

Marilyn Sachs, Upon Accepting the AJL Book Award for Best Jewish Children's Book of 1982

When I was a child, most of the Jews in the books I read were money lenders. It was a little puzzling for me since I grew up in a poor neighborhood in the Bronx and nobody I knew was a money lender. My father, as a matter of fact, was pretty big on borrowing money but I don't believe he ever had enough to lend.

So much for the image of Jewish men in the books I read. As far as Jewish women, they were generally referred to as Jewesses. Which is probably why I still cringe when anybody calls me an authoress. At any rate, these Jewesses seemed to have a weakness for non-Jewish men. Generally, they lost out to the Christian girl — e.g., Rebecca vs. Rowena in *Ivanhoe*. But once in a while, if they were smart enough to convert and unscrupulous enough to steal their fathers' money, like Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*, they might end up with the guy.

I was a big reader as a child, and I listened to my teachers and read the classics. Of course, as we all know, the classics are probably more anti-semitic than lesser examples of literature. In any case, I became hooked on books at a very early age and decided, almost as soon as I could read, that I would be a writer.

I didn't like being a Jew. From my reading, it was clear that Jews weren't as good as other people. They certainly weren't as good Americans and lots of them talked funny. This was especially true of my grandmother who came over to this country at the turn of the century and never quite mastered American slang. She used to refer to my sister and myself as "The boiled rats." I didn't like her much, as a child—she was everything the Jewish grandmother is supposed to be and then some — tyrannical, opinionated and very long-lived — but I came to love her more and more as I grew up. She was a born storyteller and she had hair-raising, passionate stories about her life in "the old country" as well as her life in America. She believed in a personal world whether she was haranguing a sales clerk in Macy's or instructing God on how to manage the Universe. She lived to be ninety-five and she always cared.

It took me ten years to get my first book published and I can't honestly say it was due to anti-semitism. Because in actuality, in the fifties when I wrote my book, Jews didn't exist at all in children's literature. A few shadowy ones did, but if you were writing about minorities — that's what ethnics were called then — they had to be exotic. Indians had to wear feathers, Chinese, pigtailed and Jews had to be celebrating the Jewish holidays all the time. Otherwise, as one editor wrote to me, why would you introduce them at all? The family in my first book, *Amy Moves In*, happened to be Jewish. Their name was Stern and, once in the course of the story, they ate matzoh-brei but that was the extent of their Jewishness.

Thank goodness the publishing world of the eighties is a very different place from that of the fifties. Ethnics are definitely in and Jews no longer have to be celebrating Jewish holidays in order to be acceptable in books for children.

But I'm getting away from my grandmother. For years I tried to put her into a book but she was too powerful for me to handle. Some years back I wrote a book called *Grandma's Bungalow* in which there were two main characters — Joan of Arc and my grandmother. As I might have anticipated, my grandmother proved too much for Joan of Arc and I had to take her out and rewrite the book.

Call Me Ruth did not start out as a book about my grandmother or the immigrant experience. I wanted to do a story about a Jewish working class family, using my own and my husband's families for background. I don't know how it happened but I kept moving further and further back in time. I read about the history of trade unions in this country and took great pride in the contributions of Jewish men and women. I was particularly struck by the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909 in New York City in which 20,000 young women, mostly Jewish, conducted a successful general strike. My grandmother was not involved but she could have been. Fanny, the mother in the story, loving, caring, believing, and never speaking good English, is based on my grandmother.

Of all my books, *Call Me Ruth*, is the most personal one for me. Not only were my own roots in it but I also felt as if I had paid off a long-standing debt to all those "money-lending Jews" and "predatory Jewesses" who thronged the books of my own childhood. I am very grateful to you for honoring me and my book with one of the Association of Jewish Libraries' awards.

Books by Marilyn Sachs published by Doubleday

Call Me Ruth
Amy and Laura
Amy Moves In
Veronica Ganz
Marv
Peter and Veronica

The Bears' House
A Pocket Full of Seeds
Dorrie's Book
A December Tale
A Secret Friend

Marilyn Sachs has been writing and reading for as long as she can remember. She was born in New York City, graduated from Hunter College, and received a Master's Degree in Library Science from Columbia University. For more than ten years she was a children's librarian with the Brooklyn Public Library, and later with the San Francisco Public Library. Mrs. Sachs has two grown children and lives in San Francisco with her husband, Morris.



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