



Something on My Own (Television and Popular Culture)

Glenn Smith

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In 1929 “The Goldbergs” debuted on the air, introducing Gertrude Berg -- and her radio alter ego, Bronx housewife Molly Goldberg – to the nation. The show would become one of the most beloved and enduring sitcoms of Golden Age radio, and early TV. At the helm was Berg who, as creator, star, writer, and producer, became a force to be reckoned with. This multi-faceted biography provides a penetrating look at how Gertrude Berg carved a special place for herself in the annals of broadcast history. Decades before Lucille Ball, Berg triumphed as a woman of commercial and creative consequence in what was essentially a male-dominated arena.

For over three decades, Berg’s “Molly” fluttered about and hung out her kitchen window dispensing motherly advice laced with engaging malapropisms, insights, and lots of “schmaltz”. The show offered a warmly comedic look at the lives and dreams of working-class American Jews, and subtle insights into the nature of assimilation. While Molly, husband Jake, and Uncle David represent Old World Jewish stereotypes, children Rosalie and Sammy are as American as apple pie. Berg makes it clear that the only thing separating shtetl and middle-class new world values is style.

Drawing on Gertrude Berg’s papers at Syracuse University’s Bird Library, and rare interviews with her family and colleagues, the author reveals her as shrewd, creative, and forthright. Unlike “Molly,” Berg was a cultivated woman and a Columbia graduate. A pioneer in the concept of product tie-in, she parlayed the show’s popularity into a movie, short stories, and even a cookbook. In 1951 she stood up to the blacklist by refusing to fire longtime co-star Philip Loeb who was under fire by the House un-American Committee. The book also chronicles Berg’s accomplishments in theater, film, and literature.

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