

Two Cents Plain: My Brooklyn Boyhood

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Martin Lemelman's elegiac and bittersweet graphic memoir *Two Cents Plain* collects the memories and artifacts of the author's childhood in Brooklyn. The son of Holocaust survivors, Lemelman grew up in the back of his family's candy store in Brownsville during the 1950s and '60s, as the neighborhood, and much of the city, moved into a period of deep decline. In *Two Cents Plain*, Lemelman pieces together the fragments of his past in an effort to come to terms with a childhood that was marked by struggle both in and outside of the home. But his was not a childhood wholly without its pleasures. Lemelman's Brooklyn is also the nostalgic place of egg creams and comic books, malteds and novelty toys, where the voices of Brownsville's denizens—the deli man, the fish man, and the fruit man—all come to vivid life. Between the lingering strains of the Holocaust and the increasing violence on the city's streets, *Two Cents Plain* reaches its dramatic climax in 1968, as Lemelman's worlds explode, forcing him and his family to re-create their lives. Through his stirring narrative and richly rendered black-and-white drawings, family photographs, and found objects, Lemelman creates a lush, layered view of a long-lost time and place, the chronicle of a family and a city in crisis. *Two Cents Plain* is a wholly unique memoir and a reading experience not soon forgotten.

Two Cents Plain: My Brooklyn Boyhood Details


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From Reader Review Two Cents Plain: My Brooklyn Boyhood for online ebook

Rachel says

This graphic novel was told in a distinctive voice with illustrations that had loving details, interwoven with photos and other memorabilia relevant to the story. It did not have a plot and a climax as a fiction story would, but was instead a series of vignettes and descriptions that painted a picture of what the author's childhood was like, placed into the context of his parents' stories. It began and ended in the same place in a way that made it feel satisfying. It was also a window into what life was like for post-Holocaust Jewish immigrants and their children in Brownsville, Brooklyn, and how their lives changed as Brownsville changed.

Becky Trombley says

This graphic novel beautifully depicts the author's boyhood in Brooklyn. The captivating drawings, overlaid with vintage photographs, capture the essence of the time and place. Lemelman's biography also chronicles the story of his parents as young people, survivors of World War II. There are several moments in the book that leave the reader cringing in horror, as the ways that hatred did not end with the war, even in the land of promise and opportunity, are revealed.

Lemelman's story is hopeful. We are given enough information to know that life turned out very well for this young boy from Brooklyn, who is now in his 60's. As a reader, I would love to know more about the intervening years, as the young man makes his way in the world as an artist.

Reese says

I consider TWO CENTS PLAIN: MY BROOKLYN BOYHOOD (2010) an exceptionally fine example of its genre. In a tapestry of drawings, photographs, and words, Martin Lemelman offers a personal history that reveals a big and important picture. The whole comes in the size of a piece -- a real deal that is "the real deal." So I want to say that this book will be widely treasured. I want to say, "Hey, except for two three-month stays in Washington, DC, I have never lived anywhere but North Carolina." I want to say, "My great-grandparents were in America at least fifty years before Nazis were sending Jews to gas chambers." And I want to say, "If Lemelman can take a Tar Heel into his early life in Brooklyn, NY, and into the world of his parents, one having survived five years of serving in Stalin's army, the other having survived two years of hiding in a hole, isn't it likely that a broad spectrum of readers will appreciate his book?" That's what I really want to say, and I'd be telling the truth about my background -- just not the whole truth.

My mother spent the first nineteen years of her life in Brooklyn. Some of my favorite memories of my childhood were made in Brooklyn, where my grandfather and other relatives still lived. Like my mother, my husband grew up in Brooklyn. What the Nazis did to members of Lemelman's mother's family, they did to members of my husband's grandmother's family.

I should also mention that I'm familiar with the sometimes untranslated Yiddish expressions that appear in Lemelman's work. I can hear his parents, whose voices largely determine the sound of the book. In short, I am well acquainted with the places, the smells, the lifestyles, the events, etc. that Lemelman remembers and artistically renders.

I believe (or want to believe) that TWO CENTS PLAIN has elements that can touch the heart of anyone not missing an "empathy gene." But I also believe that, if you're not Jewish or "sort-of Jewish," if you have never known Holocaust survivors or their children, if you aren't old enough to remember JFK's assassination, then Lemelman's work probably won't find a home in your heart.

I entered the Goodreads giveaway for a copy of TWO CENTS PLAIN -- the result: free book to good home. By the way, as Lemelman is ending his September trip "to Brooklyn to see what was left of [his] childhood," he tells us: "Next month, I'll be 59 years old"(310) -- so will I. But the number to remember is 5, the number of stars above this review.

Joy says

I received this book from GoodReads firstbook giveaway. It was very good timing, as I have just moved to NYC, and this book is about growing up in Brooklyn. This is the first graphic novel I have read, but I believe it is probably quite different from most graphic novels. Since this is biography, there are some photos, although most are drawings, but they are depicting the childhood of the author. He takes us through his parents getting out of Europe after the Nazis, and through his childhood in the family candy store in Brooklyn. I can see it evoking a lot of emotion in someone who grew up similarly, but for me it was just enjoyable meeting the interesting cast of characters, and watching the story unfold, complete with "comments" from family members. I recommend this book as a quick enjoyable read to anyone, but suspect for anyone who grew up in Brooklyn or a similar location, it will have deeper meaning.

Mike Aragona says

As much as I found the storytelling intriguing (due to the mix-and-match of old photographs and trinkets along with the actual drawn pencils) I had a hard time really getting into this biography.[return][return]I'm not certain if the message or stories would have been more powerful had the point of view not shifted back and forth from that of the narrator to his mother to his father and back again. In too many instances, those shifts took me "out" of the story - as much from the fact that they are (obviously) no longer living yet speaking in the present tense as much as the actual manner in which they "spoke"[return][return]Although there are similar references in my own life (having parents who grew up during the war and moving to the "new world" to build a new life), I believe this book will appeal more to those who've a closer link to the author's life (ie; growing up in America in the 50s).

Amy says

I have to admit that I was a little bit skeptical of this book when I first got it. This was my first graphic novel, and I have to say that I loved it. I am a very visual person and the integration of drawings and photographs added so much to the story.

The book tells the story of the authors life growing up in Brooklyn. Lemelman also tells a brief history of his parents life in and their experiences as Jews during the nazi occupation, and then their journey to America.

Lemelman has a way of really drawing you into his story telling and making it feel real. By the end of the book I felt that I really knew him and his family. Though the story does not always flow seamlessly, I didn't find that to be too distracting. I enjoyed Lemelman's writing style and the way he used interjections from his family members throughout the story as well.

I would recommend this book to anyone who enjoys reading memoirs. It is a quick read, and the illustrations in it are wonderful.

Sara Habein says

Growing up in the 1950s and 60s, Martin Lemelman watched his Polish-Jewish family struggle with their new American lives running a candy shop in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. Though the shop was legendary for its ice cream, egg creams and toys, the neighborhood itself was beginning its steep decline. Young Martin (or “Mattaleh,” as his parents called him) discovered his interest in art — particularly drawing — during this time, and has since made himself a career illustrating books. *Two Cents Plain* is his second graphic memoir, after *Mendel's Daughter*, which gives a more detailed description of his parents' childhood and escape from Nazi Poland.

Recounting his childhood and the events leading to it, Lemelman offers his own memories, the points-of-view from his family, and historical documents. His black-and-white drawings are richly detailed — almost as real as the photographs included on some pages. I really enjoyed the use of different mediums to tell the story, and I would recommend looking at the preview offered on the book's Powell's page to get a taste of the visuals.

The moment I pressed brush to paper... Time slowed down. Minutes turned into hours. As if by magic — a face appeared on my paper, a tree, a house, a bird, a Pepsi bottle, hands... The cracked walls, dusty floors, screaming parents, worries, faded away. All I saw and felt were the marks I made on the paper.

Naturally, as non-artist parents of artists are apt to do, his parents wish he'd chosen something more lucrative. “I will be happy to pay for you to go to pharmacy school,” his father says.

The tales aren't all poverty and struggle — There are quite a few funny moments, including stories about their cat named Cat, who would attack any dog that was brought into the shop. “She always seemed to know when one was around,” he says.

There are little character sketches along the way of the other neighborhood workers — the fish man, the fruit man, etc. — and he writes his parents' dialect well. The narrative itself isn't perfect, but neither is memory. Lemelman gathers what he remembers most about growing up and assembles it thusly. To assemble more facts into the story when he did not personally feel any connection to them would feel inauthentic.

The only complaint I'd give is that the ending is a bit ... well, anti-climatic doesn't feel like the right word. I

suppose since the reader knows what is coming, it's not as affecting as it could have been. I'm not exactly sure how it should be different; it's hard to say. However, I enjoyed this book immensely, and I am now wanting to read *Mendel's Daughter*. The artwork alone is worth the time.

(Full disclosure: I won this book through a Bloomsbury Press GoodReads giveaway. This review originally appeared on Glorified Love Letters.)

Dani Peloquin says

As I have started before, there has been a surge in graphic memoirs in the past few years. Some have excelled while there have certainly been some who have failed. Martin Lemelman's memoir "Two Cents Plain" falls somewhere in the middle.

Lemelman focuses on his childhood growing up in Brooklyn and the changes that the community undergoes from the 1950s to the 1960s. Additionally, he details his relationship with his parents and their experiences as Holocaust survivors in America. The story is bittersweet for both Lemelman and his parents as Lemelman tries to find the silver lining in a childhood filled with rats, quarrels, and antisemitism.

The graphics are exceptional and consist of photographs, sketches and collages. Unlike other graphic novels, I found the Lemelman was able to seamlessly incorporate the narrative and the illustrations. I even lent the book to a non-graphic novel reader who devoured it in one sitting. She had grown up in the Brooklyn during the same time and agreed with many of Lemelman's remembrances. Additionally, she found the book accessible and even lent it to her 83 year old mother who adored it despite never having read a graphic novel before.

Personally, I was not as enthralled or engaged as I have been with other graphic memoirs. At times, I felt that the characters were a bit one dimensional and didn't leave a lasting impression on me. Still, I would recommend this book as the illustrations are excellent and the story is certainly worth reading.

www.iamliteraryaddicted.blogspot.com

James Hill says

from Todd:

If anyone tells you that graphic novels could never reach the level of the literary, this is a case in point to the contrary, though it is not a novel per se, but a memoir. What one immediately realizes upon reading this account, is that there is no way all that the author communicates could be possibly conveyed without the visuals -- though the textual content is tellingly deployed and is as dynamic as the illustrations. The illustrations themselves are mixed media: actual cut-away photographs of symbolically potent artifacts or personages from the author's boyhood, but mostly highly evocative images done in what looks like lightly textured drawings of soft graphite. The story itself concerns the immigration to America of a Russian Jewish man and a Polish Jewish woman after managing to survive World War II and escaping the privations and sometimes dangerous mischances of Jewish refugee camps during the postwar allied occupation of Europe. But mostly it tells the story of the author's growing up in Brooklyn during the 1950s with his brother, while

their father with his mother's help ran a candystore. What one comes to understand is that a candystore in that era was a kind of neighborhood watering hole, and included all kinds of knickknacks to temporarily divert the mind and body of its customers among the working-poor from the stresses and uncertainties of life. It was also a full-time job just to make ends meet, and involved the whole family one way or another. The reader becomes engaged with a very specific cultural era that soon came to an end as culturally-different waves of immigrants later came in. Growing population and economic changes in the country also created a level of violence that destroyed the old social fabric of Brooklyn being a welcoming haven for people escaping the unhappy conditions of Europe after the War. The author is unsparing in his honesty about conditions growing up, though it is often also touching. He also does not hide unconventional attitudes and uncomfortable facts, so this is no piece of sentimentalist whitewash. The powerful personalities of their parents loom large in the story, both being intensely psychologically divided figures due to their difficult pasts, though their parental love is quite real. One gets a vivid sense of what it was like to grow up in a working class apartment building, as well as the powerful hopes that American public education brought to immigrant families. Also the reader learns in a nice contextual way many things about the Yiddish culture the author's parents carried with them and to which they exposed their children, even as everyone in the family must square these Old Country traditions with the influences of the broader American culture in which they actually lived. The end of the account is wistful. The author's Brooklyn, the Brooklyn of his youth, was so soon swept away. Though it is a nonfiction account, there are some wonderful novelistic elements: often he switches point of view to someone else, especially a parent, to provide a counterpoint to his personal viewpoint on key matters in their lives. Otherwise one discovers the life of the neighborhood and how it went from an eternal moment of rough social harmonies to a gradual giving way to a new and harder era that arrived with the 1960s. A quiet masterpiece.

Niki Sorensen says

When someone asks you if you could pick any person in the world to meet, who would you choose? Usually the person is someone famous. Me, I'd like to sit down and have a chat with Martin Lemelman's mama.

Two Cents Plain is a beautiful graphic novel. I loved it. It was a unique way to learn just a little bit about the life of Jewish immigrants in the 50's and 60's. How they survived the Holocaust is a miracle.

I wish this book could be mandatory reading for high school students. I learned so much more from Mr. Lemelman's memoir than I did from any lecture or textbook.

We live in a crazy world. But somehow the Lemelmans raised two wonderful sons. I think the part I enjoyed most was that Martin's mama thought he had the evil eye and did some hilarious things to rid him of it. I wish I could have known her.

All of the voices in the book became real without my even noticing it. This is a novel that makes one appreciate the gift of reading, which allows you to understand and really "see" the world around you. I highly recommend it.

Freyja Vanadis says

Wow, this book was amazing! I've never heard of Martin Lemelman before; I don't read children's books so I

would have no idea who he is. But I was blown away by his artwork and his storytelling.

Amanda says

I went through this very quickly. It's a biography of a Jewish boyhood written years later when all the sights and familiars of the neighborhood are gone. Mattaleh is the son of a soldier in Stalin's army and a holocaust bunker survivor. He is born in New York City. His father wants to have a farm, but his mother brings them back to the city. He grows up living in the back of the candy and junk store his parents run. He really likes wrestling. The book is soft pencil realistic looking people with photograph artifacts and copies of documentation and receipts. Life is tough. The people are tough. Eventually the Jews are forced out of the neighborhood. On the last day mother gets a knife put to her throat and father saves her life. There is love in those strange and challenging ways.

Riv says

I won this book in a Goodreads giveaway (yay, I won something!!) not even knowing what it was (I just tried to avoid the vampire/bodice ripper looking ones they were offering).

Never having been a fan of comic books, I never picked up a graphic novel before. This is a graphic memoir, the story of Martin Lemelman's childhood in Brownsville, Brooklyn told in hand-drawn story boards. He describes his parents' escape from the Nazis and Soviet army respectively, after the war, and their meeting in a displaced persons camp in Germany (I think) just afterward. They married and traveled to America, eventually settling in Brownsville (where my mother grew up, probably around the corner from them) and ran a neighborhood candy store.

Though I am only about 40 pages into the story, I've already been drawn into the lives of the Lemelman family; perhaps that their Jewish immigrant existence is so similar to that of my predecessors that connects me to their story (thankfully minus the horrors of the Holocaust, but the effort of making a living and being a Jew at that time were similar. The drawings and photographs enhance the text tremendously.

I'm looking forward to finishing the book, though knowing the fate of the Jews of Brownsville, I can only hope the Lemelmans found their happy ending elsewhere...

Susan says

I can't help but love this book dearly. Narratively speaking, I think it has some issues; the chapters don't always flow together very smoothly and the build-up to the last event is rather anti-climactic and well, almost non-existent.

On the very simplest of levels, the narrative reminded me of William Goyen's *House of Breath*. Obviously the two are executed in very different ways, but both employ very distinct voices of the "ghosts" of the past, stemming from a return to the narrator's hometown after a lengthy hiatus. Despite *Two Cents Plain*'s struggle with the structure, everything else about the memoir was a true pleasure to read and experience. Although my favorite sections were "Merchandise, Customers" and "Treasure," most of the individual were gems in

their own way. I loved the style of drawing and it stayed consistent throughout the whole book, but my favorites were the black and white photo cutouts of all the '50s and '60s toys and junk food. Such a joy to flip through those pages. His immigrant parents often reminded me of my immigrant parents; I could definitely relate to many of the stories and vignettes.

In short, a wonderful book and memoir, despite its flaws. I thank Goodreads and Bloomsbury for sending me such a lovely, hardback copy of it.

Grade: A-

Matthew says

Lemelman put out a great piece of work here. Essentially a portrait of his own family through his childhood eyes, the book opens with his parents escaping from Russia just after WWII and making their way to NY City. A large portion of the book focuses on their adjusting and adapting to a new way of life while still trying to hold onto a sense of their Jewish and Russian heritage. His father tries a few occupations and finally ends up owning and managing a small candy store in the Brownsville neighborhood----quite ironic since he doesn't seem particularly interested in children. The mother is quite the character with her powerful superstitious and over-riding sense of worry giving bit of levity to the tale. Lemelman himself is a great character, especially as we see him confront those difficult first days in public school and show off his early talents for art.

Lemelman's artwork is tremendous; while most of it is black and white pen and brushwork, he does include some ambitious collages that bring in photos and objects to enhance the historical feel of the book.

I've been struggling with who this book is for. In the end I think it's a great graphic novel for people who really love bios and memoirs rather than a great memoir for people who read lots of comics. The pacing is a little slower than normal and some of his choices in images and lettering might put off people not willing to stretch beyond the norms of Marvel Zombies. A great book, though, to put in the hands of anyone who doubts the power of the medium.
