

Her harrowing Hasidic life

Deborah Feldman takes us into the oppressive world she grew up in

UNORTHODOX: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots, by Deborah Feldman. Simon & Schuster, 254 pp., \$23.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

From the materials of a life resembling one of the darker Grimm's fairy tales, young memoirist Deborah Feldman gives us "Unorthodox," a true story of abandonment, twisted caretakers, arranged marriage and sexual misery. Denied every kind of nourishment except the doughy, shimmering plates of food obsessively produced by her Holocaust-survivor grandmother, this proud, stubborn girl, nonetheless, heard and followed the call of her own true self.

Feldman was born in 1986 in Brooklyn within the sect of Satmar Hasidic Jews, a group that came originally from a tiny village on the border of Hungary and Romania. Like other Hasidic groups, the Satmar are focused on preserving traditional Yiddish culture, and on having as many offspring as possible, as they see every child born to them as revenge against Hitler. Feldman, however, is the rare only child in this community, raised by grandparents and a cruel, stingy aunt.

Where were her parents? Feldman's English mother, lured into a marriage with promises of material abundance, found that her American husband was a mentally handicapped and emotionally disturbed man. She fled his family's clutches not long after Deborah was born but was forced to leave her behind. Deborah's father, too, was absent, though lurking in the neighborhood as a filthy, confused itinerant.

As if she were growing up in a shtetl centuries earlier, Feldman's Williamsburg childhood



Hasidic Jews in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. "Unorthodox" pulls back the curtain on this closed community.



Deborah Feldman

is devoid of serious education and filled with indoctrination about the sinfulness of the female body, secular life and even the English language. "Zeidy says the English language acts like slow poison to the soul," she writes. "If I speak and read it too much, my soul will become tarnished." Unbowed, she sneaks to the Jewish bookstore and to the public

library, where she devours "The Chosen," "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," "Matilda," "Harry Potter" and "Jane Eyre." These books nourish her spirit and put in her hands the liberatory power of storytelling. As she becomes a reader and then a writer, Feldman reinvents herself as a human being.

She is barely 17 when her aunt arranges her marriage to a young man she meets only twice before the wedding day. Despite the horrible experiences she has in a marriage training class — where she is trained to protect her husband from her impurity by using the mikvah (a public bath, which ends up giving her shingles) — she can't help dreaming that the relationship will bring friendship, romance and love into her lonely life. This exchange from their first meeting seems full of promise:

"You know I'm not a regular girl. I mean I'm normal, but I'm different."

"I can see that by now," he says, smiling slightly.

"Well, I just thought I should

tell you, you know. Warn you, maybe. I'm not easy to handle."

"Eli relaxes suddenly in his seat, spreading his hands out on the table in front of him. I notice the knotted veins protruding beneath thick calloused knuckles, the lines in his open palms thick and red. They are the hands of a workman, masculine yet graceful.

"That's what I'm good at, you know," he says, giving me an earnest look. "I'm the kind of person that can handle anyone."

This turns out to be far from true. The marriage is doomed by Eli's inability to consummate it, a failure that brings on the interference of both families, whose remedies include throwing away all the bride's

books. A year of humiliation, panic attacks, doctors, hypnotists and painful procedures finally yields the desired result. Suddenly, Feldman is both pregnant and burdened with a sex-crazed husband who can have her whenever he wants because the female body is considered "clean" during the nine months of gestation.

She manages one small rebellion — a move to the largely Hasidic suburb of Monsey, N.Y., away from her aunt and her mother-in-law. To that achievement, she soon adds a driver's license. She grows out her shaved hair and goes to a salon for a cut and color. After the baby is born, she enrolls in a degree program at Sarah Lawrence, buys her first pair of blue jeans and takes steps toward divorce, moving surely to fulfill the pledge she has made to herself and her son. "I won't keep quiet forever, baby, I promise. One day I will open my mouth and I will never shut it again."

Let's hope she never does.

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