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Families reading together: Summer novels for children

BY LISA SILVERMAN

When was the last time your fifth grader read a book written in free verse? How about a children's version of life in Stalinist Russia? These two very unusual novels for young people from two Los Angeles children's authors make excellent summer reads and particularly good discussion starters for families to read together.

Looking For Me... in This Great Big Family

by Betsy R. Rosenthal (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, NY. \$15.99) Grades 4 – 7.

It's not so easy to get children to read a book of poems. But there is a particular genre of children's literature called free-verse novels that has been very successful in doing exactly that. These books offer up a succession of individual poems that tell an entire story. They contain fine characterization, tense plots, gripping conclusions, and very few words per page. They are considered perfect for reluctant readers, but also for literature lovers who like to linger on a good turn of phrase. Often these free verse novels have won the highest awards of children's literature (see Karen Hesse's, "**Out of the Dust**" or Margarita Engle's "**Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees in Cuba**"). Now Betsy Rosenthal, A Los Angeles author of delightful picture books, has hit the mark with her first novel, which she based on anecdotes from her mother's poignant childhood in depression-era Baltimore.

The book is short, and each page is graced with a poem, sometimes rhyming, sometimes not—more often not. Each poem is titled and captures the distinct voice of 11-year-old Edith Paul, Rosenthal's mother and the fourth of 12 siblings. "In my overcrowded family/ I'm just another face./ I'm just plain Edith/of no special place." As the young girl searches for her individual identity within her large and boisterous Jewish family, she also wonders about the type of person she can become. Rosenthal relies on extensive interviews with her mother, along with the many stories she was told as a child to recreate what life was like in the tumultuous depression years of 1936-37. This young girl sees herself only as she imagines others see her: as a "good little mother" to her younger siblings, or a child worker in her gruff and distant father's diner. When a caring teacher finds that spark within her that lights her way to imagining herself as the first of her family to go to college, she is able to break out of her musings about her invisibility and see into the future, knowing she is on her way "to being so much more/than just plain Edith/who's number four."

The Judaism practiced by Edith's family will intrigue today's children. Edith sincerely describes her struggles to fit in. She is pleased her family changed its name from Polansky to Paul and astonished to discover that a "dumb neighbor" thinks Jews have horns. She is also embarrassed at having to refuse a ham sandwich at a friend's house, but then eats crab cakes with her sisters on a paper plate at home ("sometimes we cheat"). At Rosh Hashanah services, she wonders whether God is listening to her prayers ("Even though I don't understand a word of it,/I like hearing the sounds—it's like a visit with an old friend."), and empathetically recounts the difficult choices made by her immigrant grandmother on the day she had to leave Russia for America.

Readers will particularly appreciate Rosenthal's inclusion of an author's note at the end of the book, including a black-and-white photo of young Edith Paul, along with a glossary of the Yiddish terms she has seamlessly woven within the text.

This beautifully written short poetic novel is a great choice for a young person to share with parents. Each poem is a little gem and readers will admire the author's ability to be able to create entire characters out of just over 100 individual poems. Pair this one with Sydney Taylor's classic, "**All of a Kind Family**," for a take on what it was like to grow up in a Jewish family in the first half of the 20th century.