

# Writing what you know: Often a great notion

ROBIN FRIEDMAN

For the longest time, I avoided writing about my family. My husband, who knew all about my interesting childhood, couldn't fathom why I'd waste "such a gold mine."

"Nobody will believe it," I'd tell him, then quote, "Life can be as strange as it wants, but fiction has to be believable."

He'd shrug, muttering about how "you can't make this stuff up."

I had written three novels for young readers, none about my life in particular, though my first came the closest. That one, *How I Survived My Summer Vacation*, is about a boy who wants to be an author.

The next two, *The Girlfriend Project* and *Nothing*, are, respectively, about a boy who wants a girlfriend and a boy who develops bulimia. (My family, startled by the subject matter of the latter, asked for several assurances that I was not, in fact, writing from experience. I was not.)

But I'd never written a novel about a girl. Or, more specifically, a girl who was born in Israel, lives in immigrant poverty, and tries desperately to understand the American dream.

And I never thought I would, until I met the late Paul Zindel, renowned author of *The Pigman*, at a writing luncheon. Offhandedly he commented that all of his books are autobiographical.

"Doesn't your family get angry with you for writing about them?" someone asked.

"Yes," he replied casually. "But then they ask me who's playing them in the movie."

It got me thinking. More than thinking,

it got me writing.

I started with the basics: A 13-year-old girl, born in Israel, growing up on Staten Island in the 1980s.

I added: She hates gym, watches too much TV, and, most distressingly, can't get her hair to do what everybody else's hair does, that is, feathering into a set of perfect wings.

I kept going, embracing all the cringe-worthy memories of adolescence that are probably best left forgotten, much less broadcast. I'm talking about the most private, most embarrassing, most personal kinds of thoughts a 13-year-old girl could possibly confide to a nonjudgmental diary with a lock firmly around its middle.

Yes, that means observations on boys, body image, desire, and self-esteem, all tinged with a palpable current of longing that could exist only within the peculiar eccentricities of being an outsider, a foreigner in a strange land, with the attendant constant feelings of being excluded, differ-



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ent, and even unwelcome.

Then I added the fiction. Or, more to the point, I added what I would have liked to see in real life if I

had been in charge of the story. A seductive concept, to be sure. Maybe even literary therapy.

I had a finished draft all ready to go in 2004. Little did I know it would be five rewrites and five years before my draft became a published novel.

The responses from editors were surprising, to say the least.

"Not believable."

"This can't really have happened."

"The characters don't seem real."

More and more, I rewrote my autobiog-

raphy, moving my story further and further away from reality. Finally, it sold. *The Importance of Wings* will be published in July.

It's still about a 13-year-old girl growing up on Staten Island in the 1980s, born in Israel, who watches too much TV and hates gym and her non-feathered, non-wings hair. But mostly it's fiction, fiction I would have picked for my childhood story. After all, authors don't just "write what they know"; sometimes they write what they wish they knew.

As publication day drew nearer, I still had two hurdles left to clear: my sister and my mother. I stalled as long as I could, and, knowing I was writing from experience, they were getting downright concerned. (My father was in the book too, but he'd always been easygoing about my writing, and not much of a reader, besides.)

I mailed my mother and sister advanced reading copies a few months ahead of publication and hoped for the best.

The verdict came back: Four thumbs up. Along with indignant "how-come-you-never-told-me?" comments.

"I thought you really liked gym."

"Did you really hate your hair?"

"I didn't know you liked Wonder Woman."

"Were you that worried about fitting in?"

"Well," I replied, trying to shrug off the questions and trying to channel Paul Zindel, "you'll just have to wait for the movie." ■

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# Dark humor documentary explores anti-Semitism

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The Binghamton Reporter

At the beginning of his documentary, *K\*ke Like Me*, Jamie Kastner asks, "Why do I still feel somehow threatened when people ask me if I'm Jewish?" Throughout the movie, he is reticent to reveal his true religious identity, both to the individuals he interviews and the viewer. He says "yes" when the situation requires, such as when receiving an impromptu bar mitzva in Brooklyn or visiting an immigration center in Israel. Yet being asked if he's a Jew allows Kastner to pursue the often surprising answers to the more relevant question: "What's it to you?"

The Canadian-born Kastner admits to not having a strong Jewish identity, but what does this matter if, to an anti-Semite, he looks Jewish? Although his film aims at serious inquiry into the perception of Jews around the world, he approaches the subject humorously, often through sarcastic asides delivered onscreen — directly to the camera — instead of through voice-over, making his examination of a heavy topic an enjoyable experience. While not a detriment to the subject matter, occasionally Kastner's inexperience shows: He sometimes loses his composure or patience at times when he finds something deeply significant that

could have been explored further and to greater impact.

The making of this documentary takes Kastner to numerous venues, including New York, Jerusalem, London, Paris, and Berlin. In Brooklyn, he is welcomed warmly by members of Chabad, and he meets non-Jews in Germany who love Jewish culture — especially klezmer music — but subsequent travels reveal completely different attitudes. Particularly disturbing is his visit to Paris.

"Are people really getting killed just for being seen as Jews? Haven't Jews been peacefully integrated here since the war? Am I now going to get kidnapped on my way for a crois-sant?" he asks. He is given a tour of a synagogue embedded in a building indistinguishable from any other on the street, secured by an electronically locked door, purposely hidden after an arson attack. Worse, Kastner is told to visit the sub-

urb of Sarcelles, where the locals are purportedly tolerant and peaceful, only to find prevalent anti-Semitism. After establishing a rapport and engaging in a respectful debate with a group of youths, he asks them,

"What would you think if I told you I was Jewish?"

Quickly one replies, "If you're Jewish, we don't like you." Kastner tries to explain he means himself personally — the person they've just spoken with amiably for several minutes — and not Jews in general. "If you ever get the chance, you'll screw me over.... That is what a Jew is like," the kid asserts.

Kastner interviews not only strangers on the street, but famous personalities, including Pat Buchanan, English journalist Richard Ingrams, and Israeli writer Abraham Yehoshua. He meets the infamous German journalist Lea Rosh, who helped to found the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, and has done everything to take on a Jewish identity (i.e.,

change her name, dress appropriately, etc.) except actually convert.

He visits not just random points of interest, like the Shmaltz Brewery, home of He'Brew, "the Chosen Beer," but also locales indispensable to any study related to Judaism, such as the Western Wall and Auschwitz. Entering the latter he loses his humorous disaffection, delivering dark quips, forgetting his relaxed, deadpan inflection. He loses his drive to poke fun at every turn and, for a person whose Jewish identity is ambiguous at best, his uncharacteristic reaction to the camp reveals what could be construed as either a lack of emotional maturity or a stronger connection to his Jewish heritage than even Kastner realizes.

Which is it? Throughout the picture he reiterates, "Why do you want to know?" Well, probably because it might explain why he made this film in the first place, as well as the choices he made in presenting its perturbing message. Sometimes the subject of a documentary speaks for itself and sometimes it needs a narrator like Kastner to provide a voice. Perhaps he wisely recognizes that if, at the end of *K\*ke Like Me*, the viewer is still hung up on whether or not he is really Jewish, then maybe the documentary has a voice that it does not need. ■

***K\*ke Like Me* was recently released on DVD by Kino International.**

