew, sugar, and ice, and seeing what results, but it won't turn Toronto into Tel Aviv. One of the best meals of my life was in Israel, in Mitzpe Ramon, a town with roaming ibex. It is, as I look out the window in Toronto right now, snowing. Why even try? ■

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