

**David Weinstein, *The Eddie Cantor Story: A Jewish Life in Performance and Politics* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018), 304 pp.**

Author and historian of early American broadcast media, David Weinstein has crafted a readable yet analytic biography of American entertainer and philanthropist Eddie Cantor. In *The Eddie Cantor Story*, Weinstein argues for a reconsideration of Cantor's centrality within narratives of American entertainment by contextualizing the comedian's responses to a complex web of political, social, and economic forces. The book frames Cantor's identity as an American Jew as deeply influential not only to his public performance—paving the way for the acceptance and ultimately popular success of Jewish comedians who would follow him—but also as the driving force behind Cantor's unceasing philanthropic efforts and liberal social attitudes.

Weinstein situates Cantor's career as a product of his childhood on the Lower East Side. Orphaned at a young age, Cantor grew up primarily under the care of his maternal grandmother, who, despite her best efforts, struggled to keep food on the table. Ultimately, Weinstein credits this hardscrabble childhood, during which Cantor worked a variety of jobs, with giving him the insight to continuously adapt his performance style to the ever-changing demands of the entertainment world that would serve him so well throughout the rest of his career. Building on successes in smaller comedy circuits, Cantor used his skill in understanding the inner workings of the socio-political systems that surrounded him to work his way up to increasingly more prominent stages in vaudeville before landing a long-term contract on *Ziegfeld's Follies*, an elaborate, long-running Broadway revue.

Throughout the book, Cantor is portrayed as having unlimited talent, with a keen understanding of the work and positioning necessary to ensure continued success and relevance. Other comedians of the time shed their Jewish identities, changing their names and styling routines around topics of mainstream interest. Born Edward Itkowitz, Cantor's name change was the result of a misunderstanding during his school days and scarcely concealed his Jewish heritage. Moreover, while his acts were accessible enough to garner great acclaim from largely non-Jewish

audiences, Weinstein argues that Cantor's performances contained coded references to Jewish expressions, jokes, and songs that added another level for those versed enough in Jewish culture to appreciate them (1). At times, however, Cantor's savvy positioning proved controversial, most notably in terms of the comedian's blackface routines that would be remembered as some of his trademark acts. Weinstein carefully situates Cantor's blackface within the norms of his day and recognizes ongoing conversations concerning the denigrating nature of the practice. Nonetheless, the efforts come off a bit like justification, as Weinstein argues that Cantor was under pressure to maintain the practice and contends Cantor's blackface characters challenged pervasive stereotypes. Despite these criticisms, Weinstein demonstrates Cantor's deft ability to adapt to changing trends as the comedian moved from stage to stage and through ever-developing broadcast media, crafting performances that took advantage of the affordances of each, further cementing himself at the pinnacle of American comedy.

Beyond subtle references in Cantor's formal performances, Weinstein argues that Cantor's Jewish identity served as a driving force in directing the comedian's interests and energies off stage. As Hitler's regime rose in Germany, Cantor used his spotlight to vehemently and publicly denounce the Nazi influence in the United States. Among other statements, Cantor called renown antisemites, including Father Charles Coughlin and Henry Ford, "the enemies not only of the Jews, but of all Americans" (145). Given the era's highly-charged political atmosphere, Cantor's overt condemnation startled sponsors who pulled their financial backing, concerned with maintaining broad appeal across demographics. The fallout from slowed Cantor's radio career through the end of the war. During this time, Cantor remained active in film and theatre and began to take advantage of the advancing popularity of television in order to retain his presence in the American entertainment landscape.

Throughout his career, Cantor used his platform to promote his political and charitable interests. In addition to Zionist and pro-Jewish appeals, Cantor worked closely with President Frankly D. Roosevelt to establish the March of Dimes and consistently supported union organizing within the entertainment industry. Moreover,

Cantor consistently levied his influence to promote equality for African American musicians and comedians. Despite the criticism Cantor received for his continued use of blackface, Weinstein argues that Cantor was known to insert commentary concerning anti-racist causes into his acts and used his programs to feature African American entertainers. Although Cantor was not a religiously observant Jew, Weinstein's work purports that his actions on and off the stage were informed by a deep-seated Jewish ethic that pushed him to work for justice across all arenas of life.

Weinstein's narrative is comfortably tidy. He carefully draws lines between the events that directed the course of Cantor's life, explicating the motives for each change of course. Dependent on publicly available sources and Cantor's own writings, which focus nearly exclusively on his public and professional life, however, Weinstein seems to give short shrift to influences within the private sphere. For instance, Weinstein only mentions in passing Cantor's wife and five daughters, and only in relation to the progress of Cantor's career. Weinstein notes that Cantor used them as an excuse to leave the theatre world to focus on telling "genuine bedtime stories" (82), while in fact he was positioning himself to move into the world of radio and television. Although *The Eddie Cantor Story* fulfills its promise to explain how Cantor used his influence within the realms of performance and politics, the wholly public-focused nature of the account leaves a noticeable gap in understanding who Cantor truly was.

In all, Weinstein's work presents a carefully researched narrative that attempts to resituate understandings of Cantor's influence on contemporary American comedy. For too long, Cantor was perceived to offer little past shallow humor and blackface sketches, and he was relegated to the footnotes of American comedy history. Weinstein, however, argues that for decades, Cantor provided a model for expressing Jewish identity in popular culture and crafted templates for the archetypes of Jewish comedians who would follow (232). *The Eddie Cantor Story* positions Cantor as a Jewish comedian who refused to dampen his Jewishness for a mainstream American audience, rising to stardom not despite this identity, but because of his ability to make his otherness feel so familiar.

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**Robert H. Mnookin, *The Jewish American Paradox: Embracing Choice in a Changing World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2018), 308 pp.; Steven R. Weisman, *The Chosen Wars: How Judaism Became an American Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 328 pp.; Jack Wertheimer, *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice Their Religion Today* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 379 pp.**

Robert H. Mnookin begins his book *The Jewish American Paradox* with a story about a conversation he had with his daughter Jennifer when he was on sabbatical in Oxford, England. English schools had a required course called Religious Education, and Jennifer's was taught by the headmistress at the Oxford High School for Girls. The headmistress asked if there were any students not of the Christian faith, so Jennifer raised her hand and told her that she was Jewish. The headmistress asked her if her parents would object if she were to read selections from the New Testament as part of the course. Jennifer assured the headmistress that her parents would not mind, even though they were from a different religious background.

Her father asked Jennifer, "How did all of this make you feel?" to which she responded, "When are we actually going to become Jewish?" (1). This was one of the interactions that began Mnookin thinking about what it might mean to be Jewish. Like many American Jews, Mnookin grew up with the idea that it was enough to simply say that he was Jewish. Being Jewish was a consequence of descent. His daughter challenged this view, arguing that if being Jewish is going to be more than a nominal, residual identity of no inherent value, then it should be a religious identity that needed to be studied and practiced. Mnookin and his wife had to figure out ways to respond to Jennifer's challenge, which he partially describes in this book.

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