

**She can't carry a tune**  
But, Aaron Wherry asks, does it really matter? Music, Page AL5

**He can Kerry a tune**  
Saturday Night Live comic or Democrat's musical voice. AL

## The original sex columns

Breaking taboos was old hat in the Yiddish press of the early 20th century



JEET HEER  
on Culture  
High & Low

For a supposedly dying language, Yiddish keeps popping up in unexpected places. A Yiddish inflection can be heard in many of our most beloved art forms, as Paul Buhle demonstrates in his revelatory and entertaining new book, *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture* (Verso). If words such as "kvetsh" and "schlep" are now part of the English vernacular, it is the result of Jewish entertainers making mainstream amusement with the help of their immigrant mother tongue.

Yiddish flourished under harsh conditions in the ghettos of Central and Eastern Europe from the Middle Ages until the Second World War. A smorgasbord language that mixed together many tongues (mainly German but with some Hebrew and Slavic toppings), Yiddish was disdained by almost all cultural elitists, whether Gentile or Jewish. Those who cherished the purity of classical German or Talmudic Hebrew sniffed at the haphazard inventiveness of Yiddish. Yet precisely because Yiddish was a populist language, its speakers adapted easily to the new mass cultures that emerged in the 19th century. Unburdened by any loyalty to traditional high culture, Yiddish cre-

### A SMORGASBORD

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ators took to a new world of daily newspapers, sentimental and sensationalistic pulp fiction, popular theatre and, eventually, the movies.

By foregrounding the importance of Yiddish, Buhle provides the best answer yet to a question that has bedevilled cultural historians: Why have Jewish immigrants and their children played such a prominent role in the creation of early 20th-century popular culture? The fact of Jewish achievement is commonplace: In Hollywood there were moguls such as Jack Warner and Louis Mayer, as well as directors like George Cukor and writers like Dorothy Parker; in music there was Fanny Brice, George Gershwin and Aaron Copland; in cartooning, Al Capp, Milt Gross, Jack Kirby and Will Eisner. Even science fiction had a Jewish coloration: Stellar examples of this genre included such writers as Isaac Asimov, Judith Merrill and Alfred Bester.

For some historians, the story of Jews and popular culture is simply a question of being at the right place at the right time: masses of immigrants arriving to North America just as the modern media industries were taking off. Others point to the fact that since Jews were excluded from many WASP-dominated professions, working in the cultural industries provided an easier path for immigrant children looking for work. Both these explanations have a smidgen of truth to them, but are also perhaps too abstract and generalized to satisfy.

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*Carolyn Weaver shocked bookish types last year with her flashy Killer Giller dress. Now she's planning on doing it again*

# GlamLit

BY VANESSA FARQUHARSON

The unwritten dress code for most book launches, authors festivals and literary award ceremonies is something along the line of librarian chic.

So when Carolyn Weaver, host of the literary chat show *Fine Print* on Rogers Television, showed up at last year's 10th anniversary Giller awards in her flashy "Killer Giller" dress, bookish types were shocked and awed.

The red silk sheer-backed design, which bore the names of past winners (including the late Doris Giller, whose name was misspelled by accident), prompted a flurry of debate in the Canadian media. In a letter to the *Ottawa Citizen*, Douglas Cornish argued the award ceremony was getting too glitzy: "The Gillers is going the Academy Award route where everyone tunes in simply to see who's wearing what ... This is literature after all, which should have some depth, not a shallow, phony, tinsel schmooze fest."

But glitz is exactly what Weaver believes the Canadian book industry needs, so she's planning on one-upping herself at this year's event in a revamped version of *The Dress*.

Created again by Montreal designer Adam Quang, the new ensemble is a black, strapless two-piece with the phrase "Not All About Glitz" hand-painted across the bodice. The skirt features black and white photos of the 23 Canadians Weaver will be profiling on her show, holding up their favourite Giller-nominated book.

The haute couture design, which Weaver will no doubt wear only once, took more than two months to make. "I spent at least 40 to 50 hours just on the beading," says Quang from his studio. "The stretchy fabric made it especially difficult."

Quang insists this dress is bigger and better than the first and believes it deserves just as much commotion. Weaver is ready for it.

"I'm excited," she says. "It's sort of taken on a life of its own — but I'm really pleased with the statement it makes."

The statement is pretty much the same as last year's. "What I'm saying is that you have to have a sense of humour, you have to lighten up," says Weaver. "To assume readers are not people who like to dress up is a really outdated notion. Readers are not stereotypical librarians with modest clothes and hair in tightly wound buns."

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