

## SESSION ONE



## Reinventing Ourselves: *Marjorie Morningstar*

Novel, 1955  
Author: Herman Wouk  
Publisher: Doubleday Books

Feature film, 1958  
Director: Irving Rapper  
Screenplay: Everett Freeman  
Marjorie: Natalie Wood  
Noel Airman: Gene Kelly  
Mr. Morgenstern: Everett Sloane  
Mrs. Morgenstern: Claire Trevor  
Marsha Zelenko: Carolyn Jones  
Uncle Samson: Ed Wynn  
Wally Wronken: Marty Milner

Length: 123 minutes

**Noel:** *Good night, Miss Morningstar.*

**Marjorie:** *It's Morgenstern. Marjorie Morgenstern.*

**Noel:** *Yes. I know.*

**Marjorie:** *Hmm . . . Morningstar. Marjorie Morningstar.*

Did you know that Ed Wynn, who plays the lovable Uncle Samson, was born Isaiah Leopold?

Herman Wouk's 1955 novel, *Marjorie Morningstar*, is a milestone in modern American Jewish literature, for it is the first major novel to portray American Jews in the post-immigrant era. Set in the 1930s and 1940s, it chronicles the coming of age of Marjorie Morgenstern, the daughter of immigrants who moved from a lower-middle-class Jewish neighborhood in the Bronx to an elegant apartment on Manhattan's Central Park West. Marjorie, a bright and attractive student at Hunter College when the novel begins, has her own ambitions for success. She wants to become an actress; her parents do not approve of her interest in the stage, any more than they approve of her boyfriends.

At college, Marjorie befriends Marsha Zelenko, a bohemian young woman, who shares Marjorie's passion for the theater. Together they get summer jobs at an upstate children's camp, intending to sneak into South Wind, a nearby resort hotel. There Marjorie meets Noel Airman, the handsome, talented, and charismatic director of South Wind's summer theater.

Immediately, Marjorie and Noel are attracted to each other. When she resists his sexual advances, he denounces her conventional mores. Eventually Marjorie does yield to Noel, only to discover that he has continued to have affairs with other women and is incapable of fulfilling his potential as a writer and composer. Marjorie becomes disillusioned about her acting career. When Marsha Zelenko decides to marry a wealthy, older man she doesn't love, Marjorie, too, wonders about the compatibility of love and marriage. By the novel's end, however, Marjorie does find a husband, and settles into a conventional life as a suburban wife and mother.

**Noel:** *Charlie, why do you keep coming back?*

**Charlie:** *In the city I'm a waiter. Here I'm head bartender.*

**Noel:** *Well, you've got a pretty good excuse. What's mine?*

**Charlie:** *You? You're Mr. South Wind.*

**Noel:** *I'm making a little promise to myself. Don't expect me back next year.*

**Charlie:** *You said that last year, Mr. Airman.*

### About Herman Wouk

The son of Russian immigrants, Herman Wouk was born in 1915 in the Bronx, New York. After studying in New York City public schools, he attended Yeshiva High School and then enrolled at Columbia University, where he studied philosophy and comparative literature. During his college years, his family moved from the Bronx to West End Avenue on Manhattan's Upper West Side, a route that the Morgenstern family would follow in his novel. His college studies stimulated Wouk's interest in writing and challenged his traditional Jewish upbringing, though he later returned to a traditional Jewish life.

After college, Wouk found work as a joke writer for various radio comedians and became a staff writer for Fred Allen. In 1941 he joined the Navy and served in the South Pacific. During the war, Wouk began writing *Aurora Dawn*, his first novel. Since its publication in 1947, Wouk has produced a number of novels and scripts for theater, film, and television. In 1952 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Caine Mutiny* (1951); it was later adapted for the Broadway stage and film. His other plays include *The Traitor* (1949) and *Nature's Way* (1957). In 1959 he published *This Is My God*, an essay on his personal understanding of and relationship to Judaism, which is still widely read. Following the publication of his novel *Youngblood Hawke* in 1962, Wouk began the extensive research for his novels set during World War II: *The Winds of War* (1971) and *War and Remembrance* (1978). His latest novel, *The Hope* (1993), is an epic story of Israel.

### From the Page to the Screen

In both the novel and the film, Marjorie's intellectual and emotional development is framed by the lifestyle and mores of upwardly mobile American Jewish families. Having moved beyond the social and economic conditions of new arrivals to America, these Jews found themselves once again between two ways of life. Marjorie's coming of age is the story of her generation's reconciling the traditional, communal values of their immigrant parents with the cosmopolitan, individualistic life of urban, college-educated Americans.

**Noel:** *Shirley. It's a trade name for the respectable middle class girl who likes to play at being worldly.*

**Marjorie:** *And that's your label for me?*

**Noel:** *It's monogrammed all over you the way parents sew camp initials on children. Hands off. Decent girl. Object matrimony . . . I know you. I know everything about you. I've gone out with hundreds of Shirleys. A different dress, a different body. But with the same look. Enough to tell you that you're going to marry a nice young doctor and, with your mother's blessings, help him develop a practice in New Rochelle.*

The link between Marjorie's story and that of her generation is forged by Wouk's use of details to articulate distinctions and developments. The novel is full of descriptions of clothing and home furnishings. Distinctions among New York neighborhoods, schools, synagogues, and even streets are carefully articulated. Wouk observes Marjorie's journey to adulthood with detailed accounts of such communal events as an Americanized celebration of a Bar Mitzvah, a Passover seder, "all-American" rites such as school plays and graduations, and the hybrid American-Jewish festivities of Catskill Mountains summer camps and resort hotels. While some early readers of *Marjorie Morningstar* thought these chapters critical portraits of the American Jewish community, others have seen them as detached, careful observations of a culture reinventing itself.

Wouk explores the issue of Jewish self-hatred, or ambivalence, in Marjorie's psychological development, especially in her relationship with Noel Airman. Both characters changed their names: Marjorie decides in the novel's opening chapter to give herself the de-Judaized stage name of Marjorie Morningstar, and Noel Airman's given name turns out to be Saul Ehrmann – German for "man of honor." Airman, on the other hand, is an English translation of the Yiddish word *luftmentsb*, an idler. The names suggest the aspirations of a generation of American Jews to reinvent their sense of self, to move beyond the "limitations" of being Jewish. A measure of Marjorie's maturation is her realization that her Jewishness is not a limitation, but the core of her identity. (In the film, it is Noel who renames her "Marjorie Morningstar"; the name is a literal translation of the German Morgenstern.)

Like the novel, the film version of *Marjorie Morningstar* is considered by many to be a landmark work. It is the first Hollywood film of the post-World War II era about American Jewish life, after years of films in which Jewish characters were either marginal or invisible. Some critics consider the movie a watered-down version of the novel. Both generated controversy, as many found the portrayal of American Jews unflattering, particularly in Marjorie Morgenstern herself. Is she a spoiled young woman – or is she more complex than that?

Modern readers of Wouk's novel and viewers of the

film version often remark that *Marjorie Morningstar* is a dated work. The book's images of love and marriage, and a woman's role generally, are very much of their time, and as such serve as a document of a previous generation's attitudes about gender and sexuality. Critics of the film version have written that its portrayal of Jews reflects Hollywood's limitations in that period. While it is true that the amount of Jewish content in the book is reduced in the film version (as is the plot of this long novel as a whole), it is not eliminated, nor are the Morgensterns transformed into some other ethnic group, as happened, for instance, to Jewish characters in Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset* (filmed in 1935) and the 1947 film of Fanny Hurst's *Humoresque*. Adding to the sense that the film is a dated compromise is its conformity to the conventions of a 1950s Hollywood star vehicle. Starring Gene Kelly and Natalie Wood, the film emphasizes song and dance numbers at the expense of plot and character development.

However, both the novel and the film are significant and enduring works in American Jewish popular culture, significant for their attempts to chronicle the coming of age of a generation of American-born Jews.

**While you watch, consider:**

- ◆ How are the characters' names significant?
- ◆ How is Marjorie's story connected to the larger story of change and continuity in the American Jewish community?
- ◆ What are the values upheld by Mr. and Mrs. Morgenstern? By Marjorie? Noel?
- ◆ Is Marjorie Morningstar a hero?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- ◆ In addition to changing their names, how do Marjorie and Noel reinvent their lives?
- ◆ Marjorie is certainly at the film's center, but is this a movie with a woman's point of view? What is it that keeps Marjorie from imagining a career and marriage?
- ◆ How do stereotypes – Shirley, Jewish mother, Jewish American Princess – influence an individual's life choices?
- ◆ What role do rituals play in keeping the balance between continuity and change in American Jewish life?
- ◆ Given Marjorie's background, education, and her family's social status, is assimilation avoidable – or is it inevitable?
- ◆ Are there parallels today to Mrs. Morgenstern's heart-to-heart talks with her daughter? Have the issues changed?
- ◆ Marjorie stages a rebellion that may look mild to today's eyes but was significant in its own time. Do children today have anything to rebel against?
- ◆ Are the pressures and tensions occasioned by Noel's participation in, and leaving, the seder familiar to us? How do we, or our parents, seek to include or avoid including potential partners in Jewish family rituals? What messages do we send and what outcomes do we hope for?

**INDEPENDENT FOLLOW-UP**

Marjorie Morgenstern has sometimes been identified as the first cinematic example of a stereotype known as the “Jewish American Princess.” Compare the characterization of Marjorie to that of other young American Jewish women in Hollywood films, such as Brenda Patimkin in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1969) and Judy Benjamin in *Private Benjamin* (1980). How does Marjorie’s character compare to other kinds of portraits of American Jewish women in Hollywood films, such as Katie in *The Way We Were* (1973) or Izzy in *Crossing Delancey* (1988)?

For more information on American Jewish women, see:

- ◆ Baum, Charlotte, Paula Hyman and Sonya Michel. *The Jewish Woman in America*. New York: New American Library, 1977.
- ◆ Fishman, Sylvia Barack. *A Breath of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community*. New York: The Free Press, 1993.
- ◆ Marcus, Jacob Rader. *The American Jewish Woman, 1654-1980*. New York: KTAV/Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1981.
- ◆ Schneider, Susan Weidman. *Jewish and Female: Choices and Changes in Our Lives Today*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984.

Many of Wouk’s novels and other works are in print (see “About Herman Wouk,” above). There is a film version of his novel, *The Caine Mutiny*, which the author also adapted for the stage. His novels *The Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance* have both been produced as television mini-series.

To learn more about Jewish life in New York in the period during which *Marjorie Morningstar* is set, see:

- ◆ Braunstein, Susan L., and Jenna Weissman Joselit, eds. *Getting Comfortable in New York: The American Jewish Home, 1880-1950*. New York: The Jewish Museum, 1990.
- ◆ Howe, Irving. *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.
- ◆ Moore, Deborah Dash. *At Home in America: Second*

*Generation New York Jews*. New York: Columbia University, 1981.

For critical insights into Wouk's fiction, see:

◆ Beichman, Arnold. *Herman Wouk: The Novelist as Social Historian*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1984.

*Marjorie Morningstar* is also discussed in the following:

◆ Fiedler, Leslie. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. New York: Criterion, 1960.

◆ Geismar, Maxwell. *American Moderns from Rebellion to Conformity*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1958.

◆ Guttman, Allen. *The Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis in Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

◆ Witham, W. T. *The Adolescent in the American Novel, 1920-1960*. New York: Ungar, 1964.