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Interweaving introspection with political commentaries, biography with history, **The Promised Land** (1912) brings to life the transformation of an East European Jewish immigrant into an American citizen. Mary Antin recounts "the process of uprooting, transportation, replanting, acclimitization, and development that took place in my own soul," and reveals the impact of a new culture and new standards of behavior on her family. A feeling of divisions—between Russia and America, Jews and Gentiles, Yiddish and English—ever-present in her narrative, is balanced by insights, amusing and serious, into ways to overcome them. In telling the story of one person, **The Promised Land** illuminates the lives of hundreds of thousands. This Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics edition includes eighteen black-and-white photographs from the book's first edition and reprints for the first time Antin's essay "How I wrote **The Promised Land**."

The Promised Land Details

Date	:	Published February 1st 1997 by Penguin Classics (first published 1912)
ISBN	:	9780140189858
Author	:	Mary Antin , Werner Sollors
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From Reader Review The Promised Land for online ebook

Kate says

In the tradition of memoir the author tells the story of her Eastern European Jewish families emigration from the "pale" of Russia to Boston at the turn of the past century. Her language is beautifully descriptive and the paints a very real picture of what their struggles, hopes and dreams. Mary Antin goes on to be a published author although I don't know anything about her other work.

Jamie says

"For there is nothing more tragic in the annals of the Jews"
While Antin writes this in 1912 long before the retrospective reader knows of the holocaust, I cannot help feeling that in 1912 Jews had been through worse things than an exodus to 'The Promised Land'. Antin begins the novel with her upbringing in Polotzk, the Jews are subject to persecution in Russia which is far worse than anything that happens to her in America. She is a vain author and irritating narrator, the thing is an autobiography of a woman who had nothing to remark on. Had I not been obliged to read this for university I would have put it down long ago, but as compulsion made me finish the book, it does get better toward the end and is the only thing that motivated my 2 star rating of Antin's dull memoir.

Harpoon says

This has some worthwhile observations about growing up in a ghetto, subject to hardships and persecution; and the difficulties and joys of assimilating to a new country. It's a valuable perspective by someone who lived through both experiences. On the downside, the prose gets a bit literary at times and I found that it dragged in spots.

Perry Whitford says

In the introduction to this, the autobiography of her youth and emigration from Russia to America in the decades straddling the 19th and 20th centuries, Mary Antin writes:

'Although I have written a genuine personal memoir, I believe that its chief interest lies in the fact that it is illustrative of scores of unwritten lives. I am only one of many whose fate it has been to live a page of modern history. We are the strands of the cable that binds the Old World to the New.'

And, of course, it is a story familiar to countless thousands of lives: the story of the exile from certain prejudice to the immigrant of uncertain ones.

Yet Mary is, above all else, every inch the individualist. A fervent believer in, and living embodiment of the American Dream, over the course of her memoir Mary also reveals herself to be an atheist, as well as something of an enemy of what she refers to as the *'pet institution'* of family.

Such free-thinking unconventionality would have been impossible for a young Jewish girl from Polotzk, a

ghettoized region 'within the Pale' of Zsarist Russia.

Jewish communities were highly regimented, with the sons destined to study the Torah at 'heder'(scripture school), and daughters attached to dowries in search of a favourable marriage from an early age.

Safe from pogroms in Polotzk but still routinely abused by Gentiles, she grew up literally afraid of the Christian cross, behind which the priests would incite the peasants to violence, *'insisting that we had killed their God'.*

The Jews had to lie to get by, and as Mary notes: *'I knew how to dodge and cringe and dissemble before I knew the names of the seasons.'*

So the Jews clung even closer to the comfort to be found in their ancient compact with God. But 'Mashke's' family were a little different, her father having abandoned his pious study after traveling to less orthodox places, her mother being a woman of business rather than of the home, so the makings of a willing exile were there in her parents, whose fortunes had also suffered a terrible reverse after a prosperous beginning.

Even so, outwardly at least it was too risky for a family to flaunt convention within the community, so Mary had no proscribed means of education while in Polotsk, despite her father's wishes and the occasional private lessons he could afford.

Whereas for her brother Joseph, who *'was the best Jewish boy that ever was born'*, his preordained lot only brought him suffering, for *'he hated to go to heder, so he had to be whipped, of course.'*

That would change in America, of course.

But not straight away. The families financial difficulties hardly did improve, her father failing to lift them out of the Boston slums they started from, merely moving them from one quarter to another, always in hoc to landlords and grocers, some more understanding than others, i.e. those who happened to be fellow Jews.

But it's more than worth the struggle, to see how her mother *'gradually divested herself ... of the mantle of orthodox observance'*, and the joy of her father, reflected in the face of the teacher as he finally gets to deliver his children to the free school:

'I think she divined that by the simple act of delivering our school certificates to her he took possession of America'.

The least appealing part of the book was the constant patronization of her older sister, who had to work like an adult from an early age while Mary indulged herself in daydreams. If I were the sister, Frieda, I may have felt insulted by my sister's portrayal of me as someone whose *'simple mind did not busy itself with self-analysis'.*

The best part of the book by far though, is the recollections of her girlhood in Polotsk. The stoicism in the face of abuse by authorities and neighbors, the dodges and coping mechanisms of an unfairly persecuted race, all offset by the solidarity and the sacredness of a family Sabbath celebration.

Sure, America's far from perfect; nor is my country, England.

But whenever I read immigrant literature, or see migrants interviewed on TV, talking about the racial persecution and lack of opportunity that they have faced in the countries of their birth, I can't help but feel that I am lucky to be a native of a land where I can succeed or fail, by and large, on my own terms, certainly without daily fear of subjection.

This is how Mary Antin characterizes the status of women in her adopted homeland:

'A long girlhood, a free choice in marriage, and a brimful womanhood are the precious rights of an American woman.'

She would have been denied all those basic rights if she had remained an orthodox Jewish girl in Polotsk, Russia. By writing this autobiography, at the age of just thirty, she wanted to give thanks for that and hope to others.

Thom Swennes says

Most autobiographies are written at the end of the writer's life. This seems a logical premise but the old adage, quality outweighs quantity isn't integrated into the hypothesis. One only has to think of the unforgettable diary of an even younger Jewish girl to realize that years alone aren't the only prerequisite for an excellent narrative. The Promised Land by Mary Antin was written before the author had reached her thirtieth birthday. Mary Antin (1881-1949) was born in a small Russian town and her earliest memories were of harassment and persecution of Jews. The gentile attitudes and consequent discrimination of the Jews paled only slightly by those inflicted fifty years later by Germany's Third Reich. A Jew's life under the Tsar was hard and few prospered. This, as other difficulties throughout the world, was one of the main reasons a copious number of immigrants fled to the "Promised Land" of the United States.
Mary Antin was blessed with a quick and rare intellect and a father that recognized and nurtured it. Poverty and hardship plagued this family as it had so many of their fellow immigrants but served to only slow down but not stop her development. Her talent with the written word was discovered at a very early age and the free education in her new country did the rest. This inspiring story of a young girl's life serves also as a testament to the teachers that helped her along. She had the good fortune to have a number of these and took full advantage of the system offered. This is a story of transition. What else is an autobiography? It is the evolution from young to old; from neophyte to professional. It serves as an inspiration to all and well worth the time to read.

Bernadette M says

In the autobiography of Mary Antin, The Promised Land, she automatically describes her childhood memories of how she became aware of her situation and of all those living in Belarus. Initially, Antin gives the reader a broad scope of how she sees life in Polotzk and how she slowly begins to realize that she and those living outside of Russia are different from the Russians. One particular aspect of how Antin begins to differentiate between her and those in Russia is how she realizes that she cannot do anything about the awful way she is treated by others. Unlike a newspaper article, through this autobiography Antin shows how she has to cultivate a certain indifference to those who torment her because she is a Jew.
As opposed to a newspaper narrative, Antin's emotions are clearly represented as she shows how she slowly realizes that the persecution she experiences cannot be prevented. Even the one person, her mother, who should be able to protect her, cannot do anything about it. A newspaper article does not have the capacity to illustrate the full story, from childhood to adulthood, how the person first realizes the gravity of his situation. A newspaper article may be more concerned with the person's actual departure from the place he is leaving, but it will not go into too much detail how the person came to the consciousness of injustice. That is what the beginning of Mary Antin's autobiography depicts: the realization of prejudice. Antin realizes that the "world [is] divided into Jews and Gentiles," however, the "knowledge came so gradually that it could not shock

[her]" (Antin 8). When she first has her run in with Vanka, her mother tells her "How can I help you, my poor child? Vanka is a Gentile. The Gentiles do as they like with us Jews" (Antin 8). This piece of information from her mother shows that even the one person who should protect her, cannot. This type of information is not likely to be conveyed in a newspaper where much of the space is dedicated to inform the reader about current events, and how Antin copes with the segregation when she is a child is not exactly a current event.
The autobiography of Mary Antin shows certain emotions and aspects that a newspaper narrative is conventionally not supposed to do. The way Antin processes the information about how she has to accept unfairness can only be related through a narrative. The autobiography allows the reader to go back in time and see how Antin is exposed to the discrimination in Belarus.

Chaim Rube says

Fascinating insight into the of life an immigrant from the pale of settlement in Russia to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. A poignant perspective of the Jewish-American experience for many at the time, providing perspective on both the meaning of being Jewish and being American.

John Senner says

This is a story of the immigration of a smart nervy Jewish girl from Belarus and her transformation into an American. She begins with several chapters of life in a ghetto in Russia and her beginnings into learning and questioning. Her father goes to America and after several years the family joins him. He is not successful and experiences considerable financial stress in the slums of Boston. Nevertheless, he is determined that his daughter will get an education. She makes friends who become equally determined that she will succeed. Public schools and the Public Library become her means of rising out of the slums.

Skye says

I saw this book and picked it up because it was a Modern Library Classic (I've found a lot of off-the-beaten-track-but-incredibly-fantastic books through them, including Nella Larsen's "Passing" and G. K. Chesterton's "The Man Who Was Thursday). I love history and actually trace my passion for the past to my high school obsession with American immigrant stories, fueled by the cute actors in my favorite movie at the time, "Newsies."

The book seemed like it would be entertaining because it was written in a conversational style and included reference to so many landmarks in Boston that I love (BPL, Revere Beach, and the Downtown Crossing area, to name a few). I would definitely recommend this to anyone who lives in or is going to visit Boston, because Antin's heart just absolutely soars as she looks upon Boston for the first time.

I was extremely impressed by the quality of the writing, which read so much like poetry. I didn't originally think this was a book I'd need to underline, but I felt as though there wasn't a single chapter that didn't have a quote of immense personal meaning for me. I teach middle school girls and I wish they taught this book because it completely captures the essence of 12 year old girls, who are seeing the whole world open up.

This has, therefore, made its way onto my list of absolute favorite books. Books to be stranded on a desert island with. I'll return to it again and again not just for entertainment but for its depth and wisdom. I felt I had been given an enormous gift by Antin. I'm always going to remember that little girl who sat on the steps of Boston Public Library in 1894 and felt ecstatically happy just to have been given an education and a building full of books.

Melissa says

It's a fabulous memoir, first published in 1912. It's an immigrant story, but I loved the way so much of the book is set in Russia and that not only is there the challenge of adjusting to America, but also quite a bit of religious questioning (Antin is Jewish). And it was far more entertaining than I imagined. This book had been languishing on my shelves for years, and I'm slightly kicking myself for not pulling it down sooner. Read it, if this sounds the slightest bit intriguing!

Jennie says

Not a flawless book, but the history of a Jewish childhood in the Russian Pale of Settlement is extremely interesting, and the author won me over with her sturdy determination to be an American writer. A good immigrant story, especially considering the context of its publication (described in the introduction by Oscar Handlin).

Aimee Golden says

This felt like the kind of book that I read, passively enjoyed, and will probably forget in two years or less. Antin was a good writer, with prose that flows well, lovely descriptions, and an unending cheerfulness despite grim circumstances. It was fascinating to learn about Jewish life and persecution, and I was pleased to read an immigration novel that wasn't vastly depressing (looking at you, The Jungle). Despite this, the novel wasn't particularly ground breaking or memorable, but it is a nice historical read.

George says

MAYBE THE BEST MEMOIR I’VE EVER READ.

“I have never had a dull hour in my life…”—page 246

I like memoirs. I like stories, especially first-hand accounts, of the immigrant experience in America. I particularly like stories about the lives of bright and determined people.

Mary Antin’s memoir, ‘The Promised Land,’ delivers full measure, on all of this and more.

From the first half of the book, as a young girl in the settlements of the Russian Pale, to her early adolescence as an immigrant in and around Boston, Massachusetts, in the late nineteenth century, this is a clearly written, energetically compelling, richly enlightening and very enjoyable classic read.

Recommendation: The very highest. (And it’s available as a digital book from either Barnes and Noble, or Amazon.com, for only 99¢.)

I think I would have very much liked meeting this lady:

“I became a student and philosopher by force of circumstances.”—page 6

“It was not my way to accept unchallenged every superstition that came to my ears.”—page 60

NookBook from Barnes and Noble, 258 pages. [Originally published in 1912.]

Mike Lemon says

What's to love about Melting Pot literature? Antin adheres strictly to the assimilation of immigrants into American society. She believes with conviction the American experiment, and sets herself up as a type for other immigrants. In that, she is admirable in her diligence to learn a new language, but I feel her memoir does not adequately demonstrate the trials of assimilation. She does not mention the linguistic struggles of learning English. Yet, she does enlighten the reader of cultural differences between the Old and New Worlds; she uses her family as the dividing point.
I feel she is patronizing in her portrayal of her father, mother, and older sister as too Old World to truly become American. She goes so far as resigning her sister to the factory, while she glories in her educational opportunities. While I believe the United States is a good nation, I have trouble with authors who set up this nation as the ideal, which is often at the expense of the oppressed and silenced. Antin, I fear, is one of those authors.

Marcelle says

This is the second time I've read this book. I decided to read it again because it is approaching the 100 year anniversary of publication. Who doesn't love a story about a poor girl from the ghetto using education to pull herself out? It was also interesting to see what life was like for the orthodox Russian Jew (prior to her coming to the States). I'm amazed at how Antin maintains her upbeat nature throughout some difficulties (like hunger!).
