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Q & A with Zehava Cohn

By Patricia J. Murphy | Nov 13, 2023

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As a children's book editor, bookseller, and librarian, Zehava Cohn has read her share of stories for young people. But, she says, it was the stories she heard from teachers and parents about "countless examples of little

boys kissing girls" that led her to write her debut picture book, *Connor Kissed Me*, illustrated by Sarah K. Turner (Lee & Low, 2023), addressing issues of consent and bodily autonomy. Her book is about a girl named Miriam, and how she processes and handles an unwanted kiss from a classmate. PW spoke with Zehava about her transition from editor and bookseller to head librarian and author, and why she's passionate about protecting personal space and standing up for oneself.

How did you transition from editing and selling books to working as a librarian?

I worked as a children's book editor with Arthur Levine for a number of years. I left publishing when I had my children, and stayed home with them when they were young. When I re-entered the workforce, we had moved to Quebec, where there isn't a lot of English-language publishing. So, I started working at a library, and realized that this was actually what

I wanted to do! I also spent time as a bookseller in Quebec at a bookstore called Livres Babar. At that time, I decided to go back to school at McGill University and get my MIS—and I've been working in the library ever since. I came to library work because I had the book knowledge. I earned my degree because I needed the librarian knowledge. And I love mixing those two worlds together!

What would you say is the greatest joy of being in the library world—and the biggest challenge?

It's very different every day because of the school that I work in. The kids start at age two and go through 11th grade. So, one moment, I could be reading stories and singing songs with my two-year-old students, and the next, I'm helping seniors with their research paper citations. Whether I'm helping students with their reading, writing, or understanding of the world, I can see it in their eyes that they're learning new things and starting to think differently. I love having this kind of impact in my students' lives—and in their world.

Because of what we now know about dyslexia and other reading issues my students may experience, my biggest challenge is to fully understand their reading complexities, to meet them where they are so I can fully engage them, and to help them succeed.

When did you begin writing your own stories and books for children?

I started writing after I left publishing. While I was editing, I had been working on other people's work, and I had other people's words and characters in my head. It was easier to start writing when these were just mine! While working with Patricia Lee Gauch [at Philomel] during a college internship, and, later, when I was working with Arthur Levine at Random House [and then Scholastic], my brain got turned on to kids' books, and I first started thinking about writing them.

Can you talk about writing *Connor Kissed Me*, and how it came to be?



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Zehava at Hebrew Academy School in Montreal, where she serves as head librarian.

The idea for *Connor Kissed Me* actually came from hearing about similar things that my book's main character Miriam went through when she was kissed by her classmate Connor—the confusion over what she experienced, and what to do about it. As a writer, I felt that I needed to address this confusion in that moment—the “wait, what just happened? How do I feel about this? What's going on?” So, it came from these types of circumstances that happen in schools, whether it's students being kissed or touched by other classmates.

Since the book has come out, I have heard from a number of parents, teachers, and people who work in schools that this is happening all of the time. I have also seen times when kids have touched other children in ways that they clearly did not like. This actually just happened the other day. I was reading a story to a class, and a little boy was touching and bothering a little girl. She kept moving to get away from him. So in that circumstance, I asked him to move away from her, and reminded him that we must keep our hands to ourselves. The girl didn't say anything, but her physical response was clearly, “I do not want to be in the situation” and “I do not like being touched.”

Your title clearly shows the kiss from Miriam's viewpoint, but you also show compassion for Connor. Can you share a little about why you did this?

I deliberately wanted to make Connor innocent in this case. I wanted to portray the innocence of this exchange when it happens at a young age. Some girls and boys grow up in families where kisses are given frequently and with casualness—

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and some do not. But, even when given in innocence, kissing is an invasion of personal space and kids have to be taught that it is an exchange that requires permission. So, the goal of Miriam and Connor's story is to show by example that this is not okay.

Why is telling this story to kids and to the world especially important to you today?

It's important for me because I'm a woman and a feminist. Whenever I see a woman in a [difficult] position—whether she's unable to share her own feelings, exercise her own rights, or fight for herself—I'll want to fix it. With any injustice that comes to a woman at any age, there's a part of my brain that says we can't have that, and I have to do something about it.

Whether or not this was explicitly taught to me, I learned early on that your privacy and your person are yours, not anyone else's, and that you get to protect it. I think that we do a disservice when we only teach these lessons to girls and not to boys. We have to educate boys the same way as we educate girls.

In light of *Connor Kissed Me*, what was your reaction to the recent kiss seen around the world?

It's both interesting and sad that my book seems to be quite timely. And yet, I wrote this book before #MeToo. While I don't know what the motivation of the Spanish soccer official [who kissed a female soccer player after winning the World Cup] was, I found it interesting to read the things that he said that were similar to Connor's words. He said things like, "I didn't mean it" and "It was innocent." And I couldn't help but think, "Oh my, how old are you... and why haven't you learned that this is not okay?" I also thought, wouldn't it be great if kids could read *Connor Kissed Me*, and learn this lesson earlier and this wouldn't happen any more in the future?

What are your hopes for the book?

My hopes are that kids get this message that they can be like Miriam and speak up, and that there will be parents and/or caregivers to give them support. I also want kids like Connor to be self-reflective and say, "Oh, that's me!" I want readers to ask themselves, "How do I treat people?" And I want parents and caregivers to understand that kids might not get it right the first time. They need time to learn and correct—and to mature and grow. We all need to do this. Lastly, I hope that parents, teachers, and librarians won't be put off by the "kissing" word in the title. Even if there are a few giggles at first when you read it aloud, it will be worth it.

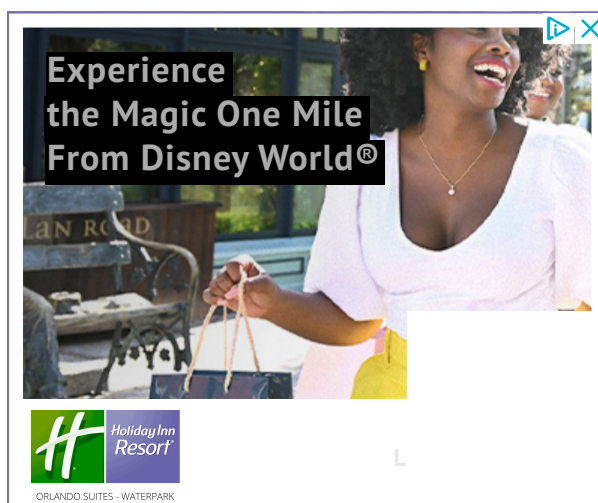
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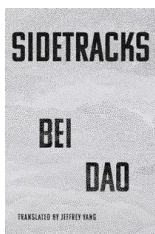
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