

Batya:

Welcome to the All-of-a-Kind podcast! I'm Batya Wittenberg.

Merav:

And I'm Merav Hoffman.

Batya:

We loved these books when we were kids, we love them now, and we hope you do too.

Merav:

Today's episode is part 2 of the chapter where the family prepares for the Sabbath. And in keeping with that we are providing you with a double portion.

Batya:

In the first half of the chapter, Mama took all the girls to market with her on a Thursday afternoon. We pick up in the second half on

Friday afternoon, with the girls going to the library before Sabbath starts. They entertain Miss Allen with an account of their market adventures, and then rush home to bring in the Sabbath, welcome Papa home from synagogue, and enjoy the peace of a companionable Friday night at home.

Merav:

Now where were we?

\*rapid fast forward noises\*

Merav:

You know, Ms. Allen's like, "Oh, tell us all about your adventures in the market because that's like a big raucous thing that they're doing." And then we get into the quiet of Shabbat.

Terri:

We use the library as a transitional space twice

in this chapter.

Batya:

That's – yeah!

Merav:

Yes, exactly.

Terri:

There's something there!

Merav:

The girls get shushed in the library by the other librarians as they're acting out their shenanigans in the market.

Batya:

We have this little thing here, which is gonna be significant later that Ella's a good actress and does impressions.

Merav:

A nice little call-out.

Terri:

That is significant foreshadowing.

Merav:

But Henny also does impressions because she goes in the market and she's imitating –

Batya:

Oh, she imitates the chickpea vendor, that's right. *Arbis, sheynike, guttnike arbislach!*

Terri:

I also love the Yiddish-inflected English that you hear from the peddler.

Batya:

Yes! Yes.

Terri:

‘Leave her alone, lady! She's helping me in mine business.’ If you have a grandparent of a certain generation, you know what that sounds like!

Batya:

Exactly.

Merav:

Absolutely.

Batya:

We also got this with the candy store owner, a chapter or two back. “For less than half a penny, I can't sell.”

Terri:

Yes!

Merav:

Right, exactly.

Batya:

Like, I can hear the cadence of it.

Terri:

That's music I understand without having to be explained.

Batya:

Absolutely, yeah.

Merav:

Yes. If you were reading this and you weren't an Ashkenazi Jew, it's a completely foreign set of phonemes.

Terri:

Yes.

Merav:

So as you're parsing that out in your brain, as you read, will you hear the same thing we're hearing?

Terri:

No.

Merav:

Probably not.

Batya:

No. Whenever you have a, phonetically or not even phonetically, but just faithfully word for word transcribed accent that you're not already familiar with – I am remembering when I read *The Lord of the Rings* as a kid, and I did not have any exposure to the sort of lower class rural accent that Sam Gamgee is supposed to speak in. Something about his choice of words, his speech patterns, made my brain parse his accent as vaguely Texan.

Merav:

Which isn't incorrect because the Southern sound is actually very close to some of the rural British sounds.

Batya:

That's the reason that some of the speech patterns are the same, that it's literally derived from rural English.

Terri:

In anime dubs, they will use –

Merav:

I was just gonna bring this up too.

Terri:

– American Southern accents to replace rural Japanese accents.

Batya:

So that we get the right vibe for the hearer.

Terri:

It's the vibe. It's also, frankly, the same American classism –

Batya:

Yes, exactly! What accent is going to sound to the hearer like a person who has these or the equivalent of these regional and class markers.

Terri:

Right.

Batya:

And that works.

Merav:

And it's often the slower speech pattern that is, laconic, drawling, that kind of thing.

Batya:

So I do wonder if you have no exposure at all to Yiddish-inflected English, what do these faithfully reproduced speech patterns sound like to you?

Merav:

I would be interested too. So the one thing I thought was really interesting about this chapter is, as Terri says, there are these two library sequences, one where they're under Mama's supervision and one where they're back at the library on Friday alone, the way that they would be on a normal Friday. And they're actually acting up because they're having this very animated discussion with Miss Allen to the point where the other librarians notice and shush them. And then the girls pretend to slink away, right? They're just kind-of like do this like sheepish, like, oh, we're going to, but we had so

much fun! It's one of the places where we get to see them being kids.

Batya:

Yes.

Merav:

And their enthusiasm for the market is still with them because this was such a special thing for them to do that they have to share it with Miss Allen, who has already asked them, has given them permission to be themselves in front of her and tell me all about your adventure. And then from there, we go directly home, and I found this a little weird, this is not what I grew up with, but they come running home and Mama's already blessing the candles. Right. The girls are not blessing the candles with Mama because they're not of age. Right. None of them – I mean, there is no bat mitzvah at this

point.

Terri:

Right.

Merav:

They're girls. Right. There is no bat mitzvah for quite a long time.

Terri:

They're in the home, so it's assumed that Mama will be doing it until they are married themselves and in homes of their own. Because at this point, the assumption that they would be in a home of their own without a husband is not there.

Batya:

It is not assumed to be likely. And if that happens, it is assumed to be a grave misfortune.

Terri:

It's also interesting to me that while she lights more than two, she only lights four.

Batya:

Four cand— hah!

Merav:

Yeah, that was really interesting to me as well.

Terri:

That's very weird.

Merav:

It is.

Terri:

Because I can understand lighting two from economy or not having the familial tradition to light one for all of your children, cause that's not

universal. But to light four but not light seven is weird. For me.

Batya:

That *is* odd.

Merav:

Yeah, I'm wondering if it was some kind of familial tradition in the family.

Terri:

It could be!

Merav:

Where she's lighting two candles for someone else? Right? Like, is there someone that she knows isn't lighting, so she's lighting them for that person?

Terri:

Or the two represent all of the children. It's

different.

Batya:

Maybe. I'll tell you, if there is somebody for whom she's lighting two candles because there's no candles being lit at their house, my bet is it's Uncle Hyman.

Terri:

Mmmm.

Merav:

That's very possible actually.

Batya:

Who lives alone and isn't married.

Terri:

Could be.

Merav:

Right, and he may not have the tradition. We'd have to look at a subsequent chapter once Uncle Hyman meets his future wife, which spoiler, that's a romantic arc for a different book.

Terri:

I was gonna say that's like not till the second or the third book, we're not there yet!

Merav:

Exactly, we're not there yet!

Batya:

(laughter)

Merav:

If Mama continues to light four candles at that point. She does have an unmarried brother, so that might be it. Or it might just be that Mama only has two sets of candlesticks.

Batya:

That could be too.

Terri:

I'm sure there's both Doylist and Watsonian explanations for why Mama is lighting four candles.

Batya:

(laughter)

Terri:

It's just –

Batya:

I can think of one other explanation.

Terri:

Okay!

Batya:

There is one tradition that says, when you begin lighting Sabbath candles, when you first get into your own household, or if you do it as a child, when you become Bat Mitzvah, you light two. If ever in your life you miss lighting the Shabbos candles, you add one. If you ever light, from now on, you light three. If you miss another time, from now on you light four. I've heard it said that the reason that some people have the tradition of you add a candle for every child is that it is extraordinarily likely that in the first week of having a newborn child you are going to miss lighting candles at least once.

Merav:

Right?

Terri:

That's fair!

Batya:

So just beat the rush and just add a candle as a default.

Terri:

While I'm noticing things that are different from how my family does things ...

Batya:

Mm-hmm.

Terri

He blesses them before he goes to shul.

Batya:

Yes!

Terri:

That is so different.

Merav:

Mm-hm.

Batya:

We always had the blessing of the children after the *Shalom Aleichem* prayer and –

Terri:

– and before *kiddush*.

Merav:

So in this text, we have Papa saying *Eishet Chayil*, which is the, I can't really call it a blessing. It's like a, it's a song basically about the virtues of his wife, right? It's taken directly from Psalms. It's literally how wonderful is my wife –

Terri:

No, it's not in this chapter.

Merav:

It is.

Batya:

Uh-huh.

Terri:

Where?

Batya:

“Papa washed his hands –” It was right after he comes back in from shul. He says *Good Shabbos*, everybody says *Good Shabbos* – they say Good Sabbath here. “It was time for supper, but first he must pronounce the prayer in praise of his wife for her fine Sabbath preparations.”

Terri:

Ah, okay, yes.

Batya:

“Then he must say a prayer of thanksgiving for the Sabbath,” and that's the *Kiddush* –

Terri:

That's *kiddush*, right?

Batya:

With the wine. The recitation of *Shalom Aleichem* doesn't seem to be part of this, whether that wasn't their tradition or they just skipped it.

Merav:

It's not in there. It might just be too many layers.

Terri:

Yeah. OK, interestingly ... I'm wondering if the illustration – them all sitting around the table with a four-branched candelabra. And maybe she just lights what there's –

Batya:

What there's room for, that could be.

Terri:

What there's room for, and she wants to light as many candles as possible.

Batya:

Cause they use that for light.

Terri:

Cause there's no electricity in their house. So they can't leave a light on in the front room, you know, the way we might do now where, you know, I leave my living room light on all weekend.

Merav:

This is actually mentioned in the last bit of the chapter. It says that when they're reading, the only light is coming from the Sabbath candles,

and “There could be no light struck on the Sabbath. That was the law.” Which is just this really stark ending to the chapter.

Terri:

It really is.

Merav

It's specific that we now have, depending on how long the candles are, a four-hour window of light between Papa goes to synagogue, we've lit the candles, we've said the blessings, Papa's going off to synagogue. And now when everybody is gathering in the living room after dinner to read, which is a whole sequence that we get in here, the candles are burning down. When the candles burn down, they're going to be in the dark.

Terri:

Mm-hmm.

Batya:

Mm-hmm.

Merav:

So they have to kind of watch that and make sure that they get to bed safely because they can't take a candle with them to bed to make sure that, you know, stuff. And there's no, there's no heat, right? Like unless Mama stuck irons in the beds before the Sabbath, which is unlikely, they're going to bed cold. So they're going from a brightly lit room into a dimmer room into the dark. And that's very stark. And I wonder if that's why the chapter ends in this very strange way. “There could be no light struck on the Sabbath. That was the law.”

Batya:

While, while the Sabbath is lovely and calm and peaceful, there's also a degree of very sober

strictness about it.

Merav:

Exactly.

Batya:

That it's not just for enjoyment, it's also ...

Terri:

Which is going to interestingly come up much, much later. I don't remember which book it's in. The first time Papa goes to what I'm pretty sure is supposed to be a reform synagogue.

Batya:

Oh yes.

Terri:

And...

Batya:

He's got feelings about it, he's got big feelings about it.

Terri:

He's got so many big feelings about that. All the family has big feelings about it.

Batya:

What kind of rabbi is that, he doesn't even have a beard!

Merav:

Right, and we'll certainly get there, but absolutely Papa comes from a traditional rabbinical tradition.

Terri:

Yes.

Merav:

Like we know about Morris Brenner that his

fathers and grandfathers and what have you were all rabbis. So absolutely this is going to offend him. This is not how it's done.

Terri:

The family, before their exposure to this other way of being Jewish, their experience of Shabbat is both wonderful – because they eat better, because they have time...

Batya:

Rest and peace.

Terri:

Time together in ways that they don't during the week –

Merav:

And Papa is going to be home.

Batya:

Mm-hmm.

Terri:

They eat on nicer tablecloths, nicer dishes.

Merav:

And the candelabra instead of the oil lamp, they have the tablecloth.

Terri:

Right. There's still this understanding that Shabbat is also a day of rules. That there are things we may not do, and that's something that has to be conveyed to the readers.

Batya:

Right

Merav:

Yes.

Terri:

Who might not know what Shabbat looks like from the inside. I know what Shabbat looks like from the inside, but again, I am not the sole target audience of this book.

Merav:

And that's why I find it so jarring when the girls come home, they're in their – effectively street clothes, right? They're in their coats. Mama is saying the blessing and they have been transitioned into Shabbat very quickly. It's not what I would think of as the Shabbat preparation sequence.

Terri:

Also wondering why they haven't ... I don't know if bathhouses were a thing then?

Merav:

They were. There was famously a woman who owned a bathhouse on the Lower East Side.

Batya:

Oh, that's fantastic.

Merav:

And a Jewish woman too, and she operated a mikveh out of there.

Terri:

I'm actually wondering when the library is used as the transitional sequence and not, for example, Ella being in charge of taking the girls to the bathhouse.

Merav:

Which, we don't know whether they used the bathhouse.

Batya:

But yes, pre-Sabbath bathing is a thing I would a hundred percent expect.

Terri:

Yes! That – right! That, that –

Merav:

And if the carp is in the bathtub, at least not in this sequence but in other sequences, they probably have to use the bathhouse.

Terri:

Right. There's just not enough physical time and space –

Batya:

Oh.

Terri:

There's not enough physical space to bathe and

cook.

Batya:

Because the bathroom is the kitchen.

Merav:

Exactly.

Terri:

Right. So if you're going to show them doing pre-shabbat bathing, whether or not this family in real life used the bathhouse or not – they're in their weekday dresses and pinafores.

Batya:

They're in their school clothes, yeah. They may not have special shabbos clothes.

Terri:

They may not have special shabbat clothes!

Merav:

I was just gonna say.

Terri:

But one would assume that they would clean and maybe brush their dresses. There are ways that you could show them preparing that are not them hanging out at the library, which is actually really weird for me.

Batya:

There is one thing that occurs to me though, which is significant. It's winter.

Terri:

Mmm!

Merav:

Yes.

Batya:

Sunset in New York in winter is super early.

Merav:

(overlapping) Right.

Terri:

You said it's still like only November, so it's still like in the six-ish department.

Batya:

Nope, the earliest it gets in New York is the first or second weekends in December, and that's at about like ten after four. By late November it's already five or earlier.

Terri:

Right, that's true.

Merav:

Yeah. The girls are really hurrying.

Batya:

Depending on what time they get out of school ... it's a little surprising that Friday is their library day, even in winter, because this is going to keep happening, that through the winter, they're gonna be dashing home from the library just in time for candle lighting.

Merav:

They're probably running from school to the library, to home.

Batya:

I don't know.

Terri:

I don't know.

Merav:

If it's remained consistent, because I went to school in New York, I would say probably,

school probably ended about two o'clock because the school I went to, we began around seven so that you could have an afterschool job. I don't know if this would have been consistent with what they're experiencing, but in this era, absolutely kids had jobs as delivery people, a lot of kids weren't even in school because they were working, but making school as available as possible, as early as possible, seems like it's something that may have carried over. I would have to do some research on that. So the girls probably have some part of the afternoon to go to the library and probably also to do chores, but ultimately, like we also see these other sequences where they're in the house in the morning. So it's not really clear when school is happening.

Terri:

And, and some of it is that we're also digging down into like, very nitty-gritty and expecting

consistency from a piece of fiction that is not necessarily designed to provide it.

Merav:

Exactly.

Batya

Very true, very true. Piece of fiction aimed at children. There is probably a lot of detail that is ... left out, smoothed over – it's not relevant to the story as we're telling it.

Terri:

Right, and I'm noticing this now. I definitely didn't –

Batya

Right. Of course.

Terri:

Like, literally it occurred to me in the last two

minutes that – why aren't they getting clean? Like, that's a thing they should be doing, but that's something that from my perspective as, also to some extent as a parent, but also somebody who's now been preparing for Shabbat for thirty-eight years, I was not the active preparer of Shabbat when I was first reading these books.

Batya:

Oh, no.

Merav:

No.

Batya:

Although, bringing it up, I am reminded I've brought this up in previous chapters, and I'm gonna bring it up again now, another point of comparison between this and the Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Terri:

Mmm.

Batya:

We got – in a couple, not many, but a couple of the earlier books in that series – what it is like for a child in that context. We get it, I think, once for Laura, and we get it once in *Farmer Boy* for Almanzo, who becomes Laura's husband later, we get this book about his childhood.

Terri:

Yes.

Batya:

We get what Sunday is like and what preparing for Sunday is like. What you said, Terri, about the Sabbath is a time of peace, but also of rules, was I think to Laura and even more so to Almanzo and with an inner story, even, even

more so to Almanzo's grandfather when he was a kid. Way more than I think to most Christian children today, Sunday being a day of rules.

Terri:

Yes!

Merav:

Mm-hm. Yeah.

Batya:

Of things that you can't do 'cause it's Sunday.

Laura has this little tantrum at one point –

Terri:

Yes, I remember that.

Batya:

Because she's like, she's *five*. She's a little, little kid, and she is being expected to spend the whole day sitting quietly. And not running

around and having fun because this is Sunday and Sunday is not a day for running around and having fun. No, you can't cut out dresses for your paper dolls.

Terri:

Right.

Batya:

For Almanzo it's no, you can't whittle on that wooden chain you're making. It's just the rules becoming oppressive, in a way, that then their parents in different ways have to deal with getting them through that.

Terri:

It's interesting that that's not Sydney Taylor's approach.

Merav:

Not at all.

Batya:

Exactly. We do not have Gertie because she is so little or Henny because she is a much wilder kid than the others feeling frustration about the things you can't do because it's Sabbath.

Merav:

Keeping in mind though that we're only seeing the first part of the Sabbath.

Batya:

That's true. We are seeing Friday night. We're not seeing Saturday. We don't get Havdalah.

Terri:

(laughter)

Merav:

Right – *Havdalah*, for those that don't know, is the ceremony that ends the Sabbath. Because

we start the Sabbath with wine and fire, we end the Sabbath with wine and fire. So there's a little ceremony we do to, like, break apart the Sabbath from the rest of the week.

Terri:

To somebody who has never been exposed to it, Friday night is to some extent the nicest part. And it's the part that does not – that exists in the home. It's been a long time that I haven't even really finished rereading this book, but it's – I don't remember if other than when they go to the Reform synagogue, if the girls ever go to shul in these books.

Batya:

They do for holidays, I do not recall if we ever see them do so for Sabbath.

Terri:

These books make you want to be there in

ways that I never felt with Little House. And maybe to some extent that's because this is my culture and Little House is very foreign to me.

Batya:

Which is why I think it's so interesting how many similarities there are, is that the cultures are profoundly different. The settings are profoundly different. And yet –

Terri:

I mean –

Batya:

– I keep finding similarities.

Terri:

So, again, haven't reread them in a really long time, but I think there's less casual racism in the All-of-a-Kind Family books! (laughing)

Batya:

Little bit less. We talked about that in one of the previous chapters.

Terri:

And significantly less corporal punishment. Yes, there's at least one or two significant spankings, but it's not on the scale that the Little House books have.

Merav:

And it's presented with more humor, I think, too.

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

Because there is that sequence in the future where Papa accidentally spanks the wrong person, which we will get to in a later book. But ultimately, yes, the Little House books are more

rules than fun. And I would say that these are cast with more fun than rules.

Terri:

Yes.

Batya:

Yes. Which I don't think is necessarily reflective of the difference between the cultures so much as the difference between the writers' approaches.

Merav:

Yeah, it's the telling as opposed to the culture.

Terri:

Yes.

Merav:

Because absolutely these girls lived in a stiff, starched world. And there was corporal

punishment on the table if they stepped out of line. That being said, all four of the parents in those books, right, you've got the Ingalls Wilder parents and you've got the Brenner family parents, they all have a sense of humor.

Batya:

It's true.

Merav:

Even when Pa is really riled up in the Little House books, you know he's not going to really hurt Laura.

Terri:

Yeah, but – and again, this is very much a difference in the telling – I get love from Mama and Papa in a way that I don't – wouldn't have recognized it when I was reading them for the first time. But certainly knowing the stories as an adult, there is love in that house, in the

tenement, that I don't see in the cabin in the woods.

Batya:

I do, honestly. And that was, that's, I mean, I feel like that's probably a whole other discussion.

Merav:

It is.

Terri:

Oh sure! And again, and maybe some of it is just because I relate to these books on a level I cannot relate to the Little House books on.

Batya:

Honestly, legit, because we are all of, if not the same culture, a strongly, strongly related culture.

Terri:

I am in many, depending on which part of my family line, I am not that removed from this immigrant experience.

Batya:

Exactly, yeah. Same.

Merav:

Exactly. I mean, I myself am an immigrant to the States. I am the third generation that immigrated, like, in each generation, someone immigrated to a different country.

Terri:

My grandmother was a first-generation immigrant. For my grandmother, it happened in Detroit and not in New York.

Batya:

My mother's parents were St. Louis and not

New York, and a generation later. Still a lot of similarities.

Terri:

Right.

Merav:

Whereas we're a split in my family. Some of my people came over in this era to Canada, and some of them came over right before the war. And by the war, I mean World War II. So we have a split on that end of it where we have people from the earlier wave of immigration, we have people from the later wave of immigration, but mostly from a middle wave that doesn't really get documented as much. And because we were coming through Halifax and not through Ellis Island, it's similar, but it isn't the same.

Batya:

Yeah. So we have jumped to the end of the chapter with the lovely, lovely Sabbath meal and post-Sabbath meal, Friday night, calm and peacefulness. And we skipped over a little bit, which is very arc-significant, which is that Charlie gets brought up.

Terri:

Yes.

Merav:

Yes. And this is a lovely parallel, I think, to the fact that we have these insertions of Miss Allen into the chapter. And even though Charlie isn't present, Ella's very like, oh, is Charlie coming to dinner? Because Ella's still got that crush on Charlie.

Batya:

Mm-hmm.

Merav:

And then everybody has an opinion about Charlie

Batya:

Yes.

Merav:

And Mama kind of refuses to play the opinion game.

Batya:

“You don't ask people about their personal lives.” I love that. I love that sense of propriety and respect and just ...

Merav:

And decorum, right?

Batya:

Decorum!

Merav:

This is Papa's best friend.

Terri:

And if Charlie didn't want to tell you his story, you're not entitled to Charlie's story.

Batya:

Exactly, yes.

Merav:

Exactly. But everyone has an opinion.

Terri:

I mean, to some extent, Charlie and Miss Allen are the two most different people – yes, they have their teachers who are not really brought up in this book, at least not in this half of this book.

Batya:

We don't hear about them at all, I don't think.

Terri:

They will get brought up later. In other books we will have significant interactions with different teachers. But most of the adults that these children interact with are like their parents.

Merav:

Yes.

Terri:

And Charlie and Miss Allen are so very different from their entire family.

Merav:

Right, because they aren't Jewish.

Terri:

Because they're not Jewish, because they're

not immigrants, because they're just – I don't remember if Miss Allen is supposed to be blonde, but like, they just look different!

Batya:

(laughter)

Terri:

They look different from everybody they know! So they're going to spend a lot of time thinking about them, because they're so different.

Merav:

Mm-hm. And they're also, they're young and beautiful, and they are of marriageable age. So in the imaginations of the girls, who've been fed on romantic stories – we see that Charlotte reads fairy tales, Ella's reading Dickens – so marriage plots are something that they're all kind of familiar with from storytelling.

Batya:

That's true, but they don't really seem to be – in contemporary parlance, the kids don't ship them.

Terri:

(laughter)

Merav:

No, they're not matchmaking them.

Batya:

No.

Merav:

The *narrative* is matchmaking them, but we don't know that yet.

Batya:

Yes, it's already leading into it.

Terri:

The narrative ships them *hard*.

Merav:

Very much so.

Batya:

Absolutely, but the kids don't yet. They're not thinking, "wow, we should really introduce Charlie to Miss Allen, I bet they'd get along well," because they belong to very different parts of the girls' lives.

Merav:

Exactly.

Terri:

And this is something ... because Ella's got that crush. The younger girls are loyal in a way. They wouldn't think to put Charlie with anybody because of course they know the way Ella

thinks about Charlie. He's –

Batya:

*Do they know? I'm not sure.*

Terri:

These kids are living on top of each other!

Batya:

I mean, that's true. ... I bet Sarah knows. I don't know about the others, but I bet Sarah knows.

Terri:

(overlapping) I bet Sarah knows.

Merav:

Sarah shares a bed with Ella.

Terri:

Sarah probably knows. So no, they're not going to look outside the family to set Charlie up.

Because Charlie's theirs.

Batya:

Yes.

Merav:

Right, exactly. I was gonna say that too.

Terri:

Again, in a way that, had Charlie, people in my life, who I grew up calling aunt and uncle, because we didn't call adults by their first names.

Batya:

Not without a title, yes.

Terri:

Not without a title, in my house, so had he been part of my house he would have been Uncle Charlie. There's a possessiveness that the girls

have of Charlie. Charlie is ours. We're not gonna give him to Miss Allen because Miss Allen isn't ours in the same way that Charlie is.

Batya:

I think – yeah. Yeah, well put.

Merav:

Right, and also, it probably doesn't occur to them, that Charlie is having whatever he's got going on in his life, they just know Charlie in the context of Papa.

Terri:

Right.

Merav:

Charlie is ours, Charlie is Papa's best friend, Charlie is part of our family, where is Charlie?

Terri:

Right.

Merav:

Cause like Sarah actually finds herself contemplating, like who are Charlie's parents? Does he have parents? Is he an orphan? You know, Henny is assuming that Charlie is choosing to go off and explore and adventure

...

Batya:

“I guess he likes it this way,” she says. And you can tell, you can tell that part of her is thinking...

Terri:

I would!

Batya:

I sure wouldn't mind living in such a way that I could come and go as I liked and no one could

stop me.

Terri:

And I didn't have to live on top of everyone.

Batya:

Yes.

Merav:

And Ella is making up a background for him, right? She's taking what she knows and she's trying to like manufacture a life story for Charlie because she's daydreaming about him and she wants to have facts to daydream on.

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

We've got those different perspectives and Charlotte is just kind of like, huh, Charlie comes

and goes. I wonder, there's nobody else in our lives that does that. Like, what is that about?

Terri:

Why they think about him so much is because he's so very different.

Merav:

And he's very present also.

Batya:

He's different from them, he's different from the other peddlers ...

Terri:

Right.

Batya:

He doesn't fit any standard framing for an adult that they have. They wanna know what's his deal.

Merav:  
Exactly.

Terri:  
Because he doesn't go into a box, they're trying to build the box around him.

Merav:  
Exactly. And because he's so very present with them when he's with them, and he's so very absent from their lives when he's gone, there's that feeling of like, wait, you were right here, ten minutes ago, now you're gone. And I don't know where to find you.

Terri:  
Other than Miss Allen – and Miss Allen doesn't do it to the extent that Charlie does – he's the only adult that engages with them on their level. He's not an authority in their lives. He's a friend.

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

And in this chapter, we see the beginning of Miss Allen becoming a friend.

Batya:

Yes, we do.

Terri:

But Miss Allen is still Miss Allen.

Merav:

Miss Allen.

Batya:

She has a specific role, she fits in it, there's no mystery about her.

Terri:

Yeah, and she has power over them.

Batya:

Also that, yes.

Terri:

She has been gracious in demonstrating it, but the girls are to some extent a little afraid because they know –

Batya:

Respectful, I would say. They're respectful of her authority.

Terri:

Yes, they're respectful of her authority because Miss Allen can make the library go away and they don't want that. Whereas Charlie comes, you know, I'm pretty sure at least in one picture, he's like physically on the level of the little girls.

And Charlie engages with them as kids. Miss Allen and Charlie are really the only people who let them be children in a way that modern children understand childhood.

Batya:

Yeah. Yeah.

Merav:

(overlapping) Yes.

Terri:

Mama and Papa have very strict requirements of their children, because that's the way they understand parenting.

Batya:

It's not that there's no room for playfulness in the house.

Terri:

(overlapping) No!

Batya:

There certainly is. But again, Charlie is a friendly, safe adult who's not an authority over them.

Terri:

Right. Which –

Batya:

And that's so good for them.

Terri:

What it does is, if Charlie wasn't there, there would never be a time – other than, they're starting to with Miss Allen – but if Charlie wasn't there, there would never be any interactions with adults that really allowed them to be children all of the time.

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

Yep.

Batya:

That's valuable.

Terri:

And again, I think – bringing back Little House. You don't get that until the kids start interacting with teachers in Little House.

Batya:

And teachers have to be very, very strict disciplinarians. You wanna talk about corporal punishment –

Terri:

(overlapping) Yeah, I know!

Batya:

– corporal punishment in the classroom being a thing. And there is this one teacher who is seen as deeply weird because she won't hit the kids.

Terri:

But with – those kids are never, especially when you're talking about who was the intended audience, by 1950, kids are kids in ways that they were not in 1912.

Batya:

Mm-hmm.

Merav:

Absolutely. And I think that gets emphasized in one of the beginnings of the other chapters is that they say, oh, there's no brook for them to play in ...

Batya:

(overlapping) Yeah.

Merav:

... there's not an environment for children. In this era, we actually have the, I think this is about ten, fifteen years later, we have the opening of the first playground on the Lower East Side, and they actually build tenement-shaped doll houses.

Batya:

I didn't know that. That's fantastic. Ah.

Terri:

That's amazing.

Merav:

There's photographs of it. It's really kind of amazing. But that doesn't happen for quite a while at this point.

Terri:

But you need, if kids are going to engage with it, you need that children-being-children.

Merav:

Exactly.

Terri:

And you also – this is, again, a lot of this is just occurring to me right now – you want them to be children in front of adults.

Batya:

It's good for kids to be able to be kids with adults and not just with other kids. And talking of things just occurring to us now, we have in this first book almost nothing of these girls interacting with other girls their age or other kids their age.

Terri:

Whoa!

Merav:

It's all off screen.

Batya:

Friends are mentioned, yeah.

Terri:

And they go to school.

Merav:

We hear about it, but we don't see it.

Batya:

We see it in some of the later books.

Merav:

The first time we get an onscreen friend, we get Guido and we get Grace, but those are the first

time we really get onscreen friends who aren't adults.

Batya:

And there's a bit with Henny hanging out with her friends or Henny bringing her friends into the house to see the baby in a later book.

Merav:

Spoiler. (laughter)

Batya:

But we have – spoiler, sorry. (laughter) We don't have kids outside of the family on screen in this book at all, I don't think.

Merav:

No.

Batya:

That's so odd.

Merav:

But it is, it is really the girls existing in the world of the adults.

Batya:

Very much so, yeah.

Merav:

And that is something that – there's a mentality, absolutely, like of being at home and being with adults versus being at school and being with other kids. And that's the story that Sydney Taylor chose to tell for this book, right? It's the adult world of Judaism, of the Lower East Side, of New York, encompassing this little family.

Terri:

And again, it's 1912. Childhood as a concept. Not really there yet.

Merav:

The Victorians have it.

Batya:

Not to the degree that it is later. You have – kids being kids, kids playing with each other out on the streets, is absolutely a thing in the tenements at this point.

Terri:

(overlapping) Yes!

Batya:

I'm thinking again of *Everything But Money*, which is a book I brought up in a previous chapter, it's comedian Sam Levinson writing about his childhood in just about this period, and he has whole chapters about street games. There is one crucial difference, he is a boy.

Terri:

He's a boy. I was just gonna say –

Merav:

Because we have pictures of girls playing street games, but Mama would never allow it.

Terri:

Right.

Merav:

These girls are starched and frilled within an inch of their lives. They're not going to squat in the street and play marbles.

Batya:

They're not gonna play stickball. They're not going to play “run under the horse's hooves before it can hit you.”

Terri:

And I don't think other girls their age would [to]

a large extent.

Merav:

Depending on where they were being raised and by whom.

Batya:

Depending on what their parent's approach was.

Merav:

And how many brothers they had.

Terri:

That is a big difference. This is a family of daughters. And actually, in this chapter, it is emphasized that the girls and Mama are both very proud of the fact that Mama presents herself well.

Batya:

Yeah.

Merav:

Yes, and there's a tiny bit of body shaming there too, where it's –

Batya:

(laughter) Yeah.

Terri:

I wasn't gonna bring that up! I was trying to be nice about it!

Merav:

I know, but it's right there on the page. And I kept that line in my head for years thinking, I don't want to turn into a mattress, right? And then, you know, of course, we all turn into mattresses eventually, that's aging.

Terri:

Yeah.

Batya:

And that just makes us comfier.

Merav:

Exactly. Mama has this proud carriage because she's carrying herself beautifully. Miss Allen does this too. And I think that that's one of the reasons that girls are so eager to introduce Miss Allen. They're like, here is a woman of Mama's quality that we can introduce her to.

Terri:

It's obvious that Mama cares enough about it to always look that way –

Merav:

Yes.

Terri:

— and to wear shirtwaists and skirts instead of cheap dresses and things like that. Because that's what Mama cares about, that's also what the girls are going to care about.

Batya:

And also what Mama is going to care about in terms of telling her girls how to behave.

Terri:

Right.

Batya:

I don't think we ever actually hear Mama tell the girls, "I expect you to behave like ladies," but there's something of that in there.

Merav:

It's heavily implied just by the culture in the home.

Batya:

Yeah.

Terri:

Right. There is an expectation that you will behave a certain way, and some of that has to do with the way that meals are regimented, which will come up later, and the way that behavior is regimented, and the fact that every child has a chore that they're obliged to do.

Merav:

Absolutely, and also because there's a monetary compensation. And Batya and I talked about this in an earlier episode of the social contract between the parent and the child, which is if you want your allowance money, you're going to behave according to our strictures, and these are the strictures.

Terri:

Right.

Merav:

And every child had that in their brain by the time that they were going to go out and interact with society.

Terri:

So there's not a whole lot of opportunity. The library is like their special place. That implies that they're not doing a lot of socializing with the other children in the neighborhood.

Batya:

Or if they are, it's entirely in the context of at school and not after school.

Terri:

(overlapping) Right.

Merav:

I mean, the girls do have friends. Like it's clear that there are definitely people outside the family who are significant. They're not coming on the page as often as we would expect in a narrative about children. The contemporary narrative about children, the parents would be eclipsed and the kids would be emphasized. And we've got the opposite. The kids are almost eclipsed by the adults in their world.

Batya:  
Yeah.

Terri:  
Because it's about family. I mean, that's the title of the book.

Merav:  
Exactly.

Batya:

That's a big thing, yeah, this is about their family life. And the presence of friends is only important in so far as it affects the family life –

Terri:

Right.

Batya:

Which it hasn't much yet. And it will more as they get older.

Terri:

Other than the last book, which is in many ways very different from every book that came before it –

Batya:

Oh yes.

Terri:

That's Ella, because it's *Ella of All of a Kind*

*Family*. And it is about Ella making vastly different choices than – and we're getting like way ahead of, I'm, you know, I'm way out over my skis here, but –

Merav:

You're gonna have to come back (laughter) for book five.

Batya:

Oh yes, come back for book five, if we get to book five.

Terri:

I would be delighted to come back for book five. I will come back for books two, three, and four.

Merav:

Recurring guest, Terri Ash.

Batya:

Yes!

Terri:

These books are very family-centric. They, their friends are always ancillary, and it's always about home and family, and that is the core. And that's why the books are called *All-of-a-Kind Family* and *More All-of-a-Kind Family* and *All-of-a-Kind Family Uptown* and *All-of-a-Kind Family Downtown*.

Merav:

Title drops! But it's true, because you get that expanding wave. As we establish characters, we've got this little circle of family, we've got our seven characters, and then we add our peddlers, and then we add our, we add our neighborhood. We add our religious figures. We add our extended family. And all of a sudden we have a larger family circle. We haven't even gotten to the uncles and aunts except for Uncle

Hyman. And so slowly, slowly, we're panning out from the family dining room and out into the world. And by the time that we get to books three or four, you can afford to have a couple of chapters that include friends, because everyone knows that the rest of the characters are still baked into the world.

Terri:

The first novel is very much a setting-establishment novel in a lot of ways.

Batya:

Yeah.

Terri:

It's establishing the character of the girls. And frankly, when you have five girls and – other than Gertie, who there's not a lot of there there because she's not that old –

Batya:

She's four.

Terri:

Four-year-olds definitely have independent personality, but when you're in a family of five, there's rarely a lot of there there for the youngest at this point. When you're spending all of this time establishinga whole chapter just on how do these girls spend their allowance money and eat their candy and their cookies ...

Batya:

Yeah, it's a great chapter. Love that one.

Terri:

It's a great chapter!

Merav:

A little callback to that chapter when they go into the fish shop –

Batya:

Yes!

Merav:

And Charlotte says, let's hold our noses while we're in the fish shop.

Batya:

And talk to each other with our noses held!

Merav:

With our noses held! That whole, Charlotte making the rule and Gertie following the rule, which is their dynamic, especially at this point. And later we see them on the Sabbath when everyone else is silently reading, Gertie is quietly reading in the corner with Charlotte reading to her because Gertie still doesn't read.

Terri:

There's not that much book. And if you're going to spend all this time establishing the character of five girls, there's not a lot of room for friends regardless.

Merav:  
Exactly.

Terri:  
There's just only so many words.

Batya:  
It's true.

Merav:  
Especially because they're inserting this arc plot for a romance, and they already have the characters of Mama and Papa, which are sort of, you have to have Mama and Papa or the story doesn't work. So now you've got two more adult characters who are significant. We've got

like eleven characters on the page now. That's a lot of people.

Batya:

Yeah.

Terri:

It's nine. That's not how math works.

Merav:

(laughter) That's not how math works. But we will have more characters. Like we do have recurring characters, shop owners, we've got the uncle, and we're eventually gonna have the aunts. So there is definitely that growing sense of like, who are all these people? And we know that Sydney Taylor actually slimmed down the number of aunts and uncles and children in the books to make it more palatable because you can't have that many people on the screen.

Batya:

Ensemble casts are hard to work with, and the more characters you have –

Merav:

Exactly.

Batya:

So since this is based on real life, deciding who to include and who to leave out was probably a whole thing.

Merav:

And I mean, we do know that she deliberately conflated some people. I mean, even Charlie and Miss Allen, I think, are actually conflations of people. They weren't real people necessarily. It's taking the story of a romance that happened to like an older neighbor who was friends with one of the girls, and taking that and transferring it to the library lady so that we have that neat

parallelism between Charlie and the library lady.

Terri

You're always going to get composites instead of people.

Batya:

And composites of individuals and also stories being conflated and edited and dramatized because very seldom, not never, but seldom that things that happen exactly the way they do in real life make for great stories. What do you put in, what do you take out is what makes the story work as a story. And sometimes what you have to do, or what you choose to do, to make it an even better story is to fictionalize an aspect. And that's really a big thing of what we've been discussing all through these books is what gets fictionalized.

Terri:

Yes.

Batya:

Terri, thanks so much for joining us. This has been great.

Merav:

It was delightful.

Batya:

I do hope we can get you back for later ones. For our audience, tell us, where can we find you? What, if anything, are you working on?

Terri:

Thank you so much for having me. This has been wonderful. So you can find me on most social media platforms at a very archaic handle that dates back to the days of ye olde Livejournal, which tells you just how internet old I am.

Batya:

Ah!

Terri:

Which is at C R E W G R R L, @crewgrrl, except on Instagram where I'm something else, but I hate Instagram, so don't go find me there. My personal website where you can also purchase me as a Wrangler, which is artistwrangling.com. Very complicated. And basically anywhere also that Geek Calligraphy, my other business, lives on social media. And right now I am working on doing all of the seven million freelancing things that I do and trying to get some Geek Calligraphy things out before the end of the year.

Merav:

Thank you so much for being here. It's been delightful and we look forward to having you

come back someday.

Batya:

Indeed.

Merav:

I'm Merav Hoffman.

Batya:

And I'm Batya Wittenberg, and we're really glad you're here.

Merav:

Tune in next time when we'll hear Ella say, "I think we're old enough to buy a present for Papa this year."

Batya:

*Our opening theme music is the public domain Dill Pickles Rag, performed here by Arthur Pryor's Band, courtesy of the Internet Archive.*

*Our closing theme music is the La Sirene Waltz, also in the public domain, written by Pietro Deiro, performed here by Daniel Gunderson and Sunnie Larsen. All-of-a-Kind Podcast's logo is by Al Benbow. Please see our full production credits on our website at <https://all-of-a-kind-podcast.com>.*