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Mel Brooks: Disobedient Jew

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Mel Brooks: Disobedient Jew

Abstract

This is a book review of Jeremy Dauber, *Mel Brooks: Disobedient Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, Jewish Lives Series, 2023).

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Author Notes

Jennifer Caplan is Associate Professor and The Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati Chair in Judaic Studies at The University of Cincinnati. Her research is in American religion and popular culture. Her first book, *Funny, You Don't Look Funny: Judaism and Humor from the Silent Generation to Millennials* was published in 2023. She is currently working on a book on Jewish identity in comic books.

Dauber, Jeremy. *Mel Brooks: Disobedient Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, Jewish Lives Series, 2023).

Jeremy Dauber's new book, *Mel Brooks: Disobedient Jew*, is a must-have for any Mel Brooks fan. It's also an extremely complicated book for one that only runs 163 pages of text. The book is part of the Yale University Press "Jewish Lives" series, which currently contains 60 some books and publishes five to six new titles each year. The series is—according to their website—meant to “illuminate the imprint of Jewish figures upon literature, religion, philosophy, politics, cultural and economic life, and the arts and sciences.” To accomplish this the series chooses academics (for the most part) and asks them to write about figures they know well, or whose work is central to their own in order to produce, “lively, deeply informed books that explore the range and depth of the Jewish experience from antiquity to the present.”

The series, then, is comprised of cross-over books in the truest sense of the word. They're by academics, through an academic press, but are intended for a non-academic audience. This is a very difficult line to walk; when you write an academic book, you expect a reader who wants to follow you through deep dives into theories and ideas and appreciates a thick, juicy footnote. If you instead write a popular book, you go into it assuming a reader who is possibly interested in your topic, but not necessarily on an academic level, and you write a book meant to bring broad ideas and exciting connections to readers who are looking forward to being guided through an intellectual story. A crossover book is neither of these things, and both of these things, and that makes it a difficult trick to land.

Dauber does land it, perhaps as well as anyone can, but that still leaves a book that skates tantalizingly close to the edge of academic depth before moving away, and that introduces new and exciting ways of thinking about Brooks and his work without the space to really explore them.

Highlighting these formal limitations of a crossover book aren't meant as a critique of how Dauber navigated them. It is a warning to an academic reader that you will find here both more and less than you may be expecting, but the more is really exciting and is worth the read. In fact, many readers may want to read Dauber's book first, and then Brooks' recent autobiography *All About Me* (Penguin Random House, 2021). Read in that order, Dauber's analysis of Brooks as a person would give a reader of the autobiography a whole new way of viewing Brooks' self-presentation. What Dauber does so well in this book is think about Brooks' career as a trajectory, as opposed to offering discrete analyses of individual movies. Dauber's beginning with Brooks' work in television is especially engaging, as these are things that often end up as side notes or brief references about Brooks' early years. Dauber, on the other hand, makes a compelling case that Brooks' early work wasn't just throwaway experience he got on the road to making *The Producers*: rather, it is vital to understanding him, and deserves to be considered on its own merits.

Dauber writes extensively about Brooks' work on Sid Caesar's staff for *Your Show of Shows*, *Caesar's Hour*, and other variety specials and reunions Caesar did. But Dauber also looks closely at Brooks' work on *Get Smart*, which is a much less-frequently discussed building block of Brooks' career. Dauber's discussion of *The Producers* and *Blazing Saddles* may offer the most to researchers, especially Dauber's highlighting of Brooks' love of men. Dauber points out that Brooks really appreciated and reveled in friendships between men. His friendship with Carl Reiner was legendary in its productivity, but there were many homey articles about the two in the years before Reiner's death in 2020. The two had slipped into a comfortable dotage together, watching TV and eating sandwiches, and even when COVID lockdowns precluded being together in person they would watch TV together virtually. Dauber points out that almost all of Brooks' films have this homosocial element to them, and are ultimately about the bonds between men. This is a new

and potentially generative way of reading Brooks' work and I look forward to other scholars taking up this reading of his oeuvre.

The book is not a work of hagiography, and Dauber does not pull his punches (much). Dauber is up front about the decline in quality across the trajectory of Brooks' career and makes it clear that in his estimation Brooks probably peaked with *Blazing Saddles*, and by the 1990s his best work was WELL behind him. To a certain extent I think Brooks functions similarly to *Saturday Night Live* in that everyone thinks the last time *SNL* was really good was when they were a teenager. People probably remember the first Brooks movie they saw fondly, up to a point, so to this Xennial I think *Spaceballs* is better than Dauber gives it credit for but by the time we get to *Dracula: Dead and Loving It* I think it's just as well that Dauber chooses not to engage with it, and even better that the book came out before *A History of the World Part II*. Dauber's choices allow us to remember Brooks at his best, and he does not belabor a takedown of Brooks at his worst. It does not need to be exhaustive as Dauber is painting a picture, not cataloging a career in its entirety.

The other way in which Dauber's book is a valuable case study in non-hagiography is his depiction of Brooks the man. One does not necessarily come away from this book with a desire to sit down and share a meal with Brooks. He seems to have been difficult to work with, had womanizing tendencies (although if those continued after his second marriage Dauber does not indicate it), was a disengaged father, and often took criticism poorly. Luckily, Brooks' failings are human and reasonable, and Brooks remains, in his own words, a national treasure. Dauber shows how to walk a line between slavish devotion to the reputation of your subject (especially a living subject, in this case) and the needed distance to present unflattering details where they are found. Brooks may have been difficult to work with and had extramarital affairs with stars such as Eartha

Kitt, and he may have even been physically abusive to his first wife (according to her divorce filing) but he was not a true monster. Dauber does a poorer job of modeling for other scholars what to do when dealing with those who potentially are more monstrous.

It is inevitable that a book about Brooks will also involve Woody Allen. Their careers intersected at several points, and throughout the 1970s and 1980s they defined the poles of Jewish humor, between Allen's nebbish, intellectual explorations of city life and Brooks' farcical, over-the-top pageants of scatology and sex. To be clear, this is not a book about Allen, and Dauber had no obligation to devote more of the book to Allen than he did. Additionally, there is no consensus on how to deal with figures like Allen, especially when, as in the case of Allen, they have been convicted only in the court of public opinion. Nevertheless, I think history will show that Dauber's approach of not mentioning, even in a footnote, why discussions of Allen are fraught, or why simply comparing the two as though their presentations of Jewishness are equally neutral (pp. 123-125) is not ultimately the winning approach. I do not pretend to know what the right or even winning approach is or will (in the fullness of time) be, but I cannot help but think total silence isn't it.

Dauber was set a nearly impossible task; write a Jewish biography of a man who for so many embodies "Jewish humor," and who himself does not believe Jewish humor exists. In this Dauber has exceeded all possible expectations. Regardless of whether Brooks himself thinks that Jewish humor is a misnomer, and that his own Jewishness doesn't really impact most of his humor, Dauber paints a picture of a man whose Jewishness built him from the ground up in many ways, and whose humor cannot be fully understood in isolation from his Jewishness. Dauber brings new, exciting insights into the discussion of Brooks, his career, and his legacy and offers us new ways of reading his films. He reminds us why *The Twelve Chairs* and *Silent Movie* are every bit as

important in understanding Brooks' place in American cinema as *Young Frankenstein* or *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* and he makes a convincing case that while Brooks' feet may have been clay, his mind was still a divine thing.