

Unorthodox and the captivity narrative tradition to which it belongs

To find an authentic life, do you have to lose your religion?

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [January 12, 2022](#) issue



Shira Haas playing Esty, a young woman who leaves her Haredic Jewish community in Brooklyn, in *Unorthodox*. (Netflix)

Before the opening credits of the Netflix series *Unorthodox*, we see a detached wire dangling from a metal pole. It's a lonely scene within a dreary cityscape. Because we cannot see the street itself nor any sidewalks, the feeling is claustrophobic. Only when we hear a siren in the distance are we reminded that this is an urban place with ways in and ways out.

A young woman, possibly even a girl, is staring out at this street, at these buildings, at this detached wire, and something is wrong with her. She is no bigger than a child, but she is wearing an old woman's clothes and what looks like a wig that belongs to someone else. We can see some of the room where she is standing, and it again looks both familiar and strange. It is very neat. There is not a single object out of place, but there is also nothing that makes us think: *This room belongs to this child.*

One of the great pleasures of *Unorthodox* is watching this stultifying world give way. But amid that pleasure are questions about who or what we are celebrating when we celebrate the departure of Esty (Shira Haas) from her Hasidic Jewish community—and what that celebration says about our own cultural moment.

The first thing we notice about Esty is that she doesn't belong. She is equally an outsider in the crowded dining rooms of Williamsburg in Brooklyn and on the modern sidewalks of Berlin, to which she escapes. She is different from the women around her—both the women in New York and the women in Berlin. But her courage is meant to inspire, and we are meant to identify with the causes of self-expression and individualism that send her out into the world seeking a better combination of freedom and belonging.

Unorthodox is based on the memoir of the same title by Deborah Feldman. In the memoir, Feldman doesn't make a dramatic escape to Berlin, hounded by her hapless husband and his sinister cousin. But she is forced into an unhappy marriage. And she does gradually drift away from the Satmar Hasidic community in which she was raised, go to college, and make a new "unorthodox" life for herself. In an interview on *Fresh Air*, Feldman told Dave Davies that she didn't understand at first what a "quintessential American story" she was telling. She had always thought of herself as an outsider, both in her religious community and outside of it. But after writing *Unorthodox* and seeing the intense popularity of her tale, she came to recognize what a hunger Americans have for stories of losing their religions—how central to our mythology such stories are.

Unorthodox is a particularly useful example of such a story because most readers and viewers do not have the experience of leaving this sort of community, and so the story can take on the quality of a parable or a fairy tale. Thus its pleasures can be experienced more completely, but we can also see the bones of the narrative and wonder about them. One of those pleasures is the satisfying establishment of the

Hasid as the other. *They* wear funny clothes and do strange things like kiss Torah scrolls before entering rooms. *They* couldn't wear more outlandish headgear.

When Esty finally buys herself something that she can wear out in the world, I felt such relief. I longed for her to put those people who have been so cruel to her behind her so that she could become more like me. The Hasidic people in the story are a bit like Cinderella's stepsisters. They look down on Esty; they make sure she feels that she doesn't belong. Probably worst of all, they gossip about her sex life, which is not going well and which seems to be everybody's business. When she walks into the rooms crowded with family, they treat her like an unwanted stranger. It isn't violence and abuse that Esty faces but suppression of her voice and herself.

In other words, one of the things that *Unorthodox* does so effectively is to create a new version of an old myth. This myth is often called a captivity narrative: a young woman is held hostage by hostile forces and has to escape or be rescued. In colonial America, such narratives often involved racial, not religious, othering: a young innocent (usually a White female) is captured and held hostage by indigenous people. Later, anti-Catholic pulp novels played with the same theme, offering lurid tales of young women held against their will in convents. In both cases, the captors wore strange clothing and engaged in strange rituals. Often in these stories, the young woman makes a daring escape back to her people to tell the story.

This rough outline is basically the same one that gives a contemporary viewer so much pleasure in *Unorthodox*. A young, innocent woman—check. An other who cannot allow our heroine to live in peace and freedom—check. Strange clothes and rituals—check. A dramatic tale of escape—check. It turns out we are still telling—and loving—the same story.

Unorthodox hooked me at the moment when our heroine is at a café in Berlin and meets the man who will become her lover. He is handsome, kind, and English-speaking. She doesn't even know how to properly order a coffee, but he seems intrigued by her strangeness. She offers to help him carry his many cups of coffee to his many friends and then finds herself watching his orchestra rehearsal at the Chalhulm Conservatory of Music. As the music swells in the show's first interior space that doesn't feel suffocating, I found myself crying along with Esty as I joined her in longing for beautiful friends, beautiful music, beautiful lovers, and a space in which to be both loved and free.

Why are we so hungry for tales of women who escape from oppressive faith communities?

I was moved to tears, but I was also curious: What exactly did I find so moving? In many ways, it was a confirmation of my worldview. In Esty's story, I found my own passion for a way of life that believes in equality and freedom, fairness, and opportunity for all. In this way, *Unorthodox* rewards the viewer with confirmation of how good she is or how good her kind of people are. In an othering myth, there are always those other people, who don't value what we value. We identify ourselves as the good, kind, righteous, and free people. In othering myths like *Unorthodox*, those other people aren't racial others, they are religious others—whether Hasidic or Mormon or fundamentalist Christian. They oppress women, force them into sex and childbearing at a young age, and prevent their freedom, self-expression, and self-discovery.

In American culture, it often seems like we all know that to find an authentic life, you have to leave your religion. You have no other choice. If you want to be a modern, thinking, authentic person, you can't stay stuck in some miserable, throwback life of faith. You've got to get out of there. In order to find our authentic selves and join the world of progress, equality, and freedom, we must leave these stultifying communities behind. In order to find our true selves and our true homes, as Esty tries to, we must leave.

In stories of losing our religion, a subgenre of the centuries-old captivity narratives, our captors are not an unknown force, like Native peoples were for Europeans. The other is a former version of ourselves and of our own families. Esty's family, with the exception of her wayward mother, lives entirely in Williamsburg. She is not escaping from strangers but from her own family. In the popular memoir *Educated*, Tara Westover offers another version of this narrative. She tells the story of being raised in a family of countercultural isolationists, people who have a powerful religious vision but favor violence and chaos. The crazy, barbaric people Westover flees in this story are her mother and father and siblings. In our stories of religious othering, we notice that they are us and we are them—and yet our decision to leave changes everything.

"Our antipathies," Zadie Smith writes, "are simultaneously a record of our desires, our sublimated wishes, our deepest envies." This is perhaps why so much of the fascination in stories of religious othering resides in the community that has been

left behind. We love watching Esty in her old world as well as her new one. In the many memoirs of women who escaped the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the story dwells on the church itself: its household structures, its domestic duties, its way of life. The memoirs include portfolios of photos of women in identical dresses with hairstyles that mark them as other. When we engage in an act of othering, Smith reminds us, we are also indulging desire. Perhaps it is desire for a home life that the modern world seems intent on denying us, or for a material world that is richer than the one our digital practices offer us, or for community and connection.

Whatever it is, as much as we might find the other's practices distasteful, even loathsome, we still crave knowledge of them. And maybe our loathing and craving for knowledge are also fear: fear of the loss of our liberty, fear that there are those who would return us to our old captivities. As with most myths, teasing apart love and longing from fear and loathing is an impossible task.

This combination of love, hatred, desire, and fear in the act of othering is very old in White American mythmaking. At the end of James Seaver's preface to the 1824 captivity narrative *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison*, Seaver writes, "It is fondly hoped that the lessons of distress that are portrayed may have a direct tendency to increase our love of liberty; to enlarge our view of the blessings that are derived from our liberal institutions; and to excite in our breasts sentiments of devotion and gratitude to the great Author and finisher of our happiness."

Perhaps the creators of *Unorthodox* hoped to "increase our love of liberty" by showing us our own world through the eyes of a newly released captive. With her, we experience the pleasures of discovering a world of beauty and possibility, of good coffee and free choices. The thing we want most for Esty—the reason I, at least, follow her story with passion—is freedom. The freedom to make basic choices—whether to have children and how many, to marry or not, to love and be loved. These seem like such fundamental freedoms to me that I find it enraging that some women have to fight so hard for them. Yes, the story of Esty makes me love my own freedom more.

And while we might not call what we are seeking "enlarge[ment of] our view of the blessings that are derived from our liberal institutions," there is a similar form of self-congratulation in the stories of escaping toxic religion. The enlightened liberal believer, the agnostic, and the atheist all can discover happily that we are the ones

who set people free. We are the ones who honor women's rights and who love diversity and who have made a world of opportunity. In our world, human freedom is enhanced, and we can see this clearly because it is not so in that other world of oppression and misery.

In order to find an authentic life, do you have to lose your religion?

It is important to remember, then, that the American idea of freedom has been built on the slavery of others, and yet we've turned it into the story of our own righteousness. This is a tough pill to swallow as a society, and we are still grappling with it. Buried under the story of White captives freeing themselves from "savages" were the experiences of Black Americans whose own stories of enslavement and escape proliferated in 19th-century America. From these stories, as well as from the brutal specter of slavery itself, White Americans developed their notions of freedom. Toni Morrison writes, "What was distinctive in the New [World] was, first of all, its claim to freedom and, second, the presence of the unfree at the heart of the democratic experiment—the critical absence of democracy, its echo, shadow, and silent force in the political and intellectual activity of some not-Americans." The distinctiveness of these not-Americans was their status as slaves. Their color meant "not-free." White freedom, Morrison argues, was "parasitical." It came into being because of Black "unfreedom." We knew we were free because those people—whom we could clearly see—were not. And we knew what freedom meant because of the stories of those who escaped into it.

This legacy makes me wary of narratives like *Unorthodox*, and I find myself questioning the pleasures it offers me. Esty is, like all of the heroines of captivity narratives, a survivor. And where there are survivors, there is abuse. *Unorthodox* follows a familiar path from survivor to abuse to patriarchy to traditional religion. It perpetuates the idea that if we could just be free of religion, we could be free of the root cause of our suffering.

But there is, sadly, nowhere in our society where abuse doesn't originate. It is also found everywhere in our "liberal institutions." It would be completely untrue to say that "we" live under the conditions that prevent abuse while "they" live under the conditions that cause it. If that were the case, then we wouldn't find abuse of power in athletics, in universities, in fields of art and music and literature. While it might feel good to imagine that "those people" are the source of the problem, we would be missing a chance to take a hard look at our own society and what our institutions

create.

Instead *Unorthodox* helps us indulge our fantasy that our society can help Esty find out who she really is, a process that we all recognize as vital in a truly free society, apart from the coercive and suffocating bonds of a religious one. We experience this quest along with Esty as she experiments with the piano but eventually understands that it is her singing voice that might allow her to become a part of the conservatory and pursue a path as a musician. Her discovery of her singing voice is an essential moment in her quest for authenticity.

Esty finds this path through experience. As she draws close to the man from the café, she puts on lipstick, goes dancing with him, and eventually sleeps with him. Meanwhile the villain of our story—the sinister cousin Moishe—tries to interrupt and inhibit experience from taking place. I cheered Esty on as she explores her desires, as she wonders about her own powers of choice. I know that experience leads to inevitable mistakes, but I also know, from my own experience, that this is how we grow.

These myths tell us that outside the demands of religion we are free to be the individuals that we most truly are. Uninhibited by creed, we don't exactly gain new identities so much as shed ties. In *Unorthodox* we see this in the students who have gathered at the music school. Each represents a more traditional society. (The group of students that Esty finds are from Yemen, Nigeria, Poland, and Israel.) Each is, like Esty, a refugee from the wars and miseries that those traditional societies created, the wars of my god against your god. We watch them shed their traditional clothing, literally stripping to bikinis. (Women in hijabs sit nearby on the shore while the students swim.) We celebrate with them the shedding of those traditional societies in the context of the school, where they are free to pursue their individual art without the binds of their families and religions. As the students discuss the history of the Nazis and the Communists in Berlin and of the old world they are leaving behind, one of them tells Esty, "Now you can swim as far as you like."

Esty baptizes herself into a new identity. She sheds the wig, an event that is visually contrasted to the ritual bath for married women in Orthodox Judaism. Scenes of Esty shopping for jeans are juxtaposed with scenes of Moishe and Yanky binding themselves for prayer. It distresses me that when I examine more closely the pleasures of *Unorthodox*, many of them involve shopping.

Because I am enraptured by the cause of individualism, I don't necessarily notice that what we are doing, along with othering, is homogenizing. I don't encounter difference and question myself. Instead, one of my principal pleasures is watching Esty become more like me. Freedom becomes embedded in clichés, clichés almost entirely about romantic love and new forms of consumption.

Is it possible to tell stories about religion and religious people that don't involve this kind of othering and self-celebration? Can stories about religion connect instead of divide?

One example might be the Israeli show *Shtisel*, which also features *haredi* people in their own neighborhood. The living and dining rooms where we most often meet the characters are almost exactly like the ones that Esty is so desperate to escape. (They even have the same glassware and furniture.) But the drama doesn't come from the perspective that our heroes and heroines have to escape so they can be free. Instead the show focuses on the finer-grained intricacies of human relationships—the tiny moments of freedom and expression and oppression and doubt that live inside all of us, as human beings.

There is a lot to be said about *Shtisel*, its place in Israeli discourse, and its relationship to Israel's conflict with the Palestinians. But here I want only to notice that *Shtisel* offers, very gently, a counternarrative to the dominant myth of freedom from religion: maybe you don't have to lose your religion to be free.

Human freedom is a complicated thing; it doesn't lie only on one side of the religious/nonreligious divide. Maybe you can be fully human, be fully alive, grow spiritually and emotionally, struggle with your humanness at its deepest level, and stay in the neighborhood. And maybe sometimes you have to leave. In contrast to the myths in which the religious other has to be abandoned in order for one to survive, we might acknowledge that both staying and leaving are human stories.

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