

**Shulamis Yelin, Gilah Yelin Hirsch, and Nancy Marrelli.
Demonic to Divine: The Double Life of Shulamis Yelin.
 (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2014), 211 pp.**

Readers of this journal will know Shulamis Yelin (1913–2002) as the accomplished author of *Shulamis: Stories from a Montreal Childhood*, published in 1983 by Véhicule Press, and as a Master Teacher with the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal. She was also a gifted public speaker whose frequent lectures captivated and entertained audiences. More than a decade after her death, Yelin is still remembered by Montreal's Jewish community and her presence looms large in the city's streets and buildings – synagogues, schools, iron-railed walk-ups – rendered so vividly by her prose.

Less widely known is Yelin's lifelong struggle with mental illness, the focus of this unusual volume, *Demonic to Divine: The Double Life of Shulamis Yelin*. The book brings together Yelin's diary entries and stories, family photographs, and editorial commentary to limn a portrait of the artist in turmoil in an effort to show the curative potential of creative expression. Editor Gilah Yelin Hirsch – daughter to Shulamis and a visual artist herself – presents this work “as a celebration of the courageous complexity of a rare and singular woman. I sense that the teacher Shulamis would be grateful to know that her most intimate life's work [i.e. her selected writings] to overcome her crushing hopelessness, may inspire those who suffer from similarly devastating afflictions” (16).

The volume opens with a foreword and two prefaces. The foreword by Laurence J. Kirmayer, professor of Psychiatry at McGill University, provides both personal and medical context for the material that follows. Kirmayer met Yelin in 1981 and they remained friends until her death. For Kirmayer, the volume probes the question, “What then does it mean to produce art out of suffering?” (10). Yelin “was visited and sometimes possessed by demons” (10) and only through the act of writing – by “making living things with words and images” (9) – could she quiet those demons. Throughout her life, Yelin suffered terribly from the twin extremes of elation that came from creating and performing, followed by feelings of deflation and loneliness that repeatedly led to the depths of depression. The “friendship and long colloquy on the nature of art, creativity, woundedness and healing” (9) between Yelin and Kirmayer informs the professional perspective that opens the book.

In the preface that follows, Gilah Yelin Hirsch, executor of her mother's will, explains that she was “entrusted” with the “private world” (15) of Yelin's diaries that form part of this project. She surmises that Yelin always intended for the diaries to be made public as “her true literary legacy” and decided to publish portions to show her “mother's layered full spectrum personality, as well as the kaleidoscopic nature of the creative process” (15). Although she both loved and feared her mother – Yelin was an abusive mother and wife – they “shared significant values as artists, women, thinkers, and doers” (16).

As Yelin's publisher, Nancy Marrelli's own preface describes the process of produc-

ing this volume, a massive task that she found neither “easy” nor “comfortable” (19). Over geographic divide – Marrelli lives in Montreal and Yelin Hirsch lives in Venice Beach, California—and a protracted period of eleven years, the editors collaborated and read through thousands of pages of mostly handwritten diary entries. The diaries regularly brought them to tears but they forged ahead, determined to weave a “multi-dimensional story” (21) about Yelin’s life and achievement.

As Marrelli notes, this editorial undertaking required extensive work with the Shulamis Yelin fonds housed in Montreal’s Jewish Public Library. An invaluable source of archival material, the Yelin fonds holds the key to Shulamis Yelin’s tortured personality, which the editors worked diligently to uncover and understand. Their narrative comments include important biographical, historical, and cultural details. When she was four months old, Yelin’s father died tragically in a railway accident. Three years later her mother married her father’s brother, but Yelin would experience the untimely loss of other family members: her half-brother Arele at age two and her half-sister Deenie at age 41. Her mother was sickly and often unable to care for her children. In her own marriage, Yelin’s husband became an invalid and she was obliged to care for him and raise their only daughter while working full-time as a teacher. Moreover, following a serious car accident in July 1969, Yelin was in a coma for two weeks. She had reconstructive surgeries and relearned to walk, but lived with chronic pain for the rest of her life.

Yelin endured excessive hardship and the emotional and physical suffering took its toll, as this volume shows. She was never at ease in the world; even as a young girl she knew great sadness that during adulthood would grow into darkest depression: “a black shroud thrown over me”; “the uttermost depths of hell” (26); “fire . . . holding my brain in two lashing hands, torturing it” (127). The editors believe Yelin “suffered from what we would now call borderline personality disorder” (159) and the diary excerpts and narrative commentary provide corroborating evidence of her extreme mental anguish. Yelin was a volatile person, often explosive in interactions with family and friends. It is no surprise that her daughter left home at age 17, settled in California, and made annual visits to her native Montreal. Yelin Hirsch expresses gratitude to her mother for encouraging her “early departure from home” (13).

My own reading of this volume did not yield, however, to the editors’ claims that the book was produced to honour Yelin’s creative life in light of her emotional torment. The work’s several components are less complementary than the editors assert, for example. The short stories reveal Yelin’s mastery of craft and her ability to sublimate her suffering in nostalgia for a Montreal long past, while the diary entries and narrative sections reveal the threatening side of Yelin’s personality. In the end, it is the raging, hostile Yelin who dominates this book, which is less a celebration than a brutally honest portrait of a tortured and torturing woman.

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