

On becoming a Jewish novelist

At Rutgers, award-winning author Dara Horn discusses history, inspiration, obstacles



Award-winning author Dara Horn autographs a copy of one of her books Dec. 8 after her lecture at Rutgers University in celebration of National Jewish Book Month.

Photo by Debra Rubin
NJN Bureau Chief/Middlesex

December 16, 2008

Jewish authors do not necessarily have to pen their works in Yiddish nor include “a goat and shtetl” to write a Jewish novel.

However, they do have to include long-held Jewish nuances and concepts, according to Dara Horn, whose two novels have won the National Jewish Book Award.

She presented Field Notes on Becoming a Jewish Novelist, the Abram Matlofsky Memorial lecture, at the Rutgers University Student Center in New Brunswick on Dec. 8. Her talk included her thoughts on the inspiration, problems, and history of the Jewish writer.

Horn’s writing career took hold at an early age, when her parents eschewed “normal vacations like Disney World” for more exotic locales like China and Cambodia. Horn, her two sisters, and her brother were required to keep journals of their journeys.

“I’m grateful to my parents,” said the 31-year-old native of Short Hills, “because those saved journals provide a glimpse back that no simple photograph could provide.”

“No one would go to a place like Cambodia without a camera,” said Horn. “But pictures only show what you saw. I can go back and read about it. People who have read my books often ask me how I know what a 12-year-old feels. I can go back and read how she feels.”

Both of Horn’s sisters are published novelists and her brother, who also liked to draw in his journal, is an animator.

Still, Horn — who has sat on panels with many so-called Jewish authors — finds even they can’t quite define “Jewish writer.”

“When you ask them, everyone says, ‘No, no I don’t consider myself a Jewish writer,’” she said.

But Horn, who has a doctorate in Hebrew and Yiddish comparative literature from Harvard University and is fluent in both languages, said the question is complicated by assimilation, modern influences, and the primacy of English for many readers.

“No one ever asked Sholom Aleichem, ‘Do you consider yourself a Jewish writer?’ she said of perhaps the most famous of the great Yiddish storytellers.

“The problem is most American Jews, and probably most Americans, can name four concentration camps, but the question is: How many of them can name four Yiddish writers? Why is it we care so much about how people died if we don’t care how these people lived?”

Moreover, the great Yiddish writers not only wrote in a language understood by many Jews, but used subjects and linguistic nuances to which they could relate. Horn’s favorite example is Sholom Aleichem’s reference in one of his stories to what would be called today an “insurance fire.” However, he described the arson as “lighting Shabbos candles in the middle of the week,” without going into unnecessary explanation.

Horn has sought to overcome the “predicament” faced by contemporary American-Jewish writers by incorporating Jewish themes and texts in her novels.

The two novels — *In the Image* (2003) and *The World To Come* (2006) — won the National Jewish Book Award. The latter book — the focus of her Rutgers talk — also received a number of secular accolades.

Horn has a third novel coming out in March, *All Other Nights*, about Jewish involvement on both sides during the American Civil War. The novel takes its name from an assignment given to a Jewish Union soldier sent to New Orleans to murder his uncle, a spy for the Confederacy, by poisoning his fourth cup of wine during a Passover seder.

“We have this idea that Jewish American history started about the 1890s, somewhere in the garment district,” said Horn.

The program was held in celebration of National Jewish Book Month and cosponsored by Rutgers' department of comparative literature and the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life and was supported by the Karma Foundation.

Unseen books

DARA HORN got the idea for her second novel, *The World To Come*, from a 2001 *New York Times* article about a singles event at The Jewish Museum during which “somebody walked out with a \$1 million painting by Marc Chagall instead of a phone number.”

Through her research, Horn learned that Chagall and many of the great Jewish artists and Yiddish writers were living together in “avant garde” communities in Russia while teaching at orphanages established to care for children whose parents were killed in pogroms.

In the 1920s, Chagall befriended “Der Nister” (the Hidden One), the great Yiddish novelist (on whose work Horn based her doctoral dissertation). They produced a series of children’s books, Der Nister writing and Chagall illustrating.

Chagall left Russia for France, became a world-renowned artist and lived to 97. Der Nister, along with so many other great artists and writers, disappeared into Stalin’s prison camps, their work largely unknown to succeeding generations.

Today, Horn said, those children’s books sit packed in boxes in the basement of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, unpublished and unseen by the public.

<http://www.njewishnews.com/njfn.com/121108/ltOnBecomingJewishNovelist.html>