

Author Spotlight

With

Ellen Kushner



Growing up, did you read a lot of fantasy novels?

I devoured books by C.S. Lewis, Madeleine L'Engle, and J.R.R. Tolkien. If they'd published *Harry Potter* then, I would have loved that, too. I loved anything that smacked of magical adventure. I wanted to enter those worlds because they glowed in the dark.

The authors you mentioned were strong Christians and their writing reflects their beliefs. How did you reconcile their Christian message with your Jewish heritage?

As a kid I wasn't even aware that I was inhaling huge amounts of Christianity with every page I turned. My Hebrew school teachers and synagogue librarians were always trying to get me to read Jewish books for kids, but they were about things that didn't really interest me, like how to get along with other kids or your family in the real world. I said, "Phooey on that! Give me magic and adventure!"

It wasn't until I got older that I realized to fully enter those worlds, I had to leave behind a little of what I was, and am: a Jewish kid who identified strongly with my people's history. In retrospect, I wish there had been a way for me to find that "numinousness" of the best fantasy in something from my own people; for me to feel that close to the Jewish world on terms that made sense to my inner self.

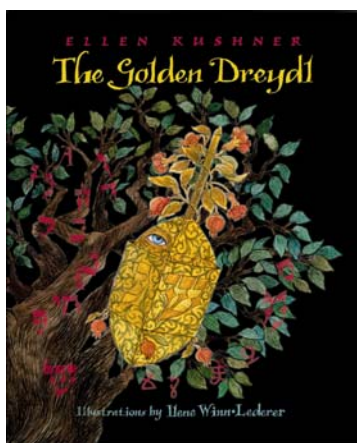
What was the inspiration for *The Golden Dreydl*?

I loved Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*. I used to put on the record and dance around the living room in my petticoat, trying to be Clara, the Sugar Plum Fairy, and all the other characters from the ballet. I dreamed of something magical like that happening to me! But I was Jewish. A giant Christmas tree wasn't ever going to grow in my living room.



Years later, when I was a professional radio host and fantasy novelist, I learned that Shirim Klezmer Orchestra, a Boston-based band, had recorded a klezmer version of the *Nutcracker Suite*. As I listened, I heard how wonderfully this nineteenth-century Russian composer's ballet music complemented the dance music of nineteenth-century Jewish villagers.

I wanted to write a story to go with this crazy klezmer music, to bring some of my own people's point of view into the holiday fantasy discourse. So the guys from Shirim and I sat down together to create a Chanukah variation on the *Nutcracker Suite*.



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Using their music, I wrote a whole new story, full of magic and adventure and all the things I loved—but with a Jewish slant. I drew on Jewish folklore, mythology, and, just as important, Jewish ethics and worldview. I also wanted to make the story more modern: instead of a Christmas ball with an enchanted nutcracker prince for little Clara, *The Golden Dreydl* opens with a Chanukah party where Sara’s magical aunt gives her an enchanted dreydl that turns into a girl her own age who takes her to a land of adventure that tests her wits and courage.

The band and I took our new story on the road, and have performed it onstage in cities all over the country. It was then turned into a public radio special that airs every year for Chanukah, and was later picked up as an album by Rykodisc.

Was it difficult to adapt the live performance into a chapter book?

When editor Judy O’Malley asked me to turn the story to a book for children, I thought, “Great! I’ll just add some lines of description to my performance script, and it will be done in a couple of days!” But once I sat down with it, I realized I wanted the book to be a little deeper than the script. Writing it as a book allowed me to flesh out more of the characters, the family dynamics, the mythos of my imaginary land—and to be sure the plot really did make sense!

What do you hope Jewish readers will take with them after reading the book?

The Golden Dreydl is the first book I’ve written that consciously drew on Jewish material. Most of the “magic” in the book comes from some aspect of Jewish folklore or tradition—transformed by my own imagination, and what I learned from the classic fantasists—not to mention my own family’s rich store of jokes that always got trotted out after a big family dinner (kind of like dessert—only with words).

Even some Jewish kids don’t know that much about their own traditions. I don’t want to be preachy, though. I just want them to sense that magic can happen anywhere. And I hope they’ll all giggle knowingly and say, “Hey – I have cousins like that, too!”

What do you hope readers who are not familiar with Jewish traditions will gain?

I hope all readers recognize themselves in the story. It would make me very sad to think that this book got put on the Special Jewish shelf; as if to say, “It is your obligation to read this book if you are Jewish, and if you are not, it’s not for you so you can ignore it.” We all have crabby days, and fights with our family, and good times with them, too, and times when we feel challenged to deal with things beyond what we think our strength is.

I believe it’s really important—and delicious—to read about people who don’t live lives that are just like yours, and to revel in the difference. I loved *Little Women* and *The Secret Garden* and any number of books about kids whose lives couldn’t have been more different from mine – not because of religion, but because they weren’t twentieth century Americans. I hope people who didn’t grow up with the traditions of Sara’s family (and that includes many Jews) feel about this book the way I felt about those books: it’s great to enter another world and love it and its people as much as your own, and even to feel part of them while you’re reading. We’re very different, and we’re not different at all, and both are true at the same time.

