

SESSION FIVE


 Brooklyn Nostalgia:
Brighton Beach Memoirs

Feature film, 1986
 Director: Gene Saks
 Screenplay: Neil Simon

Eugene: Jonathan Silverman
 Kate: Blythe Danner
 Jack: Bob Dishy
 Stanley: Brian Drillinger
 Blanche: Judith Ivey
 Laurie: Stacey Glick
 Nora: Lisa Waltz

Length: 110 minutes

Brighton Beach Memoirs is based on a play by one of America's most prolific playwrights, Neil Simon. This is the first of a semiautobiographical trilogy that includes *Biloxi Blues* (also made into a film) and *Broadway Bound*. Born in 1927, Simon would be slightly younger than Eugene Morris Jerome when the film begins, but Jerome has the voice and sensibility of a young man who already sees the world as a writer.

This play took Simon nine years to complete. More accurately, it took him eight months to write, but he left his original thirty-five pages for nine years – and began and finished several other plays – before coming back to this one. “Sometimes all you need is nine years of encouragement,” Simon explains.

In *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, Simon depicts a struggling extended Jewish family in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, New York. Kate and Jack (Jacob) Jerome live with their two adolescent sons, Stanley and Eugene, and with Kate's widowed sister, Blanche Morton, and her two daughters, Lisa, a blossoming teenager, and Laurie, a frail preadolescent. The story is told through the eyes (and the journal) of the younger Jerome brother whose prime interests are baseball and girls.

Through Eugene, viewers gain a sense of the roots of Simon's humor. Eugene is self-deprecating and self-loving; his style of wry wit and sarcasm, which provides comic relief, can be seen as Jewish humor, even though the content might not be specifically Jewish.

Simon's family portrait is poignant and affectionate as well as funny. Here is sibling rivalry as well as brotherly (and sisterly) love, conflicts between parents and children, and their satisfying resolution. As World War II is approaching, the seven family members living under one

Eugene: *I hate my name:
Eugene Morris Jerome. How am I
ever going to play for the Yankees
with a name like that? You have
to be a Joe or a Tony or a Frankie.
All the best Yankees are Italian.*

roof face financial, interpersonal, and other challenges with pride. Stanley deals with a quarrel with his boss, Blanche begins to regain her interest in living, her daughter Nora is offered what seems like a dream job, Jack's health deteriorates, Kate keeps a tight reign over everyone – and Jerome sees all. He also sees into the window of his female neighbor, a preoccupation he particularly enjoys.

Like many adolescents, Eugene is an expert on his family's foibles, and he depicts his mother's need to control, his father's weary exasperation, his aunt's indecisiveness with keen and accurate humor. However, the young man also conveys, far more generously than most writers dealing with similar materials, the kindness that underlies the behavior of the adults.

Simon successfully depicts an era and a place that a large number of American Jews feel some connection to. For many, Brooklyn was home at some point in their lives, or perhaps a transitional place between the immigrant neighborhoods of the Lower East Side and the more Americanized suburbs. And Brooklyn remains home to many Jews. Brighton Beach, the very neighborhood depicted here, is home to many of America's newest Jewish immigrants, those from the former Soviet Union. Its main street lined with Russian delicatessens and restaurants, and the Russian language spoken casually on the boardwalk, Brighton Beach is frequently referred to as "Little Odessa."

In Depth: Gentle Memories of a Jewish Past

Brighton Beach Memoirs is one of the most lucid depictions of a secularized traditional Jewish family available to modern audiences. In contrast to most of the films in this series, both parents in the Jerome family are strong characters. Kate and Jack are caring, compassionate people who see themselves primarily in relationship to their responsibility to other family members and ultimately to the family unit as an organic whole. They care for, counsel, and support not only their own children but Mrs. Jerome's widowed sister and her two daughters as well, almost without complaint.

The gendered division of parental attitudes and behaviors in the Jerome family precisely illustrates the way American Jewish families adapted historical Jewish

Eugene: *Actually, I think I'm going to be a writer. I want to write books, plays, movies. That is, if things don't work out with the Yankees. Yeah, I'll definitely be a writer.*

gender roles to the American scene. Like most American Jews in the late 1930s, they have thoroughly absorbed the American attitude that it is better for a man to work two jobs, day and night, than for married females to assume paid employment. Jack works in the garment industry during the daytime and takes a variety of night jobs, and Stanley works in a hat factory, where he and other workers must endure the tyranny of a supercilious German-Jewish boss, Mr. Strohmann. Both Jack and Stanley are committed to sending Eugene, whom they recognize as talented and intellectual, to college.

The Father as Hero

The father is no mere workhorse in this family. His enormous efforts as a breadwinner are fully appreciated, and he is cherished for his innate personal understanding as well. He is seen as the source of wisdom in making major personal and familial decisions for every member of the household and is treated by all with respect and deference interlaced with love.

The reasons for his family's respect of Jack Jerome are delicately illustrated in an interaction with his oldest son. Stanley has faced a moral crisis in his workplace. When a black coworker is unfairly blamed and punished for a workplace accident, Stanley is the only person who takes his side. Stanley acts impulsively, not only threatening Mr. Strohmann's authority but embarrassing him in front of his employees as well. Mr. Strohmann threatens to fire him unless he submits a written apology.

Outside in the yard, Stanley tells his father the story. Although he himself has just lost his night job and is suffering from chest pains that will soon result in a heart attack, the middle-aged man listens patiently and sympathetically to his son. Responding both sensitively and honestly, he praises Stanley for standing up for what he believes in. But he worries as to whether the family unit can now afford such integrity. By this time Stanley is radiant with pleasure at his father's approval: He has been permitted to go back to his job despite his revulsion at his boss's behavior, because his father has ratified and legitimated both his son's courage in challenging the boss and his responsibility in returning to work. The values

Eugene: *I love tense moments – especially when I'm not the person they're all tense about.*

the father demonstrates – seeking justice, supporting, accepting, and loving a son – are important lessons here.

Another Version of the Jewish Mother

It is pragmatic Kate who must deal with the often irritating and sometimes terrifying intricacies of daily life. Tall and lean, unlike the stereotypical image of a Jewish mother, Kate has been the responsible and hard-working sibling ever since childhood. She deals with responsibilities that might overwhelm another woman by adhering to two principles: First, she never worries about eventualities, but instead deals swiftly and effectively with each day's trials – “I can't deal with boats that haven't landed yet,” she declares. Second, she tries to maintain an iron control over every aspect of her household that fate allows her to control.

There are many things Kate cannot control. Her brother-in-law died at thirty-six, leaving a timid, asthmatic wife and two young daughters. The plump, pretty but disorganized Blanche, whom Kate resented mightily as they grew up, has now once again become her responsibility. Putting dinner for seven hungry people on the table every night is a challenge with their limited budget. Kate is also limited by her own nature, by an emotional restraint or repression that seems almost physical at times. When her son Stanley returns after a long, tense absence, and the viewer knows her to be relieved and joyous, her face shows nothing. Instead, she suddenly declares that she must make a chocolate cake, and she imperiously dispatches Eugene to Gottlieb's grocery store for an unheard of luxury – two pounds of sugar. “I'll need identification,” Eugene croaks.

The half-civilized Eugene, young, healthy, and exuberant, is the most controllable element in Kate's world, and control him she does, while she may. Eugene chafes under her awesome control. “If I came home and said my hands had been cut off, my mother would tell me to go upstairs and wash my face with my feet,” he reflects morosely. But behind Kate's dry, controlled exterior glints an affectionate and generous woman. When the boat with a half-dozen more relatives finally lands, she unstintingly offers her own home to them. “We'll put beds in the dining

room,” she says happily. “I like to eat in the kitchen.” Her husband, who clearly adores her as much as she adores him, embraces her.

This serious, carefully crafted subject matter is kept from becoming too cloying by the hilarity of much of the material. Eugene, for example, is comically obsessed with sex, in a typically goofy, young adolescent way, and yearns to get a good look at a naked woman. He is almost painfully absentminded and oblivious to his surroundings at times, given to eating half a loaf of bread on the way back from the grocery store, spilling almost two pounds of sugar without noticing it, playing an imaginary game of football with a glass deposit milk bottle, and crashing into a neighbor. His unworldliness plays an interesting and believable counterpoint to his precocious understanding of other people. It is Eugene’s raucous and often raunchy humor and his cracking adolescent voice that depict this tender page in the social history of not just one family, but indeed of American Jews as a culture.

Street Life

Urban neighborhoods during the Depression and World War II years have been popular settings in the creative work of contemporary American Jewish novelists, playwrights, and filmmakers. Woody Allen’s *Radio Days* depicts a nearly identical setting and time frame. *The Way We Were* includes episodes in working- and lower-middle-class urban Jewish neighborhoods, as do Meyer Levin’s *The Old Bunch*, Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March*, Chaim Potok’s *In the Beginning* and *Davita’s Harp*, Bernard Malamud’s *The Assistant*, E.L. Doctorow’s *World’s Fair*, and others.

One explanation of the frequency with which these settings are used may simply be that so many writers grew up in them. For writers whose early impressions are based on life in the streets, schools, apartments, row houses, and flats of Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, certain areas of Manhattan, the West and South Sides of Chicago, St. Urbain Street in Montreal, and other urban areas, the real-life experiences of those settings provide a rich source of inspiration.

However, other factors in addition to sheer familiarity may be at play. Some authors view these years as a

kind of transitional plateau in North American Jewish life. Before the “white bread,” homogenizing years of widespread suburbanization, professionalization, and affluence, many semi-acculturated first- or second-generation Americans had “street smarts.” They were comfortable navigating in the English language through their neighborhood streets and the public school system, and were actively and aggressively working toward establishing themselves as middle-class Americans. However, despite such Americanization, many maintained traditional Jewish attitudes toward such crucial areas of life as extended family units, social responsibility, and higher education. They might, and did, often chafe under the social expectations imposed upon them, but they knew quite clearly what those expectations were. While some Jews had already opted out of Jewish environments through mixed marriage and/or rapid professional or financial success, the vast majority lived and studied and worked among Jews and neighboring ethnic groups. The sights, sounds, and smells that permeated their daily lives derived from the grocery stores and bakeries, the bars and pool halls, and the places of worship of their coreligionists and other ethnic Americans.

Ethnic groupings were an enormously salient factor in the lives of many urban Americans, including American Jews. Each group had clear (and often erroneous) ideas about the differences between their own ethnic group and their neighbors, and firm convictions as to why their group was superior to the others. The world of *Brighton Beach Memoirs* was largely one in which people stayed among their own kind. Fear of antisemitism prevailed. During a series of telling moments, Kate reveals her conviction that a timid, poor Irish widow and her often-drunk son who live across the street are virtually indistinguishable from the Cossacks. “They’re all the same,” says the widow coldly, lumping the entire non-Jewish world into one disreputable and dangerous whole. In her eyes, the widow’s slovenly housekeeping and her son’s amiable inebriation might turn, at any moment and without warning, into antisemitic violence.

Although the screenplay does not shy away from interpersonal conflicts, the extended Jewish family Simon

Eugene: *I'm putting all this down in my memoirs so that if I grow up twisted and warped, the world will know why.*

portrays struggles with poverty, unemployment, disease, and death while retaining its humanity, mutual affection, respect for higher education, and conviction that human beings have a responsibility that transcends their impulses toward ephemeral pleasures. In this film, there are no scenes of Jewish rituals – no holidays, no Bar Mitzvahs, no Jewish weddings. Perhaps Simon felt that the subtle references to a Jewish family were all that a mainstream audience could handle. Or perhaps he wished to show just how “American” Jews were becoming.

While you watch, consider:

- ◆ Which of the characters are most familiar to you? Do any seem to be stereotypes?
- ◆ Note the ways in which the word “Jewish” is brought into the dialogue. Would you define any of these occasions as specifically religious?
- ◆ How does Eugene’s relationship with Stanley compare to the other sibling relationships viewed in the previous films?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ In what ways did you find the portrayal of the Jerome family realistic and in what ways unrealistic or perhaps idealized? Do you think families like the Jeromes still exist? If not, why not?
- ◆ Parental responsibility is accepted as a given in this film, but so is the responsibility of children. In what ways does the Jewish family expect children to “honor thy father and mother”? Is this commandment easier or more difficult to follow today than in the period of the film?
- ◆ For Tevye, the main decisions he faced about his daughters’ futures related to their marriages. For parents of sons like the Jeromes, those key decisions relate to education and choice of career. How are sons and daughters treated, and how are their futures imagined, in contemporary Jewish families?
- ◆ In what ways do family loyalty and personal desires come into conflict? Is there a “Jewish way” to resolve such conflicts? If so, is it different from the “American way”?
- ◆ Do Jewish families follow different values systems than other families in America today? Should they?
- ◆ Like Eugene, many Jewish writers are “outsiders.” Do Jewish writers (and artists) remain on the outskirts of the culture because they are writers, or because they are Jewish?

SUGGESTIONS FOR READING AND VIEWING

Books and stories

- ◆ Bellow, Saul. *The Adventures of Augie March*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1965.
- ◆ Doctorow, E.L. *World's Fair*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985.
- ◆ Gerber, Merrill Joan. *The Kingdom of Brooklyn*. Georgia: Longstreet Press, Inc., 1992.
- ◆ Gornick, Vivian. *Fierce Attachments: A Memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone Books, 1988.
- ◆ Levin, Meyer. *The Old Bunch*. New York: Carol Publishing, 1985.
- ◆ Malamud, Bernard. *The Assistant*. New York: Avon Books, 1980.
- ◆ Potok, Chaim. *Davita's Harp*. New York: Fawcett Books, 1985.
- ◆ _____. *In the Beginning*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1986.
- ◆ Schwartz, Lynne Sharon. *Leaving Brooklyn*. New York: Penguin USA, 1990.

Films

- Biloxi Blues* (1988)
- Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986)
- Radio Days* (1994)
- The Way We Were* (1973)