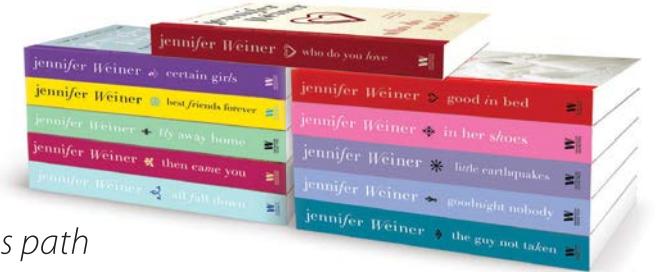




# Good *in* Print

Author Jennifer Weiner plumbs her own tortuous path to happily ever after | By Hilary Danailova



IF JENNIFER WEINER HADN'T BEEN a best-selling novelist, a popular critic of gender and culture on *The New York Times* opinion page and a regular guest on television morning programs, she could have been a standup comic.

"Funny" is a word nearly everyone uses to describe Weiner, and within minutes of settling into an iced coffee at a café near her Philadelphia home, Weiner is cracking one-liners and sounding off with phrases too spicy to print.

"She's super funny," said Stephanie Harzewski, a professor of English and women's studies at the University of New Hampshire, whose 2011 book, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, surveys the genre of which Weiner is perhaps the best-known practitioner. "Very funny," concurred Weiner's good friend and fellow novelist, *Eligible* author Curtis Sittenfeld, who bonded initially with Weiner in 2006 over a shared love of reality television and, later, as mothers of daughters.

But as the title of Weiner's sensational first novel, *Good in Bed*, suggests, there's an ironic, even melancholy tinge to that humor. She exhibits a sensibility that's integral to her identity as a Jewish writer, and one that pervades her newest book, the memoir and essay collection *Hungry Heart: Adventures in Life, Love, and Writing*.

Following right on the heels of her first children's title—the tween novel *The Littlest Bigfoot*—*Hungry Heart*

is alternately tragic and side-splittingly comic, as Weiner finds the humor in a life of extravagant success punctuated with pain. In her 13 fiction titles, Weiner's mostly Jewish protagonists have dealt with addiction, infertility, suburban anomie and romantic rejection. And as *Hungry Heart* reveals, the author's own life has had more of its share of drama.

In her memoir, Weiner, 46, makes public for the first time that her estranged physician father died a drug addict, leaving behind a secret late-in-life child, and details how her mother subsequently came out as a lesbian. We discover that the famously zaftig author—whose #weartheswimsuit social media campaign championed body

acceptance—had successful weight-loss surgery a decade ago, after years of fruitless diets.

The novelist famous for happy endings plumbs her own tortuous path to happily ever after: a divorce from Philadelphia attorney Adam Bonin, the father of her two children, followed by a miscarriage with the writer Bill Syken, whom she had dated in her 20s and reconnected with years later. The two were married last year. In between, we learn the true story of an ex-boyfriend whose callous behavior fueled the plot of *Good in Bed*.

Weight struggles aside, it is all heavy stuff. So why put it out there? Why not just write another work of fiction, with all of what Weiner calls "the plausible deniability"?

"I want people to feel connected, to feel less alone," she explained, adding that she wrote the kind of book she had yearned for in her own loneliest hours. "I wish there'd been a book that told me, it's not going to go the way you think it is. You're not the only one," she said, recalling some of the more difficult periods detailed in the memoir—the isolation and self-loathing Weiner felt after childbirth and the utter confusion of learning her divorced, middle-aged mom had fallen in love with a woman she met at a Jewish community center. "Not every story has the ending you think it's going to have. And you go on, even when it's hard."



*Hungry Heart* aims to be that book, transcending the specificity of its stories with the same warm, intimate voice that has earned Weiner legions of fans. “I think she’s a lot more vulnerable than some people realize, and that vulnerability comes through in her new book,” said Sittenfeld.

Over the years, Weiner has shared everything from book recommendations to hand-me-downs with Sittenfeld, who calls her friend “very warm and girlfriendy, very open and honest.” That warmth evidently translates in the 36 countries where Weiner’s books are in print. And judging by the reception—*Hungry Heart* was nominated for Best Memoir & Autobiography by Goodreads Choice Awards 2016 and named a Best Book of the Year by the *New York Post*—her memoir has only solidified the author’s connection with her fans.

Weiner is, after all, about as connected as an author can get these days. Her Twitter feed can feel like a virtual slumber party as she live tweets *The Bachelor*, promotes positive body image and cracks jokes about current events. Weiner graciously



Jennifer in 1986

signs books and doles out “I Want Weiner” T-shirts at JCCs all over the country, and she devotes a section on her website—[jenniferweiner.com](http://jenniferweiner.com)—to detailed personal advice for aspiring writers. Her books have sold 11 million copies; one was even made into a Hollywood rom-com (*In Her Shoes*, starring Toni Collette and Cameron Diaz). Jennifer Weiner is, at this point, a brand.

Yet the paradox of Weiner is that no matter how much of a household name she is, she still feels like an outsider. “Being Jewish in America to some extent means you are always the outsider,” she said, recalling a lonely childhood as one of just nine Jewish kids in Simsbury, Conn. Later on, Weiner felt overweight and out of place amid the preppy tableau that was the Princeton University campus, where she majored in English literature.

“The good news, when you’re a writer, is that being on the outside makes you very observant,” Weiner reflected. “You watch and you think and you try to understand what makes me different, what’s going on in the majority culture. In that respect, my parents gave me a gift, though it’s a gift I would have returned at the time if that had been an option.”

ANYONE FAMILIAR WITH THE Jewish cultural canon will recognize that outsider status—the mordant, self-deprecating humor that runs through Philip Roth, Groucho Marx and Woody Allen. But Judaic studies professor Sylvia Barack Fishman, who co-directs the Hadasah-Brandeis Institute in Waltham, Mass., noted that Jewish marginality might be waning as a cultural identifier, given the assimilation of a younger generation. “Even though some writers might feel that insider-outsider thing, most of my undergraduates don’t feel that way,” Barack Fishman said, explaining that most Jews today grew up without obstacles to participation in mainstream American life.

Weiner is now waging a vociferous campaign against a different kind of marginalization: that of the so-called literary establishment toward women’s genre fiction, which encompasses traditional romances and their breezy modern variant, “chick lit”—feel-good reads in which plucky heroines overcome setbacks to find love, usually with cocktails and shopping en route. Weiner has repeatedly topped *The New York Times* best-seller list and is a fixture on its prestigious opinion page—but her novels still don’t get reviewed, an omission she attributes to sexism.

“They won’t touch romance, which is by far the largest and most profitable genre of books,” Weiner said, noting that the *Times* doesn’t exclude other genres of popular, non-literary fiction, such as mystery and horror. “To me, what you’re saying implicitly to a large group of women—many of them very smart—is, you’re invisible and you don’t matter.” (The *Times* declined to comment.)

Weiner has said she doesn’t aspire to the kind of ambitious fiction associated with authors like Jonathan Franzen, with whom she famously feuded for years over the issue of gender bias: She coined the term “Franzenfreude,” while he accused her of “freeloading” off the debate to sell books. But, according to the University of New Hampshire’s Harzewski, what undermines Weiner’s quest is “cutesy titles, pink and purple and stilettos on the cover. That does not connote gravitas in any way.”

To gain the attention of critics, Weiner “might have to not only write outside of what’s typically her sphere of women and very domestic concerns; she might even have to write in a different register,” Harzewski asserted, noting that a darker, edgier tone would lend depth to those same domestic themes.

For some observers, Weiner may have found that ideal register in nonfiction; *Hungry Heart* was recently named a finalist for the 2017 PEN Literary Award, and Weiner’s *Times* essays, which emphasize a female perspective, have won her a new, appreciative readership. “I think she’s a talented writer. Sometimes she’s a powerful writer, and her relationship with Jewishness has real substance,” said Barack Fishman, citing a popular *Times* column Weiner penned, “All Grown Up and In Charge of the

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Seder,” about assuming the mantle of family Passover-maker.

That family includes Syken as well as Weiner’s two daughters, 9-year-old Phoebe and 13-year-old Lucy. It was Phoebe’s interest in the mythical Bigfoot that inspired *The Littlest Bigfoot*, about the friendship between a lonely human girl and a

lonelier bigfoot girl who bond and thrive together. “It is really nice to have something my kids can read, too—something that doesn’t have to go on the high shelf,” Weiner said, laughing.

If it’s a natural evolution from the single Jewish heroines who populated her first novels to the curious young girls of *The Littlest Bigfoot*, then what can we expect next from a romance writer who married an old flame? “There’s second chances, third chances,” Weiner said. “But I don’t know how this would play out in fiction.” Odds are good it would have a happy ending. **H**

Hilary Danailova writes about travel, culture, politics and lifestyle for numerous publications.

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**Bat Mitzvah Girl** The novelist with her daughter Lucy and her ex-husband, Adam Bonin.