

JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

New Children's Book Explains and Celebrates the Differences in Winter Holiday Traditions

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By:

Marissa Stern | JE Staff

Dear Santa, Love, Rachel Rosenstein, written by Amanda Peet and Andrea Troyer
With Christmas just around the corner, it's time for another annual holiday tradition: that of Jewish children asking why Santa Claus won't be coming to their houses, too.

Young student Rachel Rosenstein understands the struggle.

Well, Amanda Peet and Andrea Troyer understand the struggle and tell the story through the fictional little girl.

In their new book, *Dear Santa, Love, Rachel Rosenstein*, Peet and Troyer drew upon their own experiences raising kids in a Jewish home during the omnipresent Christmas ads and activities.

Peet and Troyer were in town to discuss the book before a sold-out crowd at the National Museum of American Jewish History on Dec. 2.

Peet, an actress and playwright known for roles in works such as *The Whole Ten Yards* and *Something's Gotta Give*, grew up celebrating Christmas in addition to Chanukah. She and her husband, *Game of Thrones* co-creator David Benioff, decided to raise their three children Jewish.

(Despite their unfettered access, neither Peet nor Troyer — who is married to *Game of Thrones* co-creator D.B. Weiss — could divulge any secrets for the upcoming sixth season of the award-winning show or the fate of Jon Snow because, unfortunately, their husbands won't tell them either. "We want to know as badly as you do, trust me," Peet lamented.)

Living near a Christmas tree yard, Peet said her older children, who are 8, 5 and 1, began asking why they aren't getting a tree or if Santa Claus will visit them as he will their classmates.

Troyer had “Chanukah envy” growing up.

The idea of getting a present every night intrigued her, she remembered. She and her husband, who is Jewish, are also raising their two children, who are 7 and 5, in a Jewish home, but she can’t quite let go of Christmas, so they celebrate that, too.

As their children began asking questions about Christmas, they looked for a book that helped answer these questions, but couldn’t find one.

The feelings their kids have brought up about not understanding why leaving latkes out for Santa isn’t the same or why there will be no reindeer hopping on their roof brought them back to their own childhoods growing up, Troyer said.

The book was a way to explore these questions in a funny and relatable way for children.

“We just felt like we couldn’t find any books about that particular topic [...] We wanted to figure out a way to talk about it and write a story for other kids,” Troyer said. “I remember Amanda really wanting Rachel to be laying in bed thinking about the reindeer hopping on the roof. I think a lot of it was these images we remember from childhood.”

The book began with a completely different storyline when they first started working on it last summer.

Originally, they were looking to write a story comparing Chanukah and Christmas and showing how great Chanukah is. However, it morphed into something different as they went along. After hitting a few rough patches, it eventually became Dear Santa.

“Hopefully, they’ll think it’s funny, hopefully they’ll find it comforting that not everybody celebrates Christmas and it’s not the end-all deal,” Peet said of her readers.

The book celebrates different religious traditions and shows Rachel coming to understand she is not the only one who doesn’t celebrate Christmas, which she discovers while she and her family are — where else? — at a Chinese restaurant on Christmas.

Rachel begins to understand more about her peers and those who also do not celebrate Christmas, but may also not celebrate Chanukah.

“It’s more dramatic for children,” Peet said. When you’re an adult, she continued, “you’re much more aware that you’re not the center of the universe and racially and culturally, you’re not the center of the universe. But when you’re young, you don’t know that yet.”

“We think it’s sweet that at the end, she realizes she’s not the only one,” added Troyer. “It’s a book about feeling left out and there’s a solution to that.”

Learning and accepting other cultures is especially apt today, Peet said, adding that a portion of the proceeds of the book will benefit Seeds of Peace.

“Right now, the political climate is really — the language being used is really scary and I think it’s really wonderful to try to, in any way you can, to combat that ‘us and them’ messaging that seems to happen,” she said.

Now, they are discovering their own holiday traditions — especially Troyer, as she grows more accustomed to Chanukah, including making latkes for the first time.

“I’m discovering Chanukah,” she said. “We play the dreidel game, light the menorah, get a present every day. My kids are already making lists. Every year we add something.”

For Peet, one of her favorite holiday traditions is “drinking,” she said with a laugh.

Emily August, director of public programs at the museum, said the program was a great addition to the museum’s other holiday programming, including its “Being ____ At Christmas” event on Christmas Day, which celebrates different cultures.

The book itself is educational for children, she said, because of its message.

“She [Rachel] has these feelings of being left out when it seems like the whole world is doing something,” August said. “It validates those feelings of being a minority and feeling left out and explains them in terms kids can understand.”

Of course, that Rachel learns these lessons at a Chinese restaurant was particularly fitting.

“She runs into other students who don’t celebrate Christmas, all these different heritages that come together. Even though she feels a little left out, she starts to realize the bigger picture,” August said.

The idea of “Christmas envy” could be a reality for many people, and this book helps celebrate difference and diversity, August added, especially as the holidays creep closer and more and more commercials will start playing.

“Jews are the minority in this country and are constantly bombarded with Christmas messages, and I suppose having not been a kid in that situation in a very long time, it’s easy to forget the things that make you special and celebrating difference instead of not celebrating difference,” she said.

The question-and-answer program with Peet and Troyer, which was moderated by Sharon Pinkenson of the Greater Philadelphia Film Office, was a way for the parents in attendance —children were not the target audience for the event — to get a better idea of how to answer the questions their children may begin asking.

“The holiday season is about a lot of different traditions and beliefs,” she said. “That’s really the takeaway from the book.”

Contact: mstern@jewishexponent.com; 215-832-0740