



Unterzakhn

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A mesmerizing, heartbreaking graphic novel of immigrant life on New York's Lower East Side at the turn of the twentieth century, as seen through the eyes of twin sisters whose lives take radically and tragically different paths.

For six-year-old Esther and Fanya, the teeming streets of New York's Lower East Side circa 1910 are both a fascinating playground and a place where life's lessons are learned quickly and often cruelly. In drawings that capture both the tumult and the telling details of that street life, *Unterzakhn* (Yiddish for "Underthings") tells the story of these sisters: as wide-eyed little girls absorbing the sights and sounds of a neighborhood of struggling immigrants; as teenagers taking their own tentative steps into the wider world (Esther working for a woman who runs both a burlesque theater and a whorehouse, Fanya for an obstetrician who also performs illegal abortions); and, finally, as adults battling for their own piece of the "golden land", where the difference between just barely surviving and triumphantly succeeding involves, for each of them, painful decisions that will have unavoidably tragic repercussions.

Unterzakhn Details

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From Reader Review Unterzakhn for online ebook

Oriana says

This was a total total stunner. Spanning several decades in the lives of two sisters in 1910s Lower East Side NYC, it's got incredibly evocative dark-lined drawings and paints a really stark picture of the catch-as-catch can tenement life. It was a perfect Jugs & Capes choice, as it's just steeped in lady troubles, from pregnancy and its avoidabilities to abortion and its complexities, from prostitution to chastity to hypocrisy to many very different kinds of faith. How to use your sexuality vs. how to hone your smarts. Whom to fall in love with and how to let them love you. What it means to be a woman, to be poor, to be talented, to be desired, to be weak. Beautiful and heartbreaking through and through.

Kitty says

It's been a while since a piece of art made me cry, but this book did it twice.

Christian McKay says

Place this one up there with Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis and Craig Thompson's Blankets. Honest, simple, devastating. I think what intrigued me most about Corman's work is all of the panels she left out. She is a master of pacing and time.

Amanda L says

My six cents:

1. All over the place. Individual chunks of the narrative never really connected, so I never felt it ultimately culminated in much. Also cut off rather abruptly at the end.
2. Depressing and hard to swallow but that doesn't weigh negatively for me (though it may for you!).
3. Female inequalities plaguing the era in which it takes place (early part of the 20th C. USA) played a big part, such as culturally-acceptable bar from formal education (consequently illiteracy), limited opportunities, even illicit access to reproductive autonomy and associated risks. Caveat: I didn't think they were handled with laudable finesse.
4. Content excluded, I find the dedication "For New York" a bit uppity.
5. A lot of reviewers have said they don't care for the drawing style, but I found the art to be **uniquely stylized, innovative, and one of the better facets of this work, even if not aesthetically palatable/ "appealing" in a conventional sense**. So I'll grant it ~2.5 stars since that's a pretty important consideration for a graphic novel.

6. Countering the praiseworthy illustration STYLE, I feel like the bulk of the characters were drawn as caricatures, **exaggerating** features that are stereotypically lumped as "ugly" Jewish features (EVERY Jewish character, not just the twin main characters). For the record, I do not find these features ugly and it is very likely that even the author does not --BUT-- coming from an illustrator who has the quintessential attractive Millennial(ish) look down pat ---and shows us as much with her author bio page (not judging that; it's what she looks like), this aspect almost felt like a **parody**. I'll grant her that perhaps that wasn't the intention, but it's definitely a worthy point of discussion.

Mariel says

It was the best time of their lives. Identical twin sisters Fanya and Esther were little girls in the Lower East Side of New York City in 1910. This must mean do this, help in the shop, go fetch the lady-doctor to help this hemorrhaging pregnant woman on the sidewalk. Too late, what's an abortion, what's a lady doctor, who is going to take care of her children. Be pretty, be stupid and be married off one day out from under my feet. Under my thumb, be this, stay poor. An old woman who must have had no teeth (or underpants under her dirty clothing) calls her goat-child and everyone is pulling everywhere those little arms. Her breath smells like the pickles she sells. Everyone is selling. Can you run fast enough. I missed their old days. In the end, when I'm not sure if Fanya even made it, I see the little twin girls on the roof tops laughing and dropping buckets of water on the people beneath them, happy together. I was reminded of that film from Swedish filmmaker Lukas Moodysson *Lilja 4-ever*. Russian teenager Lilja is going to jump off the bridge onto the cars below to escape sex slavery. Lilja is also playing basketball on the rooftops with her gone guardian angel best friend Volodya. She is already dead and it is those kind of good times again. The kind when you're living it in your head because you can't live without it. Esther answers the door to her sister's married lover with their baby in her arms. "Fanya doesn't live here anymore." I had the feeling that she didn't. I don't know for sure. But when it is the past again in the last panel I had the feeling that she didn't make it.

The men are covered with hair. They could have crawled out of somewhere. They sit in beds with sheets or stand in the middle of rooms, asking for something. I saw a lot of hair and skin. The young girls grow into women with an aura of Jewishness. The kind you always feel naked in front of someone else and they are pointing out that you are naked. They will always be reminded that they are Jewish and the only thing it means is different, to be pointed. They say "Jewess". Everyone says it and I never felt it meant anything to them other than something to be called. They sit on top of men in beds with exotic black hair hanging over their faces like a curtain. Sex is a position, too. Don't look at me, slanted eyes, all twisted up in making your bed and lying in it. The kind you feel you are wearing your underwear in a hospital and it is bed side manner that is not desire.

Fanya works for the lady-doctor, Bronia. Bronia went to their mother and guilted her to allow her smart daughter the chance to read and write. She indoctrinates her in pamphlets for womankind everywhere. The deserving ones, of course. How can you tell who those are when everyone is immigrant, a Jew, your mama was a whore. People die on sidewalks or rumors are made to kill you on the street. I can't tell which is which. Esther leaves her mama's dress shop to clean up puke in a whore house. I only wonder it took so long for them to find out. I kind of figure they always knew where little Esther was going. The little girls ran into their futures on the streets. They would have run into it in their mama's hand, I suppose. Their little sister dies and I'm not sure how it happened. She cried a lot with arms outstretched and a white nightgown. Esther runs into her future into the hand of a brutal john. You may as well start earning. You may as well start dancing. The other girls don't like the Jewess and the menfolk fancy a piece. How does she live for them this

way, how does she feel indebted to the big woman with the big pockets to sink little Esther in them. The little girls used to tell stories in the tub. Fanya stops talking about Persephone (sidenote about the art- the black and white drawings didn't work for the pomegranate. The seeds had no luster). What did she run into other than black and white fist markings from the reading material possessed by the doctor? Beliefs run in the street and where did it go when they were running?

Fanya kicks her sister down the stairs. We don't want a whore in our family, pretty much. I feel like Corman lost something in drawing the circumstances of the day. I get that she wanted to write about what it was like for women when sex and bodies were so much a prison. But people are not only circumstances of the day. Why did Fanya want something more for these other women, and for herself, and could not take care of her sister who needed her? When did it happen that she led her bleed her baby out of her body alone in a bed where men shed hair and skin and I'll take the Jewess from the spotlight when the lights are off. Whispers of I'd marry you. No one means it. She didn't want them to mean it. She could be a little girl again and not understanding what it is anyone means when they say it'll be her turn one day. People still live in the middle of standing or not standing for whatever the hell is happening to them.

Fanya's lover, her childhood friend, beseeches her to marry him after he has announced his betrothal to the little girl they used to mock on the stoops. "We don't believe in marriage," she says. He says it is because she is Jewish. Since when? Esther became a prostitute because she took a job fetching for a lady who had nice things. Fanya stretches against Bronia's only-for-the-married rules. But all of these women are dying and we could help them! Oh, but it made me so sad when she kicks her sister down the stairs. Why did she forget her because of who she had sex with? I thought it was pretty brilliant when, after Fanya is unemployed and pregnant out of marriage, the two sisters cuddle in bed out of one's need and the other's need to be with her sister. Esther does not forget the little girl who would take home to her what she had learned. I didn't want to forget it either. It hurt that Fanya did and I don't understand it. I loved it when Esther tells her that their mother used to be a prostitute herself when they are in that grown up bed together. She had never told Fanya who had been away with her chance to raise her mind above theirs. Of course she passed this secret onto the daughter she kept to her side as a punishment when she grudgingly gave over the other. I can see this turn of the face of their hard mother. When did Fanya start to look like that? That they would whisper this like the most important thing was what their mother thought when the best they had all along was each other said a lot. Only one of them knows it.

Fanya wanted to have her lover. She says don't speak to me about your children. He is supposed to not want to get married, to step in with the days. I'll only love you. When they were kids it must have been exciting for him to run with this girl who was so fast in all of that shit that was going down. Yeah, well, I don't care that she couldn't make her choice. He's hairs in bed and she's hairs in bed and they have sex. I don't care about all of the reading material about safe sex in the world. When did it happen that the important thing was everyone lived up to these rules that Fanya had for how everything had to be?

There's a flashback sequence of their father in his Russian homeland. (I read a review on librarything that said they were Polish immigrants. This reviewer was not paying attention. He buys a copy of Ulysses in Polish because his sister can read it. It will be all that he has left of her when his family is burned in a hate attack against Jews.) Isaac meets a blonde farmgirl he loves. He has persuaded her to leave her father and run away with him. More like she discovers her father's plan to marry her off to some creep. The girl was loyal but loyalty is only so much when it comes to being married off to an imbecile.

Our first task, when we came down to the sea and reached our ship, was to turn her into the good salt water and put the mast and sails on board. We then picked up the sheep we found

there, and stowed them on the vessel. After which we ourselves embarked and a melancholy crew we were. There was not a dry cheek in the company. However Circe of the lovely tresses, human though she was in speech, proved her powers as a goddess by sending us the friendly escort of a favorable breeze, which sprang up from astern and filled the sail of our blue-prowed ship."

"Why do you like this story about a homeless sailor so much?"

"You don't like it?"

He sleeps and her eyes are opened, turned away from him. When he wakes she is gone. I thought this was great to show his ceaseless void to send another away.

According to the back of the book the author illustrated a book on the history of the skirt. I have no trouble believing this is her interest. I also can see her as a belly dancer (it also says that). There's something bodily about her art.

At the risk of coming off as a pale shut-in who has seen way, way too much television I will say that I was reminded of a 1990s English series *The House of Eliott* about two sisters who escape the iron fistings of a cold father to live in the whirly bird world of flapper dresses and high fashions when they start their own fashion house. At first I thought it was going to be the best thing ever. They find out they have no money left to them at all. So they go eat ice cream and watch cinema. "This is the best show ever!" I said (it was a good few years ago so take this with a few grains of Morton's salt). It wasn't, really, because the story is lost to the ins and outs of the problems of the day. The pretty and younger sister falls in love with a married man and it will never work. It doesn't work until I got bored and stopped watching it. If it just wasn't done back then that still didn't make me care about it. If I felt why this was important to her it would have been different. If you could love because you couldn't stop yourself. Or you loved because you didn't want to stop yourself. The fashion stuff was interesting from a history stand-point. I guess I'm trying to say I don't like it when the background takes over and the people I'm interested in are there for any other reason than picking their bones like xylophones and drum solos. If what they lost was when they had each other (and it is what they lost) then why did Fanya cling to that stupid guy and throw her sister away? Nothing they ever did was because it was easy. My guess is people thought they were still going to have time and then they are laying around in beds and hair keeps growing after you are dead.

Dov Zeller says

Identical twins Esther and Fanya, daughters of an unhappily married Eastern European Jewish immigrant couple, struggle to make sense of life on the Lower East Side in the early part of the twentieth century. The closer they get to adulthood, the more they understand about the world, and the more trapped, tangled and liberated they are by their individual ways of understanding. Clearly there is no such thing as freedom, but within the confined spaces of history and circumstance, they each make fateful choices. That said, fate itself is nothing in this book if not arbitrary and fickle.

Unterzakhn means undergarments and it's a clever, textured title as the book addresses a broad array of intimacies, from satirical to sartorial, from sisterly to sexual. Most of the sexual unions in the book are fraught, quite a few violent, and most of them comical, and yet the art in the book remains serious and has a certain sober, sharp quality. Surely this is a comedy with a Yiddish sense of irony, but it's also a tragedy with lofty ideals and a drive to set the journey of these sisters, trying to make it from childhood into adulthood in

one piece, next to the travels of Odysseus himself.

The novel is fast paced. It spans many years and zips back and forth between the worlds of Fanya and Esther, worlds which grow further and further apart, and the action is confusing at times, though it is framed, compellingly, by two deaths, similar enough and different enough to bring the book full circle in the spiraling form of a small tornado. The book mainly focuses on the twins, but there is an interlude about half way through that returns to Russia and tells the story of the twins' father's journey from pogrom to exile to marriage and toward America. I appreciate this book enough to wish it were a little slower in its pacing and more grounded and even in its structure. That said, it's a worthwhile exploration of a troubling, vibrant and often romanticized time and place, with two important female characters leading the way.

p.s. I really enjoyed this review <http://www.tcj.com/reviews/unterzakhn/>

David Schaafsma says

Early twentieth century lower east side Jewish historical fiction, focused on women: two twin sisters, one who becomes a prostitute/actress; women raising kids; women gynecological "doctors," prostitutes, moms, etc, but it's a women's world. Gaps in the narrative give it a sort of loose feel, as we jump across time... and the art has a kind of loose feel, too. (One other review used this word, Loose, I think, and I like that description). Kept my attention, liked it, didn't love it, but it is a real contribution to the history of early feminism, women's issues in a time when contraception was illegal (well, that was most of the twentieth century), when women began to theorize why marriage might not be such a good deal for them... Very interesting story, just more complicated and epic than it actually can handle, in my opinion. The story of the twins is the centerpiece, and that is compelling, nevertheless.

Sofia says

This short and stupendous graphic novel made me realize that I've been reading too many books written by men. This may sound like a cliché, but there was no one you could ever imagine this author was not a woman. It doesn't mean it's a graphic novel for women, it's just that this is a book about being a woman and even though it's set in early 1900's Lower East Side, a lot of the decisions these two sisters have to make aren't very different from the choices that are presented to women nowadays. Are you defined by your sexuality? Are you defined by your virtue, by your filial piety, or by motherhood? Are you a better/happier person if you strive to educate yourself rather than being concerned with looks? Are you doomed to become your own mother? Although initially the art threw me off a little (I'd become used to the precise lines of Dan Clowes and Craig Thompson) it grew on me and I now find it very fitting. These girls are adorable and the women they become will not leave you indifferent.

Scott Patrick says

Corman tells a short and moving story about two working-class twin Jewish girls growing up in early 20th century New York. The smart one, Fanya, becomes an apprentice to an underground family planning provider while the pretty one, Esther, joins the seedy entertainment underworld. As a man, I am somewhat reticent to judge too harshly a story that deals mostly with women and their issues, so I'll start with the art.

It's distractingly bad. It's better than I can draw, admittedly, but it nevertheless looks like a child got into a liquor cabinet and decided to doodle angry, hairy fat men and what looks like the genetic equivalent of women crossbred with skinny birds. The art wouldn't be so bad if most of the cast wasn't naked for most of the book. Going back to the story, I felt it was mostly dominated by Esther and her time as a showgirl, with very little time or development given to Fanya, who I actually thought was more interesting. In her storyline, the questions of marriage, reproductive rights and gender equality get broached but never explored. In the end, Corman does an adequate job at tugging heartstrings when it comes to family relationships, love (forbidden and otherwise), and so forth, but in terms of actual substance there's very little present here.

mentalexotica says

I don't know how you could give this graphic novel anything but 5 stars. It's dazzling, dramatic, and devastating. The characters are remarkable of their own merit and the plot is labyrinthine. Such a refreshing departure from the linear narratives of other books in this genre.

Immigrant life in the early years of the 20th century in New York is illustrated in a dark, heavy hand that reflects hardship that is almost casual in its ubiquitousness. The characters are perfectly flawed and set so gratifyingly in their milieu that one forgets to judge their choices and instead root for them - the good, bad, and ugly - so that they all eventually meet their well-deserved, if not entirely unfortunate fates.

Nelliamoci says

Perché le donne, si sa, hanno il potere di essere terribilmente cocciute.

<http://www.finzionimagazine.it/extra/...>

Karyl says

Esther and Fanya are nearly identical twin sisters (Esther has a beauty mark to differentiate herself from her sister) growing up on the Lower East Side in the early 1900s. Yet the paths they take as they grow are both similar and vastly different. One goes to work for a madam, while the other apprentices under a midwife who also performs illegal abortions. It is surprising to see which one flourishes, and which one suffers tragedy.

I wanted to like this book so much more than I did. I loved the artwork; I know other reviewers found it messy or simple, but I felt it fit the storyline perfectly. The problem is, I wanted to know so much more about Fanya's life under Bronia. We see so much more of Esther's rise to fame, but almost nothing of Fanya, other than that she sticks up for her beliefs. I also didn't really understand why the flashback to their father's life was inserted where it was. It felt jarring to be there, and honestly I would have liked to have had that subplot fleshed out a bit more.

At any rate, I did enjoy it. It just wasn't as good as the other graphic novels I have read lately.

Sooraya Evans says

A stressful read that left me with a lousy feeling.

What an awful boring story.

Confusing dialogue. Most characters look the same and for some reason, everyone's just angry all the time.

Elizabeth A says

Once upon a time there were six year old twin sisters, Esther and Fanya. The sisters lived among the hustle and bustle of New York's Lower East Side circa 1910, a place where immigrants struggled to get their piece of the "golden land".

This historical graphic novel explores the coming of age of these sisters - their interests, the choices they make, the different lives they end up living. The bold sketchy black and white art really worked for this story, and I liked the juxtaposition of their young innocence against the hard earned wisdom of their later years.

The title of the book *Unterzakhn* (Yiddish for "Underthings") is wonderfully apt for the lives of women. This feminist text asks the tough questions - what does it mean to be a girl/woman? Who gets to decide? What are the repercussions of not living a life that is expected /proscribed for you?

While on the surface the twins live very different lives, they are similar in that they make choices that are right for them. I grew quite fond of these sisters, and their insistence on living a life of their choosing.

Rick says

Corman's absorbing book follows the lives of twin sisters Esther and Fanya, the children of Russian Jews, on the teeming streets of New York's Lower East Side. Beginning in 1909 when the six-year-old girls work alongside their seamstress mother, the tale follows each of their divergent lives. The young Fanya attracts the attention of the "lady-doctor" Bronia, who performs illegal abortions. Bronia teaches her how to read and mentors Fanya in the medical arts. Corman's evocative portrayal of health care for women in those pre-Roe V. Wade days effectively showcases why abortion must remain legal. Esther finds paying work for a woman who runs a burlesque theater and a whorehouse. While there, she learns about and eventually relies on her sexuality to find her place in society.

Unterzakhn (Yiddish for "Underthings") follows the twins throughout their lives, chronicling their loves, successes, failures, and losses, while exploring the roles -- sexual, intellectual, familial -- of women. Corman produces an exceptional portrayal, deserving much laudatory praise and acclaim, of immigrant and Jewish life on par with the works of Will Eisner and Art Spiegelman.
