

differences in less than a year, and after that “she was the best wife and mother you could ask for.” (115). These are strange words from a man proud of always moving on. But these are minor caveats. *Leo: a Life* offers a fine explanation of how Canadian Jews have become so comfortable in Canadian society that they are, as Morton Weinfeld rightly observed, “like everyone else but different.”

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Laxer, James. *Red Diaper Baby: A Boyhood in the Age of McCarthyism*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004. 184 pp.

In his latest book, *Red Diaper Baby: A Boyhood in the Age of McCarthyism*, James Laxer takes the reader on a journey into his own past as he examines and re-visits his youth—a child growing up in Canada in a communist household. A prolific writer and professor of political science at York University, Laxer’s work is a highly readable, compelling, personal account. He immediately draws in his readers; from the first anecdote on the first page, *Red Diaper Baby* proves a truly accessible memoir. Laxer offers a well-developed portrait of a young boy growing up in a communist family in Ontario and Quebec, demonstrating the challenges of this somewhat anomalous background, delving into the struggles of navigating a double identity. Through his vivid recollections, the reader is invited along on the journey as young James grows up and begins to question the communist party line and his family’s connection to it. The book ultimately succeeds as a powerful exploration of this chapter in the boy’s life and in Canadian history.

The book details many of Laxer’s personal struggles with his identity. He articulates his feelings about being half-Jewish, his life in both Toronto and Montreal (a reminiscence of Baron Byng High school immediately conjures up the work of Mordecai Richler), his work handing out Communist Party fliers, his stint at Camp Naivelt (a haven for Toronto’s left-wing

Jewish community), and his feelings about the changing political situation, both in his own household and throughout the world. He recalls childhood fights and bullies, the stories of his grandfather and relatives, of his parents' first meeting and marriage, and his peers and their families. The work is primarily a study of this young man's relationship with his family and with himself as he seeks to uncover the truth of his parents' views and tries to find his own path within (and without) the communist rhetoric with which he lives on a quotidian basis.

Laxer does not assume any prior knowledge of his readership; therefore the book is appropriate for those for whom this will be their first foray into this era, as well as those who are familiar with the subject matter. This is not an academic work, rather one that is intended for a wide readership. His history lesson is not didactic, but rather couched in a personal narrative, one that makes history enlightening and captivating.

Laxer reports with the honesty and candor of the child whose memories he offers. Though his style is straightforward and honest, the hyperbolic or exaggerated nature of some of the anecdotes forces the reader to call into question the accuracy of the memoir (as when he tells of an aunt needing to have a scarf stuffed down her throat to keep from gasping at his appearance as a baby). While some of his minor characters do come across as caricatures, again forcing the reader to question the extent of artistic license Laxer has taken, he certainly does have a talent for painting a vivid picture and recreating his childhood world.

Because the book is a memoir, it is somewhat challenging to evaluate its treatment of the political history of the era. Laxer certainly does provide a wealth of information about the Canadian Communist Party and its inner-workings, but as his primary aim is not a history lesson but rather an opportunity to probe into his own memories, any reader would be advised to do further research into the era to uncover a truly historical picture of the time.

While the beginning chapters are certainly entertaining, with some engaging anecdotes and intriguing insights, the book

fully captures the reader in its final third. Until the latter part of the work, the book lacks the narrative arc necessary to truly captivate its readership. Until Laxer delves into his experiences and thoughts about the changing nature of communism itself, the book simply ambles along, interestingly enough, but not so engaging as to distinguish itself from countless other narrative biographies.

It is in the latter third of the book, when Laxer probes his encounters with the Communist Party line and his parents' work in the movement, his own reactions, and his own coming of age with communism as a backdrop, that the book really hits its stride and carries the reader with it. Chapter nine especially offers keen insight into the nature of a boy's interaction with communism; his naïve views and immediate reactions. It is a refreshing approach wherein the reader is afforded the opportunity to learn what the boy learns, without the prejudice that so often accompanies such a discussion.

As he explores deeper into his actual contact with communism, the work becomes extremely captivating, particularly the chapters on McCarthyism and the fate of the Rosenbergs. It is here Laxer's work excels, offering this first-hand account of Canadian history.

In the end, the reader gleans a sense of the challenges of coming to terms with a legacy and personal identity, as Laxer discovers the true nature of Stalin, the USSR, the communist system, and, as every child must do, the fallibility of his own parents. The book offers Laxer the opportunity to navigate the truth: both the truth he was offered by his parents and elders of the community, and the truths he comes to discover for himself. Laxer's "afterword" is perhaps the most insightful chapter of the book for here he looks back as an adult on his experiences and is able to reflect perceptively on the lessons he learned.

*Red Diaper Baby* is a straightforward, accessible read and an engaging one for the most part, though one's interest may wane somewhat in some of the earlier reminiscences. When

he focuses on his primary thesis, his personal interaction with communism, the work is sagacious and riveting. Ultimately, Laxer has written a compelling look into the struggles of a child in a tumultuous era, one with which every reader can identify in some form or another. He achieves his overall aim of elucidating the challenges of growing up in a communist family in Canada through this personal account, one made particularly poignant given the refreshing opportunity to gain such enlightenment through the eyes of a child.

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Menkis, Richard and Norman Ravvin, editors. *The Canadian Jewish Studies Reader*. Calgary: Red Deer Press, 2004. 493 pp.

By chance, my copy of *The Canadian Jewish Reader* arrived during the same week that the poet, Irving Layton, died. The passing of this “Jewish maverick in stuffy Canada” (Janice Arnold, *Canadian Jewish News*, 11 January 2006) was met by an outpouring of effusive tributes. Contrast that with the mixed reception accorded Matt Cohen’s posthumously published memoir, *Typing*, as related here by Norman Ravvin, in his essay “Matt Cohen’s ‘Cosmic Spine.’” Despite his presence at the heart of the English Canadian literary scene, Cohen never fully felt himself *of* that milieu, and his assertion of discomfort aroused unease, in turn, on the part of such pillars of CanLit as Margaret Atwood and Robert Fulford. In *Typing*, Ravvin suggests, Cohen effectively elevated “Spadina Avenue’s Jewish landscape” (the backdrop to his years as a literary novice in Toronto) to one of the “sacred spaces” of Canadian Jews alongside Mordecai Richler’s St. Urbain Street. Ravvin treats the abandoned Saskatchewan “Jewish ghost towns of Hirsch and Hoffer” in much the same light elsewhere in the *Reader* (“Eli Mandel’s Family Architecture”).

“Sacred space” is not a phrase that Ravvin employs, although it figures rather prominently in social historian Etan