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Announcements

Books & Movies: On The Case

»» posted Wednesday, September 01 @ 17:30:40 EDT

Author creates teen Jewish detectives in "a new Nancy Drew" for young adult readers.



SUZANNE CHESSLER Special to the Jewish News

Samantha and Sophia Shattenberg share a kinship of sorts with fictional icon Nancy Drew. The sisters follow her lead, as they become upbeat teen crime-fighting characters in Missing Persons, a new series of four books written by Margo Rabb.

There's no ethnic kinship with Nancy, however, because the Shattenbergs reference their Jewish heritage in the young adult series. Published by Penguin/Speak, each of the four books costs \$5.99. The second volume, *The Chocolate Lover*, aims at reuniting a Holocaust survivor with a valuable painting stolen by the Nazis.

Sam and Sophie, throughout the series, bring an underlying plot into play: A detective is pursuing the whereabouts of the girls because they ran away from home. The sisters, in disguise and with false identities, are escaping a stepmother ready to take full reign over them and their inheritance after the death of their much-loved father.

The Shattenbergs make a niche for themselves in a small Indiana town very different from their native New York City. They set up a household and find work with a private detective, who escorts them into the adventurous worlds of other missing persons. Some romance enhances reader interest.

"Orphans are common characters in young adult literature, but I wanted to write about that so people could understand what the experience really feels like," says Rabb, 32, whose parents died when she was only slightly older than her two heroines.

"Sisters overcoming their parents' death is a running theme in my work. There's a combination of tragedy and humor because that was what it was like for my sister and me during the period after we had just lost our parents. We had to keep our spirits up during the worst time in our lives."

Rabb's sibling heroines bear some similarity to the author and her sister, Jackie, now an archaeologist in Salt Lake City.

"I made the characters Jewish because I'm Jewish," Rabb says. "When I went to Indiana as a college student, it was the first time I really appreciated my religion. I'd always taken it for granted because it was so common in New York. I knew Jews were a minority, but I never felt it."

"When I was at college, I felt I was in a Christian environment, and that was strange even though I had a wonderful time there. I sought out the Jewish Community Center on campus. I tried to get matzah meal once, but the person working at the local grocery said he never heard of it. He told me to check the ethnic section, between the salsa and the soy sauce. I think I had a sheltered childhood."

Rabb, who attended a science high school, grew up reading *Little House* on the Prairie books and wanted to try living in the Midwest. After visiting a friend at Earlham College in Richmond, Ind., she was on her way. Later, she would return through her books, setting them in the Midwest.

"I was a women's studies and English major and wasn't certain what I wanted to do," Rabb recalls. "I started writing, mostly poetry, and my first job out of college was at the nonprofit Poets and Writers magazine."

"I moved on to fiction, mostly short stories, and I took more classes after work. I got a master of fine arts degree at the University of Arizona in Tucson and worked on literary fiction. I started that before I got the contract for the young adult novels."

While still in graduate school and teaching, Rabb sold short stories to *Seventeen*, *Mademoiselle* and *Atlantic Monthly*. Her editor at *Seventeen* helped her with the young adult books, which she aimed at readers reaching age 12 and older.

"I got a contract for the kids' books after I did a reading of a short story at a Barnes & Noble store," she says. "The editor, who was in the audience, came up to me and suggested that I consider writing novels. I always loved mystery books and decided to write them. At the time, I met a woman who was working for a private detective, and she told me about her job."

Other books in the series are *The Rose Queen*, *The Venetian Policeman* and *The Unsuspecting Gourmet*. The author is undecided about whether to create additional volumes or stay with adult fiction, her current focus that offers deeper subject complexities.

Rabb, who spent a year traveling to writers' colonies after earning her master's degree, met her husband while on the road. Marshall Reid, a University of Michigan graduate and equity researcher at



Margo Rabb: "My friends have been calling [the series] 'Nancy Jew,'" says the author.

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a bank, is not Jewish but agreed to be married in a Jewish ceremony this summer.

"I've taught journal writing at Gilda's Club in New York," Rabb says about her volunteerism for one of the support centers established in memory of the late comedian and former Detroitier Gilda Radner. "My mom died of cancer very quickly after she was diagnosed 15 years ago. When I teach cancer survivors, it's nice to meet people who are doing well."

"I'd like Sophie and Sam to be good role models for young girls in terms of their close relationship and appreciation of family values. My dad used to say that family is the most important thing, and I think to the Shattenberg sisters, that is the most important thing."



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