



Finding Inspiration in Israel

Twenty children's book authors joined PJ Library in Israel this spring. They returned energized to tell new stories.

BY NAOMI PFEFFERMAN

In Jerusalem this past May, children's book author Nancy Churnin stood inside the Yad B'Yad (Hand in Hand) school for Israeli Jewish and Arab children, tears welling in her eyes. She watched as students of both backgrounds laughed, held hands, and ran down a hallway adorned with vibrant signs in Hebrew and Arabic. Two little girls giggled as they scampered up a staircase.

The girls' exuberance filled Churnin, whose book *Dear Mr. Dickens* won a National Jewish Book Award, with joy and awe. "They were just children, enjoying each other's friendship, celebrating a world in which everything is possible," she says. On the spot, she was inspired to write a children's book based on their bond: "I wanted to tell their story, hoping that it would encourage children everywhere to break down walls and form friendships like theirs."

Churnin was one of 20 children's book writers and illustrators, selected from more

Writers learned, bonded, explored Jewish history, and experienced Israel's cultural milieu.

PHOTOS BY DANIELLE MEHLER

than 100 applicants, who attended PJ Library's 2023 Author Israel Adventure, a nine-day tour designed to introduce storytellers to the wonders of Jewish history and the vivid cultures, places, and people of Israel. PJ Library first organized trips in 2018 and 2019, followed by a pause due to the pandemic.

The goal of the Author Israel Adventure is to inspire the creation of excellent, high-quality children's books that celebrate Jewish and Israeli stories and experiences, according to Catriella Freedman, PJ Library's director of author and illustrator stewardship. "If we really want authors to write about Israel and to engage with Jewish topics, we need to send them to Israel," she says.

Since the first Author Israel Adventure, writers who attended have published some 20 books inspired by their experiences, says Patrick Coyle, PJ Library's author and illustrator stewardship coordinator and co-organizer of the trip with Freedman.

Supported by a grant from Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies and PJ Library Alliance partner funding, the 2023 Author Israel Adventure was a highlight in a year-long stewardship initiative for authors that featured intensive online workshops and the ability to discuss and develop book ideas and themes in a group setting.

Many who attended this year's Israel trip said they found the experience memorable and moving. Authors swam in the Dead Sea, met members of the Indian and Ethiopian Jewish communities, networked with renowned Israeli authors such as Etgar Keret, and visited the Western Wall. On one exhilarating excursion, participants trekked through King David's palace, traversed the subterranean Herodian tunnel, and emerged near the City of David in Jerusalem.

Writer Richard Ho, author of *Two New Years*, recounted a nighttime walk from a Bedouin camp into the Negev (the southern Israeli desert), lit only by the moon and stars. The group had been studying the portion of the Torah in which God commands Abraham to leave home and venture into the wilderness. "Each of us stood alone in the desert," Ho recalls, noting that the darkness and isolation profoundly affected him. "It was just you, your reflections, and God. It will always stay with me as one of my most powerful experiences."

For author Adam Gidwitz, a standout moment occurred while visiting the ruins at Qumran, where Jewish scribes wrote and copied the Dead Sea Scrolls some 2,000 years ago. These scribes worked in shifts, 24 hours a day, burning candles all night long. As writers, Gidwitz says he and his fellow authors "felt like these were our people in some way."

During an excursion to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, Gidwitz and the other authors perused fragments of those same scrolls. Museum employees allowed them to view the ancient writings not behind a barrier but up close in the lab. One of the participants read aloud from a scroll that featured the words *hinei ma tov*. (*Hinei ma tov u'ma na'im shevet achim gam yachad*, "how good and pleasant it is to live together in unity," has become a popular Hebrew song.) "We all suddenly started to sing along," Gidwitz recalls. "It made us acutely aware of the continuity of the practice and experience of Judaism."


Before the Author Israel Adventure, Gidwitz had tabled a book idea about a Jewish boy who

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CATRIELLA
FREEDMAN

accompanies a female spy to Israel during the Ottoman Empire period. He felt he couldn't pen the story, in part, because he had never been to Israel. Now his experience in Israel has rekindled the story. "I was not going to be able to write it, and now I think I can," he says.

The inspiration authors have gleaned from the trip is long-lasting, according to Susanna Reich, who attended the first Author Israel Adventure in 2018.

"It really connected me to my being Jewish in a way that I had never experienced before, and I have since written several books with Jewish subjects," Reich says. "It has really changed my writing and my sense of myself as a Jewish person. I'm very grateful." 

Naomi Pfefferman is a freelance writer based in California.

REFLECTIONS

This past October, Author Israel Adventure alums reunited for a writing retreat at the Highlights Foundation in Pennsylvania. In addition to preplanned activities, the authors and illustrators engaged in supportive conversations about Israel, Jewish identity, and storytelling through the lens of the then-recent tragedy in Israel. Here we share some of their heartfelt reflections with our thanks.

"I had the opportunity to visit Israel in May with a group of authors and PJ Library staff. One of my biggest takeaways? I was able to exhale and be Jewish without fear. I was, for the first time, in a community where I was supported, welcomed, and safe. ... I write books for kids, and no matter how dark my work gets, there must always be a glimmer of hope. We will work on our stories for kids and do our bit to put hope out in the world. I'm not sure what else to do, but living is resistance. Being a proud Jew is resistance."

-Joanne Levy

"As writers, we know persistence, we know grit, we know community. To me, this is Israel. It's the perpetuity of our people through dogged perseverance and unwavering courage — a promise to the Jewish souls who lived before and those yet to be born that despite everything, we will endure."

-Jennifer Wolf Kam