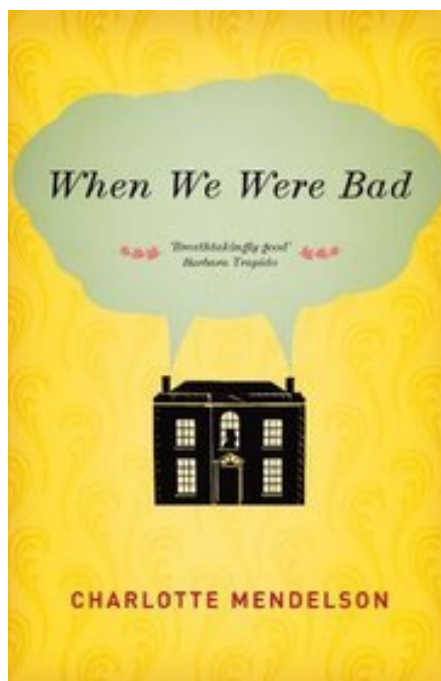




When We Were Bad

Charlotte Mendelson

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"The Rubin family, everybody agrees, seems doomed to happiness"

Claudia Rubin is in her heyday. Wife, mother, rabbi and sometime moral voice of the nation, everyone wants to be with her at her older son's glorious February wedding. Until Leo becomes a bolter and the heyday of the Rubin family begins to unravel . . .

'As intelligent as it is funny. A beautifully observed literary comedy as well as a painfully accurate description of one big old family mess' " Observer"

'Fast-paced and engaging. Brilliant, touching and true' Naomi Alderman, " Financial Times"

'Absolutely spellbinding, so funny, so moving, so totally believable' " Jacqueline Wilson"

'Intelligent and witty. The Rubin family may be a singular one but the delights and the difficulties its members have with sex and spirituality, food and domesticity, expectation and achievement, will have a universal appeal' "Sunday Telegraph"

'Funny and emotionally true, this is a comedy with the warmest of hearts and the most deliciously subversive of agendas' Book of the Month, " Marie Claire"

"When We Were Bad" is a warm, poignant and true portrayal of a London family in crisis, in love, in denial and - ultimately - in luck.

When We Were Bad Details

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From Reader Review When We Were Bad for online ebook

Jill Meyer says

British author Charlotte Mendelson gives us the Rubin family of Hampstead in her novel, "When We Were Bad". The family, super-star Rabbi Claudia Rubin - picture buxom beauty Nigella Lawson wearing a tallis - and her author-husband Norman, have raised together four children, all of whom are still part of the family, even at the advanced ages of early 30's and late 20's. Claudia is the firmament around which the other family members move and to whom they owe their love, livelihoods, and most of all, allegiance. "Rabbi Claudia" is the most famous, "out-there", rabbi in London and is a popular author, speaker, and...rabbi to her congregation in Belsize Park.

Claudia Rubin could be called a narcissist, I suppose; totally without a sense of humor about her family and world, she expects everyone to do and everything to be to her liking. Her four children, Frances, married to a widower and the mother of a young son; Leo, about to marry in a huge wedding, deserts his bride at the altar and runs off with the officiating rabbi's wife; Simeon, a young druggie and lay-about who adores his mother; and Emily, a late 20's woman who also can't get her life together. Norman is an habitually failed biographer, happy to let wife Claudia be the star in the family. Rabbi Claudia would like to present her family to the world as "perfect", but the reality of the situation begins to erase the perception.

Charlotte Mendelson's novel is a comedy-of-manners, though, as I write this review, I'm making the characters and the plot sound, well, grim. The plot covers a four or five month period in the Rubin family's life, beginning with Leo deserting his bride and ending a few nights after the Passover seder-from-hell. During that time, the children and Norman "find" themselves, in word and deed, and Rabbi Claudia's life is never the same. But, it really shouldn't be, as the reader finds out.

This book is a tough one to rate. I found it 5 star delightful but others won't. I didn't mind putting up with Rabbi Claudia and her narcissism but then I like characters with an edge. If you're thinking of buying this book, please read all the other reviews. Most are valid, I think. Then choose.

Martinxo says

Hugely enjoyable account of the trials and tribulations of Jewish family based in Camden, north London. Well written, thoughtful, funny and sad. Good stuff.

Laura says

The story of Claudia, a famous English rabbi and powerful matriarch, the husband living in her shadow, and their four children. Think *The Corrections* meets Philip Roth. Kind of.

Quite frankly, I wasn't expecting to like this book too much -- the only reason I picked it up was that it was sitting on my office bookshelf and I had forgotten to bring the other book I was reading. As I'm terrified of being caught on public transportation with nothing to read, I grabbed this, mostly because it looked more enticing than "New York Civil Practice Law and Rules," which was the one next to it. I figured it would be one of those weepy, self-indulgent pieces of work with lots of stuff about the frustrations and the beauty of

family.

Well, in fairness, it did go on a lot about the frustrations and beauty of family. But it was also well-written without being over-written, with a strong narrative and characters who can be downright unpleasant -- a difficult type of character to write well, but Mendelson has the right touch most of the time. (She's a little less successful writing characters that *she* clearly doesn't like -- she succumbs too easily to making them into caricatures.) I thought that the ending came a bit close to being a cop-out in one or two respects, but Mendelson stopped just short of really taking the coward's way out. Still, I found it somewhat less than satisfying, somehow -- it just seemed to peter out.

A side note: I find it pretty interesting to read the other reviews of this book, as the overarching theme seems to be 1) I disliked these characters so I couldn't get through the book; and 2) I disliked this book because it used terms I didn't understand, such as "shul." The second comment speaks for itself, so you can draw what conclusions you will; let's just say I never heard similar complaints about, say, books by Rakesh Satyal, which also tend to use non-English words. The first complaint I think is telling because one of the characters is a woman who doesn't like being a mother -- a type of character that seems to drive people completely insane. You can also draw your own conclusions about that, but let's just say I think it says depressing things about how people view women and mothers (and no, those two classes need not always overlap).

Michelle Elizabeth says

I didn't give this book only two stars because the the writing but I did because of the characters. Every single character was horrible. This story takes place in the home of a Jewish family but it could have been in the home of any number of groups. Anyone could fall into this family of old school ideals where children never really "launch" but are expected to live within the walls of the family throughout their lives.

Kirsty Darbyshire says

I really enjoyed this. A rambling kind of family saga in some ways, but the sort that cover a lot of family in a short space of time rather than sort that transcend generations. The central characters are the members of a London Jewish family - Claudia, successful mother, and Norman, unsuccessful father, and their four grown up children (for various values of "grown up").

I found the characters all pretty believable, often they are "larger than life" in the way that real people really are. What I really liked was that the ending of the book didn't wrap everything up neatly (because frankly I wouldn't have believed that - there were characters here who weren't going to see the error of their ways) and that the author didn't make it clear who she thought was right and who was wrong. (My take would be that I loved Frances, liked Norman and could see where Leo was coming from; totally disliked Claudia and the two younger children were hideous.) I thought it was all going to end in either a big morality tale finish or a huge party where they all lived happily ever after. Neither happened I'm glad to say.

I'll certainly watch out for more by Mendelson.

Sue Smith says

Somehow I think if I was of Jewish descent I would have gotten this book betterI just felt like i was out of the loop on some of the antics of what was going on - or they would have made more sense as to the intensity they were given.

I did get the family dynamics though - that pretty much translates across the board - in all races and religions. Let's put 'FUN' back in dysFUNctional!!!! Although they did seem alittle more screwed up than most..... or maybe just in relation to my particular family antics. I found them all a little too needy with a mother that needed a damn good slap. (Sorry). I do understand a mother making dramatics to get their way - don't agree with it - but do understand it. You see or hear about it all the time! I just felt sorry for the siblings that wanted to live a life that wasn't entirely hooped up with the past and wouldn't let them grow up and go forward. Traditions are fine, but they need to change and evolve with a families growth.

This really is a good book to read quickly. I think I would have put it down if I hadn't just kept at it. I found that I didn't connect with the characters very well and it would have been easy to just abandon it - if I was picking it up without the intent to get through it (thank goodness for book clubs!!).

Patricia says

OK. I found out about this book on AfterEllen.com. It was of interest to me because the author, Charlotte Mendelsohn is a publishing editor at a London-based publishing house.

I enjoyed the book, it was entertaining. What I liked most was the subject of the importance of pursuing our own happiness by putting our needs first rather than leading lives we think our father/mother/siblings want or we think want us to have.

Bonnie says

Oh my. Charlotte Mendelson, you sly one, you. Who knew that the erstwhile Booker nominee had written a novel that would totally consume me in the reckless manner that it did? The fact that I could barely stand to set it down for a minute only added to the overall satisfaction of a tightly written narrative, filled with witty observations and characters that you come to care about even though they have few redeeming characteristics.

Claudia Rubin is at the height of her powers: wife, mother, rabbi and moral authority for all, she is holding forth at the wedding of her oldest son, Leo, when the unthinkable happens. He bolts and runs off with none other than the wife of a fellow rabbi. Oi, the embarrassment! But that's just the start as her family begins to unravel and Mendelson is there to report every misstep and unpeel the layers, one by one. Never has a mother's suffocating hold on her family been more deservedly challenged. She is so consumed by this incident that she fails to notice that her oldest daughter, Frances, is in the throes of post-natal depression. Youngest son Simeon is in a drug fueled haze and daughter Emily brings an unusual young man home (or is it a woman?). Meanwhile, patriarch Norman has been working, secretly, on a bombshell book that will bring him much more notoriety than anything his much more famous wife has published.

Claudia takes everything in stride and Mendelson describes her philosophy with an astonishing eye for

detail:

"Claudia, running her fingertips over the plaster, thinks of skiing. A terrible sport: the ice, the pain, the slicing metal. It has, however, one thing in its favour. It demonstrates perfectly how best to lead one's life. Simply the image of herself speeding over metaphorical moguls while other people, more earnest and dangle earringed, plough through the snowdrifts, emoting, discussing, sharing, has always cheered her." (Page 216)

This is a wonderful literary comedy that will remind you of the ramshackle lives of people you know and will make you laugh out loud. Very highly recommended.

Mark says

Like the diner who wants to like brussels sprouts but just can't quite do it, I wanted to give this book four stars, but its flaws held it at 3 (when are we getting those half stars, Otis?)

The strength of Charlotte Mendelson's writing is evident. She started out giving me a family whose members I universally disliked. But as they each harbored and nurtured their secrets, they became much more interesting, if not always more endearing, and soon, everything was hurtling toward what promised to be a climactic implosion of a family Seder gathering.

The trouble was, things didn't quite implode as spectacularly as promised, many loose ends were left dangling, and some of the most important characters remained maddeningly opaque.

So what's this book about? Claudia Rubin is a celebrated liberal Jewish rabbi in London, famous for being a beauty, an author and an official ubermother. As such, all members of the family must revolve around her. Her husband Norman is supposed to remain a minor biographer of minor literary figures, but his next book will unveil a startling revelation. Eldest son Leo is supposed to be always dutiful, but he has just abandoned his safe fiancée at the wedding out of passion for her rabbi's wife. Eldest daughter Frances married the man her family wanted her to, and she is utterly out of her depth as a new mother and stepmom. Younger siblings Emily and Simeon are grown sponges living at home, whose failure to achieve anything is constantly excused by their parents.

Frances is the novel's main character, and the best parts of the novel describe her suffocating relationship with husband Jonathan, who seems to love being part of her family much more than he loves her. Mendelson is deft at sketching Jonathan's maddening combination of superfatherly calmness and all-encompassing worry. "Did you ring the plumber?" he asks conversationally. "We'll have to start looking at boilers. And there's definitely moisture under the girls' windowsill. Are we collecting my mother on Sunday? Oh, and Susannah needs new shoes again." This is how Jonathan often communicates with Frances.

It is hard to describe how all of this colorful dysfunction never quite gels without giving away key plot elements. Suffice it to say that the person who enters Frances' life and turns her emotions upside down simply disappears from the book at the end, not to mention the fact that Rabbi Rubin faces a major crisis in her life which she never reveals to her family and exits from the book without ever having acknowledged her own sins of hubris and mithering.

"When We Were Bad" could have been really good. Too bad.

Patrick says

The book deals with one of my favorite subject matters the issue of duty versus individual desire. Since I consider my value system to be heavily influenced by both I love books which places one value against the other. I actually really love this book because of the lessons of how one has to be an individual first before one can be responsible for others and equally important is letting go of control of others peoples lives and concentrate only on things that one can control.

I think one of Mendelson's insight through her storytelling is how our individual internal state of mind influences how we interpret others actions. So one cannot be truly interdependent with others without first being independent. I think this book is one of the best propaganda for living on one's own, be it via working or through college education far from family because one needs to be independent of familial sphere of influence and be independent before one comes back and becomes responsible for community and family. For example, Em gets mad at Leo for bringing Helen to the Seder because she herself gave up on her social life to please her mother so why can't her brother. It turns out France's rebellion is really just the rebellion against the forceful enforcement of Claudia's familial rule. France confusion of what she wants occurs because she never left the Claudia's familial dominion. Despite what she wants, she continuously caves in to Claudia's wishes. This is the perfect illustration of what afflicts kids who have never left home thus they cannot separate what they want from familial wants.

I do not know whether American's understand this book because only in immigrant or ethnically close families or people in developing countries where multi-generational homes are more prominent so that family has such an inescapable gravitational pull that the individual wish is an afterthought.

In the book Claudia represents the successful matriarch of the family who is a Rabbi with a successful and growing Shul. She expects all her children to follow their duty to her and her family in order for successful appearance to be upheld by her Shul and her society at large. Apparently, Claudia's drive to keep "the perfect family life" stems from her need to have her family as the stable foundation of her life. While I certainly empathize with her need to have faith and family as her foundation, I think at a certain point one has to let your family members choose for themselves how to live their lives especially once they become adults. Her grip on her family and their behavior astounds me. Her need for control is about to be tested with the advent of the AAA that might kill her. Even with her life on the line, her need to control her family and her Shul via executing her duties in it is foolishly admirable. Claudia is keeping a stoic attitude toward her illness and seems to want to will her disease away. She does not tell her family about her illness in order to keep a semblance of order and control in her life. Claudia is really a control freak that she does not acknowledge Norman personal success because of his betrayal of "writing" behind her back.

I love the ending how Claudia realizes it is fear of losing control that led to her folly of not seeking immediate medical help. Once she lets go of her fear and trust her hands in God she experiences happiness and thus is able to express her love for the first time in her life. Once Claudia lets go of her fear of control, she experiences peace with her children who want to be their own individual such as France and Leo.

It seems that in immigrant family's that duty and living in close proximity together is more important than individual desire or freedom.

But unfortunately, her children's individual desires are breaking through the cracks with Em and her Arab boyfriend, France and her unhappy marriage to the perfect in-law, and Leo's affair with Helen a fellow Rabbi's wife. France is stuck in a loveless marriage Jonathan without stimulating conversation and fabulous

sex because it was a marriage of convenience.

Her husband wants his own success and it astounds me how Claudia assumes that her husband will always be the failure. Norman wants also his day in the sun thus drawing him closer to Selina. For Norman, Selina represents someone who acknowledges his specialness outside being a spouse of a famous person. Selina is also interested in what Norman likes. Selina draws Norman to her because he feels under-appreciated by Claudia and his family for his skill.

The main issue for France is that she is a worrier who yearns freedom from her mother's rule but does not know how to escape. France is trapped in an unhappy marriage and is not ready to be a mother yet as can be seen by her disdain her children and step-children. To France, Jay represents an out of her dreary existence into the unknown. Jay also represents a way for to rebel against the straight and narrow path that Claudia made for her. I love how Jay makes fun of liberal hypocrisy in accepting gay people in theory but not in practical sense.

I enjoy Mendelson's discussion of Leo daydreams of his experience with Helen. If only time stopped, they were the only two people on earth and they had no obligations to anyone but themselves. Leo and Helen would live in a perfect world.

The question is why Leo pursued an affair with Helen providing momentary scandal to the Rubin's life not to mention Helen's family's life if they were not planning on running away together. The answer to this puzzling question is Leo's overriding sense of duty to his family and its properness initially kept him from fully committing to Helen. For Leo, Claudia's decision and thus success is closely tied to his duties as "the responsible son".

But once he figured out that he was madly in love with her, his priorities changed. I love how Mendelson explains Leo's obsession with Helen because he is in love with her. I love how Mendleson describes Helen and Leo coupling as if they were fire yearning for oxygen. I like how Mendleson keeps us in suspense on what Leo will do whether he will stick to his duty to his mother, family, and community or will he give into his individual love for Helen. I like how Leo finally has the courage to bring Helen to his family Seder because he is in love with her. Leo needs to understand that Helen wants them to be their own couple before coming back to family as interdependent entities instead of dependent on the family for his life. In this way, Leo should follow France's lead in moving out and establishing himself outside familial life before coming back to the family.

He also realizes that Naomi is not right for him because he is not in love with her because Naomi is just a continuation of what his mother wants for him. Leo also realizes it is not just sex he is after after he turns down his co-worker to go to a prostitute to take his mind off things. I can understand Leo's frustration in his life that he sees is not going where he wanted it to go. For him, he is just lacking companionship.

I think it is interesting how the children who are the most flawed with Simeon's drug habits and womanizing and Em discarding partners as if they were old clothes tend to defend tradition and order whereas the children who are seen as the most responsible Leo and France are rebelling against authority figures. The lesson here is that everyone needs a dynamic equilibrium in which security at home is balance with an external dynamic life.

Christina Rochester says

I'm finding it really hard to review this one. I feel like there's a lot to say, but I can't quite find the words.

When We Were Bad focuses on the Rubin family, who to everyone outside the family, appears perfect. However our four main characters; Claudia, Leo, Frances and Norman are each hiding their own secrets and trying to break free from the ties that bind them.

Unfortunately I really struggled with the book, despite enjoying it immensely as I found it extremely hard to warm to any of the characters especially Claudia. I didn't particularly care what happened to her by the end of the book; whereas I at least felt that I understood where Frances was coming from. I didn't particularly like her, but I could relate to her. The two younger Rubin siblings, Emily and Simeon, just felt like plot devices to me. Even Em's big storyline was just a supporting structure for Frances' one.

That said I do recommend this book if you can get past the characters.

Penny says

OK, I can see if I have to struggle with a political science book for a degree credit, but this? 3 chapters in and I still have no idea who the players are or what's going on. Give me a break!

Barbara says

Dysfunctional family stumbling through life under a cloth of fine crafted lies and a sprinkle of deception

Emi Bevacqua says

Although I grew to like the book some by the end, it was tough for me to stick with. Usually I love stories set in London, and I like a wacky Jewish family as much as the next guy but somehow each member of this one was so entirely out-of-control it made me feel anxious. And I didn't like picturing their house, it made me feel grubby. So overall this story kind of made me queasy and sad.

Veronica Zundel says

On paper (which it is) this novel should have been the ideal read for me: the story of the collapsing family of a famous woman rabbi living in Hampstead. Unfortunately, and with apologies to the kind lady who gave me my copy, it was one of those books I couldn't pick up again when I'd put them down. The characters are mostly sketchy, the plot is non-existent (not that this would normally bother me but without decent characters you at least want a good plot) and it took me until two thirds of the way through to get even a little bit emotionally involved. I will remember the chaotic Seder (Passover meal) scene at the end, but nothing else about this damp squib.
