

THE JEWISH JOURNAL

September 9, 2005

L.A. Authors Break the Heroine Mold Four novelists display their talents as storytellers.

By Sandee Brawarsky

California purists who like to shop local, travel local and eat local will have no problem reading local. Among the season's offerings of new books are several impressive works by Los Angeles-based writers.

Although the many writers at work in this city choose different genres, four novelists — Maggie Anton, Merrill Joan Gerber, Lynn Isenberg and Rochelle Krich, all fine storytellers — will be particularly visible this fall, reading from and talking about their new books at venues around town (for listings, see facing page). Two of the novels are contemporary tales set in and around Los Angeles, another is a story that takes place in Florida in the 1950s and the fourth is a historical novel set in medieval France. Anton's is a debut novel and the others are by veteran writers.

The novels are so different in tone, style and theme that it's difficult to identify any common L.A. sensibility, but these women are writing within miles of one another, probably looking out over some of the same landscape.

As "Six Feet Under" ends its run, Isenberg's "The Funeral Planner" (Red Dress Ink, \$12.95) breaks new ground as a novel involving bereavement. It's the story of building a business, with doses of romance, challenges of friendship and family, with old rivalries and new partnerships. The book is full of humor and has been the spark of a new business.

Since writing the novel, Isenberg, a media developer, took her idea of planning one's own very personal funeral in advance — at the heart of the novel — and turned it into an actual business, Lights Out Enterprises. This is a case of fiction inspiring reality. She wrote the book soon after her own brother and father died a year apart to the day, causing her to have lots of grief to deal with — along with much experience with funerals.

The novel's main character, Madison Banks is an L.A.-based overachiever, a risk taker determined to build a successful business before she dies. She comes up with the idea for a personalized funeral ceremony after sitting through a dreadful canned eulogy for a dear friend, given by a minister who never met the 31-year-old woman. Her business plan is to work with individuals and their families ahead of time to create funerals that are celebrations of life rather than a mourning of death: She doesn't seek to eliminate the grieving process but, rather, hopes to influence the way people deal with grief.

Banks always wears a watch that has the internal mechanisms showing through the Lucite face: She likes to know how all things work. Not a practicing religious Jew, she does have an affinity for ritual, Jewish and self-invented ones — they give her a sense of stability. She

realizes that most of the people working in the funeral business are the sons and daughters of others who've worked in this business; they think largely in traditional terms, while she is able to think, so to speak, out of the box. Her business is geared to baby boomers who "want to validate their lives by giving meaning to their deaths." Although the business initially fails, she remains determined and is open to new interesting developments in her life. The novel, from a publisher specializing in chick lit, makes for entertaining reading, and might inspire some readers to look up *Lights Out*.

The author, a self-described avant-garde content creator, producer and narrative marketing strategist, is the author of two previous novels, including "My Life Uncovered." Her television credits include "Youngblood" and "I Love You to Death," and she is the founder of the Hollywood Literary Retreat.

No question, the young women in the vintage photograph — seen peeking out the windows through Venetian blinds — on the jacket of "Glimmering Girls: A Novel of the Fifties" by Gerber (Terrace Books, \$24.95) are looking at guys. And they're trying not to be seen, while hoping to be seen.

This is a novel of college life, set at a time when college girls wear leather-heeled loafers and rarely go out without girdles. These coeds set their hair in large foam rollers, live in a strict-curfew dormitory where "four feet on the floor" is the rule when men visit and follow the dictum: Marry before graduation or be lost forever. "Glimmering Girls" is a period piece and also a coming-of-age story, particularly for Francie, a transplanted New Yorker who is one of the few Jews at the University of Florida.

Francie is also unusual in that she's not at all desperate — like many of her classmates — to become engaged before graduation. While her roommate reads *Bride's* magazine, she writes a paper on D.H. Lawrence's "Sons and Lovers." During her senior year, she accepts an invitation to move out of the strict-curfew dormitory with two more worldly girlfriends into a house off-campus, sharing it with the boyfriend of one and a pair of male twins.

She doesn't want to be a teacher or nurse — the chosen professions of those young women not marrying immediately — but wants to be a writer, although she doesn't know what that means. As she nears graduation, she muses, "All her life she has been in a long tunnel, and finally she is about to burst into clear air and open skies."

Gerber writes of these women's adventures, their longings and their self-discovery with sensitivity, quiet humor and an authority that a reader guesses is born of knowing that era intimately. The author of many novels, short-story collections and nonfiction works, she teaches fiction writing at the California Institute of Technology.

Krich brings back her appealing Orthodox sleuth, Molly Blume, in her newest suspense novel, "Now You See Me..." (Ballantine, \$13.95), to be published in October.

Recently married to a rabbi and author of a new true-crime book, Blume gets drawn into a case involving the daughter of a well-known rabbi who had been her teacher. The high school girl disappears, it seems, with someone she met in an Internet chatroom. The family refuses to turn

to the police, in fear of the reputation of their daughter — and ultimately the entire family — in their close-knit Orthodox community in Los Angeles.

Blume visits the chatroom, struggles to get the girl's classmates to speak openly with her, calls in favors from friends in the police department without revealing details of the missing girl and unravels some interlocking mysteries in trying to solve the case, which ultimately involved a murder. Krich's distinctive style is to mix in details about Judaism, about the Orthodox lifestyle in particular, with the clues.

The chatroom where Hadassah meets the person who lures her to meet him is called Jspot — it's a place where religious kids talk anonymously about sex, drugs and other subjects that are otherwise difficult to discuss in their lives. Her parents are shocked to learn that their daughter would frequent this site, and they also learn other facts of her life that are surprising. The intricacies of the plot can't be described without giving away details key to the pleasures of discovery for readers.

The book's epitaph is from the book of Genesis, when Dinah, the daughter of Leah, is taken by Shechem, prince of the land. "He loved the maiden and spoke her heart."

Maggie Anton's first novel (and the first in a projected trilogy) is inspired by her own adult study of the Talmud. Every talmudic student quickly learns of the work of the great medieval French scholar Rashi, whose commentary appears in every printed Talmud. Another column on the page includes the work of the tosaphists, the grandsons and disciples of Rashi. Anton's book "Rashi's Daughters — Book One: Joheved" (Banot Press, \$15.95) tells the forgotten story of the generation of women sandwiched in between. She imagines what the personal and intellectual lives of the three daughters, Joheved, Miriam and Rachel, might have been like. Little has been written of them, although they played a crucial role in Jewish scholarship.

Rashi is an acronym for Rabbi Solomon Yitzhak ben Isaac, who was born in Troyes, France, in 1040. The novel is published on the 900th anniversary of his death.

At a time when most women were illiterate, Rashi learned Talmud with his daughters. From the time of the birth of their new sister, the two elder daughters, Joheved and Miriam, began a bedtime secret ritual of studying Talmud, which readers can follow. When it is time for the family to begin thinking about a betrothal for Joheved, even though she is quite young, she makes it clear that she desires to marry a scholar. Indeed, she marries a young man who is a former student of her father. The book includes an absorbing, detailed account of the process of betrothal and marriage.

The novel is also the story of the French Jewish community in medieval times, and the daily lives of Jewish women, many of whom were vintners, merchants, midwives and mothers.

In researching the book, the author who works as a clinical chemist, visited Troyes, Rashi's birthplace where he founded a school, consulted with scholars in medieval and Jewish studies and read books in English, French and Hebrew.

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