



# Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo

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## Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo Boris Fishman

The author of the critically admired, award-winning *A Replacement Life* turns to a different kind of story—an evocative, nuanced portrait of marriage and family, a woman reckoning with what she’s given up to make both work, and the universal question of how we reconcile who we are and whom the world wants us to be.

Maya Shulman and Alex Rubin met in 1992, when she was a Ukrainian exchange student with “a devil in [her] head” about becoming a chef instead of a medical worker, and he the coddled son of Russian immigrants wanting to toe the water of a less predictable life.

Twenty years later, Maya Rubin is a medical worker in suburban New Jersey, and Alex his father’s second in the family business. The great dislocation of their lives is their eight-year-old son Max—adopted from two teenagers in Montana despite Alex’s view that “adopted children are second-class.”

At once a salvation and a mystery to his parents—with whom Max’s biological mother left the child with the cryptic exhortation “don’t let my baby do rodeo”—Max suddenly turns feral, consorting with wild animals, eating grass, and running away to sit face down in a river.

Searching for answers, Maya convinces Alex to embark on a cross-country trip to Montana to track down Max’s birth parents—the first drive west of New Jersey of their American lives. But it’s Maya who’s illuminated by the journey, her own erstwhile wildness summoned for a reckoning by the unsparing landscape, with seismic consequences for herself and her family.

*Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo* is a novel about the mystery of inheritance and what exactly it means to belong.

## Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo Details

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# From Reader Review Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo for online ebook

## Sharon says

I couldn't connect with the characters in this book. It's not a good sign when I keep paging ahead to see when the chapters will end.

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## Heather says

I did not care for this book at all, and actually found myself considering returning it to the library without reading the entire thing, which has only happened to me a few times in my life. I found myself procrastinating reading it because I wasn't excited about it. I felt like there wasn't much flow to the conversations or the plot at times, and I never got attached to any of the characters. The ending left me with more questions than answers. Based on this book, I would not read this author again.

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## Angie says

Originally Posted @ <http://readaholiczone.blogspot.com/20...>

The blurb is a bit misleading regarding what the story is about. My interpretation is that the book is centered mostly around Maya, not Max and any issues that are happening with him appear like an excuse to dig deeper into her personal issues. Therefore, I am leaving Maya's personal problems, mostly untouched as not to give that topic away. The main adult characters, Maya, her husband Alex, and his parents are immigrants who came to America for a better way of life, though I find it surprising that they not only disliked Americans but also anyone who is not like them or has their beliefs, the family also thinks adopted children are second class citizens due to the fact they are unwanted by their biological parents. This implies something must be wrong with them. One aspect of the book that I found strange is that when Maya married into Alex's family, she took on their family's beliefs and views on life, leaving hers behind including her self-esteem. There contains an immense amount of hatred in the book making it tough to read, for example:

"Alex had never touched a gay man before, but now he was holding one's hand as the twenty Participants formed a grieving circle to commemorate their failed fertility. Why were the gays grieving? They hadn't been failed by fertility, they had been failed by their dicks."

Why did Maya and Alex adopt Max if to them he is a second class citizen? Certainly they thought something was wrong with Max since they were all over the "situation" that took place like it was the end of the world. They assumed something ought to be detrimentally wrong with him because he is adopted, so let's find his biological parents due to a request the biological mother had given (what did this have to do with his behavior?) or maybe he could just be acting like a boy. I found the need to track down Max's biological parents extreme. Whereas, some things are genetic like health issues or physical looks. I highly doubt liking nature, such as sitting in a river looking at fish, having an interest in different types of grasses, sleeping outside in a tent would fall under genetic traits or be anything to get your panties in a knot about.

The prose is nicely written yet I found myself uninterested more often than not. To me the book lacked substance such as adequate situations to keep the reader stimulated, intrigued, or fascinated. Reading the book was more a chore for me yet I never gave up thinking something has to happen at some point that made this worth the time I've put into it, nope.

\*I received a copy of this book from HarperCollins but the review is my opinion only.

Got any opinions about this review?

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### **Cindy Roesel says**

Adoption is a cultural metaphor in Boris Fishman's new novel, *DON'T LET MY BABY DO RODEO* (HARPER). A Jewish couple originally from Belarus and Ukraine, now living in New Jersey adopt an "unquestionably gay" baby from Montana. When leaving with their child, the last words from the birth parents to the adopting couple Maya and Alex Rubin who are taking their son to New Jersey are, "please don't let my baby do rodeo."

Much like in his first novel, the best-selling, *A REPLACEMENT LIFE*, Fishman uses a healthy dose of history, culture and culinary arts of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in New Jersey in *DON'T LET MY BABY DO RODEO*.

Struggling to overcome the isolation and insecurity of separation from her family in Ukraine, Maya meets Alex and marries him out of love, and she also gets citizenship. Soon they realize they can't have children and Maya takes charge of adoption over strong objections from Alex and his Belarus-born busybody parents, who believe "adopted children were second-class."

Max is a healthy baby, but develops into a reclusive, almost feral, child who immerses himself in the natural world. Alex takes this to confirm his prior reluctance to adopt "because you get genes that belong to somebody else." Maya thinks this makes Max special and, she insists that they drive to Montana to meet his birth parents and see Max's roots for themselves.

So many things can drive a family apart; it's a wonder that Alex, Maya and Max, or any of us put in this type of situation, can hold it together. Immigration and adoption are not for wimps. With graceful control, assurance and a very understated sense of wit, Fishman turns, *DON'T LET MY BABY DO RODEO* into a heartfelt, clever, layered story of a family searching for answers and the risks they'll take to find them.

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### **Beth says**

Just didn't cut it. Would give it two stars but the humor pushed it to three. Plot was poorly imagined and the shallowness of the emotional relationships within this family -- assuming the author meant it to be otherwise, had no credibility.

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## **Kathryn says**

I had a hard time getting into this book, and ultimately didn't enjoy the experience much. I found the writing and the characterizations spongy - know what I mean? Mushy, not well-delineated.

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## **Caroline says**

-4.5, really liked and would've probably like even more if it wasn't an audiobook  
-story about soviet immigrant couple living in Jersey that adopts son from couple from Montana then thinks he's wild so go out there to dig deeper  
-book ends up being more about the wife/adoptive mom, identified with her  
-"you made your son wild"

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## **Kevin Wilcoxon says**

I haven't been this disappointed in a book for a loooooong time. Given the title and synopsis, I was under the impression that the book was about a little boy named Max who had a few eccentricities about him, and the obvious question of "Why?" not let my baby do rodeo. Wrong. The book is about a neurotic woman, her neurotic husband, and his neurotic parents who talk endlessly about what is wrong with little Max. Especially the woman, Maya, is so overwrought, so self-absorbed, so irritating that I couldn't wait to be done with it.

The answer to "why?" Not a clue. I hope I never meet these people in real life. What a bunch of downers.

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## **Debby says**

Really didn't like. Didn't like the style--is stuff real or not--and the writing is just flat bad at places. I feel like he didn't have an editor.

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## **Natalie Weinstein says**

I guess the writing was interesting enough that I didn't grasp the book's problems till I'd already finished it. I had three problems with the book:

1. All the adult characters think that something is terribly wrong with a child because he is adopted. Although this was a predominant theme of the book, the author just somehow loses the thread toward the end and never actually addresses this huge accusation.
2. Somehow no one thinks the use the internet to find people they are seeking. Duh.
3. You don't realize who the book's main character actually is until it's almost over. You think it's the boy, but it's not. I feel like I'd need to re-read the book from an entirely different perspective to understand it. And I'm not interested in doing that.

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## Kathleen Gray says

beautifully written and heartbreaking. You will root for Maya and this family as it falls apart and reforms. The journey to answer the birth mother's admonition is powerful. This is not an easy read because of the emotions but it is a valuable one. Read this slowly to appreciate Fishman's language. Thanks to Edelweiss for the ARC.

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## David says

My review appears in New York Journal of Books . Read that review first. Additional remarks that appeared in a different and now defunct publication comparing this novel with another that was published the same month begin with the next paragraph.

Moving is one of life's most traumatic experiences and all the more so when moving to another country and living in a new language. Two fiction books published this month explore what home means for two distinct waves of recent immigrants. **Boris Fishman** continues to relate the experiences of Russian speaking Jews who immigrated to America in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s in his second novel *Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo* , and Canadian-Israeli writer **Ayelet Tsabari** explores the lives of young Israelis at home and abroad in her debut book of short stories *The Best Place on Earth* , which won the Jewish Book Council's \$100,000 Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature in 2015 for the 2013 Canadian edition.

In my New York Journal of Books review of *Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo* I synopsized Alex and Maya Rubin's experiences as adoptive parents and how Maya in the second half of the novel becomes a femme fatale, a role that is foreshadowed earlier in the novel when Alex compares her to Tolstoy's Anna Karenina:

"Railroad mind"—that was Alex's term for the hive of Maya's brain. Railroads made him think of motion, steam, frantic activity. What he really meant was that she was like some Anna Karenina—superfluously melodramatic. And Maya understood what he really meant only because she had a railroad mind."

The age at which one immigrates also influences one's ability to adapt to a new country:

"Alex had been ten years younger than Maya's eighteen when his family had come to America; the Rubins had come for good, whereas Maya had come on an exchange program in 1988, the first year such things were possible. After college, Maya was supposed to return to the USSR—a plan altered by her love affair with Alex and the end of the USSR. Alex had taken to America—he spoke with confidence about Wall Street, the structure of Congress, technology. Maya conceded his authority. Only once had she exclaimed that in twenty years he had almost never left New Jersey, so what did he know? Alex had looked at her as if at a child who doesn't understand what it means to say things one will later regret, and retreated upstairs. He did not speak to her for three days, their sullen meals spent communicating through Max and his grandparents, and Maya never said that again."

Tsabari's Israeli ex-pats are only a few years older than Fishman's Maya was when she moved to America, and yet for them it is more of a choice. In my New York Journal of Books review of *The Best Place on Earth* I note how well adapted Tsabari's Israeli-Canadians are to life in Canada. But in an article in LitHub Tsabari

relates how hard won is her ability to write in her second language:

“During those first few years in Canada, even speaking in English was a challenge. I was discouraged by my failure to convey complex thoughts, irritated by my inability to fight with my boyfriend in an eloquent way, embarrassed by my frequent misunderstandings and mispronunciations.”

At a certain point she lacked mastery in both Hebrew and English, a feeling I experienced after living in Israel for five years when I sensed I was forgetting English but still didn’t write well in Hebrew. “My Hebrew was becoming rusty from lack of use, while my English was still not good enough. My dream of writing—the only dream I had ever truly held on to—was slipping away from me.”

While supporting herself by waitressing and cleaning homes and apartment building lobbies, Tsabari forced herself to write in English. Eventually the effort paid off and mirrored her emotional state now that she lived in Canada: “I was calmer, lighter, more confident, and my English writing was cleaner, more straightforward, less flowery.”

Some of Tsabari’s stories set in Israel capture the stress and tension of living in a country where there is a constant threat of violence, which explains why for Tsabari’s Israeli new Canadians life there feels comparatively calmer.

It is said of the Israeli poet Leah Goldberg that she thought in Russian and wrote in Hebrew, and likewise the quality of Tsabari’s writing in English improved when she allowed Hebrew to influence it:

“Once I let my English writing be inflected with my Hebrew, infused with my voice, my accent, my background, and with the multiplicities of identity—the passion and drama of the Middle East, the oral traditions of my Yemeni ancestors, the tension and urgency of Israel—a new writer emerged.

“... Writing in a language foreign to me and to the place I am depicting seems fitting for a book like mine, preoccupied with in-between-ness. It adds layers of displacement that echo the experience of my characters, travelers, migrants, expats and outsiders who are often at a crossroads, in between places, in between identities, in between languages.”

That experience of displacement is something Fishman and Tsabari’s characters have in common. I conclude my review of *Don’t Let My Baby Do Rodeo* by writing that it “fulfills and surpasses the promise of [his debut novel] *A Replacement Life*.” Likewise I write that readers of Tsabari’s *The Best Place on Earth* will look forward to her novel in progress “with avid anticipation.” For a fuller discussion of these books read my reviews in *New York Journal of Books*.

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## Glencoe Public Library says

In his latest novel, Fishman (*A Replacement Life*, 2014), once again delves into the problems inherent in acculturation, and he also examines the relationship of marriage.

Alex and Maya, originally from Belarus and Ukraine, respectively, meet in the States as her visa was about to expire. They marry and settle in New Jersey. Maya’s dream is to open a Russian-themed café; Alex’s goal



is to explore new professional realms. Neither partner's objective is fulfilled. Maya becomes a mammography technician, and Alex works at his father's business. Alex's parents loom large in the couple's life. They abhor the idea of her son and his wife adopting after Maya is unable to become pregnant. To complicate matters further, Max, the child they adopt, comes from the most foreign of places—Montana.

Although he is an easy child, Max starts acting strangely at age 8. He has only one friend, collects and labels different grasses, and communes with deer. The family, all city dwellers, is horrified. Seeking answers to this odd behavior, Maya insists they take a cross-country road trip in search of the boy's birth parents. As *O Magazine's* book editor Dotun Akintoye writes in his review:

*The quest to find out what's wrong with Max is slowly revealed to be Maya's journey to find out what's wrong with her—why she can't shake the feeling of being an outsider, why she feels stultified by the man she loves. Every step Maya takes to obtain answers about Max becomes an act of self-discovery. It is Maya who blooms like a wildflower 'enlarged by the landscape.'*

*Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo* resonates on many levels. The novel shines a light on the difficulties within the American adoption system and employs a comic case worker—Mishkin—to do so. He is a nod to the Dostoyevsky anti-hero, Prince Lyov Nikolaevich Myshkin (*The Idiot*, 1869), whose kind simplicity is mistaken for naivete.

Fishman is an expert miniaturist who examines marriage at a crossroads. Maya wonders if she married out of love or out of desire for citizenship. Has their marriage been predicated on a lie? And what has been the price of other lies over the course of many years—even those made for Alex's benefit?

*Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo* is a satiric, often comic, look at the notion of family and what it means to be American.

- Sara

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## **Nanette says**

While the book started off in a promising enough manner, I was never able to understand or empathize with the characters. A Russian couple living in the U.S. adopts a child from Montana. They always seem to hold him at arms-length, focusing on how he's different from them. When he begins to act out in a normal enough way for an 8 year old, they totally freak out. The mother becomes obsessed with going to Montana to find his biological parents in hopes of an explanation for his behavior. I found myself racing through the book, not because I loved it but to just get it over with.

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## **Kari says**

I wasn't sure what I was expecting when I went into *Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo*. In the story, Maya and Alex's adopted son, Max begins to act oddly. In their eyes, he has become wild, apt to run away, and in love with nature. They begin to wonder if it has something to do with his birth parents, so they decide to track them down.

As I said, this isn't the book that I was expecting. But that was OK because I ended up being pleasantly surprised at how much I liked this story. This book is more than just adoptive parents trying to find their son's birth parents. To me, it was more about Maya and her journey to find her niche in life. She never came across as someone who was comfortable in her role as wife, in her job, and lastly as a mother. She seemed to be thrust into all three roles without actually being prepared. As I read, I had to wonder if Maya really believed that Max got his wildness from his birth parents. Or was she seeking a way to reconcile her feeling of disconnection with her son? It was interesting to see how the parting phrase from Laurel (the birth mom), "Don't let my baby do rodeo", weighed on Maya's mind. To me, it meant don't let him turn out a loser like his birth father. But to her, it was a possible answer to the child he was becoming. The journey across the country to Montana, for me was more about her, than about Max.

This book isn't one that you will fly through because it is an exciting adventure. It's more of a meandering tale. I did feel compelled to keep reading because I wanted to see what Maya would do next. The story is one that is set to make you think about things. How do we ever really feel like we belong and what make a place home for us? I'm not sure I agreed with Maya's choices all the time, but I had to respect her journey.

I'd have to say give this one a try. There is a lot packed into this book, but they are all worth exploring.

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