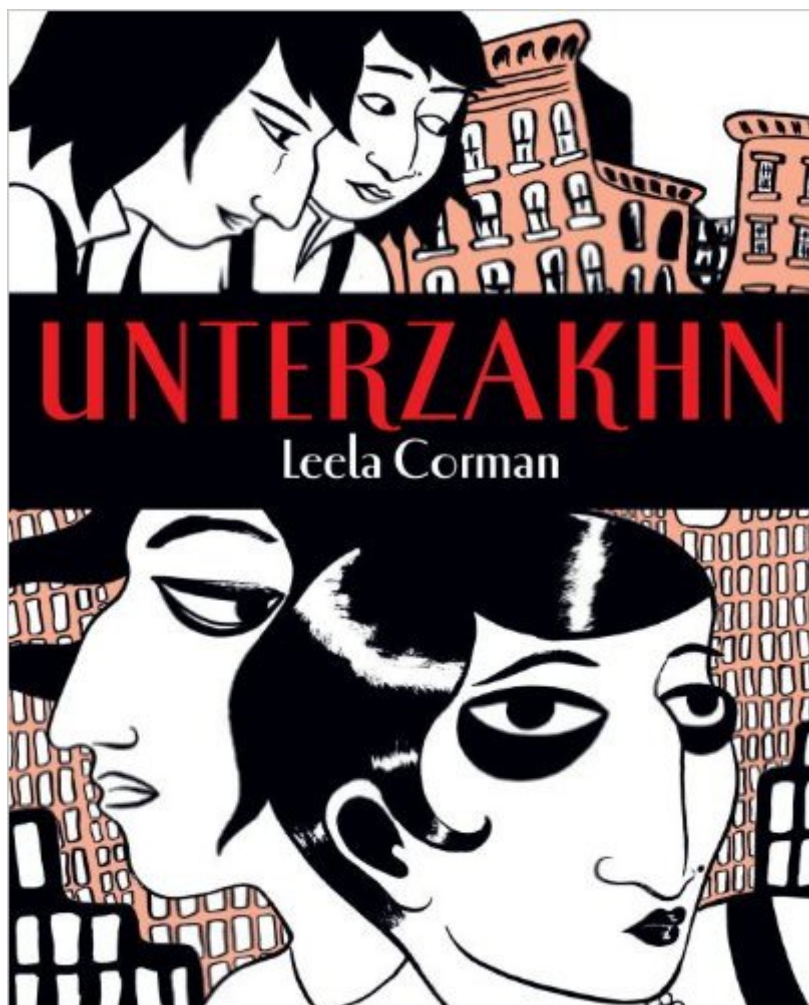


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# Unterzakhn (Pantheon Graphic Novels)



## Synopsis

A mesmerizing, heartbreaking graphic novel of immigrant life on New York's Lower East Side at the turn of the twentieth century, as seen through the eyes of twin sisters whose lives take radically and tragically different paths. For six-year-old Esther and Fanya, the teeming streets of New York's Lower East Side circa 1910 are both a fascinating playground and a place where life's lessons are learned quickly and often cruelly. In drawings that capture both the tumult and the telling details of that street life, *Unterzakhn* (Yiddish for "Underthings") tells the story of these sisters: as wide-eyed little girls absorbing the sights and sounds of a neighborhood of struggling immigrants; as teenagers taking their own tentative steps into the wider world (Esther working for a woman who runs both a burlesque theater and a whorehouse, Fanya for an obstetrician who also performs illegal abortions); and, finally, as adults battling for their own piece of the "golden land" where the difference between just barely surviving and triumphantly succeeding involves, for each of them, painful decisions that will have unavoidably tragic repercussions.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is one of those books you read all in one go, on the subway, on the sidewalk dodging kids, holding it over the stove as you make dinner, unable to hear people talking to you. And then, incredibly, it stays with you after you've finished it. I can't stop thinking about it. It might be about the story itself--could things have ended differently? Would I want them to? What does this story from a

hundred years ago mean to people today as we work, vote, have sex and screw up? But I also keep seeing the art in my head. The flower patterns on Esther's robe. Feigl's crazy hair. The way Leela Corman draws dancing so it moves on the page. How much a braid weighs. Just incredible. I'm buying this for everyone I know who loves art, history, politics, dancing, New York, and crazy beautiful showgirl costumes.

Leela Corman's graphic Novel , *Unterzakhn* is almost all that. The drawings are bold, making no compromises in the name of conventional modesty or modern notions of beauty. Twin Jewish girls grow up poor in 1910 New York and live parallel but not such different lives. The story is not one of an emigrant family making good but of half educated people surviving and attempting to make sense of an arbitrary world. Depending on when this book comes into your life it will have enormous power or just seem like "another one". The word *Unterzakhn* is Yiddish for underclothes. This is what the demanding and inflexible mother of twins girls Fanya and Ester makes to keep her family from complete poverty. What their soulful and unhappy father does is almost unimportant. The world of the two girls is hard. Death and cruelty are more common than joy or compassion. Only one will receive any education and the other will, because of her artistic bent will become a prostitute, dancer, and star. Irregular use of flashback will help the reader to understand that this family has survived generations of bigotry and bare survival and that the arranged marriage of the girl's parents is not the *Fiddler on the Roof* variety. There is too much about all of this that I have seen before. The story arc is too nearly predictable. If you come to this book before reading the story of failed immigrants, or the European stories of among others Isaac Bashevis Singer (his original *Tevya* stories are hardly all humor and happiness) then this can be a very important book. An experienced reader will believe they have felt the particular hardships by women of this class and time. This is a very good book, for me it was not 5 stars.

A very well done graphic novel, told with all of the grace and power the art is known for. I couldn't put it down and will read it again soon. Anyone with any interest in immigrant life, women's survival, Yiddish, Jewish history, the effects of collective trauma through the generations, New York City, or a myriad of other things will be drawn to this book and moved by it.

Women's history has seldom been presented so well. I have read about 30 books about life in New York's Lower East Side between 1890 and the 1940s, including fiction, history and biographies. Few have captured me as much as this one did. And yes, many of the images stay in your mind long

after you finish this book. I borrowed *Unterzakhn* from the library, then bought my own copy, which I very rarely do. The idea of using these graphics as Yiddish flash cards is brilliant! Highly recommended.

I have read a lot of graphic novels and this is far and away among the best. The story-telling and visual style are reminiscent of *Persepolis* (which I loved madly) but in addition to the difference of being fiction (albeit historical), is that the illustrations in *Unterzakhn* are incredibly evocative even while seeming quite simple. Similarly the story has many layers of meaning which you will find if you look. I highly recommend this for any fan of graphic novels, Jewish American or immigrant history, and especially those with an interest in how women use and control their bodies.

I loved this book!! I got totally lost in the story and had a difficult time putting it down. It was sad, but at the same time inspiring. It was a reminder to me of how far we, as women, have come. Very well done by a gifted graphic novelist, Leela Corman!!!

I remember reading a snippet of this in Megan Kelso's *Scheherazade* anthology several years ago. It was a real stand out then, and it still is now. Corman's drawings seem loose and casual - she does a great job of conveying clutter, tone of voice and even...smell! How does she do it? I don't know, but it really works! If you told me there was a sequel, I would run out and buy it right away!

It's been so long since I've read a comic/graphic novel, and I had forgotten how wonderful they are in expressing some of the less tangible parts of human experience (i.e. dreams, unspoken emotion, etc.). The drawing quality is simple, and I appreciated the loose ink brush marks and how they contrasted with the rest of the imagery. I found the story to be a convincing historical snapshot, and a very interesting portrait of Jewish life in the Lower East Side. I also really liked the story's focus on the role/ social expectations of women during this time period. In modern times, it's hard to remember that certain things we take for granted (i.e. access to contraception) was illegal. My criticisms for the book is that the storyline is a little choppy, and jumps around without adequate transitions. Also, it is a little hard to tell the characters apart (especially since the two main protagonists are twins). In one chapter, the book jumps to Eastern Europe with no warning, and it's a little confusing since everything else takes place in New York.

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