

Lynne Golodner's 'Woman of Valor' is a five-senses immersion into a rich world of Jewish faith and family life

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David Crumm

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By DAVID CRUMM
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"Lynne Golodner is a wonderful writer who tackles tough subjects with sensitivity and wit while delivering a heartfelt, satisfying read."
Rochelle B. Weinstein, bestselling author of *This Is Not How It Ends*

WOMAN OF VALOR

Lynne Golodner

[Click on the cover to visit the book's Amazon page.](#)

A novel is a community between two covers.

The best novels invite us to enter these communities accompanied by people we care about and whose adventures we are eager to follow—even if that involves facing perils along the way. To fully enjoy these adventures, we hope the author has authentically recreated the community on the page, faithfully enough that the things we see, touch, smell, hear and taste seem believable to us.

Lynne Golodner knows the Orthodox Jewish world of ***Woman of Valor*** so well that she weaves around us the beauty of Orthodox family life in America with all five senses from the flavors of fresh-baked challah to all the other rich sensations of a fully immersive Sabbath. That's why we care so much about the people we meet—Sally, the main character, and her

husband Barry and their children along with their close friends. And that's why we keep turning pages when the suspense of two quite different predators threatens the future of their home in Skokie, Illinois.

After reading a preview copy of the novel—which officially launches on September 26, the day after Yom Kippur 2023—I interviewed Lynne via Zoom about this vivid story.

I began by explaining to Lynne how important I think this novel is *right now*. This spring, the Anti-Defamation League issued its analysis of the calendar year 2022, which set a record for antisemitic incidents since the ADL's tracking began in the 1970s. *The New York Times* reported that the ADL's data matches what *Times* reporters are seeing. *Times* correspondent Ruth Graham concluded, "The cumulative effect is an atmosphere in which threats, slurs and conspiracy theories brew online but are increasingly visible offline, too."

Beyond a rise in hateful provocations and crimes, as a journalist who covers religious diversity myself, I've seen too many negative portrayals of Orthodox communities in popular fiction. Lots of contemporary fiction writers can't understand anyone actually choosing to live in a community with such daily boundaries and demands on family life. Case in point: The most popular portrayal of Orthodox Judaism streaming on TV now is the fictional *Unorthodox*, adapted from Deborah Feldman's memoir about fleeing an abusive Orthodox enclave in Brooklyn.

In sharp contrast to these negative portrayals in popular media—the overall arc of Lynne's novel feels like breathing fresh air!

That's true even when a couple of bad guys are looming along the way. From the opening scenes in *Woman of Valor*, we don't want Sally or Barry to be forced away from their home. We're cheering for them to find some way to remain, despite mounting threats. From the opening pages of this book, we become friends with the wide array of folks in this Orthodox neighborhood and we care about what happens to them.

An Entrepreneurial Writer and Coach

Readers who have enjoyed Lynne's other books ([which you can find on Amazon](#)) know that her body of work touches on a wide array of issues. She is nationally respected as a journalist and author whose home website is LynneGolodner.com. In more recent years, she launched [the podcast Make:Meaning](#), which we also can recommend to you. And, now, she is launching a new hybrid publishing house, [Scotia Road Books](#), with this debut novel.

At one time, she was an active part of the Orthodox community in southeast Michigan. She remains deeply immersed in the Jewish world, but as her professional life expanded over the years she decided to live a less-strict version of that religious life. Still, she and her family are

observant of beloved Jewish traditions. For example, she told me that she loves to prepare big *shabbat* dinners for her family and friends. And she continues to have a deep admiration and affection for her stricter Orthodox neighbors.

‘A strong woman defining her role’

In our interview—after I mentioned the context of the other more disturbing portrayals of Orthodox life in popular media—Lynne told me: “That’s why I wanted this novel to be about the beauty of the Orthodox world, featuring a strong woman who is defining her own role in that world. Also, while I was sharing lots of details about daily life in the Orthodox world, I wanted the book to be accessible to all readers, even if they’re not Jewish.”

I did surprise Lynne in our interview by describing her book as “a suspense novel”. While this is, indeed, a story that welcomes us into the rich tapestry of Orthodox family life—from raising kids to making friends to preparing distinctive foods and planning ahead for the weekly shabbat—this also is a page turner.

“I had not thought of this as a suspense novel, but I like what you’re saying about the suspense you found here,” Lynne said.

I told her that in my own first reading (I’ve now read it twice), I could not put it down because of the ongoing threats from two predators and, in my mind, that’s the classic definition of suspense.

Who are these predators? I want to walk a fine line in this magazine story by affirming that *Woman of Valor* is a beautifully evocative novel about Jewish life—and also giving prospective readers a “heads up” about the bad guys they will discover lurking in these pages.

Who are the predators?

The first predator is a teacher at the family’s local school who Sally and Barry discover has been physically abusing their young son—and other boys. Multiple tensions are unleashed by this news: What exactly did this teacher do? Will community leaders circle around the teacher to avoid scandal or decide to protect their children? And how will this teacher and his wife react within the community, since they are living in the Skokie neighborhood as well?

As a journalist, I have covered secretive patterns of abuse within religious groups—especially within Catholic and insular evangelical churches. I commended Lynne for accurately writing this particular storyline. *(If you are interested in helping to promote awareness of the four basic forms of child abuse, the CDC provides [a helpful summary](#)—as well as a free [info-graphic outlining these challenges](#) that anyone can download, print and post in their community.)*

In choosing her two fictional predators for this drama, I asked Lynne why she chose to highlight this particular issue?

“There’s nothing more important than protecting children and the vulnerable—period,” Lynne said. “This is an issue in every corner of our world. There are abusers who turn up in schools all around the world in both secular and religious settings. It’s an issue lots of families face.”

The second predator is a former lover from the years before Sally decided to become Orthodox and marry Barry. He resurfaces in the midst of the emotional turmoil of the abuse crisis at the family’s school—just when Sally and Barry are at their most vulnerable. He reveals himself to be a dangerous stalker.

And that’s why I’m describing *Woman of Valor* as a suspense novel as well as a family drama. I know that I had a hard time putting down this book while I was reading it, because I kept wondering: How can this family hope to survive as their beloved community seems to erupt around them?

Beautiful Sights, Sounds, Smells and Tastes of Skokie

Until my own adult children moved into a home just across the city line from Skokie a few years ago, I had never visited that area north of Chicago. However, one of the first news stories I reported as a young journalist was about reactions in southeast Michigan’s Jewish community to attempts by Nazis to march in Skokie in 1977. That’s pretty much all I knew about Skokie until several long summer visits my wife and I now have made to spend time with our adult children and our preschool granddaughters. Because Skokie is such a wonderfully walkable town, we’ve spent hours in the same neighborhood playgrounds and shopping centers where Sally and her family live in *Woman of Valor*.

“You absolutely nailed the setting,” I said to Lynne in our interview. “I felt like I was reading about a family we might have interacted with in a Skokie playground this summer.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” Lynne said, “because that was a challenge. I know the southeast Michigan Jewish community very well, but I wanted to venture out and write about a place that I didn’t know as well. Sally is from Michigan and moves to the Chicago area and, of course, there’s always been a pretty natural progression for Detroit area youth to move to Chicago. You’ve seen it in your family. It made sense to have Sally move to Chicago after she finished the University of Michigan and that’s how she winds up in Skokie.”

And as Lynne is planning her second novel, will Skokie be the home base for her new characters?

“No, the next novel I’m writing is set partially in Michigan and partially in Scotland,” Lynne said. “I had to travel to Scotland to learn that landscape well enough to write about it.”

“Jews in Scotland?” I asked. “Certainly, they’re there, but it’s not the first ethnic group I think of in Scotland. Once again, you’ve chosen a place that’s family turf for our family. What’s the Jewish connection in your Scottish setting?”

“I don’t want to spoil the new novel, but it involves a woman who is a researcher, an archivist in Edinburgh, and she discovers some writings by a Jewish woman. I don’t want to say much more about it now, but it’s something readers can look forward to, if they like this first novel.”

I agreed. My wife and I definitely are going to be early readers of the new book. We’re sold on Lynne’s storytelling abilities in *Woman of Valor*.

“What’s your hope for launch of *Woman of Valor*?” I asked Lynne finally. “How do you hope it will affect readers?”

“I hope that people love reading it. I hope that they can’t put it down,” she said. “I hope that it makes people think about who they are and how they want to live their lives—and I hope it sparks conversations. I’m excited to speak to groups of readers. One thing that impressed me is that—there are lots of foods, lots of dishes, in the book—and I know one book club that is hosting me is planning to make some of the things in the book for that night.

“I hope that lots of great conversations will grow out of this book.”

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Care to Read More?



Lynne Goldodner at a recent book event with her new novel and earlier books she has written as well.

Want to meet Lynne or invite her to your organization?

Lynne Golodner is the author of eight books and thousands of articles. If you are intrigued by this interview about her new book, *Woman of Valor*, [you can order your copy from Amazon today.](#)

If you are intrigued about our mention of food in this article, please check out Lynne's book *The Flavors of Faith—Holy Breads*, [which also is available from Amazon.](#)

Or, you can learn much more about her work through her home website, LynneGolodner.com. If you explore that website, you'll learn how to contact her and ask about future events.

If you've read this far, you'll almost certainly enjoy her podcast series, as well, which you can learn about at [Make:Meaning](#).