

Her Shoes

by Jennifer Weiner

Reviewed by Amy Waldman

One is a plain Jane with a brain; the other's a hot redhead with a learning disability and a body like Britney's. Naturally they hate each other and, of course, they're sisters. Maggie thinks Rose, a Princeton-educated lawyer, is boring. Rose thinks Maggie, fired and evicted yet again, is a leech and a slut. What they have in common is an enemy-their stepmother-and a conundrum-how to get their father to discuss their vibrant birth mother, who died when they were children.

Weiner's vivid characterizations

and her light touch with heavy topics make this follow-up to last year's bestselling debut Good in Bed an entertaining romp through family battles and toxic relationships. Weiner combines the zany and the serious without making light of the issues faced by her characters. The book is like spending time with an understanding friend who has a knack for always being great company, brightening the best times and knowing just how to convince you that not only will you get through the worst, you'll manage to squeeze a laugh or two out of the experience. (Atria, \$25) Bottom Line: Wonderful fit



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OCTOBER 25, 2002

For Jennifer Weiner, Success Comes in Large Packages

With 'In Her Shoes,' Her Second Book in Two Years, Author Gives Voice to Many an Unlikely Heroine

By ELIZABETH GOLD

It's really difficult to write a good novel about a fat woman. In fact, it's really hard to write a novel about a fat woman, period. Supposedly, no one wants to read about people who are fat, because — God forbid — reading about one might make the reader fat too. Oh, and fat women in literature never get the guy. To elaborate: Fat women never get happy, married, secure, successful, whatever, in contemporary literature, unless they drop a whole bunch of pounds. Good thing Jennifer Weiner, author of the new novel, "In Her Shoes" (Atria Books), and well as last year's best-seller "Good in Bed," is around to skew the odds back in our — uh, I mean those people with weight issues — favor.

Weiner herself is the first to bring up this issue, over — appropriately — blueberry pancakes and orange juice at Blue on Green, an upscale diner in Philadelphia, where she lives and where both of her novels are set. "In Her Shoes" is the story of two Jewish sisters, a Florida grandmother and a horrible stepmother. The book is currently receiving a big marketing push (one that includes a full-page color ad in the New York Times Book Review, a 14-city reading tour and a pending movie deal). "Good in Bed" (Pocket Books), which was published last year, tells the story of Cannie, a reporter whose recently dumped boyfriend, Bruce, starts writing magazine columns about "loving a larger woman." Humiliated and broken-hearted, Cannie sets about to rebuild her life, often in extremely dramatic ways. Weiner is quick to remember how difficult a sell "Good in Bed" — and Cannie — turned out to be.

"Finding an agent was difficult. Twenty-three out of 25 agents said no. Then I had an agent who would say things like 'Does Cannie have to be fat?" It was also suggested, by this same agent, Weiner said, that she "change the title of the book to 'Big Girl." She left that agent, and — miracle of miracles — found one who "thought there was a place in the world for a novel with a plus-sized heroine." Then the book sold in four days, and, less than six months after its paperback release, is currently number 131 on www.Amazon.com's sales ranking.

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Equally vindicating is how difficult Weiner's own life was when she began writing "Good in Bed." Back in the late 1990s, while working as a features writer and columnist at the Philadelphia Inquirer, Weiner got dumped by her nice Jewish boyfriend. While traumatic, the breakup proved inspirational for Weiner, who wrote her novel during the evenings as a form of therapy. It's a heartening story, and that's before you find out Weiner went to Princeton, or that she's recently married (to a lawyer yet) or — and here's the kicker — that she's just as strong-willed, supportive, confused and — it's got to be said — as overweight as her heroines. To that end, it should not be confusing that Weiner was shocked "that not only plus-sized women liked the book."

But why wouldn't they? Weiner's heroines are cool. They stay plump and still get to sell screenplays, figure out their problems with their parents, have nice apartments and marry doctors and lawyers. Ladies — and gents — everywhere, alert: You can read "Good in Bed" and "In Her Shoes," munch on chocolate-chip cookies the whole time and not feel like you need to go run a marathon afterward if you want that happy ending for yourself. Without exaggeration, this is revolutionary. It shouldn't be, but it is.

This brings us to Weiner's new book, "In Her Shoes." Unlike "Good in Bed," "In Her Shoes" has two, if not three, heroines, only one of whom is fat. It's as if Weiner's success with "Good in Bed" made her realize that women can be miserable and insecure for reasons other than size, and set out to write about them. The book tells the story of two sisters, Rose and Maggie. Rose is a good girl — a little too good really. She's a newly minted lawyer with a job at a big Philadelphia law firm. Shy and self-conscious with men, however, all of Rose's smarts haven't made her happy. Mostly, it seems at first, this is due to a life-long weight problem, but, as the book goes on, it becomes clear that Rose's "issues" go back to her mother's early death and her father's remarriage to a hideous caricature of a Jewish American Princess, the evil "Stepmonster," Sydelle. Also, it seems, Rose's insecurities stem from the presence in her life of her little sister, and diametric opposite, Maggie.

Maggie's a bombshell — tiny, wild and as desperately insecure with men as her sister, though she expresses her fears by acting out with them, rather than with a pint of Häagen Dazs. Maggie also suffers from severe dyslexia, a condition about which she is so ashamed that she refuses to admit to needing help, and therefore gets fired from every job she ever has, in order to avoid revealing that she has trouble. She also smokes, drinks, steals and lies — and relies on Rose to get her out of every mess she creates.

Pretty standard so far, right? We've all read about characters like Rose and Maggie before, so where does Weiner take off from her template to make "In Her Shoes" less clichéd and more compelling? She brings Rose and Maggie to an unlikely spot for cliché avoidance, especially of the Jewish kind: Florida. And — surprise! — it works like a charm.

As it turns out, Rose and Maggie have a grandmother, Ella, whom they haven't seen since their mother's death and who suffers just as deeply from lack of love as they do. For this reader, when "In Her Shoes" goes to Florida, it takes off. Weiner's descriptions of Ella's

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retirement community are both dead-on funny and very loving. The Florida scenes come from Weiner's personal experience visiting her own grandmother in a retirement community.

It is hard not to wish that a writer as talented as Weiner — and as smart — would just go for it and try to write something more literary than this. But in Weiner's case, it seems that the difficulty of writing about a group that is both underrepresented and — no pun intended — large, cannot be underestimated.

This seemed evident when Weiner discussed her depiction of the villian of "In Her Shoes," Sydelle the Step monster. A hideously cold woman, by the end of the book, it turns that Sydelle has good reason for being so horrible. If Sydelle's character seems overblown — and, in spite of also being very funny, it does — it is clear that Weiner is trying to work out some of her own issues in imagining her. "I think for Jewish women of that generation," Weiner said, when asked about Sydelle, "they thought: 'I can't be fat; I can't be loud, because then I'd be like my mother."

To that end, it should not be confusing that Weiner was shocked "that not only plus-sized women liked" "Good in Bed." Even to the author, the universality of her characters has come as a rule-challenging shock. With Cannie, Rose, Maggie and Ella — all strong women who've decided to resist the stereotyped roles they're supposed to follow — Weiner refutes many of all of our internal commands. Instead, her books challenge all of us to be fat and loud. There are worse things.

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Praise for

GOOD IN BED by Jennifer Weiner

New York Times Best Seller

"Weiner's witty, original, fast moving debut features a lovable heroine, a solid cast, snappy dialogue and a poignant take on life's priorities."

Publishers Weekly - ≯ starred review

"Weiner's voice rings true as she flouts conventional wisdom about what women want. **An unpredictable and impressive debut."**

Kirkus - \$\starred review

"First-time novelists Weiner takes a fresh, funny look at a woman who conquers her obsessions with wit and style."

Glamour

"...it's a roller-coaster ride of ups and downs, wild success and bitter lows, during which Cannie finds success, peace and even love.

A warm, refreshing story."

Booklist

"Cannie's adventures will strike a chord with all young women struggling to find their place in the world. Veteran storyteller Maeve Binchy gave us Bennie in CIRCLE OF FRIENDS; now Jennifer Weiner gives us Cannie. Look for more books from Weiner!"

Library Journal

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Praise from

Publishers Weekly (Starred review - May 8, 2001)

GOOD IN BED by Jennifer Weiner

It is tempting at first -- but unwise -- to assume Candace Shapiro is yet another Bridget Jones. Feisty, funny and less self-hating than her predecessor, Cannie is a 28-year-old Philadelphia Examiner reporter preoccupied with her weight and men, but able to see humor in even the most unpleasant of life's broadsides. Even she is floored, however, when she reads 'Good in Bed,' a new women's magazine column penned by her ex-boyfriend, pothead grad student Bruce Guberman. Three months earlier, Cannie suggested they take a break -- apparently, Bruce thought they were through and set about making such proclamations as, "Loving a large woman is an act of courage in our world." Devastated by this public humiliation, Cannie takes comfort in tequila and her beloved dog, Nifkin. Bruce has let her down like another man in her life -- Cannie's sadistic plastic surgeon father emotionally abused her as a young girl, and eventually abandoned his wife and family, leaving no forwarding address. Cannie's siblings suffer, especially the youngest, Lucy, who has tried everything from phone sex to striptease. Their tough-as-nails mother managed to find love again with a woman, Tanya, the gravel-voiced owner of a two-ton loom. Somehow, Cannie stays strong for family and friends, joining a weight-loss group, selling her screenplay and gaining the maturity to ask for help when she faces something bigger than her fears.

Weiner's witty, original, fast moving debut features a lovable heroine, a solid cast, snappy dialogue and a poignant take on life's priorities.

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