

CULTURE & ARTS

The First Murder, She Wrote**The BJV's own Carol Goodman Kaufman has a new Berkshires mystery novel now on the shelves**

By Albert Stern / BJV Editor

If you've read the bio at the end of the Traveling With Jewish Taste articles that Carol Goodman Kaufman has contributed to the BJV for 17 years, you know that our columnist's resume is incredibly diverse – but let me tell you that the accomplishments she doesn't usually include are as impressive as those she does.

She earned a Ph.D. in industrial and organizational psychology; worked as a university lecturer; done post-graduate work in criminology; authored a non-fiction study, *Sins of Omission: The Jewish Community's Reaction to Domestic Violence*; served as the Hadassah National Co-Chair of Youth Aliyah; published three children's books under the pen name of Carolinda Goodman; contributed stories on food history to national magazines; hosts the "Murder We Write" crime fiction podcast; and interviewed renowned Jewish authors for the Berkshire Jewish Voice.

Now – after experiencing just about all of the twists and turns a first-time author might have to face on the road to publication – she can add novelist to that overstuffed curriculum vitae. *The First Murder* is a mystery set in the Berkshires that revolves around a tight-knit group of friends whose (mostly) peaceful lives are upended when one meets an untimely, and seemingly rather sordid end. At the center of this circle of friends is Boston brahmin and former New York City cop Caleb Crane, police chief of the town of Queensbridge – a fictionalized version of a town famously known for its three stop signs, two police officers, and one police car. More accustomed perhaps to solving mysteries such as finding out who might have thrown the garbage to the bottom of the 15-foot cliff, Chief Crane not only must find out who killed his close friend, but navigate the emotional landmines amidst his community, circle of friends, and beloved wife – any of whom might have had either a plausible or lunatic reason to have committed the murder. And, it should go without saying, Caleb Crane carries some dark baggage of his own.

One of the things that works best about *The First Murder* is the way Carol captures the tensions between the locals who have been here forever and newcomers of various stripes. As a Pittsfield native who now lives more of a second-homeowner life in the Berkshires, she is able to capture both the insider and outsider points of view. Throughout the novel, twists are provided when Chief Crane stumbles upon connections among the suspects that, depending on whether one was a townie or an interloper, would either be common knowledge or dark secrets. Not only that, there are many of Carol's other interests and areas of expertise – food, gardening, psychology, and Jewish life – interwoven into the plot.

It's a fun mystery that fans of both the genre and the Berkshires will enjoy. And the early reviews have been glowing: "An engrossing, thorny whodunit," according to Kirkus Reviews, "set in a small town with big secrets." It's now available through online retailers and should be on the shelves of all our bookstores – check the BJV and the BJV online for author talks that were still being scheduled at press time.

In March, I spoke with Carol about *The First Murder*. Our conversation was edited for length and clarity.

Now you're a published mystery writer and, as your podcast attests, you're also a mystery aficionado. In my experience, while many crime novels follow similar formulas, what differentiates them is the setting. So what would you say are the Berkshires' unique or specific characteristics that make it an interesting setting for a book like *The First Murder*?

Well, I think there are a couple things that make the Berkshires interesting. Number one is they're so gorgeous. And because I use Purim a theme in the book, a holiday where nothing is as it seems to be, I think that makes for a good setting. I mean, the natural beauty of the Berkshires, the cultural level with the music and the dance and the theater – we have everything. And yet, behind closed doors, who knows what's really happening?



What do you consider yourself now – a second-homeowner or perhaps a part-time resident? Do you think this is really a place of deep, dark secrets? I only say that because I don't.

First of all, I grew up in Pittsfield, so to me, right, so it's sort of like...I wouldn't exactly call it making *aliyah* back. I'm a returnee. They say you can't go home again, but frankly, I'm trying my hardest to make myself go home again. I love it out in the Berkshires. It's my happy place.

I talk to myself a lot. I like a story. I love mysteries. I've loved mystery stories ever since I started reading the Happy Hollisters as a child and then went to Nancy Drew and then went to Agatha Christie on and on and on. I love a mystery, and part of it may be because I love puzzles. I like to see if we can solve something. Can I guess who the evil person is? And also, I like to see justice. And in the genre, there are certain formulas you have to follow, and for the most part, you have to bring about justice. At the end, you have to have a solution. You can't just leave it hanging.

And do I really think that there's deep, dark secrets here? Oh, yeah. Every place.

So what kind of miscreant do you think the Berkshires will attract? What are the advantages here for a criminal?

Oh, wealthy second-homeowners, for one. It would be good for a financial fraud. I can see a con man coming in and doing a scam – you're giving me ideas for a new story. Well, we've had horrible crimes. We've had people gone missing, right? I know two women who have gone

missing and one woman who was killed right near us. No one knows what happened. I mean, there can be evil working within the native population, and there can be evil coming in from outside.

Here you hear people say, well, you're not really a local till you've been here for four generations. As Crane moves through the story, he stumbles upon nuggets of information that would be common knowledge to people who are from here, such as the motorcycle accident that left one character in a wheelchair, but that he didn't know about even though he works with her. I thought it was very interesting to have a character in that position. Was that a very conscious decision on your part rather than making him a native of the Berkshires?

You know, I don't think it was a conscious decision. I like the idea that he comes in. People coming in from outside can see it with fresh eyes, without the baggage of multiple generations. That's why he has to be a good detective. As an author you have to throw some clues here and there, but Caleb has to figure things out himself, and that's what propels the narrative. If he knew everything all along, he would just say, oh, well, this and this, A,B,C, and D, this must be the killer.

What role does the Berkshires play in the story?

I wanted a setting that I was familiar with that I would be able to write about knowledgeably. And there are certain natural, physical features of the Berkshires that cry out to me – the change of the seasons. I mean, I lived in Colorado, where there's brown and there's green. That's it. If there's white, the white is there for 30 minutes, and it melts.

Here, the way the trees are bare in the winter I saw as a metaphor for baring souls. The hills are like mother's breasts – very comforting, very welcoming. I needed to set my story in a place that I was familiar with. I can't imagine writing a story about a place like India that I'd never been to. I mean, I could look at Google Earth. I could read online. I could make things up, but it wouldn't have that flavor. It wouldn't have the fragrance of the Berkshires. What the earth smells like in April when things are thawing out. There's a certain fragrance to it. And there's a feel going over potholes, too.

ADA SAGI,*continued from page 24*

When I face-timed with Ada, she gave me a quick virtual tour of her bright and cheery apartment on the 12th floor. All the furnishings are new, and the setting seems very comfortable. But Ada is a kibbutznik. Since age 18, she has lived in a collectivist community in nature where you walk out your door into a garden. Choosing to live on a kibbutz is an ideological choice. A high-rise is not a kibbutz and Ada is 75 years old.

Most of the remaining kibbutz members are likewise housed temporarily in Carmel Gat. When asked if she has been back to see Nir Oz, or whether she has any desire to do so, I received an emphatic "no." The devastation and destruction there is too painful. Half the village was destroyed by fire on October 7. Her family retrieved some books, but that's it. But Ada is not alone: Kibbutz Nir Oz has been decimated and no one is currently planning to return. Apparently, a group of 36 families are seeking to find a new home on an already established kibbutz. Integrating into a new kibbutz also presents challenges. But as for the elders of Kibbutz Nir Oz, this is not an option.

Ada is a very strong and resilient woman. She attended several therapy sessions addressing post-traumatic stress, but felt that they were no longer needed. She is putting her teaching skills to good use by working with students on remedial education.

She mentioned that recently a group of about ten kibbutz members gathered in a new community room for an activity, and one of the women bemoaned the fact that more people didn't attend. Sadly, Ada reminded her fellow kibbutznik that this was not due to lack of interest, but rather that they have lost the others perhaps forever.

The destruction of this kibbutz community is a profound loss that can't really be adequately fixed. Honestly, it makes me want to scream. Does the world yet comprehend this? With all the criticism of Israel's military response in Gaza, do people still not understand that no nation in the world can tolerate a threat of this magnitude to its residents living within their recognized borders? And Hamas has made it clear, that given the chance, they'll do it again, since their goal is the eradication of Jewish Israel.

Ada is trying to keep hope alive for the return of the remaining hostages, but admits that that hope is dimming as more and more days pass. She is surrounded by loving family: two sons and a daughter and six grandchildren. As terrible as her ordeal was, she survived and is doing the best she can and is living a purposeful life. When I asked her to describe how this ordeal has changed her, she replied: "It's too soon to say. But all my life has changed...my home, my kibbutz, and my Israel."

Hearing her first-hand account was so meaningful, and I hope she has the strength to continue to share it. Hers is a story of heroism and resilience in the face of unspeakable and cruel terror. Who kidnaps an elderly widow? It's a question with no answer but there is simply no "context" to excuse such a morally reprehensible act. None.

Ruth Kaplan is a writer and consultant with a varied career including academic pursuits in Jewish history, social services and governmental work, private practice as an attorney, and public service as an elected and appointed official dealing with public education. For the past 15 years, she has served the Jewish and Israeli communities in a variety of leadership roles. This story originally appeared on her Times of Israel blog.