



# CATBIRD

## The Ballad Of Barbi Prim

by [Barbara J. Ostfeld](#)

**Pub Date:** March 27th, 2019

**ISBN:** 978-0-9980326-1-0

**Publisher:** Erva Press

In this debut memoir, a woman describes her quest to become the first female cantor.

Ostfeld was neither conventionally beautiful nor traditionally cool. She was chunky and big-nosed, and her mother cut her hair and made her clothes. Luckily, the author had one place where she felt completely comfortable: her synagogue, where she sang in the temple choir. “When we read together during services, I feel strong and important,” narrates 8-year-old Ostfeld. “The cantor gives me solos. When I sing, I am not fat or nearsighted. I sing like a long sigh, like magic, like the hot glass I saw the man spinning in Colonial Williamsburg.” Called Barbi Prim by her uncle, the author had dreams of being a performer, but when she was cast in plays throughout her teenage years, it was always as the housekeeper rather than the lead. Her home life became increasingly claustrophobic, especially after the family moved from Chicago to Connecticut so her father could take a job at Yale. Ostfeld was instrumental in having her father—who started popping pills and drinking too much—committed to a psychiatric ward for his erratic behavior. After she finished high school, the author enrolled at Hebrew Union College, where she hoped to become the first female cantor in the recorded history of Judaism. Was such a thing even possible, especially in a religion steeped in such ancient traditions? As Ostfeld struggled against professional obstacles in her quest to break the glass ceiling—as well as the hurdles within her own family, both the one that raised her and the one she built across several marriages and children—she was reminded again and again that her place of greatest comfort was within the music and the mystery of her faith.

The memoir is presented as a series of vignettes, most no more than a few paragraphs in length. They will wash over readers, with the author’s awkward moments and epiphanies accumulating like pictures in a photo album: fretting over the lyrics of Christmas carols; writing letters to advice columnist Ann Landers; discovering a hair growing from her chin at Torah camp. Ostfeld writes with vigor and humor, capturing Barbi’s voice at various ages and always in the present tense. Here, she discusses new motherhood after adopting a baby girl from Colombia: “Maternity leave ends, and I am ready. It’s been hard work taking care of Hana. Hard, repetitious, and exhausting. I’ve read too many books about stimulating infants in their early months, so Hana’s tiny head is chock-full of songs, rhymes, numbers, verbose descriptions of nature.” The book reads more like a novel than a memoir, and its shift from early childhood to adulthood is particularly reminiscent of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (one of the works that the bookish young Barbi devours), though Ostfeld continues her narrative deep into middle age. While it’s not always dramatic, the volume offers readers the novelistic sensation of being deeply immersed in another’s consciousness, riding the emotional ups and downs and expanding with the passage of years. By the end, readers will feel they have lived a whole life.

A finely wrought account about embracing big dreams.