

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now In new memoir, Elisa Bernick explores growing up Jewish in 1960s New Hope, Minnesota 01GHVWRWMHWGKCVZV73FTZGTCZ

CREW: Well, we're coming up on that time of the year when there may be a little more family drama than usual. Elisa Bernick grew up with her share of family drama in suburban New Hope, Minnesota. But in a new book, she explores the roots of that drama and comes to some astounding and healing revelations. She spoke with NPR's Euan Kerr about it.

EUAN KERR: Elisa Bernick, author of *Departure Stories: Betty Crocker Made Matzo Balls* and other lies, welcome, welcome, welcome.

ELISA BERNICK: Thank you very much.

EUAN KERR: I know it's described as a memoir, but-- [LAUGHS]

ELISA BERNICK: Yeah.

EUAN KERR: --there's a whole lot of stuff in here. And I understand that it took you many years, literally, to find the form to tell the story about your relationship with your family, and in particular with your mother.

ELISA BERNICK: It did.

EUAN KERR: Take me through that.

ELISA BERNICK: It did. It took a long time to figure out a way in. As part of the American Writers Program, they have this terrific competition annually called *Writer to Writer*. And you submit a manuscript to win a chance to work with a mentor, a published author. And I got to work with a terrific mentor by the name of Leslie Schwartz out of California. And we hit page 100 of my novel, and she said, well, Elisa, you are a very good writer, but unless there's a drug overdose or a murder or a suicide within the next 25 pages, this is not a novel. It's a memoir, and you need to write it that way.

Frankly, Euan, I had been trying to avoid writing a memoir about my relationship to my family because it meant unlocking lots of doors that I had intentionally kept locked. And I wasn't sure that I could write a memoir that did honor to the story I was trying to tell, which was a more nuanced, more interesting larger story than the one that we had all been telling about my mom, which was this one-dimensional, she was physically and verbally abusive, which she was. She was very depressed and unhappy. That is true.

But that was the one-note story we had been telling in our family about my mother until quite recently. That story was not serving anybody well. And I couldn't figure out initially, how do I tell a larger story? She grew up in the 1930s, '40s, '50s, '60s here in Minnesota. She was Jewish and female at a time when Jewish and female was not a very good thing to be both here in Minnesota and also everywhere else. So as I started to think about that and delve into that time period, that started to open things up for me.

One other thing happened. 2016, a book came out published by the Minnesota Historical Press called *A Good Time for the Truth: Race in Minnesota*. And that book has 16 essays written by people of color about their experiences of being different in Minnesota. And different in Minnesota is a dicey thing. Difference is treated pretty gingerly here. And there's a lot of shame that comes out of being different in Minnesota for a variety of reasons. And there wasn't a Jewish voice in that book.

But I kept, in every essay, recognizing my own experience over and over of being Jewish in the Minneapolis suburb of New Hope in the 1960s and early 1970s and thinking, wait a minute, that's the difference I felt. That's the sort of unseen, disappeared experience I had as a Jew here in Minnesota. And that allowed me the door into this book.

EUAN KERR: Well, whatever they call themselves, WWE nowadays, I mean, you talk about smackdowns.

ELISA BERNICK: Oh, yeah. Your

EUAN KERR: Life was just an ongoing loud wrestling match.

ELISA BERNICK: It was. And to be fair, as I looked into my mom's life and her family of origin, and if you look back generations to those Jews who arrived in Minnesota, they have no emotional IQ. They felt like victims always, persecuted. There was not a sense of nurturing, certainly. They were not nurtured themselves, nor knew how to nurture others. There was a significant lack of compassion for others and for themselves. And that's what I got.

EUAN KERR: I have to admit that one of the things I find-- I mean, there are many jaw-dropping moments in your book. But one of the things which I found fascinating was your discovery of antisemitism, but also the fact that this notoriety that Minnesota has had for decades as being this very antisemitic place, you had no idea even as an adult about that.

ELISA BERNICK: No, I had no idea that Minneapolis was considered the most antisemitic city in the entire country in the 1940s.

EUAN KERR: The discovery that you make about this as a child happens almost invariably because of where you lived in very ordinary suburban settings, a sledding party, a swim meet, stuff like that. And in a way, that makes it all the more shocking.

ELISA BERNICK: Well, and that's how it felt. I grew up in the assimilated suburbs. And I was the first generation of Jewish kids to be assimilated in the suburbs. Jews by that point, in the mid-1950s, early 1960s, were considered white, and we did get to come out to the suburbs. But out in the suburbs, we were the most different people you could find. So most of the time, my friends were all non-Jews, every television show I watched, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, [LAUGHS] you name it. So those moments when I felt called out for my Judaism was horrifying. And I felt so shamed by it. And I did not know what to do with that information.

EUAN KERR: What was it like revisiting them now that you have a few more years behind you?

ELISA BERNICK: The first thing I ever read out loud from my book to people I didn't know was a chapter called "Mrs. Swanson 1967." It happened when I was seven years old. And in a nutshell, we were sledding, and a very nasty neighbor came out of her house and called us dirty Jews and all sorts of awful things in front of all of our friends. As I was reading that chapter out loud, I started crying. And that surprised me so much. That stuff is so deep that it just dredged it up. And that sits inside us.

It's such a shameful thing to be called out for your difference in front of others. So for me, this book has been an opportunity to be curious and lean into things that I have locked away so tight.

EUAN KERR: So how did that change your relationship with your mother?

ELISA BERNICK: So she was not a person who was able to ask for forgiveness. But what did happen is that I had spent my entire life running away from her, but this experience of writing this book allowed me to open my heart and run towards her when she needed me. At the end of her life, she had a stroke here in Minnesota as it were. She was visiting for two weeks. And on the day after she arrived, she had a stroke. And now I wasn't quite done with the book yet when this happened, but I was far enough along to understand this was a potential gift.

If I could open up my heart and find a different story to tell about her, I could embrace her, and we could both grow larger at the end of her life. And that is what happened. But I have a depth of understanding and a well of empathy for her and for myself that I didn't have before I finished writing the book. And I really do think that we imagining our stories and our memories really are huge opportunities for healing.

CREW: That is NPR editor Euan Kerr talking with author Elisa Bernick. Her book is out now. She'll be speaking on December the 1st at 7:00 PM at Subtext Books in Saint Paul.