



The Jew of New York

Ben Katchor

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In 1825, Mordecai Noah, a New York politician and amateur playwright possessed of a utopian vision, summoned all the lost tribes of Israel to an island near Buffalo in the hope of establishing a Jewish state. His failed plan, a mere footnote in Jewish-American history, is the starting point for Ben Katchor's brilliantly imagined epic that unfolds on the streets of New York a few years later.

A disgraced kosher slaughterer, an importer of religious articles and women's hosiery, a pilgrim peddling soil from the Holy Land, a latter-day Kabbalist, a man with plans to carbonate Lake Erie--these are just some of the characters who move through Katchor's universe, their lives interwoven in a common struggle to settle into the New World even as it erupts into a financial frenzy that could as easily leave them bankrupt as carry them into the future.

The Jew of New York Details

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Author : Ben Katchor

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From Reader Review *The Jew of New York* for online ebook

Jay Gertzman says

The Jew of New York, a graphic novel set in the 1830s (a period where results of the Enlightenment were newly evident), is IMO a vision of the crisis of Jewish identity in the modern world. It is equal to the work of humorists such as I B Singer, Steve Stern, and Nathan Englander, as well as the great graphic artist Wil Eisner (*A Contract with God*, Wil Eisner's New York).

Katchor weaves together various stories of Jews involved in entertainment, the preparation of food and drink, the importation of buttons and beaver pelts, and a scheme to found a utopian community of Jews and native Americans, the lost 10 tribes of Israel. Many of these stories are about the purveying of sacred materials to secular consumers. Illusion is as important as money. There is an undercurrent of "lascivious dream[ing]" and voyeurism. The most bizarre character is an obsessed devotee of an aging stage actress, whose pictures he has posted on trees in his private grove, a parody of a religious sanctuary, implying secularization, and eroticization, of religious sacrifice. Another character is an anti-Semitic writer who wishes to put into a popular play (*The Jew of New York*) his beliefs about Jewish venality. Yet he has a symbiotic relationship with the Jewish people, and says that "without the Judeo-Christian ethos," his own work would be "cheap burlesque."

The remote setting is perfect for lending a detached point of view to the events, which Katchor undercuts with both irony and sympathy. The book is far too complex to be characterized as a conservative art form such as satire.

Katchor is very original, historically acute, and wry. The faces he draws are revealing in their frozen-featured shapes and outsized noses and mouths, with intense eyes interestingly contrasting to facial expressions and postures.

Mister Mank says

Katchor will bury you in impossibly small text, suffocate you in hopelessly murky panels, and bewilder you with shaggy dog tales of 19th century men spellbound by fringe beliefs. But if you're patient — and I am — he'll charm you mercilessly with his eccentric, low-key humor and poeticism. I loved his previous graphic novel, *The Beauty Supply District*, and anticipate loving *The Cardboard Valise*. Katchor's the stuff that cult followings are made of, and I'm a believer.

Gijs Grob says

It seems that Katchor is at an utter loss at what makes a comic strip (or graphic novel for that matter). This book is really flooded with words, which have no interaction with the images, whatsoever. Without the text one has no clue what's going on, what the characters' emotions are, or what the general atmosphere is. Katchor's drawings are very idiosyncratic, but only serve as mere illustrations to the wandering texts. I've no idea why this book has not been written as a story without images. They don't add anything. The cramped text panels make a tiresome read, and even worse, there's virtually no story. Katchor may have delved into an

interesting footnote of history, his book is frustratingly uninviting and unrewarding. 'The Jew of New York' is an epic illustration of how NOT to use the medium of comics.

Megan Brueggemann says

"On a tepid August afternoon in the year 1830...." I read that first line and was like, "Fuck yeah! Awesome!" But then I kept going and kept confusing one character for another, and, well, just getting really confused in general. It's an enjoyably weird, silly take on what is was to be Jewish in a time brimming with prejudices and when "fact" was more fiction than anything else. It went well with my Chipotle.

Adan says

What a weird-ass book featuring such weird-ass characters. Nobody in this book makes a lick of sense, and because of that, they all make sense in the context of the book. Katchor is working on a bunch of different levels, most of which I don't understand because I have very little background on Jewish customs and enterprises in 1820s New York. But I deeply enjoyed how earnestly these nonsensical characters talked about their nonsensical ideas, with the gravitas of the most important scientific lectures, from carbonating Lake Erie and the belief that First Nations peoples were actually the lost tribes of Israel, to the downfall of the beaver species and the taxonomy of the Jews of New York according to a Jewish scientific institute in Berlin. I mean, doesn't that just sound like the most awesome thing ever?

Hillary says

Sometimes I feel like a bad person rating things comparatively poorly when a friend of mine has lent them to me with great enthusiasm. So let me say that I don't think this is a bad book. It's just not a me book. There's evident craft in what Katchor does, weaving together an interesting cast of characters and integrating odd historical fact with issues he wishes to address, but I just don't really like his drawing style, and I don't connect with the material all that much. I love early urban material, and I love strange artifacts from the explosion of print in the United States, but there's just something that doesn't click here, and my guess is that, more than anything, it's the art. It may also be the particular sense of humor, which is perhaps categorizable as both dry and absurdist. I like my absurdism more absurd! I'd still try another of his books, but it strikes me that I may have stayed away previously for the right reasons.

Intortetor says

probabilmente la graphic novel più noiosa che abbia mai letto, nonostante un paio di trovate buffe e qualche momento grafico degno di interesse.
davvero evitabile, e meno male che ci spesi pochissimi euri ad una bancarella dell'usato...

Tyler says

I really had no idea what the hell this book was about when I read it, nor do I now, but I remember it fondly.

AutorSvenHensel says

Well, what a waste of time. The illustrations aren't too shabby, yet way too stereotypical in their portray of the Jewish community and the story was extremely dull. Would not recommend this book to anyone, rather get new graphic novels and have a blast with'em.

Steven Bergson says

The graphic storytelling style has been used by comic book artist-writers to present a variety of eras and locales where Jews have lived, such as modern-day Israel (Sacco), Holocaust-era Poland (Spiegelman), the Depression-era Lower East Side of New York (Eisner) and Communist-era Europe (Giardino). However, few have effectively presented the essence of 19th-century New York as Ben Katchor has in *The Jew of New York*. It is appropriate that Katchor has written this work, that reflects upon the end of the last century, in recent years (i.e. at the end of the current century). The artwork, dialogue and story demonstrate both how different we have become and how similar we still are (for better or worse). For example, the respectable anti-onanism rally Katchor depicts has been replaced with the massive, boisterous pro-life demonstrations that take place outside of government buildings and clinics, yet the zeal and self-righteousness of the demonstrators has not changed in 100 years.

The Jew of New York is not so much a story as it is a collection of character sketches and mini-narratives, which are rather loosely connected to each other. The oddities of some of these characters give the work an air of absurdity, worthy of Ionesco - characters such as Moishe Ketzelsbaum, a wildman who literally seems to worship an actress whom he has never seen and who, after being mistaken for an animal, is killed, stuffed and put on display in a museum ; the New Afflatus commune of "free oxygenator" vegetarians, who are trying to promote a Yiddishized version of English ; Hershel Goulbat, whose stage show involves an American Indian who recites Jewish prayers in perfect Hebrew on a synagogue set ; and Yossel Feinbroyt, who transcribes the sounds of eating and drinking and sells kabbalistic patterns to a handkerchief company.

While showing us what befalls his assortment of New Yorkers, Katchor also manages to comment on attitudes held a century ago, that are still held today: the fear of poor Jewish "public relations" : "Should Kishon be arrested as a common vagrant, we are all implicated. People will talk: 'What sort of a religion drives a man to such aberrant behavior? Maybe there is some truth to those outlandish legends concerning the Jews?'" (pg. 57) ; the ridiculing of the traditional garb of Orthodox Jews: " ... we'll try to renovate your wardrobe. Something a little up-to-date ... the 14th century, perhaps" (pg. 62) ; the concern towards the shrinking Jewish community: "here in America, through assimilation and intermarriage, I fear that ... there will be no Jews left, as I know them, to write about." (pg. 68) ; and the anger towards Jews who are perceived as being unscrupulous businessmen: "They've devised a scheme whereby they can charge people two cents for a drink of water. Can you imagine making a business out of what falls freely from the sky?" (pg. 68). The character Issac Azrael's observation about the information explosion of the time (which is nothing compared to the glut of information we have today) is something librarians can relate to: "There are high-speed steam presses in Boston and New York spewing out more printed material than can ever be

consumed - over three hundred thousand bibles and six million tracts last year alone." (pg. 23).

All of the characters in Katchor's world are trying desperately (and usually, futilely) to try to make money fast in an uncertain, unpredictable economic environment that is rapidly changing, much like our own uncertain "information age". In Katchor's world, acting unconscionably has its price, whether it is Nathan Kishon selling unkosher tongues, Maynard Daizy trying to sensationalize his anti-semitic performance as a Jew by using the special effect of filling the theatre with the smell of pickled herring upon his entrances, or Hershel Goulbat trying to beat up the competition. His graphic novel reminds us all that no matter how difficult life gets, we must strive to treat each other with kindness, decency and respect. This book is recommended for fiction or graphic novel sections of public, community and synagogue library collections.

Lobstergirl says

This graphic novel is utterly strange, occasionally hilarious, and somewhere between clever and brilliant. Its characters include:

- Nathan Kishon, a disgraced butcher who walks around the New York City of 1830 in a bedsheet and is mistaken for an Indian named Elim-min-nopee.
- Moishe Ketzelsbord, a fur trader (whom the Indians call Maurice Cougar), who has abandoned his wife Ramona, a lapsed Anabaptist, pines after a stage actress named Miss Patella, and is obsessed with beavers.
- Miss Patella, whose roles have included Venus in "Bathwater Lost," Capt. Marcus in "The Public Tonsil," Storiote in "Titan's Cracker," Avoir Du Pois in "Punic Love," and Sis in "The Lady's Loophole."
- Mr. Marah, an importer of phylacteries.
- Francis Oriole, who dreams of carbonating Lake Erie.
- A man in an India Rubber suit.

The characters and their stories wend, intertwine and progress toward the debut performance of "The Jew of New York," a play by the anti-Semite Professor V. Solidus. Occasionally a convincingly 1830s piece of dialogue will disgorge something rather more 1999 Park Slope: "The members of the lost tribes, the Karaites, the Samaritans preferred to remain lost...where is that waiter?" Every 10 pages or so Katchor reproduces imaginary playbills, pamphlet covers, menus, or a page from some gazette listing the "likelihood of seats on the Broadway Coach," "values of night soil," "causes of insanity," "strength of mud," and "distances within body." There's a nice interplay between historical reality and fabricated strangeness; sometimes a 19th century advertisement really was that odd, and sometimes events really are as strange as Katchor's depictions.

Mpho3 says

One review I read criticized *The Jew of New York* by calling it a "book of ideas." Yes, exactly! And not your run-of-the-mill ideas either. I found it very inventive, original, thought-provoking, and culturally/historically accurate. That's a lot to pull off in less than 100 pages--especially pages that are largely taken up by drawings. Then again, pictures do say 1,000 words.

Another reviewer noted that you have to know something about Jewish stereotypes in the 1820s to understand this book. I'm a Black African female living in 21st century America, and I had no difficulty understanding the stereotypes or warped values behind those in Katchor's book. Maybe it would be safer to say that you need to have been the victim of some kind of stereotype in your lifetime, but I have to think that most people who would even pick up this sort of book, would be literate enough to know that the stereotypes depicted, are exactly that.

I even disagree with readers who say that the page layouts were difficult to read. If you've ever read sequential art, the layout of this one is pretty straight-forward. If you haven't read this kind of work before, the process of figuring it out becomes intuitive very quickly and adds to the telling. You **do** find the significance of certain details by kind of puzzling over the images and layout. So I guess if you need hand-holding narratives, then this probably isn't the book for you.

This is the first work by Katchor that I've read, and I am very impressed by his ability to say so much about capitalism, nature conservancy, race relations, religiosity, sexuality, theatre, etc. in so few words and how these things comprise /conflict with "progress" and the belief every age has that it is the epitome of advanced human development.

I first heard of Katchor when reading *The Narrative Corpse*, a story told by 69 artists and edited by Art Spiegelman. Unsurprisingly, a lot of people who had a negative reaction to that book, had similar comments about this one, that the "story," as such, wasn't linear, etc. But again, I feel like those readers really missed the point. If you're not so hung up on context, *The Narrative Corpse* is another that you might enjoy, though the two books couldn't be more dissimilar content-wise.

Mark Arvid White says

The Jew of New York is a graphic novel unlike most of them out there. The closest I can compare it with is *Maus*. There is much to be gleaned here, and the attention given to the simplistic style in looking at various characters as they wander through 19th century New York, city and state, is applaudable. But it is a bit tough to follow, and confusing at times to me. Still, I am glad that I read it, and it is quirky enough to be memorable.

Laura says

This was a very different experience than I normally have with graphic novels. There really was no central plot, but there were many subplots that connected in the story. It deals with a lot of themes such as assimilation or non-assimilation of Jews, and even Native Americans.

This graphic novel is a little confusing when you read it. There are many characters and sometimes it's hard to distinguish between them. There is also a lot going on in the story. The story seems to force the reader to

reread many parts to fully understand it. The story also never gives anything to you; the reader has to figure it out on their own making you think critically as you read.

It was also a little difficult to read because I don't have a religious background so I didn't understand a lot of the references that were made. I think readers would enjoy the story more if they had the background knowledge before reading this.

I did somewhat like the art. It was black and white and almost seemed like sketches, but it was still hard to distinguish between characters, but there is a character guide on the title page as reference.

I kind of enjoyed this graphic novel, I found it funny many times when certain things happened in the story. It was just a more difficult read that required more effort than I was expecting, but when you take the time to slowly read it, it really is a good piece of work.

Adam Rabiner says

When you think of the Jew of New York, (the title of a graphic novel by Ben Katchor) who pops to mind, Seinfeld maybe, Woody Allen, Andy Kaufman, or some earlier comedic talent such as Lenny Bruce? I bet you don't picture Shoykhet Nathan Kishon, politician and playwright Mordecai Noah, Moishe Ketzelbourd, a babtized beaver trapper, Abel Marah, a slightly sinister importer of phylacteries, or button merchant Isaac Azarael, just to name a few of the eccentric characters that populate an alternative New York circa 1825. For a graphic novel, the story is not that easy to follow. Many of the Jews are hard to distinguish from each other, a devise that may in fact be intentional, since the story deals explicitly with anti-Semitism (Marah's physiognomy is the stereotypical beady eyed, hook-nosed Jew). Other themes are a country and people in flux, retaining traditions but also assimilating to this new frontier. It's a strange place and a bit of a trip, but definitely worth taking.
