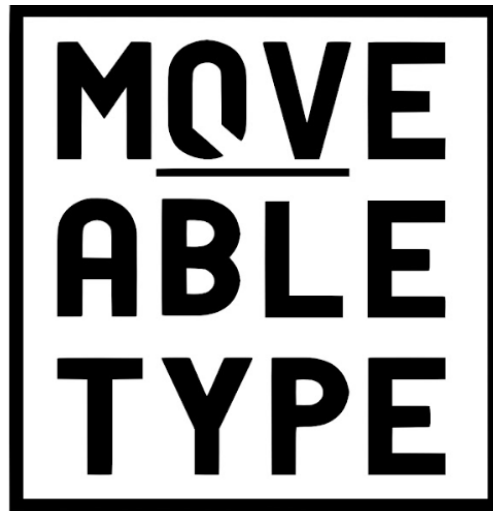




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The Promise of Control: Food, Sex, and Jewish Faith in Melissa Broder's *Milk Fed*

CATHERINE MARCOTTE

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Rachel is obsessed with what she eats. A lapsed Jew, aspiring comedian, and resentful Los Angeles talent management worker, the protagonist of Melissa Broder's *Milk Fed* (2021) pursues calorie-counting and daily cardio with a religious zeal. She subsists on a carefully calculated parade of sugar-free, fat-free products, and supplements her isolation with elaborate fantasies of her coworker Ana: a snarky, thin, undeniably beautiful woman old enough to be her mother. But when her therapist convinces her to start a 90-day detox from her fat-phobic mother, and a new girl named Miriam takes over the counter at her favourite frozen yogurt shop, the promise of control Rachel locates in her food rituals begins to falter.

Bursting with introspection, blunt honesty, and unfiltered desire, *Milk Fed* is a deeply funny, wildly erotic tale that rethinks the binary promises of thinness and fatness we continue to be fed. Not unlike Broder's first novel, *The Pisces* (2018) – in which a depressed graduate student meets the man of her dreams only to realise he is half human, half fish – *Milk Fed* plays with the mythical, interweaving the Jewish folkloric figure of the golem into this otherwise realist novel. Usually made from mud or clay, the golem is defined as a magically created 'anthropomorphic being' (70). In *Milk Fed*, Rachel's golem is molded out of clay at her therapist's request and guided by her vision of the body she feels her unrestricted eating would promise. Her figure actualises the 'amorphous', 'disgusting', 'exploding', and 'out of control' body she fears becoming (36). But instead of lessening the imagined body's power over Rachel, as her therapist would hope, the figure only increases it, summoning Miriam, the 'undeniably ... irrefutably fat' young Jewish woman who takes over the counter of Yo!Good, Rachel's favourite frozen yogurt shop (40).

In Rachel's words, Miriam's body exceeds even her 'worst fears' for her own (40). Through Miriam, Rachel not only confronts the abject—the destabilising, disgusting force that interrupts one's sense of the body's wholeness—but the stunning knowledge that Miriam herself is entirely unfazed by her corpulence. Rachel's blatant equation of Miriam with her most feared self—she confesses to her fear of 'look[ing] like Miriam', and acknowledges her efforts to intimidate her with her slender figure—in some ways casts Miriam as her foil, a reductive role that too often polices deviant female characters to bolster protagonists (69). Yet in her commitment to showcasing Rachel's blunt introspection, Broder crafts an unusually nuanced portrayal of their pairing, offering readers an alternative view of how women's relationships can function in contemporary fiction.

So as her fear of Miriam's body gives way to an increasing attraction, Rachel soon agrees to try one of Rachel's full-fat, unrestrained signature sundaes. Under Miriam's hungry gaze, she plunges into a creation so loaded with hot fudge she knows she will never be able to calculate its calories. Although Rachel negotiates her transgression with further disorder—a 24-hour binge she caps with a week of even stricter restrictions—the allure of Miriam's presence beckons her further and further from her meticulously measured portions. Rachel begins indulging in sesame chicken at the Golden Dragon—Miriam's favourite Chinese restaurant, Twizzlers at the movie theatre, and challah at Shabbat dinner with Miriam's family, eventually falling into what she can only guess is normalcy: eating what she wants when she wants and stopping when she is full.

But as Miriam and Rachel negotiate their increasingly erotic relationship and Miriam's and her family's unflinchingly Orthodox values, the novel makes clear that Rachel's growing trust in food remains deeply fragile, held at the mercy of Miriam's continued affection. While Miriam alternately pursues and rejects her advances, Rachel's clay figure reappears after mysteriously vanishing, establishing itself as a guiding, comforting force in Rachel's turbulent life. Often explained as symbolic of a 'spiritual awakening' rather than as a materially real figure, the return of Rachel's golem is accompanied by vivid dreamscapes featuring Judah Loew ben Bazalel, the late sixteenth-century rabbi best known for his creation of a famous antisemitism-fighting golem (70). Through the rabbi's council, Rachel is ushered ever further from her days of caloric restriction and encouraged in her pursuit of Miriam. Here, Broder's quasi-mythical rendering of the historical figure declares the plurality of Jewish faith, insisting that there are many ways to be faithful, to ourselves and to each other.

It is the rabbi's guidance that propels Rachel toward a new kind of belief system and toward the sense that her relationship with Miriam must be divine intervention. She names their brief, feverish affair 'the seven nights of Miriam', conceiving of their time together as a sort of 'creation myth' that both frames the end of their relationship and the narrative of Rachel's rebirth (213). As she cuts her hair, leans into androgynous clothing, and eats more freely, Rachel understands she is 'changing,' emerging as a person no longer consumed by the thinness of her body, and the promise of safety she long associated with it (246). Even as the seemingly unconditional welcome of Miriam's family—a propelling force in Rachel's acceptance of her widening body—reveals its one condition, adherence to the heteronormative ideology that underpins their Orthodox Jewish faith, Rachel stands her ground, revealing a newfound ability to find value in her own acceptance.

In the end, Melissa Broder's *Milk Fed* is not a story of religious reform or fairy tale endings. Instead, it is a story of deep healing. A deeply funny, surprisingly sexy meditation on the gravity of our promises, both the ones we make to each other, and especially, the ones we make to ourselves, Broder's novel is impeccably timely while being impressively timeless, immersing readers in the question of who and what we are all being fed.

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Catherine Marcotte holds a Master of Arts in English from Queen's University in Kingston, Canada, where she also completed an Honours Bachelor of Arts in English and French Studies. Her work centres contemporary women's writing, especially meta- and autofictional works. Her current research is interested in the relationship between Francophone and Anglophone literatures, and their production, in contemporary Canada. Her writing and criticism appears in venues including *The Miramichi Reader*, *The Skeleton Press*, and *The Literary Review of Canada's Bookworm*.