



Inside
**THE SCHMUTZY
FAMILY**
An interview with
debut picture book
author
Madelyn Rosenberg

Q: *What was the inspiration behind the book?*

A: Possibly my own sloppiness? As a kid, my mother said I always seemed to leave a trail wherever I went, like a slug; and no amount of “make your bed” or “close the cabinets” ever seemed to cure me. Now I have my own house, and I’m afraid I’m not much better. We also have one of those family stories—not from Shabbat, but from Passover—where my brother and a friend were playing in the bedroom during a seder. They were giggling, and suddenly the giggling stopped. My mother went charging in and found they’d covered themselves and the entire room with baby powder. She tells that story all the time, and I think maybe I’m telling that story too, only in a different way.

Q: *What makes this book special to you? What important message do you feel it brings to young readers?*

A: I think readers are always looking for characters like themselves in books. Maybe I was looking for a messy family that reflected my own. I also really wanted to write a story that had some humor in it. Jews have had such a dramatic and turbulent history, so of course our books reflect that and respect that and remember that. They should. At the same time, there are lots of moments of silliness and laughter. At the heart of it, I wanted to write something that would make kids smile.

Q: *What was your favorite book growing up?*

A: With Jewish books, that's easy: *All of a Kind Family*. We weren't Orthodox, and we lived in southwest Virginia instead of New York, and it wasn't the Depression, and we weren't dirt poor; but they were Jewish characters so I felt as if they were exactly like me. My daughter did a book report on one of those books just recently, and she used my old copy, with the cover taped on. With secular books, I adored *The Phantom Tollbooth* and *A Wrinkle in Time* and *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*. For picture books, I still have my copies of *The Witch Next Door*, *Patrick Will Grow*, and *Gordon and the Glockenspiel*. And of course I never would have made it through my teen years without Judy Blume. With my own kids, I've found a lot of new favorites, including *Mister Dog*, *The Little Fur Family*, *Leonardo the Terrible Monster*, *A Snowy Day*, and *Bee-Wiggled*. Oh, and *Meet Wild Boars!* (And many more. This is like asking me to list my favorite songs. I can't do it!)



Q: *What is your favorite memory from childhood?*

A: Too many to list here, too, but I remember a day spent in the creek where I came home with so much mud slathered all over me that my mother had to spray me off with the hose before she'd let me in the house.

Totally worth it, though, and it happened more than once. We lived on a great street growing up—a dead end that stopped at the woods—and we would play out there for hours, making pottery out of Virginia clay, discovering an abandoned house (and an abandoned still), climbing trees, catching salamanders and crayfish. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Q: *Did you have any pets? If so, which one was your favorite?*

A: I had a dog growing up, so of course he was my favorite. Taylor. He was the perfect mutt. I also had the aforementioned salamanders, who never

lasted long, and box turtles. We caught a possum once, but he was NOT my favorite, and a black snake. Now I have two cats who are incredible troublemakers.

Q: *What inspired you to write and when did you know you would become an author?*

A: I've written my whole life, and I always tell everyone I'm a one-trick pony: I can't really do anything BUT write. I was always making stories for my family when I was little. My relatives told me I should be a children's writer starting in fifth grade when I did a project for school ("How the Raccoon Got Its Mask") but it never really stuck that I could turn that type of writing—or any other—into a career. I went to college as an English major and promptly discovered the student newspaper, which really changed my life. I could write! For a living! I could ask people questions, and they would answer them! And I continued to write my own stories. I got serious about them in 2000 when I went back to grad school for creative writing.

Q: *If there is one thing you could tell your readers about life, what would you say?*

A: I think maybe it would be: believe in yourself. There are plenty of people who will tell you—whatever you're interested in—that you CANT do it, or you won't make money if you try to do it, and point out every obstacle in your way. It's hard to keep that mantra in your head: I can do it; I can! Especially in the writing world if you get the occasional rejection that tells you otherwise. But it's necessary and it applies to so much more than writing—for me and for anyone who chooses to listen to me. My mom always said I had "perseverance," which goes hand in hand with belief. I know it helped me in writing. It also helped me earn a spot on my junior high basketball team even though I was the shortest kid on the court.

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by Madelyn Rosenberg

illustrated by Paul Meisel

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