



THE
SISTERS
A NOVEL
SWEET

ELIZABETH WEISS

A LETTER FROM ELIZABETH WEISS

Dear Reader,

I first learned about vaudeville at the age of eight, when I performed in a children's theater production at the old Orpheum Theatre in Galesburg, Illinois. I loved everything about that place: the ornate proscenium arch. The scent and heft of the curtains. The grungy dressing rooms, bearing many years' worth of nicks and stains. The ghosts—oh, there were definitely ghosts, who sent an unmistakable shiver down your spine if you happened to find yourself backstage alone. A decade ago, when I started researching *The Sisters Sweet*, memories of the Orpheum came rushing back, brought to new life by every detail I learned about this bygone era.

But the more I wrote, the more my curiosity was drawn by what lay beyond the glitz and spectacle—the real human stories that played out after the curtain fell—and questions that, as time wore on, began to feel more personal: How might a family be shaped by life on the stage and on the road? What would it feel like to watch a dream you'd been striving for your whole life slip through your fingers? And what if that dream had never really been yours in the first place?

Harriet Szász, the protagonist of this novel, lacks her mother's talent, her sister's charisma, and her father's hunger for glory. But she is nevertheless a product of her theater upbringing, where she and her sister, Josie, pose as conjoined twins in a vaudeville act. When Josie exposes the fraud and runs off to Hollywood, the rest of the family retreats to Chicago, where Harriet has to figure out what it would mean to live life on her own terms and decide whether she dares to try.

In telling Harriet's story, even as I turned toward the past—reading about Depression-era Chicago and early 20th century stage dancing, studying old sermons and cookbooks and high school curricula, watching pre-Code movies—I found myself looking more deeply inward, drawing on my own experiences of sisterhood and familial expectations and performance and failure and friendship and love. I hope the result is a book that will draw you fully into another world, bringing to life a cast of complicated women who must navigate the constraints of that time and place, and at the same time illuminate the struggles we still go through to know ourselves—to discover, and fight for, our own dreams.

With gratitude,
Elizabeth Weiss

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. While *The Sisters Sweet* is largely about Harriet's journey to discover her own dreams, it's also a novel about sisters. Why do you think Elizabeth Weiss decided to write Harriet and Josie's story solely through Harriet's perspective? How does focusing on Harriet's viewpoint influence your understanding of the sisters' relationship?
2. Weiss writes, "Just beyond my pride there had been something else, the awareness that my mother was as real as I was, that the boundaries of her experience extended somewhere beyond my view." Discuss the relationship between Harriet and her mother, Maude. How well do you think we can ever know our mothers?
3. In the first half of the novel, Harriet understands her identity primarily through the eyes of her parents: "But now it was as if Mama had altered the past as well, erased everything I had always understand to be true about myself." How do you think Harriet's parents shaped her identity? How does her sense of self evolve throughout the book? And how deeply do you think we allow our parents to define us?
4. Performance is a major theme in the novel. What types of performance did you notice, both literal and metaphorical?
5. Josie was the one who left. Harriet was the one who stayed. Or as Weiss writes, "She had run because she was Josie, and I had stayed because I was me. We'd already had our categories." How else do you see characters conform to their seemingly predefined categories in the novel? Why do you think we tend to define ourselves in relation to other people?
6. In some ways, *The Sisters Sweet* is about what we owe our families and what we owe ourselves. Where do you think that distinction lies for Harriet? Where does it lie for you?
7. What did you think of Lenny? Do you think he is the villain of the story, or did you find him to be a sympathetic character? How was he different as a husband and as a father?
8. At one point, Harriet muses, "Maybe I had learned that rules could be changed, but rules still pricked something in me, they still marked clear, useful edges." How do themes of obedience and rebellion play out in the novel?
9. Ambition is another pivotal theme in *The Sisters Sweet*. How does each character struggle with their ambition? Did you notice any parallels between characters?
10. If you could write a different ending for Harriet and Josie, would you? What would you change?

VAUDEVILLE SISTER ACTS

From the 1880s to the 1930s, singers, actors, dancers, pianists, trombonists, fiddle players, quick-draw artists, magicians, female impersonators, fire eaters, stripteasers, jugglers, contortionists, and performers of every imaginable stripe appeared on vaudeville stages from coast to coast, delivering variety entertainment to the masses. For many of those vaudevillians, as for Harriet and Josephine Sweet, work was a sisterly affair.



THE CHERRY SISTERS

Accounts vary as to why the Cherry Sisters—Ella, Effie, Lizzie, Addie, and Jessie—first decided to step away from their hardscrabble farm life and put on a show. Their debut concert was in 1893, at the Daniels Opera House in Marion, Iowa. A decades-long career followed, with the sisters, in various combinations, singing, playing, acting, and reciting, often works of their own composition. They won a following, but not for the reasons they might have preferred: billed as the “World’s Worst Sister Act,” they were met by audiences with jeering, tossing of projectiles (rotten produce, rocks, cigars), and a general spirit of outrage that all became part of the show.

BESSIE AND NELLIE MCCOY

The twin daughters of pedestal clog dancers Minnie McEvoy and Billy McCoy, Bessie and Nellie were nine years old when they finagled their way onto the bill of one of their parents’ shows and performed an act of their own devising (or so the story goes). After a successful kiddie run, each attempted a solo career, but Bessie was the breakout star, becoming known as the “Yama Yama Girl” after her signature 1909 performance of a song of that name.



THE DUNCAN SISTERS

One of the most successful sister acts of the early twentieth century, Rosetta and Vivian Duncan became known for their musical comedy take on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in which Vivian played Eva, and Rosetta, in blackface, played Topsy. (Vaudeville contributed its own chapter to America’s shameful racial history. Blackface and minstrelsy were foundational to the development of the form, and racist tropes and ethnic stereotypes were commonplace on vaudeville stages.) The Duncans resurrected their Eva and Topsy routine during every phase of their careers, until Rosetta’s death in a car accident in 1959.



THE DOLLY SISTERS

Born in Hungary, twin sisters Rosie and Jenny Dolly were teenagers in 1909 when they made their vaudeville debut in a tandem dance routine. They later posed as conjoined twins in the Ziegfeld Follies and eventually earned the record for the longest run by a sister act at the Palace Theatre in New York, vaudeville's top stage. The Dollys became true celebrities, their love affairs and Jazz Age lifestyle overshadowing their artistry. A car accident in 1933 left Jenny gravely injured and initiated the tragic last chapter of the sisters' lives. Jenny died by suicide in 1941. After her own suicide attempt in 1962, Rosie died in 1970 at the age of 78.

THE GUMM SISTERS

Born into a family of entertainers—their father was a singer and their mother played the piano, and together they operated a theater in Minnesota—Mary Ann, Dorothy, and Frances Gumm were destined for the stage. Little Frances was only three when she started performing with her sisters, but she quickly distinguished herself as the star. After the family moved to Los Angeles, the girls continued to tour and appeared in some short films while they waited for their big Hollywood break. In 1934, at the age of twelve, the baby of the family was spotted by an MGM scout. By then, she was going by her stage name: Judy Garland.



DAISY AND VIOLET HILTON

Daisy and Violet Hilton were born in 1908, conjoined at the hip. Their mother abandoned them to the care of a midwife, who exhibited them in a pub and later forced them to appear in circus sideshows. Under the constant threat of their adoptive mother's abuse, Daisy and Violet learned to play instruments and to sing, their talent proving as much of a draw as their physical anomaly. Eventually, under the management—and strict control—of a man named Meyer Meyers, they became the highest-paid act in vaudeville. They were in their twenties when they gained legal freedom from Meyers and the right to their own earnings, but by then, vaudeville was in its decline, and in the coming decades, the sisters struggled to find their footing in the shifting entertainment landscape. They died in poverty and obscurity in 1969.

Sources:

No Applause Just Throw Money, by Trav S.D. | *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times*, by Douglas Gilbert | "The Shaming of the Cherry Sisters," by Jack El-Hai | "Time Machine: The Cherry Sisters" | "Bessie McCoy Davis" | "The Dolly Sisters: Vaudeville's Most Famous Duo," by David Soren | "The Dolly Sisters: Alike as Two Peas," by Trav S.D. | "The Duncan Sisters, Topsy and Eva," by Trav S.D. | *Bound by Flesh*, film directed by Leslie Zemeckis

HOLLYWOOD OF THE 1930s



In *The Divorcee*, Norma Shearer plays a woman who responds to her husband's affair with one of her own (to "balance [their] accounts"), followed by a post-divorce spree. The film was typical of the pre-Code period that lasted from 1930 and 1934, when lax enforcement of the Production Code allowed studios to get away with frank depictions of sex and violence that are often surprising — even shocking — to today's viewers.



Bette Davis, Joan Blondell, and Ann Dvorak, as childhood friends reunited in *Three on a Match* (1932).

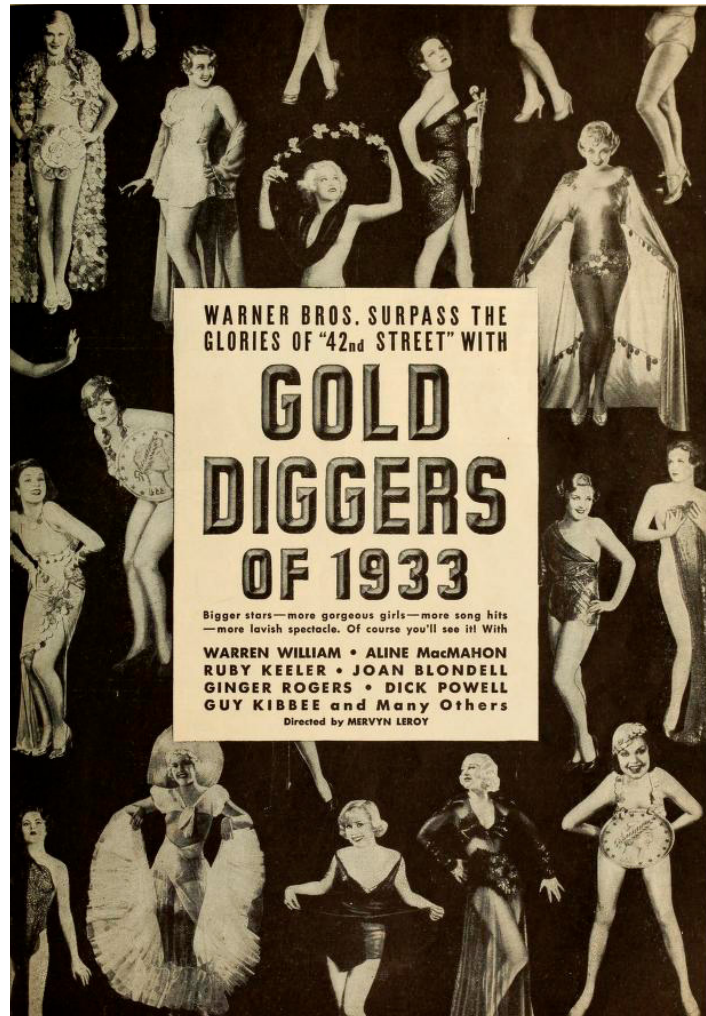


Ruth Chatterton in *Female*, featured in Picture-Play magazine (1933).



Mary Stevens, the "woman doctor," has an affair with a married man and gives birth out of wedlock in this 1933 pre-Code film.

HOLLYWOOD OF THE 1930s



The movie musical *Gold Diggers of 1933* features several of the spectacular production numbers that made choreographer Busby Berkeley famous.

HOLLYWOOD OF THE 1930s



Stars arriving for a Hollywood premiere while fans look on, featured in *Photoplay* (1932). Movie magazines like Photoplay offered the public a closeup look at the lives of the stars (their images carefully crafted by the studios, of course).



Marlene Dietrich and Maurice Chevalier behind the scenes, in *Photoplay* (1932).



Stars—they're just like us, 1933 edition: in *Picture-Play* magazine, **Jean Harlow** offers up her recipe for cottage meat-pie.



Claudette Colbert showing off her golf form in *Screenland* magazine (1930).

HOLLYWOOD OF THE 1930s



Joan Crawford batting back gossip
in *Movie Classic* magazine (1932).



Gloria Stuart in *Modern Screen* magazine (1933). A star during the 1930s, Stuart would reemerge into the spotlight six decades later, when she played the 100-year-old Rose in *Titanic*.



A spectrum of Hollywood blondes in *Screenland* magazine, September 1930.



The WAMPAS Baby Stars of 1933, pictured in *Photoplay*; each year, the Western Associated Motion Picture Advertisers announced a group of up-and-coming actresses they deemed most likely to become stars.