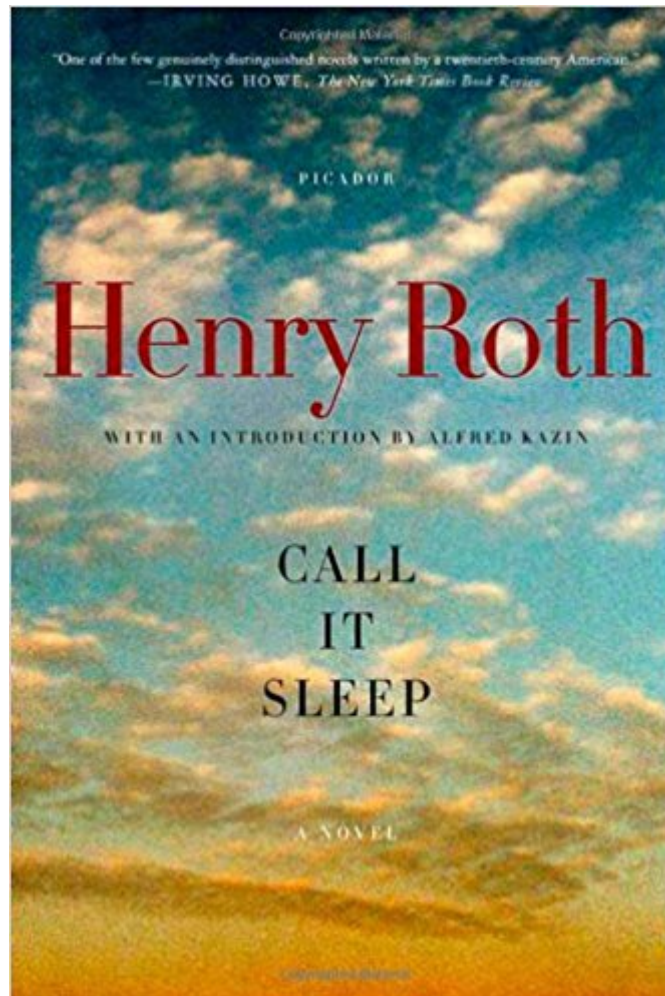




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# Call It Sleep: A Novel



## Synopsis

When Henry Roth published his debut novel *Call It Sleep* in 1934, it was greeted with considerable critical acclaim though, in those troubled times, lackluster sales. Only with its paperback publication thirty years later did this novel receive the recognition it deserves—and still enjoys. Having sold to date millions of copies worldwide, *Call It Sleep* is the magnificent story of David Shearl, the "dangerously imaginative" child coming of age in the slums of New York.

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“One of the few genuinely distinguished novels written by a twentieth-century American.”—Irving Howe, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Arguably the most distinguished work of fiction ever written about immigrant life...Surely the most lyrically authentic novel in American literature about a young boy’s coming to consciousness.”—Lis Harris, *The New Yorker*

“Roth has done for the East Side Jew what James T. Farrell is doing for the Chicago Irish in the Studs Lonigan trilogy.... When his characters are speaking pure Yiddish, Roth translates it into great beauty....The final chapters in the book have been compared to the Nighttown episodes of Joyce’s *Ulysses*; the comparison is apt.”—John Chamberlain, *The New York Times*

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times, lackluster sales. Only with its paperback publication thirty years later did this novel receive the recognition it deserves---and still enjoys. Having sold to date millions of copies worldwide, *Call It Sleep* is the magnificent story of David Schearl, the "dangerously imaginative" child coming of age in the slums of New York."Arguably the most distinguished work of fiction ever written about immigrant life...Surely the most lyrically authentic novel in American literature about a young boy's coming to consciousness "---Lis Harris, *The New Yorker*"Roth has done for the East Side Jew what James T. Farrell is doing for the Chicago Irish in the Studs Lonigan trilogy.... When his characters are speaking pure Yiddish, Roth translates it into great beauty.... The final chapters in the book have been compared to the Nighttown episodes of Joyce's *Ulysses*; the comparison is apt."---John Chamberlain, *The New York Times*"There has appeared in America no novel to rival the veracity of this childhood. It is as honest as Dreiser's *Dawn*, but far more sensitive and ably written. It is as brilliant as Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, but with a wider scope, a richer emotion, a deeper realism."---Alfred Hayes, author of *All Thy Conquests*"For sheer virtuosity, *Call It Sleep* is hard to beat; no one has ever distilled such poetry and wit from the counterpoint between the maimed English and the subtle Yiddish of the immigrant. No one has reproduced so sensitively the terror of family life in the imagination of a child caught between two cultures."---Leslie A. Fiedler, author of *The Life and Death of the Great American Novel*Henry Roth (1906--1995) was born in the Austro-Hungarian province of Galitzia. He probably landed on Ellis Island in 1909, and began his life in New York on the Lower East Side in the slums where *Call It Sleep* is set. He is the author as well of *Shifting Landscapes*, a collection of essays, and the *Mercy of a Rude Stream* tetralogy.

A great book about life on New York's Lower East Side as seen through the eyes of David, a young Jewish boy trying to fit in a world that is Jewish on one hand, yet becoming more American on the other. As a native NYer who spends a lot of time on the LES I'm always willing to read anything about that area showing it as the immigrants saw it in the late 1800s through the early 1900s. It's a hard book to read, not only because the Yiddish is not familiar but because it deals with one hardship, one heartbreak, one disturbing incident after another. David's family struggles to make it in NY after coming from the pastoral setting of Austria. In their homeland his father took care of cattle, here he is a milkman breaking his back for \$16 a week. David is not the strongest boy in the neighborhood, either emotionally or physically, and this causes him grief to no end. He is a momma's boy in a world you have to be tough to survive in. His father is a sadistic person, taking his depression out on his family, co workers, and those he believes have wronged him. In some ways they have but his overreaction shows his despair. A great book by an author who disappeared

pretty much after it was published in 1934. Highly recommended for anyone interested in NY history.

The story of a seven year old Jewish boy assimilating in New York has the power of James Joyce and the writings of Shakespeare. Three languages are utilized and can be understood by the reader along with dialects of Jewish children and Irish and Italians living in the city. A powerful novel with a final essay analyzing the messages conveyed.

When people discuss the great American novel, I speak up for *Call It Sleep*. Eight year-old David Schearl and his gentle mother are each other's refuge from a father's hardened bitterness. David is starting to probe the bigger world in its treacherous vastness and glory: dirty games, and also moments of startling beauty and mystery. A book of childhood, but not of childish things, *Call It Sleep* does honor to the dawn of awareness in a child's mind. Maybe yours. David Schearl's immediate world is the sizzling tumult of immigrant life in downscale Brownsville, a world evoked with sensual devotion. Part of the dialogue is written in an attempt to transcribe New York's varied street dialects, and this makes reading a bit slower. Fortunately there is a superb audiobook edition (on Audible and a few other outlets) which is even better than the printed page. It lifts you right into the Babel-Eden of immigrant speech. (Kudos to the reader, George Guidall.) If you like thinking about language as such, look out for the pages about how David gets more and more "lost" as Brooklynites of various dialects (Irish, elite Anglo) variously interpret David's Yiddishy plea for help getting back to his mom on "Boddeh Stritt." *Call It Sleep* puts you frighteningly close to David's fear of his father and his vulnerability as a mama's boy, yet it is a narrative of the child as hero. David's unfolding consciousness includes a revelatory component. It is prefigured by thoughts of the divine as his mind wanders from Hebrew school, but in the event it is the street, in the form of the streetcar's electric third rail, and not the scripture, that triggers David's visionary initiation. Though one might call it a realist novel, *Call It Sleep* goes light years beyond the street-novel genre's harping on mere strength to arrive at humane grandeur.

According to , I bought this novel four years ago and for the life of me I actually don't remember what made me buy it. I do that a lot, I have a very long queue of things to read and so it's not uncommon for me to buy something and then file it away for several years until I finally get a chance to get around to it. So who knows what prompted me to purchase it, as I don't really fall into what one might consider a person who this book would resonate the most with. As you can tell by my last

name, I'm not Jewish and I didn't grow up anywhere near the 1930s. Yet this book captures the feel of being alive in all its glory and terror (mostly terror) than anything I've read in a while. It's a vibrant work that seethes with the pulse of a city and a child, sometimes the two of them acting in concert and sometimes the two of them opposed. It tells the story of a Jewish family, the Schaerls, who have come over to make lives in New York City. David is a young child, his mother a gentle woman and his father a rather . . . intense man, let's just say. The plot isn't so much a plot as a coming of age tale, as David experiences life and starts to explore the world outside their apartment, the dirty city streets, the collision of people and language, the terror of separation and attempting to find his place in a world that he doesn't fit into very well. If nothing else, this novel manages to simultaneously capture not only the experience of Jewish immigrants but the feel of growing up. David's father Albert seems like a man who is aware that culturally he's a Star of David shaped peg trying to fit into a round hole, and the constant tension that results from that causes him to constantly rage at a world that isn't necessarily fair to begin with and seems doubly unfair to him. His effect on David is tremendous and balanced out by the sheer gentleness of his mother, who adores him. But if the story was just about growing up and being Jewish it wouldn't be that remarkable. What is remarkable is how Roth literally puts us into the perspective of this family and filters the world to us through them. The language churns and leaps and shouts, shifting unexpectedly into a stream of consciousness, as David's thoughts whisk back and forth, rarely focusing and coming at us in cascades of short sentences. Even more interesting, he chooses to render all the dialogue that would be Yiddish in plain English while rendering the English and other languages into a phonetic form, meaning that to us our own language becomes something alien, where we really get a feel for how the Schearls experience the world, where even the words have to be puzzled over for their meaning. It's amazing, not only in how vividly it conveys this world, but how easy it is to read once one gets the hang of it. It makes some sections difficult, especially when all the children are talking but it also comes closer to giving us these people's lives than anything else. Through it all, David tries to learn what it means to be Jewish, tries to learn what his family is about, tries to learn how to live in a world that shifts just out of reach as soon as he starts to adapt to it. His world seems both small and expansive, with the city streets of New York becoming the size of fields, where two avenues over can take you to another planet entirely. It all comes together in a chapter that seems to be a complete mess at first and then suddenly all the various shards fuse into something brilliant, all the voices of the city mingling, thoughts mingling, symbolism mingling, in one virtuoso effect that makes you sad that Roth only seemed to write one proper novel, as nothing else he's ever done really seems to approach the scope and intimacy of this. It leaps into voices and minds and into

gutters and cellars and rooftops. It takes the world that we know and first turns it into something alien and new, and then manages over the course of the book to turn it into something familiar. I'll never know what it's really like to grow up Jewish, the traditions, the pressures, the sense of being an outsider, the twin tensions of wanting to maintain your culture and become part of this new world. I'll never know these things, as a third generation American citizen. But thanks to a book written when my grandparents were children, I have some idea on how to start understanding it.

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