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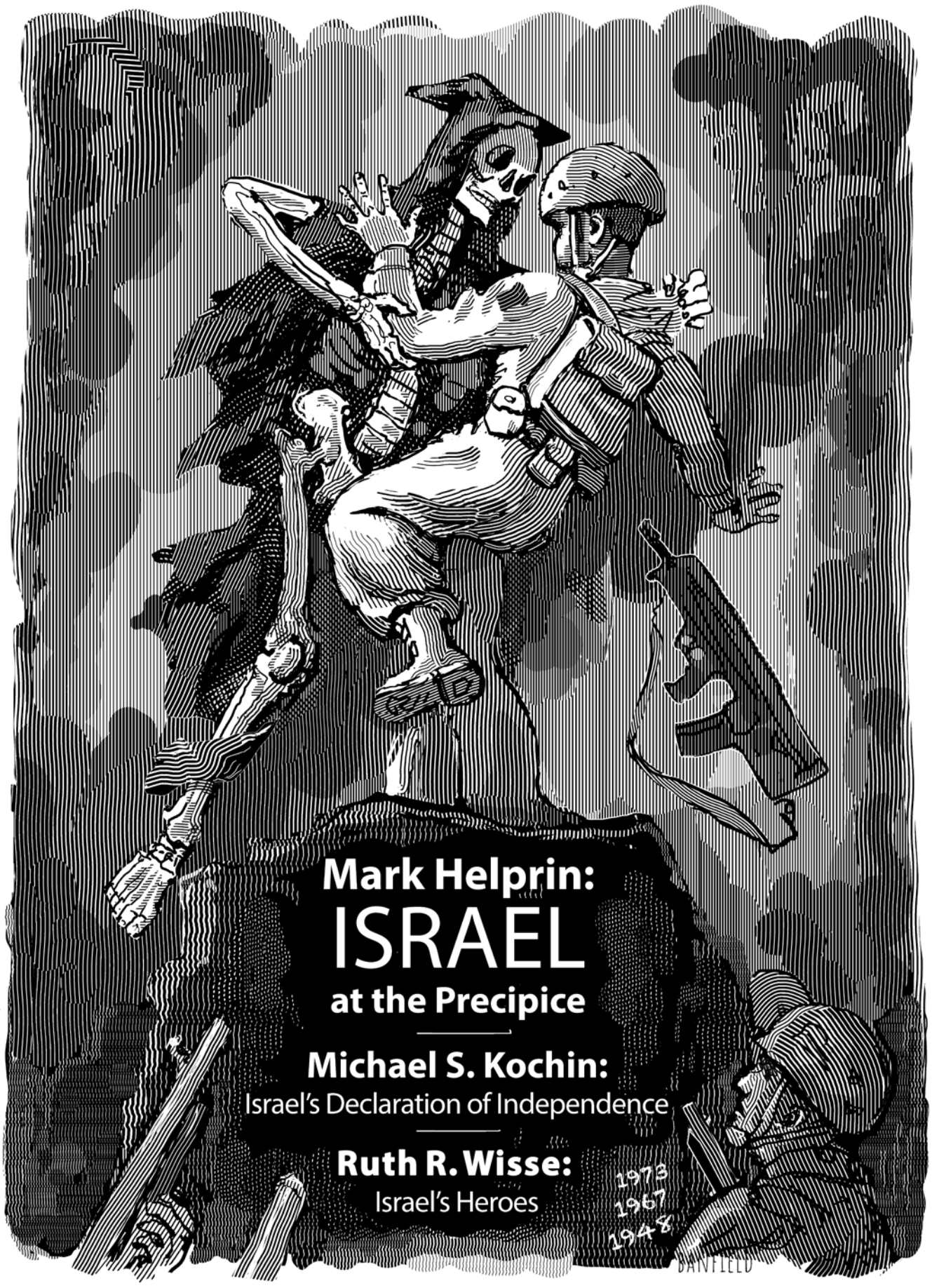

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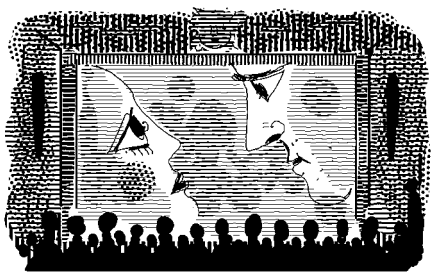


Redeeming Laughter

A few winters ago, my husband and I invited two German friends—let's call them Jutta and Dieter—for a post-Christmas visit to Boston. Along with hearty meals, evenings by the fireplace, and day trips around snowy New England, we shared a few Hollywood movie classics not available in Germany. One such was *The Producers*, Mel Brooks's first film, released in 1967, starring Zero Mostel as Max, a crooked Broadway producer, and Gene Wilder as Leo, his scheming accountant.

The film opens with Leo proposing a way for Max to get rich: instead of merely suckering foolish old ladies to invest in shows likely to fail, find a show *guaranteed* to flop, and oversell it by 25,000% of production. During these scenes, Jutta and Dieter chuckled. During the scenes where Max and Leo buy the rights to *Springtime for Hitler*, an unpublished play by a deranged former Nazi, and hire two unhinged amateurs to turn it into a musical, Jutta and Dieter (whose parents came of age during the Third Reich) looked bemused. And then, during *Springtime for Hitler*'s opening number (a cross between Busby Berkeley and the Nuremberg rally), their faces turned to stone.

Please stop the video, they said. Who was this person, Mel Brooks? Did he ever stop to consider the impact of such a film on Jewish Americans? How could the government have allowed this film to be made? And most discomfiting: why did we, two gentile Americans, think they, two gentile Germans, would find it amusing?

We explained that Brooks was a second-generation Jewish immigrant raised in a Brooklyn tenement, who as a corporal in the U.S. army served in Germany as a combat engineer and fought in the Battle of the Bulge; that Mostel and Wilder were also Jewish, drawing on a deep well of mordant Jewish humor; and that if our friends would just watch a few more minutes, they would get the joke: the audience takes *Springtime for Hitler* as an outrageous spoof, and to the dismay of Max and Leo, it goes boffo at the box office.

We would have gone on to explain that the U.S. government did not censor Hollywood films in 1967. But at that point, Jutta and Dieter were insisting so heatedly that no one should ever be allowed to laugh at Hitler, we switched to another movie. I forget what.

Discussed in this essay:

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel,
created by Amy Sherman-Palladino.
Amazon Prime

According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, comedy "consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive." In his 1997 book, *Redeeming Laughter*, Peter L. Berger agrees that "the comic experience is painless, or at least relatively painless as compared with tragedy." Aristotle's treatise on comedy is lost, so Berger does not presume to know where the Athenians drew that line. But while admitting that "comic cultures" may differ, he argues that humor, like morality, is not infinitely elastic. The line between funny and painful can shift, but it cannot be erased.

Pulsating Vitality

Which brings us to Jewish comedy—specifically, the strain that enlivens *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, the Amazon-produced series that won 20 Emmys, three Golden Globes, and countless other awards. (All five seasons are available on Prime.) The series didn't interest me at first, because the market is so glutted with politically woke "period pieces" that I expected the worst from a saga, set in the 1950s and early '60s, of a young wife and mother from Manhattan's affluent Upper West Side becoming a stand-up comedian after her husband runs off with his secretary.

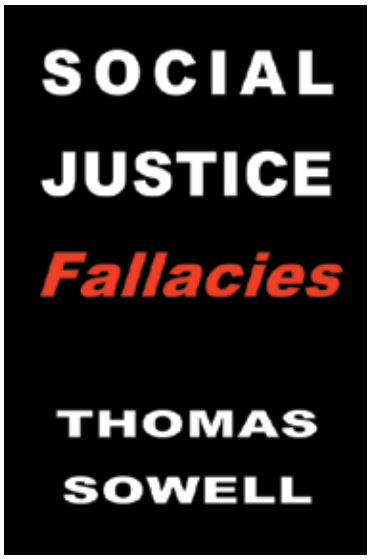
I was wrong. Amy Sherman-Palladino, who is the dynamo behind *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (and who previously created the WB show *Gilmore Girls* in the early 2000s), was born in Los Angeles to a Baptist mother from Mississippi and a Jewish father from the Bronx, a background she described in an interview as "Jewish. Sort of." But there is nothing "sort of" about her portrait of Jewish comedy in postwar America. That her father, the stand-up comic and writer Don Sherman, spent his life in that milieu lends the series a rare authenticity, while also tapping an older vein of humor reaching back to the pre-World War II coffeehouses of Peter Berger's native Vienna, and before that, to what he calls "the pulsating vitality of Yiddish culture as lived by ordinary people…within the confines of the shtetl."

"Pulsating vitality" is an apt phrase, not just for the writing and acting in *Mrs. Maisel* but for the production as a whole. For example, Sherman-Palladino worked with cinematographer M. David Mullen to choreograph numerous lengthy "one-shot" scenes set in places as varied as a Fifth Avenue luxury department store, an army airfield on Long Island, a Las Vegas casino, a posh Miami hotel, a Catskills resort, and busy streets in New York and Paris. By boosting the spontaneity of the characters' dialogue and the fluidity of their movement, these one-shots, supported by a pitch-perfect music soundtrack, transform what might have been a stagey production into a virtual-reality trip without the headset.

DOCUMENTED FACTS

Even accurate statistics on income trends over time can be grossly misleading, when *turnover* is the proverbial 800-pound gorilla in the room that no one seems to notice. Internal Revenue Service data show that, over a 23-year period, there were 4,584 people in the so-called "top 400" income recipients. More than two-thirds of those people were in that bracket for just one year out of those 23 years. This is by no means the only gross distortion in income statistics that ignore turnover.

The 2020 U.S. census showed that Asians of Chinese, Japanese, Indian and Korean ancestry had higher incomes than whites. Among full-time, year-round male workers, Asian Indian males earned over $39,000 a year *more* than white male, full-time, year-round workers. Is this the "white supremacy" we hear so much about?



When women receive less than 30 percent of the college degrees in engineering, and men receive less than 20 percent of the college degrees in education, how surprised should we be that men are "under-represented" among school teachers and women are "under-represented" among engineers?

The poverty rate of black families has long been higher than the poverty rate of white families. But, from 1994 to 2020, the annual poverty rate of black ***married-couple*** families was never as high as ***10 percent***. Over that same span of years, there were only 5 years when the poverty rate for American families as a whole was less than 10 percent. If black family poverty today is caused by "systemic racism," do racists make an exception for blacks who are married? Do racists either know or care whether blacks are married?

Even where we might reasonably expect to find the greatest equality of developed capabilities— among children born to the same parents and raised in the same home— empirical research in countries on both sides of the Atlantic shows that children who were the first-born in their family have, as a group, higher average IQs than their siblings, and are over-represented among high achievers in many fields.

Early 20th-century Progressives were as convinced that racial disparities were due to genetic inferiority as today's Progressives are convinced that those disparities are due to racism. In both eras, leading intellectuals echoed the racial dogma of the day. Back then, the solution offered was called "eugenics," a fancy word for genocide. A popular book by a noted Progressive promoted eugenics. That book was translated into German, and Hitler called it his "Bible."

Neither racial minorities nor anyone else has unlimited time, unlimited energy or unlimited resources to invest in seeking out every possible trace of racism— or to invest in the even less promising project of trying to morally enlighten racists. In countries around the world, minorities that have risen from poverty to affluence have usually invested their time and efforts in equipping themselves with skills and knowledge that pay off economically— without political melodrama or charismatic "leaders." Some of the most counterproductive policies, to the disadvantage of minorities, have come from political melodrama and charismatic "leaders."

Holding it all together is Midge—the titular Mrs. Maisel—played so brilliantly by Rachel Brosnahan that even this jaded reviewer never tires of her fashion-plate glamor and glittering patter. But at the same time, it is hard to imagine Midge without her manager, Susie Myerson. Played with equal brilliance by Alex Borstein, Susie is a short, fireplug-shaped person whose daily costume is that of an old-fashioned newsboy, and whose nonstop Rabelaisian invective is the ballast keeping Midge from capsizing. Out there in fandom, viewers obsess on whether Susie, a closeted lesbian, is smitten with Midge or just inspired by the challenge of guiding her career. To their credit, the writers on the show treat this question as an undercurrent, not an obsession.

The pilot episode opens with Midge helping her husband, Joel (Michael Zegen), attempt stand-up comedy in a Greenwich Village nightclub called the Gaslight, despite her growing conviction that he has no talent. When she finally shares that conviction with Joel, he becomes incensed and makes a show of leaving her for his secretary. Surprised and shocked, Midge gets drunk and heads downtown to the Gaslight, where she delivers a profane rant that ends with the police arresting her for public nudity. In the squad car she meets Lenny Bruce (played soulfully by Luke Kirby), and later that night Susie bails her out. The next morning, Midge bails Lenny out, and the next time she gets arrested, he returns the favor. This is the beginning of a beautiful friendship, as it happens, but first the pilot introduces us to two very different Jewish families.

The first family is Midge's. Her father, Abe Weissman (Tony Shalhoub), is a math professor at Columbia University and a classic *luftmensh*—the Yiddish term for someone with his head in the clouds, unconcerned with the practical realities of making a living. He's blithely unaware that the family's opulent apartment on Riverside Drive (with a fabulous view of the Hudson River) is not paid for by his salary but by a trust fund belonging to his wife, Rose (Marin Hinkle), whose family owns an Oklahoma oilfield. There were Jewish oil tycoons at the time, but the one episode in which Rose visits Oklahoma (Season 3, episode 2) rings so false, the writers did well to whisk Rose back to Riverside Drive and the service of Zelda (Matilda Szydagis), the family's omni-capable Polish cook, maid, and nanny.

The second family is Joel's. His father, Moishe Maisel (Kevin Pollak), is a self-made businessman whose razor tongue, pliable conscience, and thick skin have led to success in the cutthroat garment industry, but also make it hard for his son and in-laws to appreciate the fierce protective instinct underneath. Moishe's wife, lumbering, gravel-voiced Shirley (Caroline Aaron), is similarly a force of nature, whose heavy makeup and blond beehive hairdo mask an equally fierce devotion. Both elder Maisels are painted with a broad brush similar to the one wielded by Borscht Belt comedians, ethnic characters on radio and TV, and their predecessors on the vaudeville stage.

Skin on Skin, as God Intended!

To this *goyishe* viewer, Joel's parents are mercilessly funny, especially when paired with Midge's. Just to cite one example: in Season 3, episode 4, Abe has resigned his tenured position at Columbia, and Rose has severed ties with her oil tycoon relatives—two decisions that now look rash, because having been turned out of their Riverside apartment, they find themselves priced out of the Manhattan real estate market. Despite Midge and Joel's divorce, the two families are still in touch, because as Midge pursues her career in comedy, her two children are being cared for by Joel and both sets of grandparents. When the elder Maisels invite the Weissmans to stay temporarily in their grand nouveau-riche house in Forest Hills, the Weissmans reluctantly agree—and hilarity ensues.

It is 5:04 a.m., and Abe and Rose are sound asleep in the Maisels' spare bedroom when Moishe, who rises every morning at 4:30, barges in, saying, "Abe, it's your car, it's blocking mine. Get up, you gotta move it." Abe stumbles out of bed mumbling, "My leg is asleep," and Moishe, beholding Abe's pajamas and Rose's nightgown, exclaims, "You both wear *pajamas*? What are you, *girlfriends*? Shirl and me, we sleep in the buff. It's healthier! Freer! Warmer too! Skin on skin, as God intended!" A day or two later, it is Shirley barging in at 5:00 a.m.: "Rose, it's laundry day! Up, up! I need your sheets!" Cowering under the covers, Abe says plaintively, "I'm *using* the sheets," but to no avail. "Come on," says Shirley, approaching the bed, "it's laundry day! Let's go! Chop chop!" Then, yanking off the covers, she gasps: "*You don't sleep in the buff*?"

According to some critics, this sort of thing is offensive. For example, Lee Michael Cohn, a respected screenwriter, director, and acting coach in Los Angeles, cites Moishe and Shirley in an essay for the online Jewish magazine *Aish* as Exhibit A in how *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* supposedly trades in "the cultural stereotype of The American Jew [as]…obnoxious, loud, crass, obsessed with money to the exclusion of all else, lacking in manners and social grace, unclean, and possessed of a worldview that sees the *Goyim* as the enemy to be defeated by our superior cunning."

I beg to differ. First of all, the elder Maisels can be loud, crass, and lacking in the haut-bourgeois social graces that mean so much to Rose in particular. But they are not totally obnoxious, obsessed with money above all else, or unclean (as evidenced by laundry day). Nor do they burn with a passion to outfox the *goyim*. Yet for Cohn, the ugly stereotype he cites is nothing new. As he writes, "Jews pretty much invented self-deprecating humor."

Which raises a question: is self-deprecating humor the same as ugly stereotypes? For me, the answer is a resounding no. But many Americans today would say yes, because according to the ideologues on both the left and right, *any* type of humor directed at *any* group is offensive, even when it originates from within that group. This belief has become so ubiquitous, and obnoxious, that it demands to be deconstructed. For some help in that task, I turn to the late Israeli-American folklorist Daniel Ben-Amos's 1973 essay "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor" in the journal *Western Folklore*.

Noting that expert opinion in 19th-century Europe regarded Jews as lacking in humor, Ben-Amos traces the idea of self-deprecating Jewish humor back to Sigmund Freud, whose 1905 treatise on humor considers cases in which "tendentious jokes" are "directed against the subject himself, or, to put it more cautiously, *against someone in whom the subject has a share—a collective person, that is (the subject's own nation, for instance)*" (emphasis added). Ben-Amos makes it clear that the "collective person" Freud had in mind was the Jews.

Calling this statement by Freud a "casual remark," not a scientific hypothesis, Ben-Amos expresses dismay that it became "the cornerstone for most of the subsequent popular and scholarly conceptions of the essence of Jewish humor." Freud later expanded the notion of "collective person" to "collective mind, in which *mental processes occur just as they do in the mind of an individual*" (emphasis added). Today, we say "group identity," but the import is the same: to ridicule one member of a group is perforce to ridicule the group, because they all think alike.

Ben-Amos's criticism of this view is as refreshing today as it was 50 years ago. He begins by pointing out the obvious: "Jewish society is a complex, heterogeneous social environment, in which each individual fulfills sexual and religious roles, belongs to distinct age groups and professional associations and defines himself in terms of economic classes…. To view it as a collective person, as a holistic entity," is

to commit "the sin of reification." Far better, he says, to see real-life Jewish joke-tellers as individuals who in time-honored fashion enjoy telling jokes about other individuals. "For self-mockery to be a [defining] quality of Jewish humor," he concludes with a touch of his own wry humor, would require a rule saying, "a matchmaker has to mock matchmakers, a *mohel* has to ridicule *mohels*, and a mother-in-law should laugh at mothers-in-law and not at any other figures in the community."

Nobody's Perfect!

My aim here is not to discredit the idea of self-deprecating humor. Rightly understood, it is a double-edged blade aimed at the self as well as others, because to quote the last line of Billy Wilder's great comedy *Some Like It Hot* (1959): "Nobody's perfect!" Double-edged humor existed in America before the 1870s, as the fruit of the nation's diversity. But with the huge influx of Jewish immigrants beginning in the 1870s, it acquired a distinctly Yiddish inflection. And that was a blessing, because self-deprecating humor rightly understood is better than the alternatives.

Those alternatives are two: humor aimed solely at others, which quickly degenerates into malice and self-aggrandizement; and humor aimed solely at the self, which just as quickly sinks into groveling appeasement and self-abasement. (A glance at the current cultural and political landscape will suffice as illustration.) In this light, the most impressive achievement of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* is that, instead of avoiding these alternatives, it dramatizes them in a way that exposes their unfunny, at times painful, consequences.

An example of the first is Midge's appearance on a TV game show hosted by Sophie Lennon (Jane Lynch), an older comedian who despises Midge as much as Midge despises her. After trading a few clever barbs, they escalate to pure nastiness and have to be separated by the producer. If you don't have the stomach for watching the political debates this season, then you had better not watch this scene from Season 4, episode 6 of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*.

The second alternative, humor aimed inward, is dramatized in the series' revisionist view of Lenny Bruce. I say revisionist because, rather than focus on his meteoric rise as a countercultural icon rebelling against legal censorship of profanity, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* portrays him as a guardian angel who appears whenever Midge needs rescuing. Clearly smitten with each other, the pair finally get together in Season 4, episode 8. It is the night of Lenny's one-and-only appearance at Carnegie Hall in 1961, and the love scene in the luxurious hotel where Lenny is staying is as romantic as Blossom Dearie singing "Someone to Watch Over Me" can make it. But it ends on a discordant note, with Midge discovering Lenny's drug paraphernalia in the bathroom. Lenny makes light of it, but for Midge the affair is over. Unlike Lenny, on the brink of a downward spiral toward early death as a bitter, brain-damaged addict, she is a survivor.

This, of course, is the key to Midge's success. Unlike Joan Rivers, to whom she is often compared, Midge is not neurotic about her good looks or sex appeal. And though capable of mocking male comedians who disparage her, she is not primarily concerned with pushing the envelope of what her audience will find funny. Her biggest misstep occurs in Season 3, episode 8, in the middle of a successful tour opening for Shy Baldwin (Leroy McClain), a celebrity crooner modeled on Johnny Mathis. Seized by a rare attack of nerves before facing an all-black audience in Harlem's Apollo Theater, she asks Shy's manager for help. These are Shy's people, he reassures her. Talk about Shy and they will love you.

So Midge does, and while her gentle spontaneous riffing about Shy's homosexuality is a hit with the audience, it gets her kicked off the tour. But here, too, she survives. Invited to Shy's perfectly staged wedding to a woman willing to pose as his wife, Midge follows Shy into the men's room to apologize. He accepts her apology and suggests maybe they could remain friends. But she declines, and when pressured by his new management team to sign a lucrative nondisclosure agreement, she regains the high ground by refusing.

Funny, Not Sorry

How does Midge do it? The answer is hidden in plain view, although most of the reviewers missed it. Despite many slights and injuries, she is greatly blessed. Those blessings include the elder Weissmans and Maisels, whose bafflement at her comic vocation is itself a rich vein of humor, but who never reject her (and eventually come around). The greatest blessing, though, is Joel—Midge's true love, and simultaneously the most important person in her life and the most misunderstood character in the series.

For example, in "'The Cloying Fantasia of 'The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel'" for the *New Yorker*, Emily Nussbaum describes Joel as "Midge's estranged husband,…who is still stuck on her." Granted, "stuck *on* her" sounds a lot like "stuck *by* her," but surely a staff writer for the *New Yorker* knows the difference. At the end of Season 1, Midge and Joel meet at their son's birthday party and, realizing how much they miss each other, spend the night together in her old bedroom in the Riverside apartment. In the morning, as Joel sneaks out of the same window he sneaked into when they were dating, they embrace in a radiant sunbeam that hints strongly of reconciliation.

But it is not to be. Thanks to Susie, Midge gets a chance to open for Lenny Bruce at the Gaslight. All goes well until Joel turns up to hear Midge's set, which includes a vulgar wisecrack about their recent tryst. Wounded, he berates Susie, who berates him back. Then, as Joel is leaving, three drunks hurl crude insults at Midge. Following them outside, he attacks them, shouting, "She's good! She's good!" Emily Nussbaum must have been scrolling through her Twitter account during this scene, because all she noticed was Midge's "louse of an ex wander[ing] the street, moaning at her talent."

Early in Season 2, episode 1, Joel tells Midge why he cannot reconcile: "I understand why you have to talk about your life. That's why you're good…. I just can't live with it. I wish I could. Maybe another man could, but I just can't be a joke." And he remains a total *mensch* through the end—as does her manager, Susie. The final episode, set in 2005, closes with the sound of Midge and Susie, now in their 70s, laughing at their own jokes.

In the Bob Fosse film *Lenny* (1974), a young Dustin Hoffman re-enacts one of Lenny Bruce's last performances, at a jazz nightclub in Chicago. High on a cocktail of illegal drugs, he rambles through a tedious and disconnected monologue, which at first receives scattered laughs but by the end has him slumped on the railing of the stage with his back to the now-silent audience. Almost whispering into the microphone, he says, "I'm sorry. I'm not funny. I'm not funny." And he wasn't. Further proof that the line between funny and painful can shift, but it cannot be erased.