The Jewish Woman in America. By Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel.
Pp. xiii + 290, bibliography, index, illustrations.

Reviewed by Gerald E. Warshaver

This book grew out of two of the authors' interest in the literary depiction of Jewish women. Baum and Michel noted that up until the 1930s the fiction of the old country and the stories of the immigrant period portrayed "a rich assortment of active women who fulfilled many roles both inside and outside the home." Similarly, they observed that from the 30s on the literary treatment of Jewish women reflected increasing adherence to either the stereotype of the stupid, domineering, and overprotective "Jewish Mother" or the self-centered, materialistic "Jewish American Princess." In order to substantiate their theory that the change in literary treatment reflected a transformation in the real social role of the Jewish woman, Baum and Michel joined with Paula Hyman, a professor of Modern Jewish History at Columbia University, to examine the historical dimensions of the experience of Jewish women in the United States.

Folklorists can, I suppose, use this work to gain a cursory acquaintance with the broad scope of the general pattern of the Jewish woman's social history. A listing of the chapter headings suggests the areas covered. They are as follows: "Women in the Jewish Tradition," "The German Jewish Woman in America," "Jewish Women in Eastern Europe," "Eastern European Jewish Women in America," "Jewish Women Move the Movement" (mainly concerned with women in the garment industry unions), "The Uptown Lady and the Downtown Woman: Two Kinds of Jews," "The Changing Image of the Jewish Woman in Literature," and "Jewish Women Today." Readers, however, who approach this book seeking information of the folkways of Jewish-American women will be disappointed. Despite the title and prefatory statements, the actual phenomenon under study is neither the social role nor the culture of the Jewish woman in America, but rather the image of her role and culture as expressed in the English language writings of American Jews. Clearly, the initial literary interest that gave rise to this undertaking has, to a large extent, determined its focus.

It is unfortunate that in their attempt to uncover the basis of the negative abstractions and generalizations that are expressed in the literary stereotypes of the Jewish woman, the authors so infrequently turn from the general and abstract level of image, role, and literary trends to first-hand testimony about how real women lived their specific lives. The authors are aware
that popular fiction and the memoirs of notable women, sources which form the bulk of the examined material of this book, are of limited value for a proper understanding of the texture and meaning of the lives of common Jewish women. At several points Baum, Hyman, and Michel offer their readers brief excerpts from interviews that they conducted with a few women of the Eastern European immigrant generation. Unfortunately, only about twelve pages out of the entire work are given to the oral biographies of such women. Indeed, the paucity of interview material and the predilection of the authors to rephrase their subjects words becomes hard to understand in light of the fact that they admit that the oral biographies of women who do not write memoirs reveal feelings and attitudes which their acculturated and educated children did not detect and consequently could not write about. As brief as the excerpts from the oral biographies are, they give us more of a feeling for the understanding of the real, first-hand, experience of Jewish women than it is possible to gain from the authors' analytically derived models of the various images of the social role or literary stereotype of these women.

Life histories or oral biographies as folklore creations ensure that the individual within the collective historical mass is recognized and appreciated as both a creator and a carrier of individual and collective expressive style. Realistic fiction calls for the suppression of the author's personal voice; the oral autobiography demands that the audience consider the style of the telling. Life histories are more formally diverse than are works of fiction that attempt to represent reality. Furthermore because they complicate the picture of reality given in published memoirs and similar elite sources, life histories less readily lend themselves to facile sociological generalization. Greater use of this type of folkloric material would have undoubtedly frustrated the authors' tendency to be overly abstract and general. As Linda Dégh's recent publication People in the Tobacco Belt: Four Lives (Ottawa: National Museum of Man Mercury Series, 1975) demonstrates, the immigrant life history is valuable not only for this reason, but also because it offers a good deal of information in specific and striking manner about the intangible ideas and assumptions that influence the process of various individual immigrants' acculturation and assimilation.