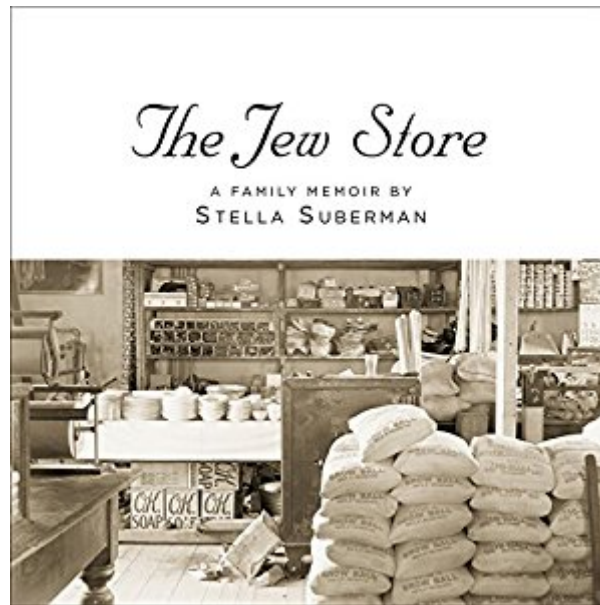


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The Jew Store: A Family Memoir



Synopsis

In 1920, in small-town America, the ubiquitous dry goods store was usually owned by Jews and often referred to as "the Jew store". That's how Stella Suberman's father's store, Bronson's Low-Priced Store, in Concordia, Tennessee, was known locally. The Bronsons were the first Jews to ever live in that tiny town of one main street, one bank, one drugstore, one picture show, one feed and seed, one hardware, one barber shop, one beauty parlor, one blacksmith, and many Christian churches. Aaron Bronson moved his family all the way from New York City to Tennessee to prove himself a born salesman - and much more. Told by Aaron's youngest child, *The Jew Store* is that rare thing - an intimate family story that sheds new light on a piece of American history. With a novelist's sense of scene, suspense, and, above all, characterization, Stella Suberman turns the clock back to a time when rural America was more peaceful but no less prejudiced, when educated liberals were suspect, and when the Klan was threatening to outsiders. In that setting she brings to life her remarkable father, a man whose own brand of success proves that intelligence, empathy, liberality, and decency can build a home anywhere.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This jewel of a book richly deserves five stars. The author's depiction of a Jewish family living in a small town in Tennessee in the 1920s is beautifully written. Especially impressive is the way the author wrote about anti-semitism without exploiting the issue for dramatic effect. (Compare this memoir, set in the 1920s, with moronic modern flicks like "School Ties" in which students at a

boarding school in the 1950s shout at a Jewish student, "We hate you because you're Jewish." Give me a break.) Just as the author's family's Jewishness is dealt with subtly, so are the townspeople drawn: all of them seem genuine, not stereotyped. So restrained is the author, yet so talented, that a low-key but powerful scene toward the end of the book sneaked up on me: I found that I had tears running down my face as I read. I miss the townspeople and the author's family. I wish I could go back in time and drive to that town and find all of them still there. This memoir is far superior to the overrated *Angela's Ashes*; *The Jew Store* is the book that should have won the Pulitzer Prize.

I read "The Jew Store" after seeing author Stella Suberman on Booktv. I was impressed with her, as she is young looking and quick thinking into her ninth decade. Her story relates an unusual childhood, growing up in a small Tennessee town in the 20s and 30s where her immigrant parents ran a dry-goods business that catered to the lower income residents. They were the only Jewish residents, occupying a unique niche in the life of the area. Her sunny-natured, optimistic father flourished there, becoming southern in speech and outlook. The adjustment was harder for her sensitive, traditional mother. For Stella and her older sister and brother, there was no question of adjustment, as life in Tennessee was the only life they knew, and they were generally accepted and able to take root. Suberman is a wonderful writer, as one might expect for a "retired editor" of many years experience. Her style is vividly descriptive, with a perfect balance of the characters' inward and outward lives. "The Jew Store" is a joy to read. Suberman's book deserves the highest recommendation and will appeal to readers of all ages.

The life of the Bronson's in a typical 1920's midsouth rural town is not so different than what many baby boomers experienced as Gentiles in middle America in the 1950's. As I read I could hear in my mind's eye the rhetoric of fear, disapproval and sometimes hate that the good Christians of our town reflected in their covert and even overt behaviors regarding Jews, Blacks, Asians and yes, Catholics. It is not so different than what we hear Southern Baptist Ministers saying about Muslims after 9/11. Suberman's character development of the towns people with which he endured is classically detailed. She brought Ms. Brookie to life for me. I was immediately able to identify the Ms. Brookie in our town. Besides great characters the book taught me a great deal about the phenomenon of a [Jewish] Store. My family routinely shopped in them because they had what farm families needed at the price they could afford. I just didn't know that is what they were. Although most have not survived this midwest rural city of 160,000 folks still have a few and I still shop in them because they still have what I want at the best price. towns. Thank you Ms. Superman for a

good read, some nostalgia and a new awareness of the ignorance of many who sit in our town's church pews every Sunday.

Someone once said that acceptance and assimilation in America has done more to destroy the Jewish way of life than all the antisemites since the beginning of time. "The Jew Store" is evidence that there is some truth to that. Born myself to a Russian Jewish immigrant father; and a first generation Jewish mother in post World War II Bronx, I recognized each person in her story as archetypes. Suberman's family is very familiar to me, down to their choice of language, attitudes, and alternately suffocating/ indifferent family ties. Suberman appears to fault her mother Reba for wanting her children to retain Jewish cultural and religious traditions. She is portrayed unfairly as a nervous, sometimes shrewish woman who drove her son away from home just so he could be bar mitvah, and who drove the entire family from an otherwise blissful life in Concordia just to prevent Miriam from marrying a non-Jew. Father Aaron, on the other hand, who was ready to assimilate completely for an easier American way of life for his children, is the hero of her piece. "The Jew Store," is an important tale of genuine family and community values, against a backdrop of the type of situational American values depicted so well by Mark Twain. The character that is most pivotal and interesting, Miss Brookie, is the least explored, probably because she was long dead when Suberman started to write and she had no heirs. What made her open her home and heart so wide to this family? I still want to know!

I don't usually take book recommendations, even from friends, so I want to thank Phil for "foisting" this book on me -- I am very glad I took his word for it this time. This book really took me by surprise; as both history and memoir, this is definitely NOT my usual "type." Reading almost like a novel for all its southern warmth and charm, this memoir evokes a vivid time and place that will never exist again. Through her delightful and unforgettable characters, Suberman tells the story of a family who never quite finds a home -- until, too late, they realize Concordia -- the pseudonymous town in which her family lived -- had perhaps been home all along. This is a book about Jews in small towns, but it is also a book about strangers of all kinds, and towns of all kinds. Its lessons are never trite or cheap; in fact, the lessons here, if there are any, are bittersweet with right and wrong choices of all kinds. This is the story of a family that could be any family, and about the kind of success that goes beyond the material -- that forges a lasting legacy for generations to come. Worthwhile reading for anyone who's ever wondered about the other side of history; the stories that don't always get told...

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