



## Transcript: Acclaimed Author Allegra Goodman on Jewish Family, Love and Tsuris

[00:00:00] **Allegra Goodman:** I don't sit down to write and think I have the mantle of Judaism on me and I need to popularize Jewish tradition and explain things. Just making people come alive without lectures and lessons showing Jewish people as people. That is what fiction can do when you can identify with a main character, even if that character's from a different background from yours.

[00:00:21] **Allegra Goodman:** That's one small step toward peace.

[00:00:29] **Lisa Hostein:** Hello, and welcome to Hadassah Magazine. Presents a program and podcast for those who love Hadassah Magazine 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*.

[00:00:50] **Lisa Hostein:** I'm so delighted to be in conversation today with Allegra Goodman, the critically acclaimed master storyteller whose latest book *This is Not About Us*, brings us deep into the soul of an American Jewish family, some of whose characteristics we may recognize in our own families. It's what *The New York Times* called “a wise, witty exploration of a contemporary American family and a deliciously readable book.”

[00:01:14] **Lisa Hostein:** *This is Not About Us* is a *Late Show with Stephen Colbert* book club selection. And a NuReads selection from the Jewish Book Council. Her award-winning novels include *Isola*, *Sam*, *The Chalk Artist*,

*Intuition*, and *Kaaterskill Falls*, which was a National Book Award finalist. Her fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker* and elsewhere and has been anthologized in the O Henry Awards and Best American Short Stories.

[00:01:38] **Lisa Hostein**: Her essays and reviews have appeared in *The New York Times* book review, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New Republic*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *American Scholar*. Raised in Honolulu, Goodman studied English and philosophy at Harvard and received a PhD in English Literature from Stanford.

[00:01:53] **Lisa Hostein**: She's the recipient of the Salon Award for fiction and fellowship from McDowell and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. She lives with her family in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Wow. Welcome, Allegra. It's just a mouthful to introduce you. I'm so thrilled to be hosting you today.

[00:02:08] **Allegra Goodman**: I'm so happy to be here with you.

[00:02:10] **Lisa Hostein**: So I wanna start really simply by asking you to give a brief synopsis of this is not about us, for those who might not have yet read it.

[00:02:17] **Allegra Goodman**: *This is Not About Us* is the story of a Jewish American family. They live on the East coast. They comprise three generations. The grandparents who are in their seventies, early eighties, their middle-aged children in their fifties, and then the grandchildren who are young adults, teens and early twenties.

[00:02:38] **Allegra Goodman**: The book is about how they all interact, how they love each other, how they make each other crazy, how they fight, how they evolve over time together. It's about their relationship. It's also a portrait of Jewish American life, of one part of Jewish American life.

[00:02:54] **Lisa Hostein**: And we're gonna get into a lot of those details as we move forward.

[00:02:57] **Lisa Hostein**: But you know, with your early works, you rapidly became one of the most well-known female Jewish authors. Then you branched out into the non-Jewish world writing *Sam* and *Isola*, which is a historical novel, also wonderful, and both of which have virtually no Jewish content, and now you're back with an undeniably Jewish story.

[00:03:18] **Lisa Hostein**: So what brought you back to Jewish storytelling?

[00:03:21] **Allegra Goodman:** I guess the answer is that I never really left this book I was writing during the time I wrote Sam, and during the time I wrote my historical novel. So really I've been working on it for almost 15 years. It's just that I was writing about this, these Jewish people, and writing this Jewish material in shorter pieces that were being published in magazines.

[00:03:40] **Allegra Goodman:** So, you know, from my perspective, I never stopped. Although I also think, you know, I'm allowed to write about all kinds of people as writers are writing about the American Jewish community in particular is just a hugely important subject for me. I think I'm always going to return to it.

[00:03:57] **Lisa Hostein:** Why is it such an important subject for you?

[00:03:59] **Allegra Goodman:** I think it's such an interesting culture and it is such a diverse group of people, and of course it is my people. So you know, the old adages write about what you know, I know the people in this book, you know, not personally. And of course they're not in my family, which is thus the title.

[00:04:18] **Allegra Goodman:** *This is Not About Us*, but, but I know them. I know how they talk. I know what they're thinking. S

[00:04:25] **Lisa Hostein:** Well, let's talk about that. The Rubensteins, that's the name of the family, the three generations as you mentioned. So how much did you mine from your own family? There's gotta be some pieces of it that maybe are represented there.

[00:04:37] **Lisa Hostein:** Do you want to reveal any of that?

[00:04:40] **Allegra Goodman:** Well, it's funny, when I finished the book, I emailed it to my daughter, who's my youngest child is now working in London, and she called me and she said, I think it's really cute how you labeled the document. This is not about us to reassure the family. I said, I wasn't trying to reassure the family that's the title.

[00:04:57] **Allegra Goodman:** And then there was this long pause and she said, it is about our family. You know, so it really is fiction. I didn't, I, I used my imagination. I used things I've observed in my family and other families. I, I have warned readers that they may see something they recognize in the book from their own experience.

[00:05:15] **Allegra Goodman:** And, you know, I always advise people if that happens to you, just deny everything, which is what I do.

[00:05:21] **Lisa Hostein:** Or embrace it, right? Why not?

[00:05:24] **Allegra Goodman:** Yeah.

[00:05:25] **Lisa Hostein:** There are a few good characteristics in there. Not so many, but some, right? Who's your favorite character? I mean, there's so many richly drawn individuals across the three generations.

[00:05:34] **Lisa Hostein:** Who's your favorite?

[00:05:36] **Allegra Goodman:** I actually don't have a favorite character. I never do, and I love them all. And actually there's pieces of me and all of them, including the men, including the children, including the old ladies. The project of the book was to take their perspective and become them and perform them for the reader in the reader's imagination.

[00:05:52] **Allegra Goodman:** And so, so that was my goal. I, I don't have a favorite when I'm in the point of view of a character I commit and I completely take that person's point of view. So, for example, you know, there's a divorce in this book and we hear Richard's point of view at the beginning of the book, but then as the book progresses we hear from his ex-wife Deborah, and we understand her point of view. And you know, there's no heroes or villains of this book. Everybody is flawed and everybody is trying, you know, sometimes they get on each other's nerves, but you know, to me these are basically good people. I really love them all.

[00:06:27] **Lisa Hostein:** And the title that you mentioned, you told your daughter it wasn't, that didn't come from the family.

[00:06:33] **Lisa Hostein:** So where did the title come from?

[00:06:34] **Allegra Goodman:** So the title is the title of one of the pieces in the book, and it's a bat mitzvah story. You know, I think the bat mitzvah has been neglected in fiction. So I wanted to write about a girl's bat mitzvah and in this particular bat mitzvah, Richard, the guy getting divorced, you know, he is down, divorced from his wife, but he is dating the bat mitzvah girls, his daughter's tutor or bat mitzvah tutor.

[00:06:57] **Allegra Goodman:** But he and Heather, the tutor, decide that they're not gonna go public. With this news because they don't wanna overshadow Lily's day, the little girl's day. It's really about her, not about them. So Heather and Richard say to each other, this is not about us. And that's the title of that Bat mitzvah chapter in the book, you know, later, I was trying to think of a title for the whole book, and my sister actually suggested that I take that title and use it for the whole book.

[00:07:22] **Allegra Goodman:** And of course it has different resonance when it's the, the title of the book from what Richard and Deborah say to each other. But I like the playfulness of it.

[00:07:31] **Lisa Hostein:** Absolutely. It's very playful. So you grew up in Hawaii, a beautiful but somewhat barren Jewish place, if I may say that. Right. So to what degree did that experience, if at all, influence the way you came to think about and write about Jewish families?

[00:07:46] **Allegra Goodman:** Hawaii is beautiful. I wouldn't use the word barren in any context of Hawaii. You know, it's a very interesting place to grow up as a Jewish person. There may be people from Hawaii like, you know, listening now. Um. I would say there wasn't really a critical mass of Jewish people in Hawaii when I was growing up, and we didn't really have sort of the institutional Judaism that, you know, my characters in this book take for granted.

[00:08:07] **Allegra Goodman:** We didn't have multiple synagogues. We had one Reform temple. There was no Chabad when I was growing up in Hawaii, although one began there when I was in college. We had no kosher butcher. So our family got our kosher meat from Long Beach, California. We had no JCC sort of the cultural part of Judaism just wasn't there because there just weren't enough people.

[00:08:27] **Allegra Goodman:** There were sort of barely people to make a minyan a lot of times. And you know, if you wanted to live a Jewish life in Hawaii, it was a very intentional choice. I would say that growing up there as a Jewish child was a gift for me as a writer because a lot of what people take for granted in mainland Judaism and sort of mainstream Judaism was exotic and interesting to me, and I experienced it when I came to the mainland as somebody who was not entirely on the inside, but also on the outside. Like I noticed more things because I came from so far away and I appreciated more things because I came from so far away.

[00:09:05] **Lisa Hostein:** I wanna talk a little bit about the format.

[00:09:06] **Lisa Hostein:** So you returned to a form of storytelling through link stories, which you had employed earlier on in your career. I love what NPRs book reviewer Maureen Corrigan had to say about this in reviewing your book, you probably heard this right, I, she said, “I worried that returning to a familiar formula might mean that Goodman was running out of energy as a writer.

[00:09:26] **Lisa Hostein:** Then I started reading and stopped worrying. She went on to say she holds fast to the gifts that have marked her since her earliest books, psychological acuity humor, and an abiding curiosity about the volatile chemistry of people bound together by affinity profession or blood.” So I guess you weren't really running out of energy, right?

[00:09:44] **Lisa Hostein:** I mean, I laughed. I can't imagine how you've reacted to that line, but I do know, and you mentioned that you've been writing and publishing some of these stories that make up, this is not about us for several years now. So if they weren't originally intended. To be connected. How did they become so, and what is it about this form of writing that continues to speak to you?

[00:10:03] **Allegra Goodman:** I actually did intend to connect the stories and make a book from the very beginning in this project 30 years ago when *The Family Markowitz* was published, that book, I was extremely young and I wrote those stories sort of separately and then put them together into a book. But I had for years wanted to write a linked story cycle like this, a novel, a serial novel as I think of it, and published it as I went.

[00:10:27] **Allegra Goodman:** I had this, this plan from the beginning. I did spend a lot of time, you know, once I had a bunch of the stories shaping it, and I, I describe it as sort of like growing a tree and then I did prune the tree a bit and shape it towards the end. But I always wanted to use this format to explore this family.

[00:10:45] **Allegra Goodman:** The reason I like this form for this purpose is that it's a way of using multiple points of view to look at a family from all sides. I think each story enriches the others. The name Rubenstein actually means ruby stone, and I often thought of this family as like a jewel, that I was turning to the light and looking at the different facets of the family.

[00:11:06] **Lisa Hostein:** Well, you know, it's also interesting, I think over the course of the time that you've been writing the use of the multiple viewpoints is

more common. It just seems to me you're more expert to be able to determine that. But it doesn't necessarily mean link stories, it's just, and sometimes it's confusing and sometimes it really works when you know a story is told from different perspectives.

[00:11:25] **Allegra Goodman:** Oh, totally.

[00:11:26] **Lisa Hostein:** So in writing and linking these stories, did you find yourself ever wondering what's special about Jewish families and what's universal?

[00:11:34] **Allegra Goodman:** I was always interested in sort of writing about this particular family, and I think as a novelist, and you'll probably hear this from other fiction writers, it's the particularities that make something come alive in a story.

[00:11:45] **Allegra Goodman:** I heard from readers that they do find it very universal from readers who are certainly not Jewish. A reader in Pleasanton, California told me that the dynamic between the sisters, the older sisters who fall out with each other, reminded her of her aunts in India. And she said it's very interesting that the brothers managed to, you know, pull it together and maintain a relationship and the women don't forgive each other.

[00:12:07] **Allegra Goodman:** And I think she said that she thought that was. Universal, I'm not sure, but it rang true for her, and it's been really fun to hear from people from different backgrounds about the dynamic and how it rings true for them.

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[00:12:57] **Lisa Hostein:** I was at the National Jewish Book Awards and someone from the podium mentioned that this year marks the 75th anniversary,

not only of the Jewish Book Awards, but also the publication of the first in Sidney Taylor's classic, *All-of-a-Kind Family* series. That series was considered groundbreaking. It was really the first book from a mainstream publisher to feature Jewish children and reach a sizable general audience.

[00:13:22] **Lisa Hostein:** So I immediately made a mental connection. 'cause I was thinking about today, and I was sitting there and I jotted down a note about that and your portrayal of Jewish families and you're a mainstream reach. So I did a little research and I went back to a review of June Cummins book. Who she wrote a biography of Taylor a few years back, and she wrote that Taylor was a transformational figure, not only in American children's literature, but in American Jewish life as well.

[00:13:48] **Lisa Hostein:** *All-of-a-Kind Family*, and its four sequels published over the next 25 years, introduced millions of Americans to Judaism, forging a bridge through literature that moved Jewish characters and themes into the national arena, enlarging the public's understanding and increasing acceptance of American Jews.

[00:14:06] **Lisa Hostein:** While Jews, so we thought had long since crossed that threshold of acceptance. Today's it's a different and fraught time, and we know that some of our notions of acceptance have been somewhat misguided. So I wonder if you see yourself, I mean, it's kind of a big thing to put on you, but I wonder if you see yourself as an author whose books have been widely read and reviewed as playing that role once again, bringing Jewish characters and themes to a wider audience and with it perhaps a better understanding.

[00:14:34] **Allegra Goodman:** First of all, you know, I loved Sidney Taylor's books and as a child I read all of them multiple times, and in Hawaii, I should say, and you know, and you, everything you say about her is true, and her stuff is so charming and her characters are so real and believable and relatable for, for people of so many different, you know, backgrounds.

[00:14:53] **Allegra Goodman:** And she was a gift and gave a gift to the world in terms of my own role. I don't sit down to write and think I have the mantle of Judaism on me and I need to popularize Jewish tradition and explain things. But I would love to follow in Taylor's footsteps in just making people come alive without lectures and lessons and showing Jewish people as people.

[00:15:19] **Allegra Goodman:** That is what fiction can do, and when you can identify with a main character, even if that character's from a different background from yours, that's one small step toward peace in this world.

[00:15:29] **Lisa Hostein:** It's true that this is not about us is infused throughout with Jewish holidays, lesser known references from Camp Rama to the Hallel Prayer.

[00:15:38] **Lisa Hostein:** And you don't explain them. I mean, you just kind of throw them in there and it almost feels like how could Jews really, you know, relate to that or understand, but it does seem that non-Jew are reading. You gave one example. What is your sense generally about the response that you're getting from the larger non-Jewish community?

[00:15:55] **Allegra Goodman:** I mean, this is just anecdotally from people that I meet, but they just enjoy the stories and to them it's maybe not primarily about Judaism, but maybe it's just about family. It's about being middle-aged and confessing to your elderly parents that you're dating somebody. It's, you know, about children going to dance class.

[00:16:15] **Allegra Goodman:** It's about music. You know, there are many threads in the book. I think that people have no trouble with references that might not be totally familiar to them. And again, enjoy not being explained to. I can tell you that when I was a very young writer, like 19 years old, I started publishing a *Commentary* magazine and they had a policy that every time you use a Hebrew or Yiddish word, you had to translate it in your work.

[00:16:40] **Allegra Goodman:** I rejected that and pushed back against that. And of course it was interesting to me that it was like the Jewish magazine and the Jewish editors who were mostly concerned about it. But I've always followed that policy of not explaining and certainly not overexplaining traditions, rituals, words, trying to weave it in in context so that it's understandable, but not sort of adding footnotes.

[00:17:02] **Allegra Goodman:** I pursued that in *Kaaterskill Falls*, my first novel as well, which was enjoyed by many people who were not Jewish and Jewish people who were certainly not Orthodox.

[00:17:11] **Lisa Hostein:** And of course we all read books about different ethnic groups. I just finished *Sure*. A very, very long book about Indian characters and you know, not everything was understandable.

[00:17:21] **Lisa Hostein:** I had to either look things up or just pass over it and it was still a wonderful story. So that's certainly true. I get the sense of like, what is it that. People are getting from the Jewish piece of it. But you know, it's

wonderful that you're out there doing that. You kind of make clear this burden is not on you.

[00:17:36] **Lisa Hostein:** But I, you know, I wondered whether there was any desire to get this out at this time. You know, having to do with the challenging times that we're in, especially even in the, the literary world where Jewish authors are having more difficulty, not really popular ones like you. And there's certainly a lot of light out there as well.

[00:17:54] **Lisa Hostein:** But there also are some difficulties. So I wonder if in any way. There was an impetus in terms of timing or you had that timeframe years ago and it didn't really affect anything.

[00:18:03] **Allegra Goodman:** I actually wrote this book in between my two novels that you mentioned in between *Sam* and *Isola*, and the decision was to publish *Isola* first.

[00:18:11] **Allegra Goodman:** So this book has been done for a while, and the whole thing was written before the events of October 7th and all of the aftermath of that before the protests happened on the university campuses before some of the incidents have happened with Jewish writers. It all was written before that, so I can't claim to respond to any of that in this book.

[00:18:30] **Allegra Goodman:** It was done. I'm really interested in all of those things. I'm very interested in antisemitism and the flare ups that are happening now, but as somebody who's not a journalist, but as a novelist, it will take me a long time to respond. In my work, in whatever way that I do respond, and I will not respond directly as I might in an op-ed or in a speech or in a class.

[00:18:55] **Allegra Goodman:** By nature, my profession is not reactive. My work is not reactive. It's reflective. So it will take time, I think, for me and for other fiction writers to address these things properly.

[00:19:08] **Lisa Hostein:** Hmm. We've heard that from a lot of Israeli writers. You know, yet your book has so many wonderful perceptive observations.

[00:19:15] **Lisa Hostein:** And I remembered laughing knowingly at the reference to one of the characters who was reading the Wall Street Journal because he had canceled his subscription to the New York Times to protest his coverage of Israel. And of course, that's been going on for years as not just since post-October 7th, but maybe even more so now.

[00:19:30] **Lisa Hostein:** So you know that

[00:19:31] **Allegra Goodman:** Yeah,

[00:19:31] **Lisa Hostein:** some of those pieces of very resonate, right?

[00:19:34] **Allegra Goodman:** Oh, for sure. And it's all there because that's part of these people's lives, you know?

[00:19:38] **Lisa Hostein:** Right. So let's switch to your focus on food, which of course is an essential ingredient throughout the book 'cause it's after all about a Jewish family.

[00:19:45] **Lisa Hostein:** So food needs to be central. So the book begins with a focus on the infamous apple cake, which ends up having outside repercussions in the family. And I wondered how you employed food so creatively, be it the apple cake or the vegan seder that you describe in such great detail in that wonderful chapter.

[00:20:05] **Lisa Hostein:** Did you construct the story around the particular food, or did you have a story in mind first and then find the right foods to incorporate?

[00:20:12] **Allegra Goodman:** Oh, for sure. I had the characters and the story in mind. First, I start from character. I knew what Sylvia would bake just as I knew what Helen would struggle to bake.

[00:20:21] **Allegra Goodman:** I knew what kind of bakers they would be because I knew them. So the person comes first and then the food. I knew that Phoebe and her boyfriend would be vegan at this time and make their parents crazy and you know, need to have a vegan seder. So it really started from the people I should say about the apple cake.

[00:20:39] **Allegra Goodman:** Apple cake is not a hard recipe, you know, and that's one of the things that is problematic. It drives Helen crazy because Helen works so hard and she's such a, she's a good and fussy baker. Sylvia is an intuitive baker who throws together an apple cake that's crowd pleasing and that, that's so annoying.

[00:20:55] **Allegra Goodman:** But it's been fun hearing people responding to the different kinds of food in the, in the book and, and the way that food interplays with some of the holidays and lifecycle events in the book.

[00:21:05] **Lisa Hostein:** Do you like to bake and cook?

[00:21:07] **Allegra Goodman:** I am a very simple baker and cook, and I do my best work on the page, I would say.

[00:21:13] **Allegra Goodman:** And my mother was a great baker and she baked things way more interesting and difficult than apple cake. You know, she did apple strudel and she did Mandelbrot, and she did incredible rugelah, and she could make a Linzer torte, you know, people cried when they had her cake. You know, I, I am not at that level. I, I saved my creativity for my work.

[00:21:35] **Lisa Hostein:** I'm with you a hundred percent. My mother also was a great baker and I'm not,

[00:21:39] **Allegra Goodman:** yeah.

[00:21:40] **Lisa Hostein:** I'm good with brownie mixe, so you have a wonderfully descriptive, amusing, and very timely chapter about Passover, where the vegan seder is just a piece of the holiday that you tackle. And I wanna quote from that, the chapter's called "Redemption Song," where the two adult brothers, Dan and Steve, are at the second Seder at Steve's house.

[00:21:57] **Lisa Hostein:** The story reads, "while Dan was non-practicing Orthodox, Steve was egalitarian, which meant Andrea did everything. She compiled her own haggada with readings from Emma Lazarus to Emma Goldman. At Andrea's table, you never knew what would turn up an orange for oppressed humans, A tomato for migrant farmers, a banana for refugees.

[00:22:16] **Lisa Hostein:** When she asked Dan what is freedom, he shifted in his chair because he hated off-road Judaism, the unscripted Seder, the personal connections, although he felt oppressed by the old rituals, and this was after completely purging his house of hametz and more, he preferred them, which is why he brought his own haggada."

[00:22:35] **Lisa Hostein:** So I'm curious, as many of us prepare to sit down to our family, Seders, this passage and chapter really resonate and it captures so much about the contemporary Jewish family, the fights and the memories, the different ways of embracing, displaying or rejecting Jewish tradition. What were you thinking about when you wrote that chapter?

[00:22:54] **Allegra Goodman:** Again, I was thinking about these people and just knowing them. I knew exactly what Dan would think of his brother and his

sister-in-law Seder, which is the creative Seder, and how it would make him crazy. The redemption song is sung at the second Seder in that chapter. It's just that I know these people, I know where Dan's, I know that Dan's wife Melanie, would've gone to Camp Rama, that she came from L.A. that she did sing Debbie Friedman's Havdala tune.

[00:23:19] **Allegra Goodman:** You know, I just knew them. So it was completely natural. It wasn't like I was trying to like, like an anthropologist, like trying to put in all of these references to make a composite portrait or anything. It was just a very natural expression of who they were.

[00:23:34] **Lisa Hostein:** I'm sure your experience is such that you've been to Seders where there are oranges on the seder plate, or you know, all kinds of other things and people feeling differently.

[00:23:44] **Lisa Hostein:** Do you wanna share at all what your own family seders look like in comparison to the ones that you write about?

[00:23:50] **Allegra Goodman:** Well, we're not vegan. My. My family Seder growing up was really special because we, as you know, we lived in Hawaii, so we had our Seder on our lanai and we did it outside. And my mother always made, uh, stuffed veal breasts and she's an incredible cook.

[00:24:06] **Allegra Goodman:** And it, this was Hawaii, so she had to make stuff from scratch. And her sponge cake, which she used like a dozen egg whites, you know, was, would rise up really high. And it was just so fluffy and everything she made was incredible. My own family Seder. Now that I am older and my husband and I have three little grandchildren, we go down to DC for Seder and share our Seder with our son and daughter-in-law, and our other kids come down there and we order food.

[00:24:36] **Allegra Goodman:** Nobody tries to make veal. My husband might make some desserts and he's a very good Pesach baker. Actually. My mother would very much approve of his cakes, but we don't try to sort of spend a week, you know, ahead of time. Creating all of this stuff. It evolves. The Seder service is traditional, like the one my parents did.

[00:24:56] **Allegra Goodman:** And so that remains the same

[00:24:58] **Lisa Hostein:** with the um, coffee Haggadah.

[00:25:01] **Allegra Goodman:** The Maxwell House.

[00:25:02] **Lisa Hostein:** House,

[00:25:03] **Allegra Goodman:** yeah. Oh yeah. We have that, but everybody brings their own. Ha. My mother had a reproduction of like a 13th century haggadah, which was a lot shorter than the later ones. And she would always say, my haggadah says we're done. You know, when she got to that point, it is like an illuminated manuscript that she had like a folio of it.

[00:25:20] **Allegra Goodman:** And I use my childhood haggadah, which is very Zionist and ends with a picture of like the kibbutzniks with their hose and their spades, you know, building the land and, and the reproduction of the Declaration of Independence of Israel right at the end. It's a very kind of Hadassah type haggadah that I use.

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[00:26:29] **Lisa Hostein:** I'm gonna switch to some of the audience questions. We have a bunch of questions, a bunch of praise. We love the book. Judith is asking, *This is Not About Us*. It's so different from *Isola*. How does your writing process change when you switch from historical fiction to something like this is not about us?

[00:26:43] **Lisa Hostein:** Does your mindset change? I enjoyed both and the Seder scenes in this latest book had me laughing out loud.

[00:26:48] **Allegra Goodman:** Oh, thank you. Fun fact, I wrote them at the same time they overlapped. So I was working on this one sort of very gradually before, during, and after the historical novel. In a way, it was easier to work on things that were so different.

[00:27:02] **Allegra Goodman:** There was no danger that 16th century Marguerite's voice would creep into the, to, to sort of the New Jersey dance

studio that, you know, Sylvia's granddaughters attend. Um, so I kind of enjoyed switching it up.

[00:27:17] **Lisa Hostein:** Can you say how the dog walker chapter relates to the family? Many readers couldn't find any connection.

[00:27:23] **Allegra Goodman:** I got the question a lot.

[00:27:25] **Allegra Goodman:** A lot of readers were really puzzled. They were sort of like, what is happening here? So Janie, the dog walker, is the sister of Heather, who is a more major character, but she's the sister, so she's a little bit more tangential. And I had originally thought about writing more stories about Heather's sisters, but this was the only one.

[00:27:42] **Allegra Goodman:** I pruned the book, and this is the one that was left. You know, I've done some reflection about reader's response to this. They were just like taken aback, like, what, where is this story coming from? And was this from a different book or something that you put it in? And I thought about how the characters in my own book would respond to that story.

[00:28:01] **Allegra Goodman:** The Rubenstein's sees themselves, this is kind of meta, but you know, Helen would hate it to discover that there was this story that didn't quite fit as in her mind as well, or, or seemed a little strange to her. Sylvia would be baffled. Um, she would say she liked the story, but she'd be baffled. But Phoebe, the granddaughter, that would be her favorite story in the book.

[00:28:22] **Allegra Goodman:** So I think it's a bit of a litmus test on the reader. You know, so what kind of reader are you? How flexible are you? Are you ready for that wild card?

[00:28:32] **Lisa Hostein:** That's a really interesting response. And delving into the characters, which, you know, just illustrates what you were saying about really getting to know those characters and, and delving deep into their, to their souls. So one question from Robin is, is it hard to say goodbye to these characters when you're finished with the book?

[00:28:49] **Allegra Goodman:** Oh, yeah. It's always hard to say goodbye to them. I think of my characters. It's sort of like being the mother of grown children. Like you say goodbye, but you revisit them through your readers, really.

[00:29:00] **Allegra Goodman:** So I, I sent them off to you. I hope they make good choices. I hope they thrive out there. But I have said what I have to say about, about this family

[00:29:09] **Lisa Hostein:** and time to go on to another. Is there any sense or you wanna reveal what your next project is?

[00:29:15] **Allegra Goodman:** I never tell what I'm working on when I'm working on it, but I am writing a new book and if you reconvene with me in like three years, I will tell you all about it.

[00:29:26] **Allegra Goodman:** But it does have Jewish elements. I will let, I will tell you that it has some Jewish elements in it quite a bit,

[00:29:32] **Lisa Hostein:** As somebody's asking in the second paragraph of the book, both apples and cake, but not apple cake are mentioned. Was this done deliberately to make apple cake more central?

[00:29:41] **Allegra Goodman:** It's an astute question.

[00:29:43] **Allegra Goodman:** I was not conscious of doing that when I worked on that opening, but since then, at various readings and events, I have read that passage and I've noticed it as, as I was reading it aloud to the audience. So you know, it's there. It's clearly a lot is happening in the writer's subconscious.

[00:30:00] **Lisa Hostein:** You've kind of alluded to this, and I don't wanna give a full spoiler, but somebody's asking about the end and the question is.

[00:30:07] **Lisa Hostein:** Whether you contemplated a different reckoning or ending to certain family relationship.

[00:30:15] **Allegra Goodman:** Yeah. Well, so delicately put, I always knew, I say at the end of "Apple Cake," the opening episode of the book, that these sisters never reconciled. Even when their family members begged them to reconcile their children said, life is too short for this.

[00:30:30] **Allegra Goodman:** I said there that they don't reconcile, and I just kept to it. So it's not even a spoiler. I, I stayed consistent. People have said to me, but why didn't the Helen and Sylvia reconcile? Why couldn't they forgive each other? And then my answer to that is sort of like, why do we not have world peace? It's hard.

[00:30:47] **Allegra Goodman:** People are difficult. I'm sure your family would never have a situation. And of course, my family is perfect. That's why I call the book, *This is Not About Us*, but it's out there. These conflicts are out there.

[00:30:58] **Lisa Hostein:** Absolutely. So Susan is asking about the family's name being referred to as Rubenstein. I believe Rubenstein was Dan and Steve's last name, the family actually should be referred to as Helen, Sylvia and Jeanne's father's name.

[00:31:11] **Lisa Hostein:** Please advise about this.

[00:31:14] **Allegra Goodman:** It's because there's so many characters who are Rubenstein's in, you know, Steve and Dan being the central ones, and then their grandchildren. You're right, the other women, you know, Sylvia took her husband's name just as Jeanne took the name Rubenstein. So it, it is a larger family than that name.

[00:31:29] **Allegra Goodman:** I just chose that name. I'll tell you why I chose the name Rubenstein for that part of the family. It was because my mother, who was a really good pianist, she played Chopin and her favorite interpreter of Chopin was Arthur Rubenstein. And she used to play his records when I was growing up and his recordings.

[00:31:45] **Allegra Goodman:** And it was a nod to my mother and in honor of her that I named Dan and Steve. I gave them, and Jean, the last name, Rubenstein.

[00:31:53] **Lisa Hostein:** Oh, that's lovely. Somebody's asking, would you ever consider writing a children's book? And I think you have, and maybe I just left that out of the bio. Is that

[00:32:01] **Allegra Goodman:** true? I wrote a book for younger readers, which you know, like 10 to 12, I think it's sort of out of print now, but I did write that who knows. Anything is possible.

[00:32:10] **Allegra Goodman:** There's a story, a piece in this book called Ambrose, where little girl Lily, you know, writes her own, she wants to be a writer, and she writes her own sort of fairytale, a children's book Illustrator contacted me and said, I wanna make that into a book. Who knows? Never say never.

[00:32:26] **Lisa Hostein:** That was a beautiful story.

[00:32:27] **Lisa Hostein:** I think she was my favorite character, Lily.

[00:32:30] **Allegra Goodman:** Aw, thank you. That's, I've heard that from other people as well.

[00:32:33] **Lisa Hostein:** Have any of your books been optioned for a movie?

[00:32:37] **Allegra Goodman:** They have been. Movies haven't been made, but books have been optioned. I think there takes a math, there are many steps between an option and an actual film.

[00:32:45] **Allegra Goodman:** You know, these are, these things are expensive to make.

[00:32:47] **Lisa Hostein:** Can you tell us which ones have been optioned?

[00:32:49] **Allegra Goodman:** Um, *Intuition* was, *Kaaterskill Falls* was. *Intuition* was also optioned for like a miniseries, a script was written, but so they've all sort of gone to different levels, but nothing has been made into a film.

[00:33:02] **Lisa Hostein:** Somebody is saying that she thinks that Bette Midler, also Jewish, grew up in Hawaii.

[00:33:06] **Lisa Hostein:** Did you grow up in the same area as their, a Jewish neighborhood in Hawaii?

[00:33:10] **Allegra Goodman:** There's no Jewish neighborhood per se. Bette Midler did grow up in Hawaii. She's older than I am, so I didn't know her. She was probably gone by the time I, you know, was sort of living there or was on her way off to the mainland. I think she lived on the other side of the island from me, but no, no, no.

[00:33:26] **Allegra Goodman:** There's no Jewish neighborhood. There's not enough Jews to have a Jewish neighborhood,

[00:33:30] **Lisa Hostein:** and plus there's so many beautiful parts that people just spread out. Right?

[00:33:33] **Allegra Goodman:** Yeah.

[00:33:33] **Lisa Hostein:** One last question, back to the apple cake. Do you make apple cake yourself? Is that one of your simple recipes?

[00:33:39] **Allegra Goodman:** No, I've never made an apple cake in my life.

[00:33:41] **Allegra Goodman:** I write fiction, you know, I make it up. My oldest son makes a very good apple cake.

[00:33:45] **Lisa Hostein:** Well, if you got your son to be able to cook and bake, that to me is an accomplishment.

[00:33:51] **Allegra Goodman:** Oh yeah.

[00:33:52] **Lisa Hostein:** There's so much more to talk about Allegra, but I think we're going to end on this note about apple cake and family and Seders and all the wonderful things that you've talked about, your writing process.

[00:34:04] **Lisa Hostein:** It's just really been a delight.

[00:34:05] **Allegra Goodman:** Thank you. And thank you for all that you and Hadassah do.

[00:34:09] **Lisa Hostein:** I wanna thank Leah Finkelshteyn, our senior and book editor who helped plan and implement this program along with the magazine's digital editor, Arielle Kaplan, who both promoted and produced it. And a shout out to our partners in Hadassah's engagement and marketing and communications divisions, who always play an important role in making these events happen.

[00:34:31] **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@hadassah.org on the podcast page where you can also sign up for new episode alerts.

[00:34:55] **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@hadassahmagazine.org. I'll be back soon with another enlightening and engaging episode. Thanks again for joining us. Until next time, goodbye.