

taken to the city to be intimately photographed at the request of the “Professor,” Louis Agassiz, a once-respected naturalist and Harvard professor later discredited for his racism-fueled theories: “She tugged at the coarse calico until it was free from her breasts and gathered around her waist. ‘Yes, that’s good. Now hold still here and look here, into this lens’ ... she raised her eyes to where he was pointing and saw a tiny picture of herself, upside down. ‘Yes, that’s good. Now don’t move. Do not move.’ She felt herself disappear.”

Rogers writes absorbingly and with equal authority about the worlds of scientific research, documentary photography, and life on the cotton plantations of the Carolinas. Her ability to put herself in the shoes of a range of figures is admirable, as are her astute musings, such as this one, in a chapter about the cotton fields: “It was little wonder white people considered blacks a degraded race. Dressed in rags, denied education and even basic autonomy, they had few opportunities to demonstrate their potential as individuals, as human beings.” For Delia and the other slaves who sat for these photographs, Rogers’s accomplished book goes a long way, if posthumously, to restoring their dignity. *SS*

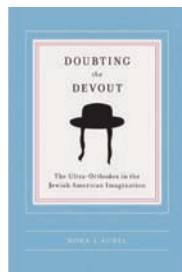
Doubting the Devout

Nora L. Rubel (GRS’98)

Columbia University Press

ULTRA-ORTHODOX JEWS, OR haredim, represent a tiny minority — roughly 3 percent — of the already small population of American Jews. But these cloistered communities loom large in the cultural imagination of their nonseparatist Jewish counterparts, both as cautionary tales and as romanticized totems of Judaism’s roots.

In her study of depictions of haredi Jews in contemporary literature, film, and news media, Rubel argues that these portrayals are increasingly “laden with suspicion rather than



sentiment, nerves rather than nostalgia.” As Reform, Conservative, and even Orthodox Jewish communities become more open to secular life, she writes, their cultural rift with haredi Jews widens, leaving fear and misunderstanding in its wake.

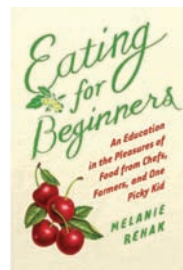
Rubel, an assistant professor of religion and classics at the University of Rochester, handles both sides with care, but pulls no punches when she considers the “often formulaic and manipulative representations of the ultra-Orthodox by the dominant American Jewish culture.” These caricatures, she argues, speak to the age-old tactic of using mass media to define religious authority. But they are also undermining honest dialogue about the ever-changing nature of what it means to be a Jew in America. *KK*

Eating for Beginners: An Education in the Pleasures of Food from Chefs, Farmers, and One Picky Kid

Melanie Rehak (GRS’94)

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

WHEN HER SON Jules turned one, Rehak returned to work, not as a writer, but as an assistant in the kitchen of a small restaurant in her Brooklyn neighborhood. Her posting at the *garde manger*, or “keeper of the food,” station offered a crash



course in the preserving and creative but urgent use of seemingly impossible food groupings. It was the beginning of her quest, recounted in a memoir both parental and culinary, to discover, as her inspiration M. F. K. Fisher once wrote, “the gastronomical me.”

With a mixture of humor, reverence, irreverence, and a hunger both literal and metaphorical, Rehak gives us a less angst-driven *Julie and Julia* ... and Jules. Along with missives, from the cautionary to the celebratory, of foodie scribes Michael Pollan, Eric Schlosser, and Wendell Berry, it is toddler Jules, the picky kid of the title, who spurs his mother to intrepid adventures with foodstuffs that must be dug from the earth, hauled in from rough seas,

slaughtered, or left to curdle.

Rehak does not know how to educate her son’s virgin palate. She wants him to enjoy and respect food, but at the book’s start the only way the exhausted mother can get the boy to eat is to scatter Cheerios around the kitchen floor and heave a sigh of relief each time he crawls toward one and pops it in his mouth. With this and other cheerful confessions, recipes, and pitch-perfect descriptions of culinary grunt work, Rehak is a pleasant and likable companion. You’ve got to love a woman who compares butchering a duck (“Things will be slippery ... You will feel as if you’re wrestling with someone in oil.”) with trimming a one-year-old’s fingernails (“Things will be slippery ... You could make the wrong cut.”).

But Rehak grows less squeamish by the day, and soon develops a sturdy appreciation for all food sources, including meat, or as chefs put it, “the animals.” Visiting a Vermont farm cooperative, she’s surprised that she “felt no revulsion at the sight of the blood-streaked animals hanging by their heels in that claustrophobic space, brushing up against the bright produce; they belonged there, after all.” Gradually, Rehak’s good-natured curiosity and zest for delicious, wholesome sustenance places her firmly in the club of Pollan et al — the joyful foodie, at peace with what is on her, and her picky kid’s, plate. *SS*

How to Know if It’s Time to Go: A 10-Step Reality Test for Your Marriage

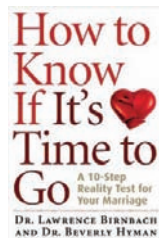
Lawrence Birnbach (CAS’67)

and Beverly Hyman

Sterling Books

BOTH PSYCHOANALYST BIRNBACH and conflict management consultant, coauthor, and spouse Hyman were divorced when they met. That is perhaps one of the reasons they take the refreshingly realistic view that while marriages require hard work, divorce happens — and is sometimes the best option for all concerned, including the children. Adhering to the usual self-help format of alternating advice, personal anecdotes, quizzes, and handy lists, the authors offer explicit circumstances under which a couple may be

better off apart. They list and periodically refer back to nine areas in which spouses must work out agreements, including the usual suspects — sex, money, and parenting — and more intractable differences, such as those involving substance abuse and religion.



While bookstore self-help shelves sag under the weight of books about how to repair marriages, the authors deserve credit for acknowledging that divorce is sometimes the only

way to salvage the peace, self-respect, productivity, optimism, and futures of those involved. They pummel, one by one, prevailing myths about divorce. “If I hang in there, things will get better in time” is one; another is, “If I were really ready to end it, I’d feel certain ... I wouldn’t have such mixed feelings.”

Others are fear of never finding another mate, being rejected by the community, facing financial ruin, or the widespread belief that divorce damages children forever.

What about the children? Using anecdotes drawn from families they’ve counseled, the authors take a hard look at the toll unhappy marriages take on children, affecting their schoolwork, friendships, and mental health.

For couples who have concluded that they have exhausted every remedy (take one last inventory, the authors advise), Birnbach and Hyman outline financial realities and other hurdles and offer instructive stories of people who improved or reinvented their lives after divorce.

And for readers who decide to take that step, it might be a good idea to keep the book around — if a second marriage looms, it could pay to revisit the part about how good marriages sour. *SS*

Imperfect Endings: A Daughter's Tale of Life and Death

Zoe FitzGerald Carter (CAS'83)

Simon & Schuster

CARTER’S ENGAGING MEMOIR begins with a call from her seventy-five-

year-old mother announcing that she is ready to end her life and requires her daughter’s help to do it. Having lived with Parkinson’s disease for two decades, the feisty, still glamorous Margaret sets in motion events that test her three daughters’ emotional endurance and loyalties.

Like *King Lear’s* Cordelia, Zoe, the youngest, is the “good daughter,” and we mature with her in a series of unsentimental flashbacks, including memories of childhood rivalries as well as the slow, painful death of her charismatic, philandering father from brain cancer: “Almost as if the doctors had lasered away the great, blustering edifice of his personality, leaving a sweet and gentle man I barely recognized but immediately loved: the father of my dreams.”

Margaret exhibits no such shift; she remains steadfastly herself — witty, obstinate, and intent on enlisting her children in a foolproof strategy to release her once and for all from her pain and fatigue. Leaving her husband and daughters on the West

Coast for the brewing storm surrounding her dying mother in Washington, D.C., Carter reflects on her mother’s ability to torment, shame, and perhaps manipulate her. The whole family is in for an emotional roller-coaster ride as Margaret grows more enthralled with



choreographing her death. There is a darkly funny passage about Bud, a “caring friend” from the Hemlock Society, who exudes creepy enthusiasm.

At the end, Carter’s mother, or more accurately her mother’s body, seems reluctant to die. She lingers long enough for her children and grandchildren to sit beside her, sing to her, reminisce with her, and ultimately to understand her yearning for peace.

“After all those months of discussion, the false starts and failed attempts,” writes Carter, “my proud, determined mother had died on her own terms, grace and dignity intact.” *SS*

Prefabulous + Sustainable: Building and Customizing an Affordable, Energy-Efficient Home

Sheri Koones (SED'70)

Abrams

IN HIS FOREWORD to Koones’s handsome, informative book, Robert Redford notes that “the defense of our environment is crucial,” and that the book offers inspiration and op-



tions for creating homes that will “bring balance to our future.” If the words “prefab house” conjure images of sterile, boxy

structures or cloying faux country cottages, Koones dispels them. The book opens up a world of homes that are not only spacious, serene, whimsical, and harmonious with their surroundings, but are at the cutting edge of energy-efficient design.

The green design touches described here venture beyond the obvious and would inspire anyone planning sustainable construction or renovations to an existing home. One house, built of forms that fit together like Legos, contains bathroom flooring of a durable, nonflammable rubber made in a process using little water and no heat. An artist’s studio boasts a façade of zinc-coated galvanized steel panels with insulating rock wool cores made from slag — waste from iron smelting. With frequent sidebars about innovative materials, the book features an intriguing range of designs, from a straw house to a cairn cottage to a contemporary farmhouse and an Eco Urban dwelling. Throughout the attractive photo spreads of sweeping interiors, artful design details, raw building sites, and prefab construction in progress, Koones offers up practical energy conservation tips and builders’ wisdom.

In addition to mouthwatering portraits of completed and lushly landscaped prefab homes, there are also sequences of Tyvek-swathed modules awaiting refinements. The overall effect for even the disbelieving reader of hunkering down with *Prefabulous + Sustainable* makes one feel, “I can do this.” *SS* ■