



## Transcript: Unraveling a Mother-Daughter Mystery With Author Mary Morris | Hadassah Magazine Presents

[00:00:00] **Mary Morris:** My family's origins are Russian Jews. I always felt I wanted to write about the Holocaust, but I didn't feel I owned that narrative, if you know what I mean. As a writer, there are stories that we choose to write about. And then there are stories that choose you and I feel that this is a story that shows me.

[00:00:22] **Lisa Hostein:** Hello and welcome to Hadassah Magazine Presents, a program and podcast for those who love Hadassah and want more. And for those who have never heard of the magazine and are looking for stimulating conversations with acclaimed Jewish authors, thinkers, celebrities, and culinary stars, I'm your host, Lisa Hostein, the executive editor of *Hadassah Magazine*.

[00:00:44] **Lisa Hostein:** I'm delighted to be in conversation today with Mary Morris, an award-winning author whose latest book, *The Red House*, is simultaneously a chilling mystery and a disturbing exploration of a little known aspect of Holocaust history set in Italy. It's a beautifully written, intensely engaging novel that our reviewer described as a penetrating psychological narrative.

[00:01:08] **Lisa Hostein:** Mary Morris is the author of numerous novels, including *Gateway to the Moon*, three collections of short stories and five travel memoirs, including *All the Way to The Tigers*, and what has become a travel classic, *Nothing to Declare: Memoirs of a Woman Traveling Alone*. Her stories and essays have appeared in such places as *The Atlantic*, *The Paris Review*, and *The New York Times*, the recipient of the Rome Prize in literature and the 2016 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for fiction.

[00:01:38] **Lisa Hostein:** Morris taught for many years at Princeton University and Sarah Lawrence College. *The Red House* represents her third novel in which she explores buried or lost histories. She lives in Brooklyn, New York. Welcome, Mary. Thank you so much for being here, and congratulations on this book.

[00:01:54] **Mary Morris:** Thank you, Lisa. Thank you for having me, and thank you to Hadassah for joining this.

[00:01:57] **Mary Morris:** I appreciate it very much.

[00:01:58] **Lisa Hostein:** Absolutely. So I wanna start with a pretty simple question. Mm-hmm. I want you to give a synopsis of *The Red House*. I like to ask the author to do that because you're after all the creator, and it's interesting to see how you describe the book so briefly without too many spoilers.

[00:02:15] **Mary Morris:** Right. No spoilers. So Laura Smith is a wannabe artist, but she's actually a real estate stager. When she was 12 years old, Laura's mother disappeared without a trace. Laura lived with her father and sister in New Jersey and for the last 30 years. Her mother has been missing. There's a detective, detective Hendricks, who has been on the case of the missing mother for many years.

[00:02:41] **Mary Morris:** He and Laura have had a complicated relationship, and when the novel opens, Laura has received a phone call from Detective Hendricks after many years, and rather than return the phone call, she decides to flee to Italy. She has a marriage on the rocks. She goes back to Italy where she was born and where she lived for the first six years of her life to try to find some trace of her mother's story.

[00:03:06] **Mary Morris:** She knows very little about her mother. She believes she was an orphan. She was orphaned in Naples. That is really all Laura has to go by except the town that she was born in, which is Brindisi, Italy.

[00:03:18] **Lisa Hostein:** It is a mystery, but clearly it's part Holocaust literature. Which has become this amazingly popular form of literature.

[00:03:28] **Lisa Hostein:** It amazes me all the time. Every day, every week we get another press release about another Holocaust fiction, Holocaust literature, and some writers devote all their writing to that. Right. But this is new for you. This is a new theme, and you have an interesting story about how you stumbled upon the story.

[00:03:47] **Lisa Hostein:** So tell us about that and what ultimately inspired you to pursue it as a novel.

[00:03:52] **Mary Morris:** Let me just start off by saying my family's origins are Russian Jews. I always felt I wanted to write about the Holocaust, but I didn't feel I owned that narrative, if you know what I mean. You know, as a writer, there are stories that we choose to write about, and then there are stories that choose you, and I feel that this is a story that chose me.

[00:04:10] **Mary Morris:** For 20 years, my husband and I did house exchanges. We swapped our house for strangers houses, and that's how we traveled the world with our daughter. After 20 years, I decided it was enough. It's a lot of work. You have to clean your house, you have to do a lot of things. I said, no more, and literally the next day we got a beautiful offer for this farmhouse in southern Italy in Puglia.

[00:04:30] **Mary Morris:** Puglia is south of Naples. It's about four-ish hours south of Naples. I'd never been there before. It was a beautiful offer and we went and it was fantastic, and we'd been there a little while when the family lived in the area and one of the members of the family called me and said, I wanna take you to this town called Alberobello.

[00:04:49] **Mary Morris:** Well, as you mentioned, Lisa, I'm a part-time travel writer. I mean, I have a little side hustle there in travel writing. I knew about Alberobello. I knew that it was a very touristy place and I didn't really wanna go, but I couldn't be rude. I had to be polite. I agreed to go. Alberobello looks like a town designed for Hobbit.

[00:05:08] **Mary Morris:** I mean, it's little conical shaped houses. It is very touristy. There are, you know, buses and you know, people walking around with duck umbrellas and tour groups and all of it. And after about a half an hour I said to our hosts I wanted to rest and I bought a gelato and I went and sat in a little courtyard.

[00:05:27] **Mary Morris:** And in the courtyard, this is Hadassah. So I guess I can say there was a first shrunken, a little tree in front of me, not far from me. A very little tree, and the tree had this big plaque around it. But I thought, well, that's interesting. The tree has a plaque around it. I wonder what the plaque says. I'm a curious person.

[00:05:44] **Mary Morris:** And I went up and the plaque was written in two languages. One I read very well, which is Italian, and one I can work my way

through, which is Hebrew. And the plex said, I'm gonna not probably get this exactly right from the people of Jerusalem to the people of Alberobello. For your kindness and generosity during the racial period.

[00:06:06] **Mary Morris:** And I was like, what could this strange little town have to do with the racial, you know, Mussolini and the Holocaust and you know, Italian Jews and, and all of that. I mean, I knew enough of the history to know that that's what they were referring to, and that's set me on this search that that took a number of years.

[00:06:23] **Mary Morris:** And I won't go into why the plaque was there, but a lot of the book for me was the discovery of why that plaque was there. To be straight with you. No one in the town knew why the plaque was there. They didn't know what it referred to. They didn't know anything about it. I filed it away. I was working on other things just before COVID.

[00:06:40] **Mary Morris:** We went back to Italy. My neighbor was walking his dog. He said, what are you doing? I said, we're on our way to Italy. This was before we went. And I said, ah. He started talking to me in Italian and I didn't know he spoke Italian and I started speaking to him in Italian. He told me they were Roman Jews and that their family had been sequestered during the Holocaust.

[00:06:59] **Mary Morris:** And I said, do you know anything about Alberobello? And he sent me a bunch of articles. He said he didn't, but he sent me a bunch of articles. I like to joke that my husband has an annoying habit of sleeping on long haul flights and I'm wide awake. I downloaded all these articles and I was reading them, and at one point I found a footnote that sent.

[00:07:17] **Mary Morris:** On the outskirts of Alberobello was a detention camp called The Red House, La Casa Rosa. So I kind of knew I had to find it.

[00:07:24] **Lisa Hostein:** Such serendipity. Right. So the Red House was an actual building.

[00:07:29] **Mary Morris:** We found it. It took a long time. It's not on any now. It is, it wasn't. Then we're talking six years ago. It wasn't on any route that people would find it.

[00:07:39] **Mary Morris:** It looks like a giant red. It looks like a concentration camp. We got there and then I, I called the family member that I was friendly with and she said, I think I know someone who can help you learn about this.

And it's the one guy in all of Italy who had the key to the padlock to that building. Like literally the only guy.

[00:07:58] **Mary Morris:** And they were about to turn it into a discotech. And then someone in the Italian Historical Society said, wait a minute, I don't think that can be a discotech. 'cause I think. It's had other histories. That building, it was an agricultural school, it was an orphanage. And then during the second World War, during the Mussolini period from 1940 to 43, it was a detention center for Jews.

[00:08:18] **Lisa Hostein:** So how did you land on centering your story around that?

[00:08:22] **Mary Morris:** That's a really interesting question. So I had the knowledge, but I didn't have the story. Do you know what I mean? Like I knew. I was able to go into this building. I don't think anyone had really walked in there in 70 years, except for a very, very few number of people, including the person who had the key to the padlock of the door.

[00:08:40] **Mary Morris:** You know, I walked in that building and I was just chilled to the bone, but I didn't really have a story. I knew I wanted to write about it, but I didn't know what it was. So, because I'm a storyteller, I'm gonna tell you one other little story, which is a little dark. But you know, I'm in my office now and you see behind me there's a big bulletin board with lots of.

[00:08:56] **Mary Morris:** Scrap paper and things like that. And I collect all this stuff. And in 2005 I was in the Memphis Airport on a book tour and something fell behind me and I turned around. It was this early TSA, you know, so a man had dropped a button, a large, like a political button, and I picked it up and there was a woman's face on it and it said, have you seen this woman?

[00:09:18] **Mary Morris:** I went to hand it back to him and he said, no, you keep that. That's my wife. And she's gone missing. And I give those to people anyway, so I want you to keep that. And I didn't know what to do with it. And I brought it home with me in 2005 and I put it on my bulletin board. And in 2019, when I sat down to write *The Red House*, I turned around and that button with the woman's face was behind me, and her name was Viola, and I named the missing mother, Viola in the novel.

[00:09:48] **Mary Morris:** You know, it was literally a shard of something that I collected in 2005. Didn't start to write it until, I can't do the math, but I guess it's 14 years later. I guess I did the math.

[00:09:59] **Lisa Hostein:** Not only did you do the math, but you gave us such an interesting window into the process of a novelist, right? How these stories just come about in all kinds of mysterious ways.

[00:10:13] **Advertisement :** Here's a great way to get even more out of a Hadassah membership. Join one of Hadassah's Professional Councils. This is a free add-on benefit of membership. For those in qualifying professions, open to both active and retired members of these professions, attorneys and judges, educators, nurses, and allied health professionals and physicians, you'll get opportunities to network.

[00:10:37] **Advertisement :** Special programming unique to your profession and the opportunity to band together to fight antisemitism in your field. Find out more by visiting [www.hadassah.org](http://www.hadassah.org) and going to the page for professional councils under the get involved tab.

[00:10:55] **Lisa Hostein:** So there's so much to unpack here. There's the powerful yet disturbing mother daughter relationship, other family dynamics.

[00:11:04] **Lisa Hostein:** What happened to the Jews of Italy? Intergenerational trauma art as an expression of grief and loss and memory. There's just so much in this rich book. So let's start with the mother-daughter dynamic. Sure. It's not too much of a spoiler. You already talked about how she disappeared, and there's Laura who lost her.

[00:11:24] **Lisa Hostein:** Her mother disappeared when she was 12 years old. Right. So tell us what in your mind is most important about these two women and their relationship?

[00:11:33] **Mary Morris:** So Laura has lived with a maternal abandonment for 30 years, and when Laura gets the phone call from the detective, this is not a spoiler 'cause it's on the first two pages of the book or three pages.

[00:11:43] **Mary Morris:** Anyway, she realizes that she's the same age that her mother was when her mother disappeared. Her mother disappeared when she was 42 and Laura's 42. Laura has never made peace. I mean, how can you make peace with something like this? You know, I mean I, you know, I hate to contemporize it, but I think about those, the Nancy Guthrie family and this.

[00:12:01] **Mary Morris:** Missing mother. That's all over the news. And how do you make peace with a, a missing person like that, particularly a mother? Maternal abandonment is a theme that has been important to me for various

reasons. Maybe my mother didn't abandon me in those ways, but she was a complicated person. She did tend to lose me in stores.

[00:12:20] **Mary Morris:** I was lost quite a bit and I often had to ask people to help me find her. It's just a theme that's been important to me, and I think it's a very powerful theme for all of us, that there's so many levels of it. And, you know, I think that what Laura needs needed to do in the novel was realize that mothers aren't perfect.

[00:12:38] **Mary Morris:** Fathers aren't perfect. Um, she had to make peace with whatever her mother's story was. And you know, if you read the novel, you know that she really knew virtually nothing of her mother's story. That it's a novel of discovery. And hopefully the reader will uncover Laura's story as they're reading it. And to be honest with you, as I was writing it, I didn't entirely know where it was going.

[00:12:58] **Lisa Hostein:** We'll get back to that point a little bit later. They do wanna ask you, writing about, you have so much out there, novels, memoirs, writing about Jewish themes is relatively new for you after such a long and distinguished career. And your last book, *Gateway to the Moon* in which you explore the Inquisition in Portugal and Converso, hidden Jews, is one other example.

[00:13:20] **Lisa Hostein:** But tell us about your own Jewish journey.

[00:13:22] **Mary Morris:** My parents named me Mary because they didn't, my father particularly didn't want people to know I was Jewish by my name. Most people think I'm Irish. I'm married to an O'Connor and many people have asked Larry if I converted for him 'cause they think he's Jewish, you know?

[00:13:37] **Mary Morris:** So it's kind of a funny situation. A story I like to tell was like, maybe I was 17 or 18. We were sitting at the dinner table and somebody said a Hebrew word. I said, what does that mean? I can't remember what the word was. My father goes, you dunno what that means. I mean, that's just a, you know, anyone would know what that word means.

[00:13:55] **Mary Morris:** And he turned to my mother and he said, didn't we send her to Hebrew school? And my mother said, no, we didn't send her to Hebrew school. And they both looked at each other and I was like, wow. Like, do you guys not realize that I didn't really have a Jewish upbringing of any sort? And I think I was about 18 and kind of going off to college and I decided, you know, I was gonna make some personal discoveries.

[00:14:15] **Mary Morris:** I wanted to know my family. I wanted to know where we came from. I wanted to know more about our history. You know, I think one of the things about being Jewish that I've learned is that, forgive me if this sounds dark, but we don't know where all the bones are buried. We don't know where the ancestors are.

[00:14:28] **Mary Morris:** I can't trace my ancestry back the way. I have friends whose family came over in the Mayflower, and they can go back to that, but I can't go back very far. I just began a journey. I learned Hebrew, I learned that I have family in Israel and I visited them in 1968 and I was living in Paris. And the Sorbonne was closed.

[00:14:47] **Mary Morris:** And I thought, well, I'll go meet my Israeli family. And I did that. And so, you know, it's been a journey for me. I'm imperfect in my learning, but it's an important part of who I am and my identity.

[00:14:59] **Lisa Hostein:** I don't know if there's such a thing as imperfect in your learning. Any learning is good.

[00:15:03] **Mary Morris:** Just do back for one second to the little question of Buried history.

[00:15:05] **Mary Morris:** So my history I felt was a little buried. So I've been interested in these sort of buried histories and gateway to the moon and. This novel and also something I'm working on now, and I kind of feel like I'm rounding out a sort of saga of buried history. So.

[00:15:17] **Lisa Hostein:** Hmm. So it's, I'm curious, is it more the Jewish history that has driven you or the buried stories within that history, or both?

[00:15:26] **Mary Morris:** Well, I don't think I can separate them. I think it's kind of both.

[00:15:30] **Lisa Hostein:** So let's talk about your research for this book. You clearly did a lot in Italy and the experience of Italian Jews during World War ii. Can you give us, I mean this isn't really fair, but can you give us just a little summary because I think the Jews of Italy are not one segment of the Jewish community that has studied or well known.

[00:15:47] **Lisa Hostein:** Right. And I learned a lot just reading your book, and that's what I love about historical fiction is that especially when it's a good, well-written story and a really interesting piece of history that I'm not familiar

with. It's complex what happened to the Jews of Italy. So can you just summarize that a little bit and talk about how you came to understand and learn about it?

[00:16:09] **Mary Morris:** Remember I told you that this gentleman took me around the Red House. I keep these little notebooks with me. Everything he said, I was writing down. I was writing down, writing down, writing down when we got on the flight. And I was so, I was so moved by being in the red house and this whole experience and I was very powerful to me.

[00:16:24] **Mary Morris:** I'm on the plane and I realize I've lost this little notebook and I've never found it again. And my husband said to me, well, tell me, what do you remember from the conversation that you had with this gentleman? Carlo was his name. I said, I remember that. They were cold, they were hungry. They meaning the detainees.

[00:16:44] **Mary Morris:** When you go to the red house, if you go there, there are no windows. You know it's bars. It's open to the elements, right? And I stood in one of those windows and I watched birds flying in and out, and I was like, and he said, this is what it was. You know, so it was cold. They were hungry and they worked in the town.

[00:17:02] **Mary Morris:** So if you were in detention or exile like that, and you were, had some kind of profession, this wasn't only true at the Red House. This is also true in, um, Carla Levi's, uh, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. He's a doctor and he, I think he does medical work in the town. He, he wants to be a painter, but he. Anyway, that's another 1930s novel about Jews.

[00:17:23] **Mary Morris:** He was an anarchist, not a detainee for that reason. But anyway, if you were a doctor, if you were a lawyer, if you were a nurse, you would work in the town. And the townspeople of Alberobello, I mean, it's a very, was anyway, a very primitive place. I mean, you're not on the tourist trail, like if you don't speak Italian and you're not with a tour group, I don't know how you get around.

[00:17:41] **Mary Morris:** So I think what happened was when Jews arrived there. The people didn't know what to expect,

[00:17:47] **Lisa Hostein:** and they were sent from the north, right?

[00:17:49] **Mary Morris:** All the Jews who were sent to the red House between 1940 and 1943, what were called foreign nationals. I'll explain that in a second just in terms of the research itself.

[00:18:02] **Mary Morris:** So there's one book written about the Red House that's in Italian. I read that as best I could. Then there are a lot of books about Italian Jews and there's a lot of Italian Jewish history and Italian Jewish Holocaust history, and a lot of different views like were the Italians better to the Jews, you know?

[00:18:18] **Mary Morris:** Was it a better situation than Germany and Austria? Well, yes, certainly, but it wasn't great. But to answer your question about who went to the Red House between 1940 and 1943, this might get in the weeds a little bit. I'm not a historian, so I'll just do my best here. When Mussolini declared the racial laws, he revoked the citizenship of all foreign nationals.

[00:18:45] **Mary Morris:** So if you were Hungarian Jew, if you were a Romanian, Jew, whatever, and you had come to Italy, and if you had gotten your citizenship before January 1st, 1919, you kept your citizenship. But if you had gotten your citizenship on January 2nd, 1919, all citizenships were revoked. So if you were foreign national, again, not Italian Jews, like if we've seen the movie, the Finzi-Continis, those are the Jews who may have lived in, you know, for hundreds of years, their families and generations.

[00:19:18] **Mary Morris:** I'm talking about people who had immigrated there within a 20. You know, I mean, immigration obviously is a topic on many people's minds. So there are people who had immigrated there if it was under 20 years to the day. Your citizenship was revoked, your passport was stamped alien, and you were subject to exile and ultimately deportation.

[00:19:37] **Mary Morris:** Most of the Jews who were sent to the Red House, maybe even all of them were foreign nationals who came from the north, meaning north of Rome, and were sent to the South. Now, there were a lot of these detention centers. They're in Calabria and other parts of Southern Italy. I don't have the names at the tip of my finger, but you can certainly look it up.

[00:19:58] **Mary Morris:** So they were there. And to be really honest with you, and this is for my research, they did a lot better than the Northern Jews or the Jews that were generationally Italian. Because if you were sent to the south, and if you had the good sense to actually stay in the South after 1943, which was when the Allied forces land in southern Italy, you did okay.

[00:20:21] **Mary Morris:** And a lot of those Jews finally, ultimately immigrated to Palestine, Israel. But north of Rome, that's where the Nazis took over. That's where the deportations began in Italy. But in the south, the allied forces came in through Sicily, through Puglia, up to Naples, and they pushed the Nazis back to Rome. And then the rest of the history we know.

[00:20:44] **Mary Morris:** So if it's a good story, which not saying it's a good story, but it's a better story. That's why there are these communities in Calabria, a number of families that were sent there. Liked it there. They felt safe. There were beaches. It was pleasant enough in many cases. They were sent there and they had literally nothing.

[00:21:02] **Mary Morris:** But they made communities for themselves. I mean, they lived in tents, they lived on the beaches, they lived wherever, but they built communities and, and some of those communities have, I forget the name of it, but there is a community. There's actually a rabbi, an American rabbi, who is the rabbi in this town in Calabrio.

[00:21:18] **Mary Morris:** That's kind of on a mount, on a hilltop, and I'm sorry if I can't remember the name, but I can't remember the name, but you can look it up. So, you know, it's a different history and, and as I said, I'm not a German Jew. My, those are not my roots. And I, I felt I could connect to this story in a different way, maybe because, you know, I do speak Italian and I've traveled to Italy a lot.

[00:21:37] **Mary Morris:** And one tiny factoid that I learned the other day, literally just Googling mindlessly, was that Jews share more DNA with Italians than any other nationality in Europe.

[00:21:49] **Lisa Hostein:** Interesting.

[00:21:50] **Mary Morris:** Yeah.

[00:21:50] **Lisa Hostein:** So was there anything in your research as you started getting deeper and deeper into it that particularly surprised you?

[00:21:57] **Mary Morris:** I'm gonna be really honest. You know, I've tried to dig deep into research and there were, yes, there were certainly things that surprised me, but I read this tiny little bit about when Toni Morrison wrote *Beloved*, she read a tiny little newspaper clip about a slave. Who killed her baby rather than let that baby be taken into slavery.

[00:22:20] **Mary Morris:** And I remember reading Tony Morrison saying that's all she needed to know. She didn't need to do a deep dive. A writer who was a very dear friend of mine, Paul Oster, who sadly passed away a couple years ago, he called me one day, he was working on a novel. He said, I'm writing a novel set in Chicago. He didn't know anything about Chicago.

[00:22:39] **Mary Morris:** I don't know if he'd even been to Chicago. He said, what can you tell me about Chicago? I said, well, there's the L Train, there's the Art Institute and Lake Michigan. He goes, that's all I need to know. And he wrote Moon Palace, which sold a million copies in France alone. You know, as a storyteller, I don't wanna get it wrong, but on the other hand, I don't want the research to take over the storytelling.

[00:23:00] **Lisa Hostein:** Mm-hmm. That's certainly understandable and it makes sense. You don't wanna get it wrong, but there's such a thing. There's too much research that. Bogs you down.

[00:23:08] **Mary Morris:** Right.

[00:23:09] **Lisa Hostein:** So you were quoted in an interview saying that travel informs pretty much everything I do and write about. So on some level I'm always thinking about it.

[00:23:17] **Lisa Hostein:** All of your books, it seems to me, involve some sort of journey. So how and when did travel become such an important part of your life, and how has it influenced your writing?

[00:23:27] **Mary Morris:** Another really good question. You know, I said I had a complicated relationship with my mother, but she always wanted to travel. And when I was a girl, I was quite young.

[00:23:37] **Mary Morris:** My parents were invited to a suppressed desirable ball. I wanna throw a suppressed desire ball. You were supposed to go as your secret wish, your secret desire.

[00:23:49] **Lisa Hostein:** Okay.

[00:23:50] **Mary Morris:** Okay.

[00:23:51] **Lisa Hostein:** Interesting theme.

[00:23:52] **Mary Morris:** Yeah, it's great, right? Maybe we don't have suppressed desires anymore. Maybe we're just all too upfront about our lives and everything.

[00:23:57] **Mary Morris:** I mean, I don't know. But anyway. Suppress desirable. My mother had a degree in fashion from the Art Institute of Chicago, and we're talking about in the thirties, she got a degree in fashion design, but because of the depression, she worked in the lingerie department at S fifth Avenue until a friend introduced her to my father and she was 35 years old.

[00:24:18] **Mary Morris:** So she was a frustrated, you know, she could have been Coco Chanel and. But she wanted to travel. She named our first dog Renoir because she wanted a Renoir. You know, she, she loved France. She was a real Francophile when they were invited to this ball. My mother went into this kind of trance and she had a mannequin in the basement, and she got all this tada and fishnet and got all these brochures and all these things, and I remember going down to the basement and watching her like, build this costume on this mannequin.

[00:24:51] **Mary Morris:** And I would go down there and she would say to me, Mary, maybe I was six or seven years old. She goes, where should I put the Taj Mahal? Where should the Eiffel Tower go? And I was like, I didn't know what she was talking about, you know? And meanwhile, the funny side to this story was my father was very handsome, but he was very bald and he, they used to call them, uh, Greer and Carrie.

[00:25:12] **Mary Morris:** 'cause he looked a lot like Carrie Grant. And she looked like Greer Garson, or she, they like to think of themselves that way. But anyway, my dad didn't have a costume. Just a short time before the, the ball, my dad's barber said to him, my dad was complaining about the costume ball and what he was gonna do with the costume ball.

[00:25:27] **Mary Morris:** And the, uh, barber said, why don't you go as a man with hair? So my dad got a toupee, which he wore for the rest of his life, and he looked very dashing always. Meanwhile, my mother, the night of the ball, she stood at the top of the stairs. I remember seeing my father in a tuxedo with hair, which I'd never seen.

[00:25:47] **Mary Morris:** My mother in this costume of the world, her skirts were the oceans. She had sewn all of these brochures into the dress. She made a hat that was a circling like a globe that with the planets and the earth on it. And

I don't know, they're just, they always, I've always come back to what I wrote about it in my first travel book.

[00:26:04] **Mary Morris:** *Nothing to Declare*. And my mother always just said, go see the world. Don't hold back. So that's what I did. Now I'm tired. I mean, I'm not tired tonight. I mean, I'm tired of traveling, but you know, I'm. I'm not that tired. I would still go pretty much anywhere if I can.

[00:26:19] **Lisa Hostein:** I share that sense of travel and adventure, and I haven't done nearly as much as you, but there's still a lot of places left on my bucket list.

[00:26:26] **Lisa Hostein:** So you've also been quoted as saying, I write the same way I travel basically with no itinerary, no roadmaps, detours are always welcome. So this book certainly included many detours on the journey that Laura didn't know where it would take her. Did you know how this story would turn out when you started writing it?

[00:26:44] **Mary Morris:** No, I mean, I don't write the roadmap. I believe you that I said that and I wrote that, but of course, I can't remember that I said that or wrote that because I don't, I don't backtrack. I'm a little bit more like a shark, and I'm not really a shark, but I mean, I'm, I move forward in life. I don't know, I, I guess the simple answer is no.

[00:27:02] **Mary Morris:** I didn't know where the story was gonna take me. I knew that Laura was gonna search for her mother. I knew it would be a novel of discovery. I didn't really know what she'd find. You did ask me about research. I did a lot of research about Naples. So the Naples material in the book is very heavily researched.

[00:27:17] **Mary Morris:** I mean, it's all research, but it's not, I don't build a story around research, if that makes sense to you.

[00:27:22] **Advertisement :** Mm-hmm.

[00:27:23] **Mary Morris:** You know, you mentioned *Gateway to the Moon*, so there's a moment in *Gateway to the Moon* that I, I don't really wanna give away, but there's a character named Elena and *Gateway to the Moon*. My editor kept calling me up and saying, Mary, I, I love this book, but take Elena out of the book.

[00:27:35] **Mary Morris:** She doesn't belong in the book. I don't know why she's in the book. And I said, no, no, she belongs in the book. But I truthfully didn't know why she was in the book either until, for those of you who've read the book, I don't wanna give it away. There's a moment of realization in the novel. I didn't realize it until I wrote it, and I literally had to walk away to my desk and I said, that is why she's in the book.

[00:27:54] **Lisa Hostein:** Hmm.

[00:27:55] **Mary Morris:** So, you know, as finally O'Connor said, unless it's a surprise for the writer, it won't be a surprise for the reader. I kind of believe that. I mean, I don't outline, I don't have a roadmap. I never travel as an itinerary. You know, there's a part of me that thinks, oh, I should do like a tourist sometimes, because tours seem like helpful ways to travel.

[00:28:15] **Mary Morris:** But I, I just can't. Do tours. I can't have people tell me information I, I need to discover. I'm a, I've always been a person who wants to discover, for better or for worse,

[00:28:27] **Advertisement:** Combating antisemitism, securing Holocaust education, fighting for women's equity and women's health, championing a strong US-Israel relationship. These are all the ways that Hadassah women and supporters are making an impact, bringing healing and justice to the world. Everyday, Hadassah members speak out in multiple ways.

[00:28:48] **Advertisement:** From signing petitions to sending emails and letters to legislators, to meeting face-to-face with elected officials, the more supporters we have. The louder our collective voice giving us a seat at the table in Washington DC and impacting governance across the nation. Raise your voice today. Join Hadassah at [www.hadassah.org/join](http://www.hadassah.org/join) and sign up for advocacy alerts.

[00:29:14] **Advertisement :** by going to [www.tsa.org](http://www.tsa.org) under the How We Help section.

[00:29:22] **Lisa Hostein:** So Viola learns to paint while at the Red House. That becomes an important part of her life. So art was also very central to Laura who holds onto her mother's paintings. How did you view in this particular context, or even in general, as an expression of grief, loss, memory?

[00:29:40] **Mary Morris:** Oh, I might have to write some of that down. Wow,

[00:29:43] **Lisa Hostein:** because it seems that all of those themes are resonant related to the art in this instance. At least that's how I interpreted it.

[00:29:51] **Mary Morris:** You know, writing and stories are also about grief, loss, and memory. I look at art all the time. I have a minor watercolor practice that I love to do just for fun.

[00:30:03] **Mary Morris:** The visual and the mental, emotional memory, it's all kind of intertwined for me. Art for me is, is much a part of grief and loss as it is love and joy. You know, I, I can't separate those things out for myself. You know, I will say something that often surprises people, but I, I love to share it in terms of process.

[00:30:24] **Mary Morris:** When I'm working on a novel such as this one, for example, or *Gateway to the Moon*, particularly, I print different time periods and different characters voices on different colored paper. If there's a present time story, if there's a pastime story, if there's a different narrator. Laura comes back into the picture like maybe Laura is green and maybe Tomaso is blue, and maybe there are other characters who are other colors.

[00:30:47] **Mary Morris:** Remember the house in Puglia that I went to when I discovered the Red House? Well, I was working on *Gateway to the Moon* there, and I had 75 chapters that I didn't know the order of, but I had printed them all on different colored paper. Hmm. I got up early one morning and I was wandering around. We had a, a very large place to ourselves and I found a room with a ping pong table in it, and Larry came down in the morning with his first coffee and I was taking the net off the ping pong table and he said, oh my God, a ping pong table.

[00:31:12] **Mary Morris:** Don't take the net off. I said, no, no, we're not gonna play ping pong on it. I'm gonna use it. And I spread out all the different colored paper, 75 chapters and different colors and move them around till I liked the way the colors looked. So maybe it's a form of, I dunno if you call it kinesthesiology or, I don't, there's a word for it, but I can't remember.

[00:31:30] **Mary Morris:** I like the sort of color palette, the idea of a patchwork of a book.

[00:31:34] **Lisa Hostein:** Hmm. Well that sounds like a roadmap that you were setting for yourself there with color roads, but interesting. Very interesting process. Again, a window into your inner workings. You have indicated that you are working on a new book. A lot of writers don't like to divulge their next

project, but I'm curious to know if you'd like to give us a hint about what the next book is.

[00:31:56] **Mary Morris:** I don't mind that because I literally finished a draft of it two days ago, and I'm very excited about it. I wrote it kind of in a fever dream. So Gateway to the Moon is about the Crypto Jews of New Mexico, the Secret Jews. This is about a buried Holocaust history. I decided after those two books and I wasn't gonna do another book about buried histories.

[00:32:15] **Mary Morris:** But anyway, about seven years ago, my daughter bought a cabin in the Catskills. She was interested in it and she asked us to go up and look at it, and we were gonna talk her out of it. We didn't think it was a good idea. And we went up there and it was really beautiful, really isolated, not borsch belt kind of thing, just a very on a mountain, very desolate place.

[00:32:34] **Mary Morris:** And we went into this one little room, and on the table there were all of these artifacts. They were Jewish artifacts. It was a Menorah and a haggadah and a photo album. And the guy who was selling the cabin who didn't know anything about the objects really, I was looking at the album and he said, oh, they all died.

[00:32:56] **Mary Morris:** Everyone in there died. And I just was like taken aback. And when they bought the cabin, he gave me the haggadah and the haggadah is from Vienna 1927. And I just, again, it's a story I couldn't walk away from. So. The novel is set in this cabin, and it's the story of the generations who've lived in the cabin. And of course there's a Holocaust theme.

[00:33:15] **Lisa Hostein:** Hmm. So interesting. So we've written a lot about the Catskills, the Jewish history, the more recent history, and it's a very popular theme, so I'm sure that will do well. So that would be your third book with the Jewish theme.

[00:33:28] **Mary Morris:** Yes.

[00:33:28] **Lisa Hostein:** I've seen you quoted several times saying quote, I'm not a Jewish writer per se.

[00:33:33] **Lisa Hostein:** So I'm curious to know what a Jewish writer is, in your view, why you've been reluctant to call yourself one, and whether that's maybe changed by now.

[00:33:43] **Mary Morris:** Hmm. That's a really good question. I think what I mean by it is that, again, I'm interested in these buried histories. I'm interested in the things we don't know, not the things we do.

[00:33:52] **Mary Morris:** Now, a book I love is Rachel Kadish is *The Weight of Ink* because again, it's this multi texture multilayered. And so I think, what I mean when I say that is that I wouldn't probably write about my cranky Jewish family. My interest is more in the histories and in the, you know, in this new novel that I'm working on, there's a small component that's Jewish, but also the first lynching that ever happened north of the Mason Dixon line happened in the town that my daughter is.

[00:34:21] **Mary Morris:** DW Griffith, the silent filmmaker, made his films at down at the base of my daughter's hill. So all these different stories come together and I, I think what I mean is that it's not a main theme that I look for, but it's always kind of a piece of a mystery or a puzzle for me.

[00:34:37] **Lisa Hostein:** Sounds like it's choosing you.

[00:34:39] **Mary Morris:** Yes, exactly.

[00:34:41] **Lisa Hostein:** What town does your daughter live in?

[00:34:43] **Mary Morris:** It's a little town called Cutback.

[00:34:45] **Lisa Hostein:** In what state?

[00:34:46] **Mary Morris:** I guess it's about 45 minutes from Monticello. Half an hour from Port Jervis.

[00:34:50] **Lisa Hostein:** Did you have an opportunity to speak to people who lived in the town where the Red House was located, and if so, did anyone tell you a story about a relative experience there?

[00:34:58] **Lisa Hostein:** And I would even extend that to ask you whether people have learned anything from your research or your book about this.

[00:35:07] **Mary Morris:** The answer is sadly no. I wasn't able to find any people who had lived there or been through this. I talked to people who were tangentially like my neighbor, whose family were Roman Jews.

[00:35:19] **Mary Morris:** There's a person at Columbia University. He wrote a wonderful book, I'm trying to remember. It's, I think it's Benevolence and Betrayal, Alexander Stilli about the Jews of Torino. But the answer is no. I have heard from a woman whose family comes from Aari, which is nearby. She wasn't born there, but she found the book fascinating and is very interested in this as a piece of her history.

[00:35:42] **Mary Morris:** But the book has not been published in Italy. The Italian sink just, they haven't picked it up. So

[00:35:47] **Lisa Hostein:** I was gonna ask you about that. There's,

[00:35:49] **Mary Morris:** yeah. Well, according to my agent, the Italians think that they're the only, with respect to them, they're the only ones who can really write about Italian history. So.

[00:35:58] **Lisa Hostein:** Besides Italy and the Sefardi communities, are there other Jewish worlds, Jewish populations, areas of migration where you can envision setting a novel?

[00:36:07] **Mary Morris:** I have an interest in the Maasai people of Kenya. We were in Kenya a few years ago and we had an incredible guide, and when he found out that we were Jewish, he said many of the origin stories, the mythology of the Maasai people.

[00:36:24] **Mary Morris:** Are similar to those of the Hebrew people as he referred to them. I dunno if you've ever seen this, but the Maasai do this dance where they jump up and down. I asked him about the dancing because I saw them dancing and our guide said, oh, when we were leaving the land of Canaan, we fell into a ditch and the people who could jump the highest could get out of the ditch and they could walk to where we are now in Kenya.

[00:36:52] **Mary Morris:** That's our origin story. And if you look at a map from where Canaan, Israel basically is straight down, it is a straight line to Kenya. They have a story that's very similar to, um, Jacob and Esau. They have a similar edit. They have a lot of stories in their, you know, and I had a lot of talk with, you know, the Maasai.

[00:37:13] **Mary Morris:** A number of them felt that we were. I am kind of interested in that. I mean, I'd have to really go there and spend some time there and, and there's some DNA who seems to refute this and yada yada, but I'm

kind of fascinated with it. I was fascinated that they thought that there's a connection

[00:37:30] **Lisa Hostein:** that's more than fascinating to me because I literally came back two weeks ago from Tanzania and spend some time with the Maasai community.

[00:37:39] **Lisa Hostein:** I did not ask any Jewish questions. Nobody asked me or, or made that connection. I was trying to get away from Jewish, which is barely, almost impossible in my life.

[00:37:49] **Mary Morris:** Yes.

[00:37:50] **Lisa Hostein:** But I did see that dancing and we did connect with some of the women and the community and the way they live, which is just fascinating.

[00:37:58] **Lisa Hostein:** So. By all means, I would a hundred percent encourage you to explore that.

[00:38:03] **Mary Morris:** I'm, I'm interested, you know, I, I have to go spend a chunk of time there and I sort of filed it in the back of my head, but now it's kind of moving forward.

[00:38:11] **Lisa Hostein:** There's so much more to talk about really. You've shared a lot personally, your process as an author, your insights into Italian jewelry and just your whole evolution as, as a writer.

[00:38:24] **Lisa Hostein:** Thanks so much to you, Mary, for spending this time with us. We really look forward to your next book. We wait anxiously and wish you luck with that and your continuing Jewish journey.

[00:38:34] **Mary Morris:** Thank you very much. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

[00:38:38] **Lisa Hostein:** I wanna thank Leah Finkelshteyn, our senior editor who helped plan and implement this program along with the magazine's digital editor, Arielle Kaplan.

[00:38:45] **Lisa Hostein:** Who both promoted and produced it. And a shout out as always to our partners in the engagement and marketing and communications divisions who always play an important role in making these events happen.

[00:39:00] **Lisa Hostein:** Thanks for joining us today. If you like this episode of Hadassah Magazine Presents, please follow the podcast on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. And please, please rate and review us to help bolster our audience. You can find this and other Hadassah podcasts at [hadassah.org](https://www.hadassah.org) on the podcast page where you can also sign up for new episode alerts.

[00:39:23] **Lisa Hostein:** Check out the show notes for further resources, and if you'd like to watch a video recording of this interview, you can find that at [hadassahmagazine.org](https://www.hadassahmagazine.org). I'll be back soon with another enlightening and engaging episode. Thanks again for joining us. Until next time, goodbye.