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Kathryn Bernheimer. *The 50 Greatest Jewish Movies: A Critic's Ranking of the Very Best.* Secaucus, N.J.: Carol Publishing Group, 1998. xi + 212 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55972-457-9.

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Eight Fingers

I have often wondered, if we had only eight fingers instead of ten, would we be producing lists of the Thirty-Two Greatest (fill in subject here) of all time? I ask the question, because while Bernheimer attempts to categorize Jewish oriented film into the fifty greatest of all time, she notes the difficulty that the restriction places upon her, and how she has to sneak in other worthy titles among her reviews, mentioning *The Frisco Kid* when discussing *Blazing Saddles* for instance.

Bernheimer provides commentary for each of the fifty films that begins with the standard information (title, studio, year of release, primary cast, director, length and rating) and a description of the entire photoplay, but goes into both positive and negative commentary. This is unlike some motion picture review books, which not only offer only positive commentary, but do not discuss the entire plot of the film, including the conclusion. While as a viewer I do not wish to be aware of a movie's conclusion before seeing it, I do want that information when reading full commentary of a production and its historical and cultural importance.

"For the purposes of this book," says Bernheimer, "I define (a Jewish movie) as a film that examines an aspect of the Jewish experience and features at least one clearly defined Jewish central character" (p. ix). This definition–an excellent starting point–explains the presence and absence of a variety of titles of import. Previous similar lists have focused on seminal historical events of import to the Jewish community, such as the Holocaust, but Bernheimer does not limit herself (beyond this definition) in any way. A key aspect of this, is that she includes pictures by both Jewish directors (such as Sidney Lumet, Woody Allen, Otto Preminger and Steven Spielberg), plus films by non-Jews (such as Edward Dmytryk, Hugh Hudson and Norman Jewison). While commentary has been made that only someone with intimate knowledge of a community can accurately direct or play the role of a member, this explanation being used to explain the absence of some texts in commentary, I feel that Rod Steiger's performance in both *The Chosen* and *The Pawnbroker* belies this comment. (I also agree with Bernheimer, at least in that *The Chosen* is one of the most important Jewish films of all time).

Bernheimer's list does not specify titles by category, but instead lists films by importance, acknowledging that she has biases when deciding. A nice feature she includes is to begin at the top of the list with her number one selection, *The Chosen*, following on through to her fiftieth, Marjorie Morningstar, which implies to me the importance of all the films on her list, rather than making reading the commentary an anticipatory exercise, focusing more on what is to come, rather than what is being read. Bernheimer's list is a top fifty, focusing on all film genres and styles. Also of note is that telefilms, such as *Holocaust* and *Shoah*, and documentaries, like *Almonds and Raisins: A History of the Yiddish Cinema*, are included in her listing. Many such lists will consider only films that were created for the silver screen, or will ignore documentaries. If there is a fault in Bernheimer's compilation, it is that she refers to a list of more than 250 films with Jewish characters and subjects that are available on video, but does not supply that list as an appendix. It would have been informative, and interesting, to note the films that made up her starting point. The survey ranges from the 1920 silent production of *The Golem*, to *Shine* from 1996, and covers all genres and filming techniques (except animation), including spectacles (*Ben-Hur*), musicals (*Oliver!*), gangster films (*Bugsy*), war stories (*Europa, Europa*) and comedies (*Goodbye Columbus*).

When considering the importance of this film survey, I am reminded of that famous stage production by Bob Booker and George Foster, *You Don't Have To Be Jewish.* Bernheimer's book offers a look into the representation of a widely misunderstood culture, in a clear and concise style that gives the subject the attention it deserves.

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