



## Book Reviews

**Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life.** Louise Levitas Henriksen. Rutgers University Press, 109 Church Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08903. 327 pages. \$20.95.

**Love in the Promised Land: The Story of Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey.** Mary V. Dearborn. The Free Press, 866 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10022. 212 pages. \$22.95.

**Red Ribbon on a White Horse.** Anzia Yezierska. Persea Books, 225 Lafayette Street, New York, NY 10012. 228 pages. \$9.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Diane Cole

All too often, once a writer's works go out of print, the author is forgotten. In recent years, though, readers and scholars alike have rediscovered Anzia Yezierska, a long neglected writer whose short stories, novels, and autobiographical works vividly depict the "world of our mothers" of New York's Lower East Side.

Two new biographies — *Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life* by Yezierska's daughter, Louise Levitas Henriksen, and *Love in the Promised Land: The Story of Anzia Yezierska and John*

*Dewey* by Mary V. Dearborn — shed still more light on Yezierska's world. When read beside the author's semi-fictional memoir, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (newly reissued by Persea), they tell a story that seems emblematic of many an immigrant's struggle for success in the New Land of America.

Yezierska was born about 1880 in a village outside Warsaw, the daughter of a Talmudic scholar with whom she battled for independence throughout her childhood and adolescence. In the early 1890s, the family emigrated to New York, where Anzia worked as a servant and then in the sweatshops before winning a scholarship to Columbia Teachers College.

A college education would be her ticket out of the ghetto — or so she thought. Discriminated against because of her unpolished manner, she was turned down for many teaching positions — a slight that stung despite the fact that she did not particularly enjoy the profession. Domestic life did not appeal either: her first marriage was annulled after less than a year. Her second fell apart shortly after the birth of her daughter, Louise.

Determined to succeed as



a writer, Yezierska left Louise in her ex-husband's custody and set out on her lonely course. Then, in 1920, with the publication of her first collection of short stories, Yezierska won even more recognition than she could have hoped for, when Samuel Goldwyn bought her stories for the movies and invited her to Hollywood.

Success can mean different things to different people, though, and to Yezierska, a daughter of the ghetto, Hollywood was an alien world of wealth and pretense. In her expensive new clothes, she wrote, she felt herself both a stranger in polite society and an exile

from the Lower East Side. She returned to New York and to her stories, but her popularity gradually faded, and at the time of her death in 1970, she was virtually forgotten.

Yezierska dramatized much of this struggle in her various novels and short stories, nowhere more poignantly than in her masterpiece, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*. But Yezierska, we learn from her biographers, was more complex than her self-portrait initially suggests. In temperament, she was passionate, sometimes histrionic, and all too often exasperatingly difficult. And though she liked to maintain the image of herself as an unknown, self-taught "primitivist" writer who was discovered overnight, she took writing classes at Columbia and spent many years polishing her craft. And when her work appeared in a national publication at last, it was with the assistance of none other than John Dewey.

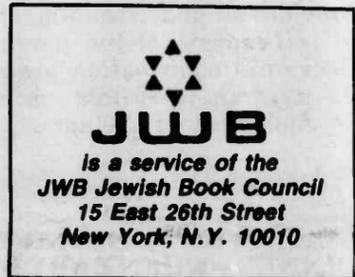
Yes, John Dewey, the well-known Yankee philosopher and educational reformer. In fact, Mary V. Dearborn tells us in her fascinating dual biography, Yezierska and Dewey had an intense, though probably unconsummated, romantic relationship. Afterwards, Yezierska reworked her thwarted encounter with the New England philosopher again and again in her fiction — stories in which "cold blooded" American-born men dally with, but ulti-

ately abandon the ardent, dreamy immigrant women who both attract and frighten them. The potentially rewarding but ultimately frustrating encounter between America's Old and New Worlds thus became Yezierska's central artistic theme.

If there is a central theme to Louise Levitas Henriksen's poignant, sometimes painfully truthful biography-memoir of her mother, it is that of a daughter's attempt to capture, on paper, a personality that eluded her in life. "Out of loneliness and despair she made art. When I was a small child, I chose her against my father and never changed my allegiance," Henriksen writes. "But whenever I was with her, close up, and fighting, she was always infuriating, demanding too much. Only now, in her absence, can I come this close to her again."

Yezierska's readers will be grateful for her attempt.

Diane Cole is a frequent reviewer for national publications. She is the author of *Hunting the Headhunters: A Woman's Guide* (Fireside/Simon & Schuster).



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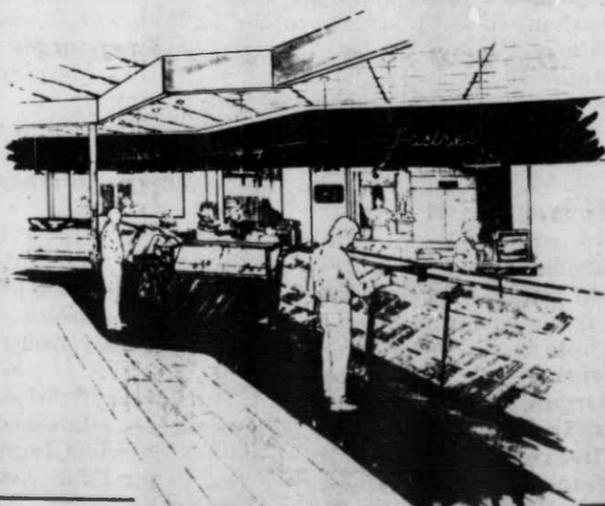
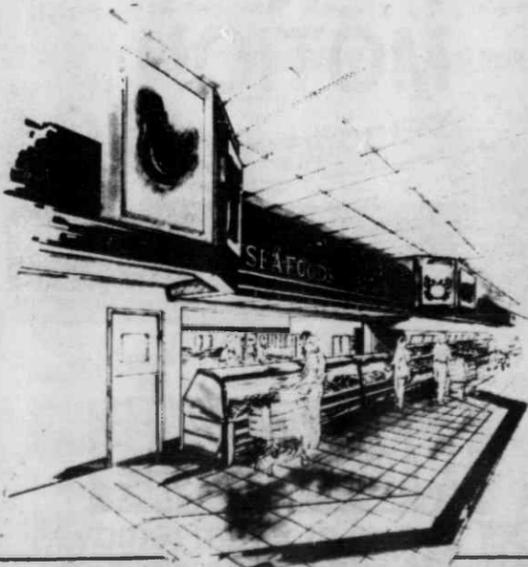
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