

## Identity in Jewish-Indian Middle Grade Fiction

*Asian Jewish Life* spices it up this issue with reviews of two recent middle grade novels. Although these books are geared toward children aged eight to twelve, they are also insightful for adults and are wonderful reads.

*My Basmati Bat Mitzvah* (Abrams, 2013) by Paula J. Freedman tells the story of Tara Feinstein, a sassy New Yorker who is preparing for her bat mitzvah. The only problem is that she's not sure she wants to go through with it. Tara's mother is from India and converted to Judaism after she married Tara's father. But at twelve years old, Tara feels unsure about her identity. Her friends at Hebrew school and public school are mostly Jewish, but her best friend is Catholic and she starts to feel their friendship slipping away as she delves further into her bat mitzvah preparations.

Most of all, however, she wonders if by going through with her bat mitzvah, she would betray the memories of her beloved Nanaji, her late grandfather. Tara is also close to her rabbi, who she consults about her reservations. When she eventually decides to become bat mitzvah, her next obstacle is figuring out how to combine her Jewish and Indian traditions. Her plan to wear an heirloom sari backfires after it's ruined in a careless accident. Tara can't tell her mother, who would be heartbroken to learn about the sari, and she doesn't think her father can help her either. So she turns to Nana, her paternal grandmother. Nana lives close by and gives Tara the courage and hope to forge ahead with her plans to unite her Jewish and Indian backgrounds.

She is surrounded by a strong Jewish community in her New York neighborhood, but still has hesitations about her bat mitzvah. Some children in Hebrew school question her Judaism because her mother wasn't born Jewish and because Tara doesn't look like most of the other kids at Hebrew school. Another boy in her Hebrew class was adopted from South Korea, so Tara feels an affinity with him.

*My Basmati Bat Mitzvah* is a lighthearted novel about identity and adolescence. Tara's Jewish Indian background provides a different perspective compared to the usual middle grade fiction.

In *The Whole Story of Half a Girl* (Random House, 2012) by Veera Hiranandani, eleven year-old Sonia Nadhamuni has everything a girl could want: loving parents, a fun younger sister, a positive school community, and a fabulous best friend. Sonia's mother is Jewish and her father Indian, but the Nadhamunis aren't observant Jews. They celebrate Jewish holidays with Sonia's

maternal grandparents once or twice a year at most. Otherwise Sonia's Judaism is more cultural than religious.

All this changes when Sonia's father loses his job and the family has to cut costs. Sonia and her sister Natasha must leave their close-knit private school to attend the public school in town. Although Sonia is used to living in a non-Jewish environment, her friends and teachers at her private school are accepting of all backgrounds whereas the people she meets at her public school are not as tolerant of other cultures.

Sonia finds it odd that the white and black kids at school sit at separate tables during lunch. The white kids are not as open-minded when it comes to people who don't look like them. Sonia doesn't know where she fits in at this school as both groups of students ask if she's white or black. It's a question she never thought about before because in her family and in her old school, she was just Sonia.

Kate, a popular girl at Sonia's new school, befriends her and convinces her to try out for the cheerleading team. Sonia's mother is opposed to it because she thinks Sonia should aim for intellectual endeavors. But Sonia wants to fit in and feels honored that Kate asked her to tryout. Plus, Sonia's father has been acting strange—yelling at the family and sulking—even though he says he's happy to have the chance to spend more time with his daughters while he's out of work. At about the same time Sonia makes the team, her father finds a new job and Sonia thinks her life will go back to normal. But it's soon apparent that her father's depression won't be solved by a raise and a new position.

While Sonia feels torn between two sets of friends at her public school, she also feels like she's lost her best friend from her old school. She is also confused about her own identity. Is she Jewish? Is she Indian like her father, or white like her mother? Or neither? Her sister Natasha is six years younger so Sonia doesn't feel like she can confide in her. Just when Sonia feels the most confused, things suddenly come crashing down both at home and school.

*The Whole Story of Half a Girl* takes a more serious tone than *My Basmati Bat Mitzvah*. Veera Hiranandani addresses issues like mental illness and immigrant assimilation. It's interesting that these authors are both women in Indian-Jewish cross-cultural relationships. Freedman is a Jewish woman married to an Indian man who writes about the daughter of an Indian mother, while Hiranandani is an Indian woman married to a Jewish man who writes about the daughter of a Jewish mother.

Both of these books provide insightful looks into Indian-Jewish family life and how children in cross-cultural families deal with and understand identity. ♯

