

# PAYING IT FORWARD



IN PUBLISHING

## HOW TRACY NEWMAN BECAME AN AUTHOR THROUGH PJ LIBRARY (AND HOW SHE GAVE BACK)

**By Naomi Shulman**

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Tracy Newman knows a lot about perseverance. Today, children around the world have read her books through PJ Library, and she has a successful career as an author. But when Newman first decided to write children's books about 10 years ago, she got a dose of something just about every author faces: rejection. "It's really hard," Newman admits. "I had been a corporate lawyer, which was intense and challenging, but in some ways, it was easier than this."

The first books she wrote were for a general children's audience, and she was having difficulty getting traction in the publishing world. Then a friend told her about a new program called PJ Library. "She thought it was the greatest thing," Newman recalls, "having these books magically appear once a month on her doorstep for her children." Newman, herself a mother of two, was intrigued by the idea, especially since she had a Jewish children's manuscript sitting on her hard drive. The story was about the challenge of eating a whole piece of matzah without making crumbs — after all, Newman says, "Write what you know!" So she submitted it for publication, but it wasn't picked up. "It's never been published," she says. Children's book publishing is a competitive business. That's the way the matzah crumbles.

Then Newman attended a Jewish Book Council conference for writers. While there, she had the good fortune of meeting editor Judy Groner, formerly of Kar-Ben Publishing. Groner read Newman's manuscript and gave her actionable feedback on the spot, encouraging her to stick with it and keep writing. She did.

The next time Newman attended a Jewish Book Council conference, something even more serendipitous happened: She sat next to Chris Barash, chair of the PJ Library Book Selection Committee. "She and I were chitchatting," Newman recalls,

"and she emphasized that authors should submit their Jewish-themed manuscripts to PJ Library."

The first manuscript Newman submitted to PJ Library was rejected. So was the second. And the third. But then Newman's board book *Shabbat Is Coming!* was accepted — and soon, so were *Hanukkah Is Coming!*, *Passover Is Coming!*, and *Rosh Hashanah Is Coming!* To date, PJ Library has sent out nine ... *Is Coming!* books. But Newman didn't stop there. Her picture books *Around the Passover Table*, *Uncle Eli's Wedding*, and *Shabbat Hiccups* have become PJ Library selections as well, and her books have been translated into four languages and sent to families around the world through the global PJ Library program.

When Newman's latest title, *Itzhak: A Boy Who Loved the Violin*, was accepted by PJ Library, Newman received an unexpected call from Barash. PJ Library had just begun awarding the Author Incentive Award (AIA), a \$2,000 prize given to every author whose manuscript is accepted by the committee. Newman was delighted to receive the call, and Barash was delighted at her response: a grateful thanks, but no thanks. "I decided instantly that I would give it back." Newman asked Barash to donate her check to PJ Library so that it could be used to fund other authors' growth and development. "I know how fortunate I am to be able to attend conferences easily and know how instrumental these can be for writers," she explains. "I wanted to be able to help some other writers be able to do that too."

This was the first time an author had donated the AIA back to PJ Library. Barash certainly wasn't anticipating it, but she wasn't surprised. "Having gotten to know Tracy's openness and generous spirit during the past decade, it came as no shock when she (almost shyly) asked how she might return

her award,” Barash says. “She wanted to help other writers who might not be able to participate because of financial concerns. That’s just who she is.”

Newman knows how difficult it can be in the publishing industry, so by paying it forward, she’s giving future PJ Library authors and illustrators a chance they may not otherwise have. “So many people are inspired to write children’s books, and so much of the difference between people who get published and those who don’t is just persistence,” Newman says. “Being an artist is really hard. In some ways it’s a luxury to be able to do it, and that’s why I was happy to pass on the grant. So many people don’t have that luxury.” In the spirit of *mitzvah goreret mitzvah* – one good deed leading to another – Newman’s donation not only furthers PJ Library’s mission but also helps provide a little extra encouragement to the creators who make the program what it is.



## Cultivating Content

Tracy Newman’s journey from unpublished writer to repeat PJ Library author was long and sometimes challenging, but as she points out, she had a lot of help along the way. Writer conferences played a key role in guiding her as she honed her writing skills and allowed her to make invaluable connections to other writers and publishing professionals. And as Newman points out, Chris Barash, chair of the PJ Library Book Selection Committee, also helped her navigate the notoriously choppy waters of children’s book publishing.

This isn’t unusual for Barash or Catriella Freedman, chair of the PJ Our Way Book Selection Committee. Both Barash and Freedman offer virtual office hours – 45-minute chunks of time dedicated to help authors go over a manuscript, flesh out an idea, or simply ask questions – specifically to guide authors through the often solitary writing process. Barash and Freedman agree that author cultivation is perhaps the most powerful tool in bringing high-quality Jewish children’s books to fruition.

That’s why PJ Library also invests in events for writers, such as the Author Israel Adventure, which includes an immersive all-expenses-paid trip to Israel; Tent: Children’s Literature, a gathering that is cosponsored by the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, MA; and an author-illustrator conference at the Center for Cartoon Studies in White River Junction, VT. All are designed to do exactly what Newman has found so useful: provide hands-on, real-time feedback to aspiring authors. That’s why Newman’s gift is so meaningful. After all, writing is solitary work – but it doesn’t have to be lonely.

