The vibrant and diverse Jewish communities of Latin America possess a fascinating history that spans the colonial era to the present day. Nonetheless, they continue to constitute a marginal area of research in both Jewish and Latin American studies. Nadia Grosser Nagarajan’s volume is an important step toward rectifying this oversight. She chooses the scattered seeds of the pomegranate, long a Jewish symbol of abundance and fertility, to represent the “cluster of stories that have been dispersed in various directions during the course of Jewish history” (vii). Her sources range from personal interviews to the Israeli Folklore Archives to letters and even a video. In the 34 separate tales, we read of a wide variety of experiences: a disoriented businessman forging unlikely friendships with Amazonian Indians, a brave sea captain in Colombia, and two Chilean youngsters who, along with their trusty alpaca, find an old Jewish wise man at the top of a mountain. Characters inhabit many Latin American countries and hail from many homelands, including Eastern Europe, North Africa, Turkey and Greece. We even read of modern descendants of marranos or “Crypto-Jews” whose ancestors took on the guise of Catholicism to escape the clutches of the Inquisition.

Although readable and entertaining, it seems the book is not intended for a scholarly audience, and I was unsure of which standards I should use to evaluate it. While some of the “tales” resemble what I would call folktales – i.e, popular stories circulated via that nebulous medium of oral tradition – most of them were personal anecdotes, albeit related in a gauzy third person omniscient voice. The author included certain historical and ethnographic detail and omitted others. She seemed to hover between historically situating the stories and casting them in a quasi-mythical “everywhen.” I was generally left wanting more contextual information.

At times, Nagarajan’s writing can come across as essentialist and potentially offensive. As an anthropologist, I was especially disappointed by her characterizations of the “natives,” who inhabited “pristine” and “impenetrable” jungles, and had a “mystical
and ancient relationship with nature” (10). In many tales, the stark contrast drawn between
civilized European newcomer and primitive South American native were rather unsettling.

Nagarajan’s storytelling style of writing definitely adds warmth and charm to her
tales. However, it can also constrict our view of historical and ethnographic context and
obscure the voice of the original teller. Although the book is an important contribution
towards bringing these communities to both the scholarly and popular imaginations,
readers unfortunately come away with a somewhat fragmented picture of Jewish life in
Latin America.