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Glamorous, confident, beautiful - finally, the Jewish screen heroines we've longed for have arrived



Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman is indicative of the new kind of Jewish heroine CREDIT: CLAY ENOS/HANDOUT

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When Michael Frank won the annual Wingate Prize on Friday for his memoir *The Mighty Franks*, a dazzling portrait of an eccentric Los Angeles family, it set the seal on what looks to be an *annus mirabilis* for a new kind of heroine. From Rachel Brosnahan's *Marvellous Mrs Maisel* to Gal Gadot's *Wonder Woman*, she is a million miles away from the kind once depicted by actresses from Barbara Streisland to Maureen Lipman. Glamorous, confident, beautiful and brilliant, the new Jewish heroine has arrived.

As one of the judges of the prize, given for the best depiction of Jewish life in literature, I found myself wishing that somebody like Frank's aunt Hankie had existed in my own. "I considered her quite simply to be the most magical human being I knew," Frank writes, and her combination of intellectual confidence, sophistication and beauty is something that could have come from the pages of *Donna Tartt's novel The Goldfinch* or, indeed, Proust.

It comes as a surprise to many of my closest friends to learn that, despite my Scottish surname and Celtic colouring, I am, according to Jewish law, 100 per cent Jewish.

My mother's mother "married out" to a Gentile artist, and when she did so, her respectable South African family of bankers, doctors, scientists, musicians and academics mourned her like the dead. (How elated they would have been to learn that, two generations later, their grand-daughter would marry back in, to a Dr Cohen.)

Given that Jewishness travels down the female line, however, both I and my daughter still count as part of the tribe. I am proud of this heritage (unlike Muriel Spark, who repudiated hers as a Catholic convert and, as recently revealed in the TLS, even threatened to sue the academic Bryan Cheyette for libel on revealing it) and have always believed in embracing it with enthusiasm.



Rachel Brosnahan in Amazon show The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel CREDIT: SARAH SHATZ

Yet growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, it was challenging work to find Jewish heroines to identify with. Not, of course, in terms of courage (Anne Frank) or wit (Nora Ephron). But what you long for as a young woman is also glamour, style and beauty; and although I was dimly aware that Lauren Bacall and Elizabeth Taylor were both Jewish (the former by heritage, the latter by conversion), it was, crucially, never a feature of the roles they played. They were simply "exotic" or mysterious. Generally, and despite all the Biblical heroines like Delilah and Bathsheba, Jewish women have been portrayed in popular culture as parodies of femininity that verge on (and in many cases are) anti-Semitic. Anyone who has ever heard the lyrics of Frank Zappa's song about Jewish Princesses will know what I mean.

Hollywood has, of course, always been brimming with Jewish talent, and so have the British artistic and intellectual worlds. Yet Jewishness itself has not been celebrated as something interesting or valuable in the same way that, say, being Italian or Greek has. (Typically, a Jewish actress would find herself being cast as one of those nationalities

instead.) Stories have tended to be doomily focussed on suffering, injustice, neurosis and anger: hardly surprising in view of the age-old persecution of the race, and its attempted annihilation via the Holocaust.

Yet where were the ones that celebrated its warmth, vitality, humour and resilience? I could think of only one, Fiddler on the Roof, which was dated even in the 1980s; and no matter how hard I looked, I could never find female characters who reflected the wonderful real-life women I came to encounter.



Despite the blond hair and blue eyes, Scarlett Johansson is actually Jewish CREDIT: NICHOLAS HUNT/GETTY IMAGES FEE

All this has, however, changed, especially in the past year. With the very Nordic-looking and sounding Scarlett Johansson making it clear in a TV documentary last November that she is Jewish, and Natalie Portman, Mila Kunis, Kate Hudson, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Jennifer Connelly and Rachel Weisz starring in an endless string of silver screen roles, there is now a bevy of cool, elegant women standing up as icons.

Last month, Amazon's hit comedy series Marvellous Mrs Maisel, about a 1950s New York wife and mother who, dumped by her adulterous husband becomes a stand-up comedienne, won two Golden Globes. It is, quite simply, bliss. Played by the enchanting Rachel Brosnahan, its twenty-five-year old heroine is, despite anxieties over entertaining the rabbi to dinner and maintaining a chic Upper West Side address, a creation anyone can enjoy. What young woman, madly in love for the first time, has not frantically re-applied make-up while her partner is sleeping? What woman, disappointed in love, does not yearn to get the best revenge in the form of professional success?

Dauntless and good-natured, Marvellous Mrs Maisel, with its exquisite 1950s clothes, spirited heroine and charming period music, has cheered audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. For once, every major character but one is Jewish. Yet while the jokes are laced with the self-deprecating irony familiar in comedies from the Marx Brothers to Woody Allen, Midge's family and friends are universal archetypes. We know these people, with

their loving anxiety, their pride, fallibility and hopes: they are Every Family. Given the resort to stereotypes in even the most sympathetic portrayals of Jewish culture (including, oddly, many written or directed by Jews) this series' avoidance of lazy tropes or condescension is a significant accomplishment. It's very, very funny, and its heroine is stunning. A second series has been commissioned.



Rachel Weisz is set to play a woman returning to her Orthodox Jewish community in new film 'Obedience' CREDIT: SAMIR HUSSEIN/WIREIMAGE

Interestingly, Midge Maisel's perfectionism also manages to be comically celebratory of the femininity that Orthodox Jewish women, however intelligent, educated and opinionated, are expected to conceal. It's a custom that is also challenged in Disobedience, the hotly-anticipated film of Naomi Alderman's best-selling first novel, released in April, which stars Rachel Weisz as a woman returning to an Orthodox Jewish community in North London for the funeral of her father. Liberated by New York, she re-encounters the love of her life – another woman, played by Rachel McAdams, whose wig and dowdy “frumm” dress are the outward manifestations of a religious convention as strict and strange to most British Jews as those of the Amish are to Anglicans. Essentially, it's a story about a woman acknowledging her true self. The Oscar-winning Weisz is internationally acclaimed, yet this is only the second time she has played a specifically Jewish role (the first, a year ago, being in the film Denial).

There is, I suspect, a sombre reason for this, in that the Muslim community is now the one so often demonised as alien and dangerous, making it less risky, perhaps, to play a Jew on-screen. Yet I also think that in any year, a book like this Wingate winner's would have melted all hearts because of its captivating real-life heroine. You fall in love with her, much as the author does, and even when the comedy darkens, her magnetism remains.

A former Hollywood scriptwriter, Hankie was a remarkable character at odds with what is normal. “You don't want to be ordinary, do you, Lovey? To fit in?,” she asks her young

charge in Michael Frank's excellent work. "Fitting in is a form of living death. You want to stand apart from your peers, always".

Her words could stand for all those who are now stepping forwards into the limelight.

The Mighty Franks by Michael Frank is published by 4th Estate (£16.99). To order your copy for £14.99 plus p&p call 0844 871 1514 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk

Amanda Craig's latest novel, The Lie of the Land is published by Abacus, £8.99 and she will be discussing Fictional Families at War in Jewish Book Week on Sunday 4 March.