



Photo: Donna Svennevik

THE INNOCENTS IN TEMPLE FORTUNE

DEBORAH BROOKS talks to **FRANCESCA SEGAL** about a debut novel that is bound to make waves

You will probably look at this photo of an attractive young woman and wonder who she is. You won't wonder for long. Francesca Segal's debut novel *The Innocents*, to be published in May, is going to be big news, especially for British Jews. The novel is both an illuminating portrait of Jewish north-west

London today and the way in which it encourages conformity (brave), and a modern adaptation of the much-loved American classic and Pulitzer Prize winner *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton (braver).

Literary agent Jonny Geller published a humorous book, *Yes, But Is It Good For The Jews?*, in which he suggests the formula to work out whether anything you can think of is good for the Jews or not. I haven't applied his formula (backlash+impact x j-factor = tzurus/kabbalah) to Francesca Segal's new book because to my mind "Is it good for the Jews?" is not as important a question as "is it good?" and luckily the answer to the latter is a resounding yes.

I met Francesca appropriately at Café Also in Temple Fortune, North London's finest literary destination and in the heart of where her book is set. She tells me that her original title was 'Temple Fortune' but her American publishers decided this sounded too much like a Chinese restaurant. More is the pity, for not only is it a great title, but it could have put this hub of Jewish life on the cultural map as more than just the home of the best bagels around.

The book tells the story of Adam, a young Jewish man who at the start of the book has just proposed to Rachel, the girlfriend he has had since he met her on Israel tour at age 16. Rachel and Adam have grown up together and he is now as much a part of her large and loving family as she is. Yet just as Adam is about to commit forever to Rachel and her family, her attractive and disarming cousin Ellie returns from New York, where she has embarrassed the family by behaving in ways definitely not suitable for a nice Jewish girl. Adam soon finds that he is drawn to Ellie, who brings with her a fresh perspective on life that disturbs his deeply held feelings of security, derived from belonging to a community and living by its rules.

From then on, the story sweeps the reader along as we accompany Adam on his journey of re-evaluation of everything that he has previously known and held dear. The Jewish community is held up for examination as Adam explores both the positive and negative aspects of being part of such a small and close-knit group. It is a group that lives in each other's pockets and watches each other's movements; frowns upon curiosity and difference and spurns those who break its unwritten rules. It is also one which shelters and holds and in which, he realises, "There was no life event – marriage, birth, parenthood or loss – through which one need ever walk alone. Twenty-five people were always poised to help. The other side of interference was support."

It is amazing how well this portrayal reflects that of aristocratic New York in the 1870s. When *The Age of Innocence* was published in 1820, *The Nation* said that Wharton described the customs of a vanished age "as familiarly as if she loved them and as lucidly as if she hated them".

Francesca says that "a lot of people who grew up part of a community have a love-hate relationship like this because we have such interwoven lives. Familiarity and shared understanding are great but with it comes a sense of claustrophobia and eyes watching".

She admits to being "petrified" about reactions to her book. As a book critic who wrote a column on debut novels for *The Observer*, and as the daughter of writer Eric Segal (author of *Love Story*), her work is likely to come under more scrutiny than most debut novels. She tells me that if it is not successful it will truly throw her sense of self.

"Imagine if someone was saying to you that May is the

beginning of a period in which you get to find out if you can keep on being you – and that here’s a chance that you might have to be someone else and take on a new identity, move to Wales and be a sheep farmer.”

Her identity as a writer is one she has been bred for. She tells me: “I’ve seen myself as a writer for as long as I’ve been conscious”. Francesca was born in 1980 and brought up in Golders Green. The family also spent a lot of time in New York, where she is at home too. She feels that her parents were able to transmit a real love of being Jewish and made being Jewish fun. In her home books were central and, with her mother being an editor and her father a writer, there was real joy in words and word play. Her father sadly passed away in 2010 and she tells me

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that although she was of course devastated that he was not there for her wedding last year, she wishes above all that she could have put her first novel into his hands. She says “He would be incredibly proud. All I have is this sense that I wish that I’d got on with it before . . . after the childhood he gave me and this identity I’ve always wanted for myself, I wish more than anything he was here to see it.”

She started writing before her father died and carried on immediately after as she just “had to do it. It kept me sane. It kept me breathing.” It is therefore not a coincidence that fathers play a big role in the book and it’s great to read a novel that has much to say about Jewish fatherhood, something often overlooked in literature as in life, obscured by the focus given to the Jewish mother. She says she had to move to New York to write the book to be able to see the community from a distance and reflect on it. The twin experiences of bereavement and being distanced from the community have infused the book with a deeper understanding, richness and maturity that belie her young age.

It is strange to read a book that reflects one’s own experience so hugely. I was brought up in Birmingham and the community she portrays is wealthier and more privileged than any I know (houses in the country and mansions in the Suburb). Nevertheless, there are so many characters that I recognise and parties I might have been at.

Francesca assures me that no-one in the book is based on anyone real except for perhaps the grandmother Ziva, who has some aspects of her own grandmother – a Holocaust survivor and “fierce intellectual”, who at 90 enjoys reading her Kindle and playing with her iPad. Amazing for me was the way in which it allowed me to see something I have always been so close to in a whole new light – and see the beauty as well as the claustrophobia inherent in being part of a small community.

There may well be those who don’t like the version of the community this book portrays but they are missing the point of what good literature is and does. A great novel (and I think this is one) allows us to enter into a world and see it anew whatever our experience. As Francesca points out:

“People are just people. This is not a book about Jews . . . I used a tapestry with which I was very familiar to write a book about people . . . just as Alan Hollinghurst is telling stories about people and not just gay men.”

Today’s climate is harsh and it can be sink or swim for new novelists, as Francesca knows well as a former book critic. She points out that there used to be an understanding that writers need to get better over time and says that what she hopes for is “the space to get better”, with the hope that by 50 she might be writing something “quite good”. However, rarely do we see authors emerge as fully formed as this.

So when it comes to publication day I’ve no doubt that her father would have been proud, just as I’ve no doubt that Francesca won’t have to move to Wales and be a sheep farmer. Readers and book groups the world over will enjoy reading and dissecting this novel and I hope that we British Jews will recognise it as the best portrait of how we are today that’s been written so far.”

How will Hampstead Garden Suburb residents react to this novel that reaches to the depths of their community? JR asked HANNAH ROSENFELDER, born and brought up in the Suburb, to read it

North-west London’s Jewish community will read *The Innocents* with keen interest. Though, for anyone who remembers the last time that we were put so squarely under the microscope – in the 2004 feature film *Suzy Gold* – there may well be an element of trepidation. But here, it’s not materialism, showy one-upmanship and fierce conformity that dominate the portrait of the community. Initially, these attributes feature – we have the flashy philanthropist and his gym-bunny wife, the mother at the shul gates after the Kol Nidrei service gloating at her daughter’s recent engagement and tut-tutting at her niece, Ellie, the rebellious visitor from ‘outside’, for daring to light a cigarette outside shul – but gradually all this is supplanted by a more nuanced picture.

When we meet protagonist Adam Newman, he feels frustrated and trapped by a community where people can generally list the whereabouts of their nursery school classmates, where many of these former classmates end up marrying each other, and where “the double first of marriage and babies is the ultimate accomplishment desired of one’s 20s”. But later, when he considers the acceptance experienced by friends of his who have either ‘married out’ or ‘come out’, it dawns on him that the community, for all its close-knit homogeneity, is rather more liberal and elastic than he had allowed himself to admit. It was his own fears of breaking the mould that had led him to believe that the mould was in fact quite so rigid and set.

And so, for all the sober acknowledgement of north-west London’s idiosyncrasies and arguable shortcomings, *The Innocents* emerges as a celebration of the intergenerational love and supportiveness within a community brought together by an endless succession of elaborate feasts and rites of passage. Any reader put out by some of the less than flattering details of north-west London Jewish life will probably be disarmed by the sensitivity and skill with which Segal conjures the “effortless choreography of lives long interwoven”.

Hannah Rosenfelder is a producer of radio documentaries