

NINE LIVES: MY RISKY ROAD FROM FIFTIES REBEL TO FEMINIST CRITIC.

By Claire Kahane. Brandywine, 2025, 273 pp.

Claire Kahane begins her riveting memoir with an old English proverb: “A cat has nine lives. For three he plays, for three he strays, and for the last three he stays.” It is an apt epigraph, for the

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notable feminist psychoanalytic scholar has survived adventures and misadventures that would have been deadly for others.

Born in the Bronx in 1935 to uneducated Jewish immigrants from Poland and Russia, Kahane spent most of her adolescence and early adulthood rebelling against them and the cultural values of the age. “Bring me a boy,” her authoritarian father demanded of his wife. He remained an ominous figure in his daughter’s life, rarely supporting any of her decisions. Nor was her mother nurturing, reminding that “men don’t want damaged goods”—advice the daughter flaunted, sometimes at her peril.

For most of her adult life Kahane was constantly reinventing herself, beginning with her name. Born Clara Katz, she changed the spelling of her first name, and although she was calling herself “Kitty Katz,” a moniker that seemed appropriately sexy, seductive, and notorious, decades later, when she began to teach in the English Department at SUNY-Buffalo, she learned from a Hebrew scholar friend at Berkeley that Katz was not the German-Yiddish spelling of “cats,” as she had always assumed, but a diasporic acronym for Kahane Tzedek (Ka-tz), a linguistic marker to the high priest Aaron, the brother of Moses: Kohen, or Kahane, means priest, and Tzedek, most righteous.

Much of Kahane’s early life involved play: playing at being a country singer in Queens, a beatnik in San Francisco in her twenties, a flaneur in Paris, a down-and-out traveler in Casablanca, even a graduate student at Berkeley—as much play as study. The play sometimes courted danger. On a boyfriend’s dare, she shoplifted a belt from Klein’s Department Store, an act she repeated several times, ending only when she had internalized her analyst’s voice: “You are an adult; take responsibility for what you are doing” (p. 191). Kahane became involved in risky situations she was lucky to survive. The greater the risk, the more intoxicating the adrenaline rush. She crashed her Vespa scooter along a treacherous road that ran between Sorrento and Salerno in Italy in 1958. Attempting to run with the bulls in Pamplona, Spain, she was pulled off the street: “*prohibido para una mujer!*” (p. 103). Her solo hitchhiking experiences in Europe were nearly as perilous, as were some of her experiences in the Middle East. She became involved with a man who, unbeknownst to her at the time they began dating, had been incarcerated at San Quentin for armed robbery. When he was arrested for breaking parole, she felt perversely proud of her

criminal connection with him, as if it confirmed her self-worth. Other men she dated were violent; when she attempted to break off a relationship with one man, he brutally raped her. She remained silent about it for decades, partly because of shame, partly because of the fear she would be blamed for it, and partly because she feared the rapist would murder her. After years of analysis, she realized that she was attracted to non-Jewish-looking men; even the German-Jewish man she married, a professor of German literature, looked like the pure Aryan of Nazi myth.

In 1952 Kahane began at the City University of New York as an undergraduate. It was not the ivy-covered college she dreamed of attending, but it was what her family could afford: at the time, it was tuition-free. Excelling in English in high school, she studied literature in college. She was drawn to the idealistic goals of the political left and later became involved in the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations. From 1959 through 1961, she attended U.C. Berkeley, where she studied with the D. H. Lawrence scholar Mark Schorer. Reading Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, she identified with the bildungsroman hero, Paul Morel, who struggled to free himself from his mother's smothering love, rather than identify with his passionless girlfriend, Miriam. "I knew that daughters as well as sons needed to fight off the sticky embrace of family, and especially of maternal love" (p. 135). She describes Schorer's weekly seminar, conducted in the living room of his home, as "ending always in an alcoholic haze for both students and professor, giving me the illusion of sophistication" (p. 149). She often asked herself what she was doing with her life. "I was a bohemian without an art, a graduate student without an academic goal. Could I seriously get a PhD and become 'a professor'?" (p. 149). After graduation, she drifted aimlessly, living in Greenwich Village, finally returning to Berkeley for the beginning of her new and more focused life, from 1966 to 1974.

As a Berkeley doctoral student, Kahane studied with Frederick Crews, whose graduate course on literature and psychoanalysis became well known. This was before Crews converted from being a Freudian to the country's leading Freud basher. Kahane wrote her doctoral dissertation on Flannery O'Connor. Encountering writer's block, she took a semester-long course at the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute, which was open to Berkeley graduate students and faculty. "Reading Freud with clinicians rather than

literary critics made a huge difference. Clinicians presented actual case histories: mothers and fathers, daughters and sons, families locked in antagonisms permeated by erotic desires, idealizations, and disappointments” (p. 188). Kahane began to glimpse her own embattled family situation, her resentment toward her unsupportive parents, the reasons behind her writer’s block, her ambivalent relationship with the man with whom she was living. She started treatment with a female analyst, who complained that the analytic hour was more a bibliotherapy than a psychotherapy. Kahane spent most of the time talking about O’Connor’s fictional world, not her own: “I could point to a fierce paternal authority that haunted an O’Connor character but was unable to free-associate to my own father and the judgmental role he continued to play in my psychic life” (p. 189). The analysis took an unexpected turn when, unable to find a parking spot, Kahane parked in the analyst’s driveway. The analyst’s annoyance ignited Kahane’s anger, which allowed her to verbalize for the first time her swallowed explosive rage toward her mother. The analysis enabled her to complete her dissertation.

Kahane’s 1973 entry into the English department at SUNY-Buffalo was an eye-opening experience. She had one advantage: the university had to hire at least one woman because of affirmative action, which had become the law. The department consisted of 75 members, all but five of whom were men. It was at Buffalo that Kahane became a feminist psychoanalytic literary scholar—one of only a handful at that time. In 1985 she co-edited two volumes: *In Dora’s Case: Freud, Hysteria, Feminism*, with Charles Bernheimer, and the ground-breaking *The (M)Other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, with Shirley Nelson Garner and Madelon Sprengnether. In 1995, at 60, she published *Passions of the Voice: Hysteria, Narrative and the Figure of the Speaking Woman, 1850-1915*. Kahane argues in *Passions of the Voice* that the rise of feminism at the end of the nineteenth century disturbed the patriarchal nature of society, leading to a breakdown of realism; the figure of the speaking woman betrayed a sexual crisis in representation that threatened the narrator’s ability to tell a story. Charting the permutations of the “hysterical voice” in iconic *fin de siècle* texts, Kahane writes about the effects of repressed rage—rage that we now know was a part of her own life.

After teaching at Buffalo for 24 years, Kahane retired, moved back to Berkeley, and decided to become an analyst. Accepted into

the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute, where she studied as a graduate student, she chose a male analyst, hoping he would help her understand her fraught relationships with men. Yet their sessions became increasingly combative, and after a few months he concluded, “We can’t continue this analysis” (p. 255), leaving her feeling rejected and abandoned. She then turned to a female analyst, Dr. S. At the same time, she began seeing patients, but this did not go as planned. Walking into the tiny office, a manipulative patient sat in Kahane’s chair, not in the one with the box of tissues next to it. The patient knew what she was doing, Kahane ruefully tells us; the analyst-in-training did not. Nor did therapy with Dr. S. work out, particularly when Kahane borrowed a copy of *House Beautiful* in the analyst’s waiting room, resulting in a scolding: “Why do you think you have the right to take the magazine?” (p. 258), an accusation that reminded her of an earlier analyst’s reproach that she sought special privileges at others’ expense. The analysis continued for a number of years, sometimes by telephone when Kahane was out of the country, but when she asked for another leave of absence, Dr. S. refused, stating it was time for termination.

Their last session was emotionally charged:

I entered her office, lay down on her couch and, before I could speak, began to weep—slowly at first, and then I could not stop. The hour went by timelessly in a river of tears that continued to rise up from an unfathomable source. Intermittently, I heard her voice asking questions or making remarks. Intermittently, I responded, immersed in the multiple arteries of loss. And then it was over; it was time to stop and say goodbye. (p. 264)

If one wrote a book about real and fictional analysands’ final therapy sessions, this would certainly be included in it!

Nine Lives ends hopefully, with Kahane meeting a new man and her son’s marriage to a woman who is, like his mother, interested in feminism and psychoanalysis. Despite many false starts in life and harrowing experiences that would have defeated a less determined person, she has been fulfilled in love and work, Freud’s definition of a psychologically healthy life. Freud’s spirit hovers throughout the memoir; one of the chapters begins with his statement, “from error to error, one discovers the entire truth” (as cited in Kahane, p. 169).

Had *Nine Lives* appeared a few years ago, I would have been delighted to write about it in *Psychoanalytic Memoirs* (Berman, 2023). It is the most self-disclosing psychoanalytic memoir, a tell-all story that abounds in details of errant behavior about which other authors would have remained discreetly silent. Kahane travels far outside of her comfort zone in offering the unvarnished truth. It is instructive to compare her memoir with those written by two of her contemporaries. The psychoanalytic feminist scholar and novelist Brenda Webster's ironically titled *The Last Good Freudian* (2000) chronicles a life spent and misspent on the analytic couch. The psychoanalytic literary scholar Madelon Sprengnether's *Crying at the Movies: A Film Memoir* (2002) explores the impact of early paternal loss. All focus on self-discovery and the ways in which the unconscious shapes the writers' lives, but *Nine Lives* is the most forthright, the most daring, the most transgressive. We see in *Nine Lives* a history of multiple personalities that are only slowly integrated into one. She conveys what Virginia Woolf described as "moments of being" that shimmer in one's memory. She embarked on a quest to experience life's plenitude, an odyssey that led her throughout the world. Although not a mystic, she felt a sense of harmony with her surroundings, "as though I were flowing into what I was seeing—becoming a part of the river, the sun, the bread and wine without the tension that marks a division. Perfect" (p. 93). The desire to *be* rather than to *become* did not last, but Kahane captures the experience of being in the moment.

I have long admired Kahane's scholarship, enjoyed chatting with her at summer PsyArt conferences in Europe, and we have many friends in common. Moreover, I was an undergraduate at SUNY-Buffalo a few years before she started teaching there. Additionally, I have written a biography of Norman N. Holland (Berman, 2021), the chair of the English department at Buffalo and her academic contemporary. Nevertheless, reading *Nine Lives* was a revelation, convincing me that I have known only one of Kahane's many lives.

As far as I can tell, there is only one factual error in the memoir, which opens with "I am now entering the 'death decade.' So, in 2015, I dramatically announced to family and friends who had gathered around me to celebrate my eightieth birthday" (p. 1). Kahane is now a nonagenarian, and her readers are grateful that she was proved wrong.

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