On Stardom in China, Award-Winning Fiction and Judaism

Interview with Rachel DeWoskin
During the mid-1990s, Rachel DeWoskin first dazzled audiences as the unlikely star of the Chinese soap opera Foreign Babes in Beijing -- an experience she captured in her 2005 memoir of the same title, exploring life and love (both onscreen and off) in a changing China. Foreign Babes in Beijing has been published in six different countries and is currently being developed as a television series for HBO.

More recently, Rachel DeWoskin has dazzled readers with her award-winning fiction set in Asia and beyond, exploring themes such as sameness and difference, empathy, women’s relationships and the Jewish experience. Her 2009 debut novel Repeat After Me won a Forward Magazine Book of the Year Award. Big Girl Small, her 2011 novel, received the 2012 American Library Association’s Alex Award and was named one of the top three books of 2011 by Newsday. Rachel DeWoskin was also the 2011 recipient of a three-month M Literary Residency in Shanghai, where she completed the screenplay for American Concubine and was inspired to develop a forthcoming novel to be set in Shanghai.

While Rachel DeWoskin currently resides in Chicago, where she is a faculty member in the Creative Writing Department at the University of Chicago, she returns to China every year and considers Beijing a second home. DeWoskin to learn more about her ongoing relationship with China, her forthcoming novels and screenplay, and her interest in exploring Judaism -- including in Asia -- through her writing.

Asian Jewish Life (AJL): Your memoir Foreign Babes in Beijing introduced you to American audiences as Jiexi, the young American who moves to Beijing in the mid-1990s. When you were writing that memoir, what did it feel like to relive your days as a Chinese television star?

Rachel DeWoskin (RD): Hilarious! The only excruciating thing about writing Foreign Babes in Beijing was revisiting the death of one of my close friends in Beijing in a drunk driving accident. I was of course sick with guilt and misery when he died, and remembering how young and oblivious we were was more painful than I’d anticipated it would be.

In a way, “youth” provides an excuse for our most egregious mistakes, but being an adult also gives me a lens through which to calibrate the horrific tragedy and loss of his life. It’s difficult and fraught to re-evaluate the ways you’ve behaved in both your own life and in someone else’s culture. But it’s also important, and I felt like if I was going to tell my friends’ stories in Foreign Babes in Beijing, it was important to ask difficult questions about my own story as well.

The tale of Foreign Babes in Beijing itself I had more or less come to terms with. And frankly the ludicrousness of both the show and the experience made that part easier to write. I had to re-watch the show in order to write the book, since I had only watched it when it was on Beijing TV. In those days, I thought it was possible that I would never recover from the embarrassment. But watching it again almost ten years later, I enjoyed it wildly and found it incredibly funny. Thank you, distance.

AJL: Do people in China still recognize you from the TV series Foreign Babes in Beijing?

RD: Sometimes. But only old people in Beijing and when they do, they’re very funny about it. I’ll have an interaction at the Ghost Market, and at the end of it someone will say, “Thanks Jiexi.” No one is in a frenzy about it, and most young people have never heard of it.

AJL: Could you talk about what you’ve been working on recently?

Asian Jewish Life sat down with Rachel DeWoskin to learn more about her ongoing relationship with China, her forthcoming novels and screenplay, and her interest in exploring Judaism -- including in Asia -- through her writing.

Asian Jewish Life (AJL)
RD: While I was [in residency in Shanghai 2011], I was staying in the Embankment Building, an iconic, fabulous mix of urban and old-school Shanghai, next to Suzhou Creek, across from Pudong and lined with tiny automotive shops.

My neighbors were a terrific mix of Shanghai-ers, from retired government officials in their late 80s, to yuppies, business owners, teachers, and children.

I was inspired to write a novel set there, called Beautiful Girls Club Shanghai, about three generations of Chinese women who live in the building, as well as an American woman married to a Chinese reporter. It’s about family, identity, corruption and love. And like all my books, it’s about people trying to figure out who they are across big distances – linguistic, cultural, and in some cases generational and geographical as well.

I also have a new novel forthcoming this year from Viking Penguin, called Blind. It’s about a young woman who loses her eyesight and has to reconfigure how to make meaning in the world, how she’ll see, really.

Blind is not China related, but, It’s about family, identity, corruption and love. And like all my books, it’s about people trying to figure out who they are across big distances – linguistic, cultural, and in some cases generational and geographical as well.

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make some unambiguous moral end to it, you become an ideologue and your work isn’t art, it’s propaganda. So the writer’s project is more about unpacking or complicating, asking questions from all sorts of different angles. And for me those questions tend to be more about culture, Judaism (as I get older and older), gender, language, and difference — as in how are you the same as everybody else and how are you different.

When I was a kid, being Jewish set me apart from everyone in my, very Christian, very Republican primary school. We lived in a neighborhood in which my parents were freaks. My dad is a Sinologist who fixes cars in the driveway and built our television set from a heath kit. He’s an Ozarkian Jew from Missouri and a classical Chinese scholar and my mom is a dancer and an English teacher and an absolute firecracker of a person. We never boasted any kind of shiny normalcy, even though like most kids I wanted more than anything to be “normal”. There were no other Jews for a million miles around. And at my primary school, my parents famously — and this is in Blind, I put this straight in my new novel — my parents complained that we were singing “Christ in a manger is born” at the holiday sing-along, and they complained about the Christmas tree. They felt church and state should be divided and it was inappropriate and they suggested that it alienated some of the kids (meaning me). The school, in its well-meaning way, added “Dreidel, Dreidel” to the holiday roster, entirely missing (or ignoring) my parents’ point. So when the holiday sing-along came along, everyone was singing. And then they started “Dreidel, Dreidel” and I burst into song before realizing no one else knew it or was singing. I sang the whole thing alone.

AJL: Do you actively seek to explore Jewish identity in your books?

RD: Most of my characters turn out to be Jewish in the same way that I am. Emma Sasha Silver, the protagonist of Blind — who my sweet daughters think of as a real person — is Jewish. Her family has Friday night dinners and her parents think about the world in a way similar to the way in which my parents think about the world. And of course Liese, the protagonist of Second Circus, is a Jewish young woman escaping from Poland.

AJL: Do you think there’s an increased awareness of Judaism in China?

RD: I think there’s generally an increased awareness of all things foreign in China. I’d say there’s more familiarity and camaraderie between Chinese and expatriates.

In the 1990’s, there was deep curiosity on both sides. Foreign Babes in Beijing, the TV show, was an apt expression of that curiosity. It’s a little muddled and gawking, and I’d say that now it’s got more nuance and subtlety. There’s no need for a show like Foreign Babes anymore.

I’ve always found Chinese people to be unbelievably welcoming of foreigners and Jews in particular. I’ve never said to a person “I’m a Jew” without applause or a warm response along the lines of, “Chinese and Jews are so similar, we care about family and education, and we’re great at making money.” Not always accurate descriptions of entire groups of people, but the feeling behind these responses is always one of connection and warmth and the connection between us has real depth. Researching that for Second Circus has been not only inspiring, but also reassuring.