

AN INTERVIEW WITH SHEYNA GALYAN

What inspired you to be a writer?

A love of reading, an overactive imagination, and people who encouraged me to follow my dreams. And one elementary school teacher who suggested that if I couldn't find the book I wanted to read, perhaps I should write it myself.

How much of the book is autobiographical?

None of it. I drew a little bit on experience and a lot on observation and interviews when I was initially writing the book. I had to research many of the things I didn't know enough about. Actually, there is one point in the book where David is calling someone on the telephone to apologize and "One Week" by the Barenaked Ladies is – perhaps coincidentally – playing on the hold music. That really happened to me.

You make a point of showing cooperation between Reform and Conservative rabbis. What was the motivation for this?

I wanted a Conservative protagonist who more or less matched my own religious views (though David and I disagree frequently), who could also realistically interact successfully with both Orthodox and Reform Jews. I also wanted to reflect many Jewish communities – including the Twin Cities.

I also – and perhaps this is even more primary – wanted to show both Conservative and Reform as valid expressions. I wanted to illustrate the struggles that Reform and Conservative rabbis have, both with their congregants and with Jewish tradition and law. I want to give readers something they can relate to, something that may support their own choice of how to express their Judaism. There are plenty of novels that say it's okay to be Orthodox and far too few that say it's okay not to be.

Why did you choose to write about the relationship of a Holocaust survivor and his granddaughter?

I'm really undecided about whether or not there are too many published books about the Shoah (Holocaust). That said, I'm also intrigued by how the legacy of the Shoah affects direct descendants. While I didn't want to write a "Holocaust book," I did want to write a book in which the Shoah is acknowledged as a reality with which both survivors and descendants have to live. Avram's experiences aren't the focal point of the story; how his experiences color his relationship with his granddaughter is more the point, and, I think, more relevant to readers in my generation. We have a better idea of what happened sixty years ago. The question I think still needs answering is, how will what happened affect future generations, and what part do we all play in it?

You're not a member of the clergy yourself, yet you write with such insight about the life of a rabbi, the conflict of time spent on the job vs. time with family. Where did you get your information?

I did a lot of research! I interviewed rabbis who have been in the clergy for decades and rabbis who were just out of rabbinical school. I read essays and books and sermons by rabbis who talked about their jobs and why they stayed in the clergy – or why they didn't. Most of all, I had my sense of

observation going overtime. I not only watched how rabbis led services and interacted with congregants, I also caught conspiratorial winks with close friends, eruptions of anger at a misbehaving child, the constant battle between fatigue and obligation that I saw in every pair of eyes.

I did a lot of volunteer work in synagogues and Jewish institutions where I saw rabbis separate from their congregations. I watched one argue with a stubborn photocopier and cast an accusatory glance upward when the machine refused to work. I saw people making constant demands, overbooked schedules and never-ending paperwork. I also saw rabbis making a show of faith and strength and certainty, but when I caught their gazes, there was doubt and fear and sadness there too. I went looking for their humanity, not just their leadership.

There is a good deal of discussion about whether people are born innocent with the opportunity to become evil or whether some are just born evil. Why did you choose to write about that particular topic?

The idea began as a paper I wrote in college, comparing the philosophy of Hobbes to Rousseau. I wanted to write a creative piece, a dialogue, rather than the traditional, boring compare-and-contrast essay that every student writes. The more I thought about each philosophy, the more it seemed to fit rather naturally with the Shoah. Were Nazis made or born? The answer to that question says a lot about our views of destiny, choice and individuality. It opens up the debate over forgiveness, personal and societal responsibility and how we present history. It says a lot about who we think we are. As a writer with a keen interest in human behavior, motivation and the capacity for introspection, that was a topic I couldn't refuse!