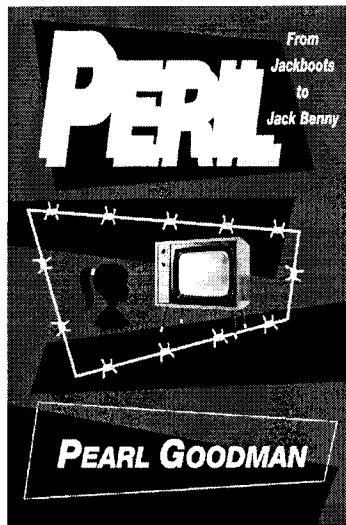


Book Review: *Peril: From Jackboots to Jack Benny*

and Conversation with author Pearl Goodman

by Jason Winkler, Clinical Member, OSP



Pearl Goodman, psychotherapist and author, has not written a Holocaust memoir. The book, *Peril*, is a narrative account of Goodman's youth in 1960s and 70s Toronto, being Jewish and a daughter of Holocaust survivors. Vignettes of her parents' respective journeys through concentration camps in Europe between 1939 and 1945 are presented throughout,

but the focus is not their survival story. These are stories about a girl and young woman trying to locate her place within the social hierarchies of childhood and adolescence, the rituals of the day, and the emotional landscapes of her young Canadian life juxtaposed with her parents' immigrant experiences and traumatic histories. Pop culture, complexity of emotion (post-traumatic stress, grief, humour), social mores and relational observations provide the fabric for what *Peril* is.

Freedom is a theme that runs throughout the book, not surprisingly, given that she was raised by parents who had lived through genocide and suffered some of the most oppressive and traumatic circumstances one could imagine emerging from alive. Readers may find themselves rooting for the protagonist as she works hard at carving out her own freedom and making a life for herself in which she feels she is 'right' somehow, that she belongs, that her efforts could lead to wish fulfillment. Goodman's recollections of her first trip to summer camp and her first teenage house parties—all charged with yearning and possibility—are particularly splendid and are just a small sampling of the deft storytelling on offer.

In contrast, one is also presented with a wider lens to see what is happening in the family system when trauma has an insidious presence in the most mundane of daily

events. *Peril* tells several stories, concurrently: a story of a young person growing up and absorbing everything around her, a story of immigrant parents, a story of trauma and survival, a story of family love, and a story of 1960/70s Toronto in a critical phase of its own coming-of-age.

Whether it is the first expanded privileges of having a bicycle and new geographic parameters to explore, or the intricacies of negotiating relational opportunities with the introduction of romantic and sexual feelings, Goodman tells us stories we may well recognize from our own histories. From television shows (The Ed Sullivan Show, Perry Mason, Bonanza, Leave it to Beaver) and music (The Doors, King Crimson, Miles Davis) to fashion, beauty and domestic products, cigarettes, cocktails, modes of transport (bicycles, TTC, cars), to the pop culture of CHUM radio and the top 40 charts, nostalgia is abundant—for both reader and author. Readers who have grown up in Toronto may find the book a vivid trip down the memory channels of their own early life. The book acts as a terrific time capsule and one is easily immersed in Goodman's recollections of the wonder and excitement in some of her past experiences.

The book coheres as a long-form narrative that traverses past and present but, as an author, Goodman considers herself to be a teller of short stories first and foremost. "I had been writing short stories for several years, when my brother, also a writer, read a story of mine that was more autobiographical in content. He was struck by the writing and suggested that I write, what he termed, the post-Holocaust story which would weave stories such as the one he'd read into a more complete narrative of my childhood in our family." What emerged from her almost four-year writing process is a highly descriptive and engaging journey through the eyes of a curious and persistent young girl trying to find her own way through a quickly changing and sometimes resistant world. It acts as a veritable mini-encyclopedia of cultural references, date-stamping time and social context on this young person's discoveries of the pleasures and pains necessary for her growth.

"The tone of the book is, much like me as a person, using humour as a balance to look for light in the darkness of

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those times,” says Goodman, as we are bathed in the glow of sunlight beaming in through the window we are seated next to. She wants her reader to feel some of the visceral shock she felt at certain moments growing up, when her world was punctuated by the formidable and perplexing anger and rigidity of her mother, in particular, while her father would oscillate between deference to, alignment with and protection of his wife when he got angry. They were trying to maintain a kind of control she couldn’t understand. At one point in *Peril*, she describes her feeling as “a dull boulder that weighed me down and made it hard to move around in a world so at odds with the people closest to me.” She also wants her reader to understand how much love and tenderness there could be between her, her parents and her older brother. The emotional rhythms at home were often just immensely perplexing.

“My parents were traumatized Holocaust survivors who became atheists and rejected much of Judaism. I had my own struggles with being Jewish and I was confused by what they expected of me.” This is no more evident than in Goodman’s stories of dating and wanting to spend time with boys who happened to not be Jewish. “My mother wouldn’t even go to a Jewish doctor when I was growing up. Tall, white, gentiles were who she would place her trust in.” Confusingly, her Holocaust-survivor, civil-rights supporting, relatively progressive, secular/atheist mother was horrified and enraged that her daughter’s friendship with a black boy or a gentile could lead to SEX and interfaith marriage and that it would seemingly be done in the spirit of trying to betray her. The only acceptable scenario would be a Jewish boy and even that might have had myriad restrictions on it. For the young heart, many instances of being stonewalled took its toll.

In *Peril*, she writes: “It was so easy to inflame them. Innocuous things to me were catastrophic to them and seemed to hurt them, and, in turn, their explosive reactions hurt me.” On her mother: “I was dumbfounded by her ability to put 2 and 2 together and get 4.1, repeated to infinity... she was sure she could see what was implicit, in ways that lay beyond the scope of even the most intuitive people...no way she was going to be fooled.” Much of *Peril* highlights the ongoing paradoxes Goodman faced in navigating life between her desires, her parents’ demands and restrictions, the norms of her social world and her comparisons to others around her. Her way of describing the tensions of existing within these realms is highly evocative and emotionally stirring.

Being that we are two psychotherapists sitting down to talk about her experience of writing and promoting a book, it feels natural to speak about how the worlds of therapist and author overlap or collide. As a therapist, is there a compromise in her privacy that has to be made? For Goodman, this has not been a prominent feature of her experience. “I have written about events that took place in my life a very long time ago, so it has never felt too exposing for me. There are many details about me and what my life is now, that are nowhere in the book, so it allows me to maintain my privacy in the public realm.” She generally has not done much process with psychotherapy clients about the story of her family and early life being out in the public domain, accessible to them. “No one has come back to me with a need to discuss it in sessions, and clients generally wouldn’t know about the book unless they happened upon it themselves. If they have read it, the person sitting across from them is not the same person as described in the book.” She is open and ready to do this if ever the need arises, as she would anyway, a matter of course in her practice as a relational psychotherapist.

Has she found that her narrative-building experience through her writing has impacted her work as a therapist at all? “The reciprocal impact of therapy and the written word has, in my experience, been more related to being a client rather than a therapist. The most pertinent thing I’ve learned is that it’s okay to speak of these things, to tell these stories, and to describe these feelings.” Making sense of her world is what motivated her, and her rich memories provided the content. She only had fragments of her parents’ history so she paralleled her experience with theirs to tell both stories. Her own personal therapy, psychotherapy training, and self-exploration in creative expression as a short-story writer were significant cornerstones. As she writes in the introduction, “I am a stickler for detail, gathering and ferreting to make sense, remembering and remembering, following tangents like a squirrel that traverses every limb of the tree.” Expressing those memories has helped Goodman name and integrate what she experienced.

It struck her profoundly how trauma had pervaded the core of her parents’ beings, while reading *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Herman for the first time, in her psychotherapy training at the Toronto Institute for Relational Psychotherapy (TIRP). “It was like a whole other level of awareness opened up for me in understanding my parents’ reactivity to most things.” Much like Goodman’s own experience of growing up into her adult years, the reader of *Peril* begins to understand more and more about how her parents came to know one another, the experiences of traumatic loss they had

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endured, the travels and travails they faced in finding a place in the world to live, to be, and to inhabit the freedom that befell them against the tremendous odds.

We begin to understand the particular needs of these two fragile yet indomitable souls and how their worldviews would always somehow conflict with their children's personal evolutions, needs and longings. We learn more about acceptance and forgiveness and how the force of early negative emotional experiences leave their stains and imprints at the deepest levels of self, while still allowing for an openness to resolution. It is very moving to witness the unfolding of Goodman's relationship with each of her parents as age determines an eventual role reversal. There is much love in this family story, but it is a

love hard-fought for and is, along the way, often difficult to feel at ease in.

A series of sharply observed short stories — brought together seamlessly into a memoir by default — *Peril* invites its readers to follow Goodman's journey of implicit memory, vicarious trauma, individuation, narrative and integration. The path is sometimes perilous, but often humorous, always incisive and never frivolous or without great meaning.

Peril: From Jackboots to Jack Benny is published by Bridgeross Communications and is available at Caversham Booksellers, Chapters/Indigo, through Amazon.ca, and in Kobo and Kindle versions. Copies can also be purchased directly from Pearl Goodman at perilthebook@gmail.com or at the OSP AGM display tables on November 14, 2014.