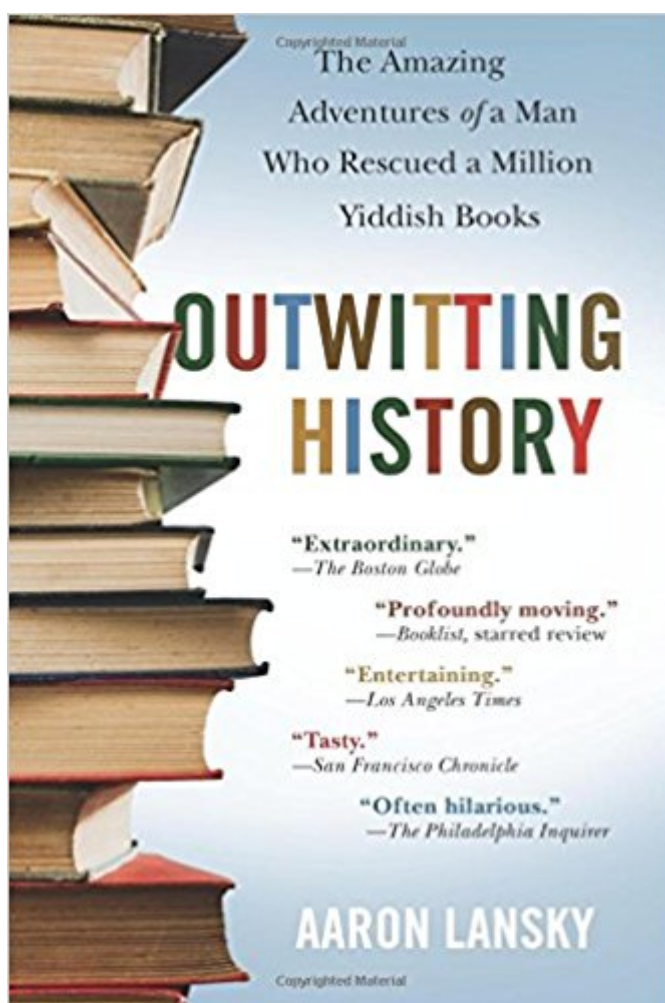


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# Outwitting History: The Amazing Adventures Of A Man Who Rescued A Million Yiddish Books



## Synopsis

“Incredible . . . Inspiring . . . Important.” • Library Journal, starred review  
“A marvelous yarn, loaded with near-calamitous adventures and characters as memorable as Singer creations.” • The New York Post  
“What began as a quixotic journey was also a picaresque romp, a detective story, a profound history lesson, and a poignant evocation of a bygone world.” • The Boston Globe  
“Every now and again a book with near-universal appeal comes along: Outwitting History is just such a book.” • The Sunday Oregonian  
As a twenty-three-year-old graduate student, Aaron Lansky set out to save the world’s abandoned Yiddish books before it was too late. Today, more than a million books later, he has accomplished what has been called “the greatest cultural rescue effort in Jewish history.” In Outwitting History, Lansky shares his adventures as well as the poignant and often laugh-out-loud stories he heard as he traveled the country collecting books. Introducing us to a dazzling array of writers, he shows us how an almost-lost culture is the bridge between the old world and the future—and how the written word can unite everyone who believes in the power of great literature. A Library Journal Best Book A Massachusetts Book Award Winner in Nonfiction An ALA Notable Book

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Lansky was a 23-year-old graduate student in 1980 when he came up with an idea that would take over his life and change the face of Jewish literary culture: He wanted to save Yiddish books. With few resources save his passion and ironlike determination, Lansky and his fellow dreamers traveled

from house to house, Dumpster to Dumpster saving Yiddish books wherever they could find them—eventually gathering an improbable 1.5 million volumes, from famous writers like Sholem Aleichem and I.B. Singer to one-of-a-kind Soviet prints. In his first book, Lansky charmingly describes his adventures as president and founder of the National Yiddish Book Center, which now has new headquarters at Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass. To Lansky, Yiddish literature represented an important piece of Jewish cultural history, a link to the past and a memory of a generation lost to the Holocaust. Lansky's account of salvaging books is both hilarious and moving, filled with Jewish humor, conversations with elderly Jewish immigrants for whom the books evoke memories of a faraway past, stories of desperate midnight rescues from rain-soaked Dumpsters, and touching accounts of Lansky's trips to what were once thriving Jewish communities in Europe. The book is a testimony to his love of Judaism and literature and his desire to make a difference in the world. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Lansky's quarter-century quest not only helped keep Yiddish literature from slipping into history, but also provided him with plenty of terrific material for his first book. Granted, a story about collecting old volumes in an obscure language initially sounds less than thrilling. But thanks to Lansky's storytelling skills, this memoir lives up to the "amazing adventures" advertised in its title; it's quickly clear why he's been dubbed "the Yiddish Indiana Jones" and "the Otto Schindler of Yiddish literature." Lansky's recounting of his personal mission may come off as self-aggrandizing to a few readers. But most will likely view the book as a great tale filled with memorable anecdotes and a rich cast of characters who reflect the endangered culture they're trying to save. Copyright © 2004 Phillips & Nelson Media, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Aaron Lansky's *Outwitting History* presents an interesting counter-trend to modern habits of reading: in an age when physical books are being less and less read, Lansky has spent his whole life rescuing Yiddish books. Lansky's account of rescuing the literature of a quickly dying language has both sad and triumphant overtones. As he first starts collecting Yiddish books, many Yiddish writers and readers are alive, if not old, and Lansky gets to see glimpses of their world. As an American Jew, Lansky knows what he has missed: the world of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish, working together to form a seamless world. Through Herculean effort, Lansky and others eventually create the Yiddish Book Center, a home to a million and a half Yiddish books. Yet

that world is gone, and after the Center is built, Lansky has some interesting and sad things to say about Jewish continuity, or the lack thereof. All in all, this is a fascinating book that documents the steady decline of a civilization and in relatively short space of time, and a group of people's determination to save a piece of it.

In reading Lansky's book, I experienced the similar thrill of an evening of going from one Jewish home to another eating the first superb meal followed by an extravaganza of delectable dishes in the next homes, and then mouth watering desserts at yet another home. These extraordinary feasts represent the outstanding features of Lansky's book. He examines the Yiddish language, culture and diversity, and all who have contributed to making these important aspects of Judaism persevere over centuries. He brought to life Jewish writers, scholars, philosophers, politicians, artists, philanthropists, comedians, artists, survivors of the Holocaust, ordinary Jews living decent lives, and decades of Jews lost in pogroms, ousted from almost every country in the world, despised, vilified, tortured and ultimately put to death. Lansky accomplished this with poignancy, intelligent writing, and humor. All of the idiosyncrasies and concerns of his characters, real people with names and places, made for fascinating reading. So much of Yiddish writing and literatures concerns itself with Yiddishkeit, what it means to be Jewish, and how it plays a role in the day to day lives of all Jews. The writings teach us about humanity, performance of mitzvahs, regard for one's fellow man, respect for education, and continuity of family and tradition. Lansky has helped many of us who fail to understand why we cling to our roots in this modern world; we go to shul maybe once or twice a year, have an occasional Passover dinner, or attend a children's Purim festival. His book has served as a wake up call. There is more to Yiddishkeit than marginal participation. He has opened my eyes to the extensive world of Yiddish literature. Even though my memory of the language is vague and I can only read a little in Yiddish, the fact that these books are now available in English translation is a phenomenal achievement. Up until now, I have read only books by Isaac Bashevis Singer and Malamud; available is a myriad of genius writers that I can access. When the feast ended, I realized the feat of his travail. His book is a testimony to the efforts of one, and many others as well, to preserve our Jewish history and language. Lansky made me laugh and cry from page to page as he educated me in the re-appreciation of Yiddishkeit.

An amazing book that really was an eye-opener in regards to a part of Jewish history that tells the story of not only of our Yiddish-speaking relatives in the US but an almost forgotten history of Jewry in Eastern Europe. Not only was our culture practically wiped out during the Holocaust but then

almost again, with the destruction of these books that Mr. Lansky and his zambler had the foresight to save. Really a must read!

This book really took me back and got me thinking again about my family's heritage. There was so much that my grandparents and great-aunts/uncles DIDN'T talk about - and this book gave me a bit of insight into what their experience might have been like. I attended a Workmen's Circle school as a child, and learned a great deal about my Jewish and Yiddish heritage. We were culturally Jewish (as opposed to religiously). This book helped to fill in some blanks. In addition, the stories of Mr. Lansky's collecting experiences were wonderful and I was sorry when the book ended. I loved meeting people who reminded me of my relatives, now long gone.

I could only wish people would put as much work into preserving the history of Yiddish speakers as they did to preserving Yiddish books! Very interesting read!

This book keeps you reading for so many reasons. It is, not least, an incredible account of young entrepreneurship and perseverance - Aaron working together with his friends hawling tons of books at incredible hours, then gradually developing a vision for the Yiddish Book Center and securing funding to make the vision come true. It is also a beautiful story about how people make a difference, one example being the old Jewish couple on Long Island who on a plumber's income, had been a cultural harbor for many poor authors in the Yiddish immigrant community. It is also a touching story of how history was outwitted when Aaron and his crew were able to furnish Yiddish readers in the Baltic countries with books from the American Center - books that originally had been brought over by East European Jewish immigrants in the early 1900s. Anyone interested in history or simply in a good story will enjoy reading this book.

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