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A CONSEQUENTIAL WOMAN: Spotlight on Linda Kass

In her latest novel, the author explores the life and times of Bess Myerson, the daughter of Jewish immigrants who was crowned Miss America in 1945, when hostility against Jews was high

As the founder and owner of Gramercy Books, an independently minded neighborhood bookstore located in Ohio, Linda Kass not only curates a robust author program but also carves out time to write books. Her latest novel, *Bessie*, reimagines the early life of Bess Myerson, the talented daughter of poor Russian Jewish immigrants, who, in 1945, when American hostility against Jewish people was high, was named Miss America.

But even before she began writing *Bessie* three years ago, Kass was familiar with Myerson's life and work. "She was an iconic figure and in the public eye," Kass says, "probably the most famous of the long list of women crowned Miss America due to the many things she did after winning the title."

Myerson followed her pageant win with a successful run as a panelist on early television programs, including the weekly prime-time show *I've Got a Secret*. After television, Myerson had a productive political career, which included being appointed commissioner of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, a position she held under Mayor Ed Koch in the 1980s. Additionally, Myerson was an outspoken voice of support for the Anti-Defamation League.

And while Kass was aware of Myerson's numerous achievements, it was a 2020 article that persuaded the author to write *Bessie*. In addition to mentioning the Miss America win, the article listed the date that Myerson received the title: Sept. 8, 1945.

"My first two novels (*Tasa's Song*, *A Ritchie Boy*) were set during World War II, so I was very familiar with the time period and with the bigoted milieu that existed then," Kass says. "What astonished me

was the timing—the cultural context and contradiction under which Bess Myerson became Miss America. This crowning took place at a precarious cultural moment."

Bessie focuses on the formative years of Myerson's life. After a brief prologue in which Myerson is in Atlantic City for the Miss America pageant, *Bessie* begins in 1936, when the beauty queen is just 12 years old, and ends in 1946.

"My fictional writing interest has consistently focused on the formative years of my protagonists as they persevere through early challenges, their futures remaining open," Kass says. "I have always been fascinated by the moral and psychological growth of my protagonists. Bess Myerson became such a consequential woman. The biographies of her that I became curious to read revealed an early life unknown to me and one at direct odds with the beauty queen image the world has of her today."

One biography that served as source material for Kass was Susan Dworkin's *Miss America, 1945: Bess Myerson and the Year That Changed Our Lives*. "Dworkin's biography interspersed Bess's first-person comments throughout the narrative," Kass says. "This gave me Bess's actual perspective looking back at her early years. It also, by reading her direct quotes, gave me a sense of her voice, her way of speaking, how she thought, and how she viewed the world."

Dworkin's book helped Kass overcome

one of the many challenges of turning a real life into historical fiction. "In a fictional portrait of the early life of a famous woman like Bess Myerson," she says, "the challenge for me was to inhabit her emotional essence as she grew into a young woman, to bring new insight to historical events, and to remain faithful to the facts of her life."

Although *Bessie* is a work of fiction, the political environment the novel captures is eerily similar to present-day America. "By mid-1945, Hitler is dead and

the Nazis are defeated, yet antisemitic, racist, and sexist propaganda still spreads hatred and distrust," Kass says. "I'd say that sounds awfully, and sadly, familiar. Frankly, antisemitism is at an all-time high right now, as is the repeated violence against people of color and women. The backdrop of isolationism, antisemitism, racism, and sexism were the context of Bess Myerson's world in the 1930s and 1940s. My

novel reflects that reality, and it mirrors what we are seeing today."

But Kass's hope is that readers don't focus on the societal parallels between 1945 and 2023. Instead, Kass says she is optimistic that *Bessie* will "remind audiences that talent, hard work, and fair play can be rewarded, that everyone has a shot. Most importantly, I hope they see a young girl thirsting to go beyond her beauty and talent, to find purpose and to make a difference in her world."

