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A Children's Author Offers a Tribute to Her Teachers' Influence

By RAHEL MUSLEAH
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JANE BRESKIN ZALBEN knows how potent a teacher's influence can be. Her first one-woman art show was encouraged by a first-grade teacher.

The teacher let her stay alone in the classroom to finish a detailed painting of a bell and stripes instead of following the class to lunch. When the painting was finished, the teacher hung it on the classroom door. With the support of other teachers, Ms. Zalben pursued a career in art and writing. She has illustrated and written more than 30 children's books.

Her son Jonathan, 14, a student at Schreiber High School in Port Washington and the Juilliard School in Manhattan, received similar support from his teachers, who nurtured his talent for the violin from the time he was a third grader at Daly Elementary School in Port Washington.

His music teacher, Joseph Mooney, featured him in solos and concerts. The principle time let him keep his violin under the desk in his office instead of storing it with the rest of the instruments. When the principal left four years ago with a "cold letter" from the district saying that he had hepatitis, Ms. Zalben said she was shocked. "The principal had shown generosity and warmth to Jonathan," she said. "He disappeared like an actor in a play who gets the hook off the stage. I felt I needed more."

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Ms. Zalben created what she needed in her sixth novel for young adults, "Unfinished Dreams" (Simon & Schuster). Set on Long Island, it tells the story of Jason, an aspiring violinist who is stunned to learn that his principal, Mr. Carr, has AIDS and may not be coming back to school. Jason defends Mr. Carr against the intolerance of his schoolmates and faces the devastating consequences.

Kirkus Reviews said: "Zalben's gift, in simple, unobstrusive writing, is to make readers feel what Jason feels. At the end, what they'll feel is hope."

Although the novel is based on facts, Ms. Zalben stressed that she did not know much more about the real teachers who made the composite for Mr. Carr. "It's not their story," she said. "What happens is that I see a glimpse of life, a tiny scene, something that happens to a friend or to someone in the street. It affects me so deeply that it turns into a character in a novel. But ultimately I'm writing about different parts of myself. I'm the principal. I'm Jason. I'm playing different roles."

A secretary at Daly said the principal had recovered, had recently called the school and was living and teaching in Florida.

Mr. Mooney, who has taught music in the Port Washington schools for 25 years and teaches

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Jonathan, said he did not "recognize himself specifically" in the book because of how Ms. Zalben had fictionalized characters and scenarios. He added that as a teacher he was aware that he could influence a child "for good or for bad."

"You never really know if you're doing the right thing," Mr. Mooney said. "If you encourage one talented student you run the risk of hurting another who might feel left out. Sometimes it's not until years later that you realize you may have opened or closed avenues for your students."

One easily recognizable Long Islander is Jonathan's violin teacher at Juilliard, Margaret Pardee of Westbury, who is renamed Mrs. Lee.

Many pieces of Jonathan's life are woven throughout the novel. With his permission, Ms. Zalben included poems that he wrote when he was 10. The story of how Jason began playing the violin is Jonathan's story.

"Jonathan always wanted to play the bagpipes," Ms. Zalben recalled. "I remember my mother saying, 'What kind of Jewish boy plays the bagpipes?' That's what the grandmother says in the book. When the school system offered each child an instrument in third grade, Jonathan chose the violin, because he said it sounded closest to the bagpipes."

Ms. Zalben said she did not worry about betraying private or embarrassing moments when she fictionalized real people. "I know where I'm stepping over the line," she said.

Jonathan, who has not read the book, said he was not worried, either. "It's not me," he said. "It's mostly my mom's life."

The book is not an "AIDS novel," Ms. Zalben said, but a coming-of-age story of friendships and loss. Still, it stirs issues about AIDS, as Judy Burnett, executive director of the Ryan White Foundation, which promotes AIDS education, noted on the book jacket, "The novel will stimulate discussions on death and dying, peer pressures, AIDS discrimination and religious tolerance."

Ms. Zalben said she took a risk in writing about AIDS. "Teachers in schools say they love the book," she said. "Yet they are not sure if they will let their students read it. There's nothing sentimental about the book. It's direct and down to earth. I want my sons to be alive in the next century. I'd rather they know the facts about AIDS and not have their heads buried in the sand. A lot of people see AIDS as only connected with homosexuality. It's really about staying alive in the world if you are going to be sexually active."

While she would like to see the book included in school curriculums, Ms. Zalben said she did not write it to teach children, but to "work out my own issues and dreams." The principal's letter to Jason that enumerates a list of things that he wished for Jason, she said, is really a letter from her to her sons.

Perhaps best known for a series of picture books on the Jewish holidays that features a family of bears, Ms. Zalben, 46, said writing for teen-agers came naturally. "It's a time in life when all your emotions are on the edge," she said. "Everything's changing, and you're becoming who you eventually are. It's an age I love and I remember well."

Ms. Zalben could almost pass for a teen-ager, barefoot in a flowered purple dress. Her eyes light up when she talks about the intensity of a first crush, the subject of a new novel. "I never had a diamond engagement ring," she said. "But I still have a 'diamond' ring that a boy gave me from a bubble-gum machine."

She has been married to an architect, Steven, for 26 years.

In some ways, Ms. Zalben's novels have come full circle. "Maybe It Will Rain Tomorrow," her first novel, published by Farrar Straus & Giroux in 1982, the year when Jonathan was born, is about a boy named Jonathan who becomes a musician and wants to go to Juilliard.

Music, in fact, is a thread throughout all of Ms. Zalben's books. It was a path that she might have taken had she not sweated so much when performing at the piano, she said, and if a junior high school teacher had directed her with more care. She recalled practicing a Rachmaninoff concerto over and over for a concert that the teacher had promised. At the end of the year, he said there was no time. "That's when I decided to pursue art," Ms. Zalben said.

She attended the High School of Music and Art in Manhattan and received a bachelor's in art

from Queens College. Several huge canvases that she has painted hang throughout her house in Sands Point, colorful grids in which the shapes of letters proliferate into abstract forms and color.

Ms. Zalben's own unfinished dream hangs on the wall in her sun room. Only 6 of the 16 squares are filled with swirls of beiges, pinks and grays. The rest are blank. "It's the only thing in my life that's unfinished," she said as tears filled her eyes. "Maybe that means I can make an entrance back into painting.

"It's unfinished, because I had children, because I have a good violin to be bought, because I have to pay for my children's education, because I have a house to take care of, because I like good food. Now my books are my dreams. Writing is an extension of my passion for art. It's very visual for me. It's painting pictures with words."

Children's books offered Ms. Zalben a career that she could count on. She began working as a graphic designer and became art director of children's books at Scribner's. In 1973 she published her first picture book, "Cecilia's Older Brother" (Macmillan). Fourteen books later, she wrote her first novel.

"The act of having children pushed me into fiction," she said. "I wrote three young adult novels in a row, because I felt inundated with diapers. I needed distance.

Her novels, she said, were "gifts to children who dare to be different."

"I don't want them to change to fit in," Ms. Zalben said. "I want them to stay to the beat of their own drums, because in the end, those are the people in life who succeed."

In "Unfinished Dreams," Jason understands what it is like to be different, because his dream of becoming a violinist sets him apart from the other young people in his class.

"He's not a Long Island soccer player or football player," Ms. Zalben said. "He's in love with music. He writes poetry. He has a close friendship with another boy. One editor even suggested I make the central character a girl, partly because she thought the character was too sensitive to be a boy."

Ms. Zalben harvested abundant material for her novels from her older son Alexander, 18, who writes humorous plays and is in a comedy troupe at Cornell University. She recalled that Alexander, at 9, told Henny Youngman jokes on the first night of shiva for her father, who died of cancer. That incident, combined with an invitation to the bar mitzvah of an 83-year-old friend, sparked the idea for "Earth to Andrew O. Blechman," the story of a boy named Andrew who dreams of being a comedian and makes a deal with Lou Pearlstein, a former vaudevillian who agrees to teach Andrew his 101 best jokes in exchange for Hebrew lessons so he can finally have a bar mitzvah.

The novel, she said, represented a way of dealing with her father's death, as did her fifth book, "Fortuneteller in 5B," in which 11-year-old Alexandra tries to adjust to life without her father. When she finds out that her mysterious new neighbor, Madame Van Dam, is a Christian Holocaust survivor, Alexandra resolves to emulate her courage and overcome her pain.

Last year Ms. Zalben faced the possibility of ovarian cancer. As she recuperated at home, she found the joy of listening to the rustling of the trees and the songs of birds. The stark poverty that she saw on a recent trip to Egypt and Ethiopia, sponsored by the International School in Addis Ababa, also left her feeling that "life is about essentials."

She continues to write about the losses in her life. "Pearl's Marigolds for Grandpa," a new picture book about the Jewish mourning custom of shiva, also explores death and mourning in other religions. Two books that will be released this fall offer lighter fare. "Papa's Latkes," a Hanukkah book, and "Beni's Family Cookbook" (Henry Holt) both feature the Jewish bear family she is known for.

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