



**Interviewee: Risa Miller**

**Title: When parents go counterculture**

**Duration: 8 minutes, 2 seconds**

### **Introduction**

We have all heard about children who turn their back on their parents' way of life. But what about parents who reject the values they once taught their children?

In this episode of Bookpod, Risa Miller talks about *My Before and After Life*, a novel that explores the problems that children encounter when a parent takes on a countercultural lifestyle.

### **Presentation**

I give an introductory story about an onset moment of the obsessive idea that birthed this book. And what happened was we hosted a high school girl from an outlying Boston neighborhood in our religiously observant home. My high school daughter was asked to host this girl.

We were feeling especially put out because, for a bunch of reasons, it was not a good Sabbath for us, a good weekend



for us, and the girl's mother was supposed to come pick her up on Saturday night. Never came, never came. Finally, some time midday Sunday, came. When she dropped the girl off she never greeted us. She just stayed in her car and peeled out into the street. And when she picked the girl up she had the same kind of response. Didn't greet us. Didn't wave. Didn't look at us. Just waved her daughter into the car.

I had all kinds of reactions like: How rude! What nerve! How strange! What does she think we are!

But I actually thought I saw this look of sheer panic on her face, this kind of panic of someone who didn't understand religion, just some kind of fear of religion.

And I've thought about that moment many, many times. It could be I was entirely wrong. For all I know, the mother could have just looked at her gas gauge and said, "Oh! My gas tank is empty," and that was the look on her face.

But writers always spin straw into gold. And people who live with writers know writers always make a big deal out



of anything. And I thought about that face for days, for even weeks. And then I thought, I wanted to write that face, the face of fear, the face of someone from the outside confronting religion.

I thought about it quite a bit: Oh, a girl becoming religious and her mother is horrified. Then I thought, well, that's about the oldest story in the world – a kid not growing up exactly the way the mother thought she would.

I thought it wouldn't be interesting to read especially. It wouldn't feel like a fresh read. It sure wouldn't be interesting to write. So I thought, what would be more and more interesting is if the person you look up to -- your parent -- puts this on your plate very suddenly. Then a child, even an adult child, will in one way or another have to sit up and listen.

So, that's how I created this character, Honey Black, who lives in Brookline, Massachusetts, where I live, a beautiful, enlightened, urban, sophisticated,



multicultural, multiethnic town.

And Honey Black is a real do-gooder. She's an attorney with a degree in urban planning. She is, in my fictionalized Brookline, the Brookline watchdog for justice, injustice, right and true. So she's the person who will make sure that the town puts in crosswalks across from the assisted living center, or that, let's say, the Brookline Booksmith won't get swallowed up by a Barnes & Noble and a Borders Bookstore, both franchises that could knock an independent store out of business. She fights for everything that's good and right and true.

And now the definition of what's good and right and true come pounding back at her in the form of her father, an especially dear father who raised her as a single dad when he lost his wife, when she lost her mother. He has become an Orthodox Jew.

And he's in Israel, sending Honey and her sister all kinds of e-mails about the everlasting soul and the afterlife. And these seem like very strange and kind of out-of-whack concepts for a secular Jew, a secular do-gooding Jew whose



life is filled with issue of justice and rightness.

She's very challenged because she loves her father. And she always looked up to him. If he had said he had installed the sun himself she would have believed it.

She's a person who's really fearful of change, as opposed to her sister who is always renovating, one of those people who is always renovating. Honey is very fearful of change. This is a roadblock for her with everything she does. It's something that will haunt her, as you see, through the book. It obstructs her clarity of thinking, really, to the end of the book.

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I have one brother and he's three years older than me. And when he was fifteen, he became religious. And I was not religious even though, I was brought up in this traditional home. And I remember it was the same year he started high school.



And we were brought up in Pikesville, the bona fide Pikesville of Baltimore. And, I mean, people talk about the whole general Jewish area of Pikesville, but I'm talking about the real Pikesville, this upper middle-class demographic where everyone had everything. It was, like, the quintessential, upwardly mobile section of Jewish Baltimore.

We were in school with kids in high school where everyone was Jewish just because it was the way the district worked. There's so much social competition with dress and cars and vacations. Everything you can imagine.

My brother became religious and he put on a *kippah*, he put on a *yarmulka*, and wore white socks -- which was social death. And I couldn't figure out what embarrassed me more, the white socks or the *yarmulka*. This is saying nothing about him. It's saying everything about me, but what my perceptions were as a secular Jew looking at a religious person.



The thing that always and ultimately attracted me to Torah Judaism was the idea of the eternal soul. To me, that's what the book is about. Since we don't know exactly what the eternal soul is or looks like, we can only talk about it in kind of ground level issues like grief and illness.

And it had to be broken down to the dramatic components of grief and illness. 'Cause you can't really talk about a soul, about something you can see, about something you can't feel. But you can talk about the times you think you might need it or it might come in handy or the idea might just give you some relief or something.

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It happens to be that my husband was the co-chair of the zoning board of appeals for ten years in Brookline. But that was before he and I and our small community was involved in the school case, building a school, an Orthodox school, in Brookline in a commercial area. And the things that came up in that case were so outrageous they couldn't



be use in fiction because no one would believe it. But in the book there's, you might call it a subplot. Another way Honey is challenged is that at the same time her father has become religious and she goes to Israel to try to get him back, that she has taken on a case, as she would, a neighborhood association who's fighting against the building and expansion of an Orthodox Jewish day school. So she's terrifically challenged in that arena. All of a sudden, everywhere she turns she's dealing with Orthodox, with religion, with Orthodox and religion. So of course, something has to change for her.

But there was, certainly, a lot of truth behind that school case. Especially, for example, in our case -- and this was a detail I could not put in that book -- when the people of the town drew a map of the neighborhood and drew a line, a big red line around the neighborhood and said, "We will let you build out your school if you don't put any other Jewish institution in this area here, this red line."

You could only imagine someone saying this to an African-American person. You can live here, but if you promise no



other African-American person will live in this area.

So, Honey's bombarded.

I'll tell you, in a one-line summary, I'd say this is a story about someone who's a pursuer of truth, a lover of truth, but equally fearful of change. And that's how I best understood that face of that woman, that mother, and wrote it.

### **Valedictory**

Risa Miller teaches writing at Emerson College and the Shaindy Rudoff Graduate Writing Program at Bar Ilan University in Israel. You can learn more about her at [www.risamiller.com](http://www.risamiller.com).

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

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