

# REVIEWS

Phil Brown, editor, *In the Catskills: A Century of the Jewish Experience in "The Mountains"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 415 pp.

Phil Brown is on a mission. Raised in the Jewish hotel life of the Catskills in the summers of the 1960s and now a sociologist at Brown University, Brown has set out to preserve the rapidly fading Borscht Belt milieu in a collection of reminiscences, photographs, and memorabilia. In 1993, after an extended absence from the region, Brown took a trip up to the Catskills resort area of Sullivan County, New York, finding a terribly dilapidated landscape, with shuttered, abandoned buildings. Unmowed fields replaced former lawns, overtaking empty, cracked pools, tennis courts, and the foundations of burned buildings. The speed with which the once-vibrant region has fallen on hard times is truly remarkable, and given the importance Catskills vacations once had in American Jewish culture, and indeed on all of American culture, Brown has set out to "save the Catskill legacy." In 1995, he helped establish the Catskills Institute ([www.brown.edu/Research/Catskills\\_Institute](http://www.brown.edu/Research/Catskills_Institute)), dedicated to doing just that. Organizing an annual history of the Catskills conference in the mountains, collecting reminiscences, both written and oral, and any Catskills-related documents he can find, Brown has now dedicated nine years to the very important work of preserving the special Jewish Catskills culture.

*In the Catskills* is an edited volume of material Brown has found particularly useful. It includes remarkably various works, including an excerpt from Brown's own book on the mountains, *Catskill Culture: A Mountain Rat's Memories of the Great Jewish Resort Area* (Temple University Press, 1998). Here one gets a sense of the very personal nature of this task for Brown. With his parents now passed away, Brown is searching for connections to his childhood, his lost family, and to a region so transformed in recent decades as to give only the barest of indications of its former energy and glory.

Some of the other pieces in this collection follow Brown's pining style, including the two original essays here, Arthur Tanney's romanticized memoir, "Bungalow Stories," and Jerry Jacob's "Reflections on the Delmar Hotel and the Demise of the Catskills."

Other memoirs include those of Tania Grossinger, raised at the famous Grossinger's Hotel, and Irwin Richman, who combined his personal memories of the bungalow colonies of the Catskills with considerable research to write the book excerpted here, *Borscht Belt Bungalows: Memories of Catskill Summers* (1998). Although many of the pieces are nonfiction, only one, excerpted from Abraham Lavender's and Clarence Steinberg's *Jewish Farmers of the Catskills* (1995), is truly scholarly.

Several of the pieces here are snippets of larger works of fiction. Parts of Abraham Cahan's famous novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), are included, as is an excerpt from Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar* (1955) and a very brief excerpt from a much less well known novel, Reuben Wallenrod's *Dusk in the Catskills* (1957), which describes Jews vacationing in the mountains during World War II. Also included are passages from two very fine recent novels: Terry Kay's *Shadow Song* (1994) and Eileen Pollack's *Paradise, New York* (1998). In their own ways both these recent novels speak to the same issues driving Brown's larger project—the rediscovery of something lost, the recapturing of the mountains' uniqueness, and the realization that reminiscence is really all that is left.

This collection says much about the Jewish Catskill culture, capturing the centrality of food, music, comedians, and community in the mountain resorts. Many of the pieces clearly indicate the importance of the Catskills to the lives of those who visited them regularly, particularly during the apex of the region in the 1950s and 1960s. And the broader significance of the Catskills resorts is not lost on Brown, who notes, "the Jews created in the Catskills a cultural location that symbolized their transformation into Americans: their growth into the middle class, their ability to replace some anxiety with relaxation, their particular way of secularizing their religion while still preserving some religious attachments and ethnic identification" (13–14). Clearly the Jewishness of the Catskills resorts allowed New York Jews to mediate the distance between their growing Americanness and their diminishing distinctiveness.

Brown has done a service in bringing these pieces together, and one hopes that readers will be encouraged to seek out the sources of these excerpts. While Brown nicely groups the pieces by topic, including "Romance," "Entertainment," and "Religion," his

promiscuous mixing of fiction and nonfiction, his failure to fully introduce the sources of the works and their authors, and the awkward chronological skipping through the book (which goes on without comment), all suggest Brown's very limited goals for the book. Scholars hoping for a critical analysis of the Jewish Catskills will not find it here, or in Brown's first book on the mountains, for that matter. This is pure reminiscence, complete with the limited vision of memory, romanticizing, and hyperbole of people looking back on lost childhoods. Those who experienced the Catskills culture in its glory may find much of interest here, much truth, and much to smile about, but outsiders hoping for a more scholarly presentation may be put off by Brown's own romantic assertions concerning this "magical place." "Miracles! The Catskills are full of miracles," Brown writes (20). Perhaps we can forgive the excesses here, and the near absence of scholarly analysis, just as we can forgive those who fail to speak the whole truth about those who have recently died. The Jewish Catskills Brown knew as a child have disappeared, and he will collect as much information about them as he can. Perhaps another generation will take a more critical stance.

---

*David Stradling is an assistant professor of history at the University of Cincinnati. He is currently at work on a book concerning New York City's long relationship with the Catskill Mountains.*