

# Sara Miriam Gross: the pot on the stove, permission, and the pebbles within the details

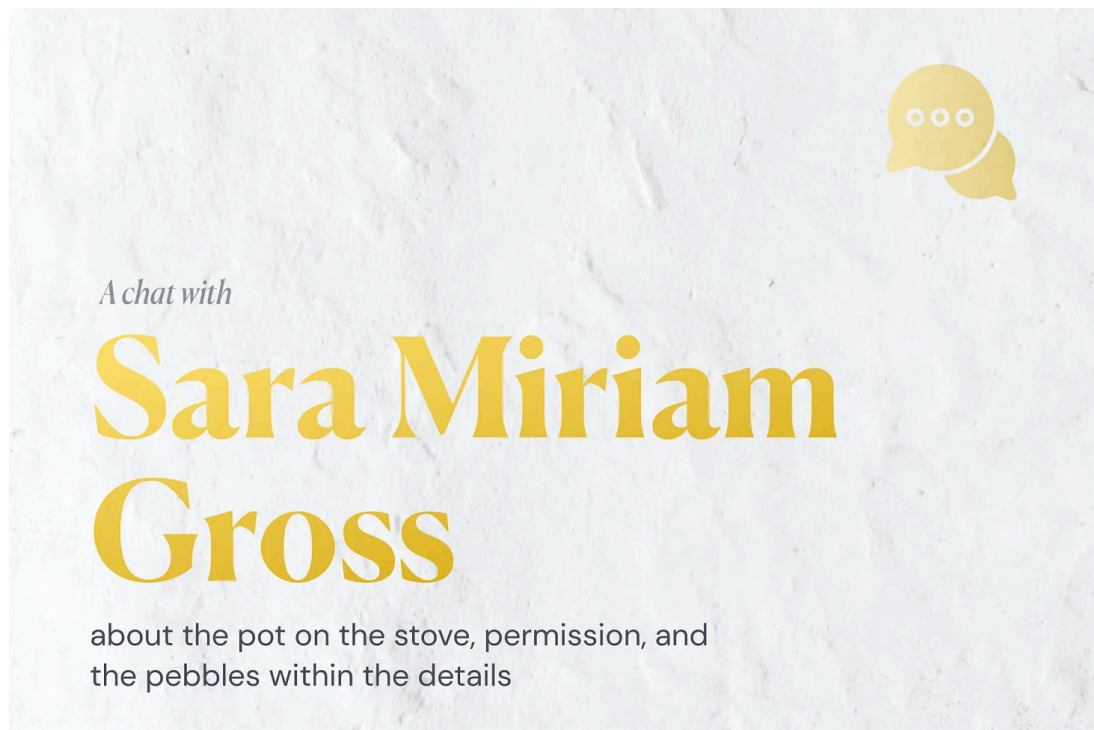
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*Most books list just one name on the cover. But behind the author stands a team of professionals who bring the book to life, lending their expertise and talent to support the writer’s vision and voice. It is those unseen hands that provide the guidance, polish, and coordination to ensure the final product creates an engrossing read.*

*Sara Miriam Gross is the rare publishing professional who has done it all. Currently the editor-in-chief at Tfutza Publications and director of [Blue Ocean Books](#), she is a book coach, ghostwriter, editor, translator, and children’s author. Her most recent release was [Catch That Crook](#), published before Sukkos.*



**A while ago I had the experience of reading four Tfutza books back to back, preparing for a release roundup. And while good translation is invisible, reading them all back to back made it so clear how each translator differed in style and skill. What do you think makes a good translation?**

The litmus test of success is when I get an email saying, “Can your author come to our school in Boro Park to speak?” And meanwhile, the author is an Israeli who doesn’t know English. If I get that message, it means the translation flowed and was natural.

When I first got into translation, I got a call from the Faigel Safran, saying that they were looking for translators. I said, “That’s so nice, Faigel, I don’t translate.” And she said, “I’m looking for writers who can translate, not translators. A translator is someone who doesn’t see themselves as a translator.”

**If you're looking for people who have that talent and can be a challenge where they're translating the story, somebody else invented, which they surely have opinions on that boundary between inserting themselves into the story, that's words?**

When a book is translated, in a certain sense, a child is born. Some authors say, I'm so glad my baby will have a great new home. Others struggle to come to terms with the fact that for readers in another country to receive their baby properly, it will have to be changed.

There's something I tell people often, which you published when you interviewed Adina Edelman. If you have a voice within saying, “Write, you have a message for the world”, don't take it out on your editing or translation clients. Don't do it to them. Always have your own pot on the stove, some book you're working on, even if it's just a passion project and not for pay. Keep something of your own going so that when you sit down to translate or edit, you're not trying to find an outlet for your creative energy through that book; you are the midwife. You're not the mama.

**Would you differentiate between developmental editing and the later more technical and stylistic editing? In developmental editing, you do have someone relying on you for guidance, they want your creative energy and opinions in that stage of the process.**

Developmental editing is figuring out what the “spine” of the book is, the essential structure that's holding it together. And if it's not holding it together, how many other vertebrae does it need to better support and tell the story?

When I talk about not living through your editing or translation clients, the point is that you're not imposing a vision. You are making great efforts to understand the perspective and message of the author and then supporting them in that. Your personality and brilliance are not center stage; you're bringing out the best in them



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and their story. Now, if you find yourself saying, “No one will believe that, I have to give them a reality check,” why should they only be given this reality check when it hits the stores? So it's a *chessed* to tell them in a way that's honest but wrapped in diplomacy.

**What is that fine line between weaknesses that can be coached and perfected versus weaknesses that are a sign of the wrong material or direction?**

It's quite personal. If I'm finding a story gripping but flawed, I see there's a story here. Perhaps canned dialogue, or characters floating in outer space because they didn't create any background... What would be a fatal flaw? If I read it and feel sorry they spent their time on this. This shouldn't be released into the world for various reasons, or this is such a preposterous setup that it can't go anywhere. I run into that, and it's painful, I feel for them.

If you have an idea for The Great Frum Novel I would suggest writing yourself a synopsis. Work on your table of contents, get a 10,000-word sample, and then put it out there to see what the response is. Don't write an entire 80,000-word novel and then say, I hope the world loves it.

**Authors who are “pantsers” (those who develop their story as they go, rather than planning in advance) and not “plotters” would struggle with that, because they think of it as they write.**

That's true. Look, it depends on who's doing the writing. If someone needs to make a living from their writing, they're often selling their story as a serial and then later combining it to make money on royalties in book form. If someone has the financial freedom to sit and pen novels, they don't have weekly deadlines, but they also don't have immediate feedback from letters to the editor and readers. Don't go too far. Get feedback from someone who can point out what needs to be done, give you some lay of the land, and tell you a bit about the market situation. Maybe you're writing something amazing, but it's too niche.

**I'm very interested in the idea of fiction as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, where fiction can be either resonant with our own lives, a peek into another experience, or a journey to a whole new world. With translated fiction, a story written as a mirror for its initial Israeli audience often ends up being a window for American readers looking in on a very different world. Do you think all books can serve both of these functions? Or is there something you look for to determine that a book will be suitable for both roles? And: what do you think a translator's role is in setting up a 'mirror' book to be successful as a 'window'?**

We try to think about which elements are unrelatable. The novelist wants the reader to buy into the story and care about the characters. If the reader is sitting there saying: Cucumbers for breakfast? Or, what's the big deal about being a *madricha* in Batya? These are the things where, for *kleine gelt*, why kick out your readers? You've got a character in a store with money, ready to buy a new blouse. I raise the prices! If an American reads it they'll be like, oh they must be so poor, that's all her mother gave her for a shirt? You don't want these little things to be the pebbles that your reader trips on, and all of a sudden gets booted out of the story, busy thinking about the differences between Israeli and American culture.

**Do you ever find that there is a story unrelatable in the core of the story itself? Where the original writer hasn't done a good enough job of making the inner conflict universal?**

I've been at Tfutza heading on 11 years. In that time, I can count on one hand the times when I said to my boss, "I know this is on the roster and we're already financially, logistically, and emotionally invested to a certain extent, but we can't release this. Don't keep pouring Swiss chocolate into the batter saying there will be a cake in the end." Sometimes you have to call it quits, but it rarely happens. I think that's because I have such discerning bosses, they're picking solid books. They have a unique niche because nowadays, most novels are reprints from serials. Most writers can't afford to sit and pen novels. Because of that, the English reading audiences are hungry for new material. What's newest to them are books that came out in Hebrew that they have never seen. So that's Tfutza's niche. And they pick strong writers. So, generally, strong writers are coming out with books that I don't have to nix.

**While Tfutza and other publishers bring many genres to the American readership, my impression is that American readers are most excited about thriller or suspense novels. Why do you think that is?**

Israelis live against a backdrop of intensity that cannot be replicated. There is an intensity to the *hashgacha pratis* in this land, to this lone sheep in the worst neighborhood in the Middle East. Anyone who lives here has gone through wars, and has thought about how to handle emergency safety situations. However you slice and dice it, they are shaped by their environment. You've got high drama and intensity in a way that you don't experience in America. Children growing up in the States don't see troops of soldiers being sworn in at the *kosel*, don't have a brother, cousin, or son off fighting in Gaza, and are not running into their reinforced room because Iran decided to send missiles. It's easy to understand that the literature coming out of a country with such a remarkable and intense spiritual and physical reality will have a special draw.

There's also a mystique. Who are these Jewish superheroes in the Mossad? We don't see many Jewish spies, investigators, or police officers in America. I mean, *hatzalah* people are our heroes, but it's very different than Shabak and the special Sephardi divisions in the army that go undercover in Arab towns and live there for years. You're in a whole different world, and yet they're all our brothers.

**Agent for Hire is a huge hit. How surprised are you by its popularity?**

My boss wasn't surprised. I was because I'm not a thriller reader. I prefer family drama / relationship novels.

**I think Agent for Hire nails something specific because on one hand, it's not your Yair Weinstock thriller with 10 different plotlines coming together. It's focused and specific, following one set of characters throughout. And later in the series, there is a strong emotional element with strong internal conflict. It's not just the guts and gory, but so much more than that.**

A lot of EQ was put into the box. Even the very premise: Who is this Mossad agent? He's a ba'al teshuva who turned around his life. He didn't come from this and look what he's made of himself. We root for the underdog. He married his cousin's almana, who didn't have anyone to raise her children and be the father in their home. We're rooting for this guy from the get-go. We want to see this guy win, and boy, he's a cat with nine lives. How will he get out of this one? It's not a shallow thing. We care about Eyal Gilboa, even if we have no one in our lives we've ever met named Eyal, he pulls at our hearts in many ways. He always wants to do the right thing. But what is the right thing in a circumstance that maybe no one has ever been confronted with before?

**Last year, you published Catch that Crook, two mysteries featuring history and international crime for middle-aged boys. After writing the first of these, what led you to continue with the same characters?**

When I was a mother of young kids, it didn't take me too long to realize that 'I can't write a book; I'm happy if I write my shopping list each week.' At the time, I was doing a ton of translation and feature articles for the Mishpacha Junior, but I wanted something more enduring. I pour my *neshama* into my stories beyond any justification that money could provide, so I won't let it become fish wrapper. I didn't want my stories to just be in a periodical. I wanted them to end up in a book.

So how would I do it? Each time the editor of the Jr. came to me and said, "Can you write a story?", I said, "Sure. Just so you know, I'll be writing about the Lemonade Girls every time." And they went for it. It wasn't weekly, it wasn't monthly, it took me years. But I got a book out of it. After that I did a sequel series called Best Friends Forever, and eventually, I put the stories together and called it [Lemonade Girls](#)

[Forever](#). Catch That Crook was a variation of that book-writing recipe. I wrote two adventures about Avi and Shlomo. These were each 11-12 installment mini-series, and it was enough for a book.

That's a nugget I'd like to offer aspiring authors. If someone feels like their life is too busy to write a book, maybe they can write one story, and then another story about the same characters, until they find that after six or seven years they have enough stories about those characters for a full-length book. Have patience. Just like I, as a human being, am a work in progress, I've got a book that's a work in progress. My first book was 6-7 years of stories, my second book was more like a year of stories because they were in weekly installments, and my next book coming up, *Invisible Tribe*, contains more than six years of stories.

**[Invisible Tribe](#) is your upcoming short story collection for middle grades, featuring fiction stories about the experiences and challenges that children who have lost a parent face. What led you to take on this project?**

I come by the subject honestly, because I was a *yesoma*, I lost my father when I was seven. Back in 2016, Sarah Rivkah Kohn of Links Family was looking for writers with personal experience with loss to pen stories for their newsletter. I realized I had a calling and began: one 1200-word story, another 1200-word story. Here was this platform with kids who were thirsty for everything I had to give: the insights I had learned in the school of hard knocks, and the entertaining stories I'd learned how to write.

I told Sarah Rivkah from the outset that I wanted to put these out as a book so younger generations of *yesomim* could also benefit from them. After all, how many times could I write a story about going to a new summer camp and wondering if you should tell or not? Or about being the youngest one in shul saying *yizkor*... I want to help *yesomim* see the humor in their unique predicaments, gain strength from the insights I've garnered, and feel understood. The English edition should be out in mid-September and I'm hoping to have it translated into Hebrew next.

**[Once a Bride](#), published this Pesach, was a beautiful read that was loved by readers of all ages and tastes. From what I understand, the book was printed in a very small run and sold out immediately. Can you take me into the behind the scenes of how decisions about run size are made?**

Without discussing numbers, if we haven't worked with an author before we're more cautious. It's better to sell out and reprint. If we've already printed an author's work, as in this case, we generally aim to print something that matches the sales of the author's previous book plus another few hundred copies spare. Do we have wild cards? Yes.

### Did Once a Bride do better than you expected?

Yes. Ruti Tanenwald is a strong writer but it was still a nice surprise. What I've noticed is that people enjoy titles that imply discord, disconnect, and disruption. I'll give you an example. We published a book [Formerly My Sister](#), which in Hebrew was Achoti L'sheavar. We had decided to call it Forever My Sister, but while I was out of the office for a few days, the book was printed with Formerly My Sister. Divine Providence at work. It sold out right away, and I realized a valuable lesson from that. Forever My Sister would not have sold out, because love, harmony, blah, blah, blah. Formerly My Sister: What do you mean? Are you alienated from one another? How did this start? Is there a side of right and wrong? You get people curious. So too, Once a Bride? But not anymore? Who broke it off? What happened?

### What's coming up next from Tfutza?

Rachel Newton has a fiction anthology coming out called Fault Lines. It's just scrumptious, and is the best thing I've read recently. The minute it comes out for Sukkos, grab it.



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