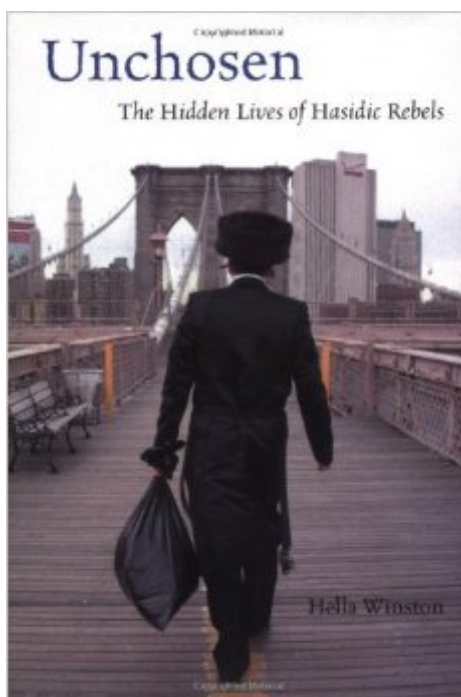


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Unchosen: The Hidden Lives Of Hasidic Rebels



Synopsis

Honorable Mention in the 2012 Casey Medals for Meritorious Journalism When Hella Winston began talking with Hasidic Jews for her doctoral dissertation in sociology, she was excited to be meeting members of the highly insular Satmar sect. While several Jewish journalists and scholars have produced largely admiring books describing the Lubavitch way of life and that group's outreach efforts to unaffiliated Jews, very little has been written about the many other Hasidic sects in the United States. Unlike Lubavitchers, members of these other groups are raised to avoid all unnecessary contact with outside society, including contact with other Jews. Winston's access was all but unprecedented. As a nonobservant Jew with little prior exposure to the Hasidic world, she never could have guessed what would happen next—that she would be introduced, slowly and covertly, to Hasidim from Satmar and other sects who were deeply unhappy with their highly restrictive way of life and sometimes desperately struggling to leave their communities. First there was Yossi, a young man who, though deeply attached to the Hasidic culture in which he was raised, longed for a life with fewer restrictions and more tolerance. Yossi's efforts at making such a life, however, were being severely hampered by his fourth grade English and math skills, his profound ignorance of the ways of the outside world, and the looming threat that pursuing his desires would almost certainly lead to rejection by his family and friends. Then she met Dini, a young wife and mother whose decision to deviate even slightly from Hasidic standards of modesty led to threatening phone calls from anonymous men, warning her that she needed to watch the way she was dressing if she wanted to remain a part of the community. Someone else introduced Winston to Steinmetz, a closet bibliophile worked in a small Judaica store in his community and spent his days off anxiously evading discovery in the library of the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary, whose shelves contain non-Hasidic books he is forbidden to read but nonetheless devours, often several at a sitting. There were others still who had actually made the wrenching decision to leave their communities altogether. Already called a "must read" by Hasidic blogger "Shtreimel," *Unchosen* tells the fascinating stories of these and other rebel Hasidim, serious questioners who long for greater personal and intellectual freedom than their communities allow. In so doing, *Unchosen* forces us to reexamine the history of these communities and asks us to consider what we choose not to see when we romanticize them.

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Customer Reviews

In this attractively-written little book we learn something that may but should not surprise us: not all of these black-clad Hasidim that we encounter in the streets of Williamsburg, Crown Heights, or Borough Park are happy in their skins. Some seem to be desperately unhappy, wishing, somehow, to escape into the larger American (or American Jewish) landscape . But, not surprisingly, such an escape is not easy for someone who has spent all his life in the closeted, chaperoned, cosseted world of Hasidism. Hella Winston calls these escapers or would-be escapers "Hasidic rebels." She has talked to quite a few such people, and their stories make interesting enough reading. And these stories are no doubt important. But there is a question that needs elucidation: important for what ? Winston's book is based on research that she did for her dissertation in sociology, but the book is not the dissertation itself. That work, it appears, remains to be completed. When it is, she will no doubt give us social and historical context, and it is such context that will clarify how and why these "Hasidic rebels" have something important to teach us. A consideration of context can take any of a number of forms: 1) Hasidism has a long history. These current "rebels" are not the first in this history. How do they compare (or contrast) with earlier ones ? 2) As Winston points out, there are a number of Hasidic groups -- the Satmar and the Lubavitch are two of many. How do the "rebels" fit into the internal politics of each ? How, in other words, do the different groups differ (or resemble one another) in the treatment of such dissidents ? This question could give us important information into the variety that is today's Hasidism.

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