

## THE COUNCIL OF WISE WOMEN

by Izzy Abrahamson

UK Release Date: August 25, 2024

US Release Date: September 16, 2024

Author and Cover images available at

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## Q &A with Izzy Abrahamson

**Most novels revolve around a single character. Why does THE COUNCIL OF WISE WOMEN take a multigenerational approach?**

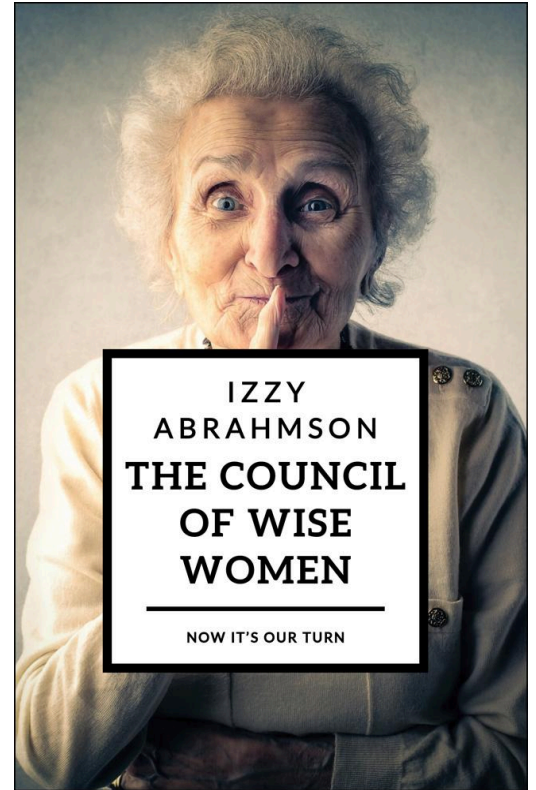
THE COUNCIL OF WISE WOMEN is centered around Rachel Cohen, a brilliant young woman, who is born on the first page. But a good portion of the novel is about her family and especially her mother Sarah's fracturing relationship with Rachel's father, Benjamin.

These days, we tend to box literature into genres and demographic niches. But our lives are so much richer than the rules of YA or even magical realism allow.

As Beyoncé wrote, "Genres are a funny little concept... in theory they have a simple definition that's easy to understand, but in practice some may feel confined."

The village is a community, so the story is also about Oma Levitsky, the oldest person in the village, and Mrs. Chaipul, the midwife and caterer...

Older generations are keepers of the culture, but younger generations push for change. As Rachel grows into adulthood, she crashes into the boundaries



of her traditionally patriarchal community. The questions she asks, and the example she sets, force the village to grow.

**THE COUNCIL OF WISE WOMEN is a magical realism novel, set in a Jewish village of fools, how does that relate to contemporary society?**

The first version of THE COUNCIL OF WISE WOMEN was serialized in print and online more than a dozen years ago. About halfway through the writing process, my first marriage fell apart. While the novel isn't at all autobiographical, much of that tension and upset made its way into the pages. When the initial serialization was complete, I wasn't ready to revise. So, I tucked the book away.

For a decade it was forgotten.

Then, during the COVID lockdown, I vaguely recalled writing something about an influenza epidemic and a "Chicken Soup Bucket Brigade."

I dug out the manuscript, and began reading. It was perfectly contemporary.

I know I'm the author, and a performing storyteller, but my memory is often like a stainless steel sieve – I couldn't remember my own book.

The more I read, the more I enjoyed it. The stack of pages grew smaller, and I became terrified that I might have blown the ending.

Fortunately, it worked out.

This book is written for audiences of any culture or background. Visiting a remote and pastoral village is a bit of a vacation. You leave your "normal" existence and for a brief time immerse yourself in another way of life.

But of course there are problems. THE COUNCIL OF WISE WOMEN is set in an idyllic community, where everyone is either family or a friend, which means they don't always get along. People still have to deal with jealousy, resentment, competition and the vagaries of aging and epidemic.

Since the characters aren't electronically distracted, and there aren't many strangers, the villagers have no escape and must deal with each other – and themselves.

Once there was a real village of Chelm, but the Holocaust destroyed it. In Jewish literature, it is remembered only as a village of fools.

My “Village Life” books take a different tack. Their foolishness is relative. Certainly their neighbors think that they are dolts. And yes, sometimes they act like idiots, but isn't that true of you and I?

Other authors have written about “The Wise Men of Helm,” so I used THE COUNCIL OF WISE WOMEN to dig deeper into the lives and influence of the women in the community.

One of the things that I love about “The Village Life Series” is that it's both universal and timeless while simultaneously specific to today.

Sometimes it's good to remember that we're simply and wonderfully human.

**THE COUNCIL OF WISE WOMEN touches on elements from the Bible and Jewish religious traditions. How has your Jewish upbringing informed your writing? Why doesn't the book deal with the politics of today or the violence of antisemitism?**

First off, as much as we joke about it, not everything Jewish is about suffering. I believe there is – or can be – much joy in the world. My earlier book, THE VILLAGE TWINS, touches on the subjects of anger, hatred and fear, but THE COUNCIL OF WISE WOMEN is deliberately about the personal relationships and the community itself.

My ancestors fled the region where THE COUNCIL OF WISE WOMEN is set, and my five-year-old Grandfather was literally carried away on the back of a stranger. Both of my parents were raised somewhat traditionally in the Boston area. When their grandparents spoke Yiddish, it was as a code, so their children wouldn't understand what they were saying. The direct culture was lost to assimilation.

I grew up in suburban Bethesda, MD. We attended a Reformed Jewish synagogue, and never learned Hebrew. Nevertheless, our synagogue's rabbi fascinated me with Biblical stories, Jewish history, and Jewish folktales, including the stories of Chelm.

Fast forward a few decades. I began editing *The Rhode Island Jewish Herald*. One day, we had a "hole" in the newspaper that needed to be filled, and I wrote my first Village Life story. I enjoyed the humor and the characters who immediately sprang to life. For me, writing these stories became both an artistic and spiritual practice.

As a performing storyteller, I relish sharing Izzy Abrahamson's Village Life stories with adults and children in churches and community centers, synagogues and schools. The first time I tried it, I was terrified that it wouldn't work. That the stories would be too Jewish or not Jewish enough. What I found was though the stories are Jewish in setting, the characters and problems are universal.

That said, the actual Council of Wise Women in the book is inspired by the Biblical and Quranic story of Sarah and Hagar – which is at the core of today's conflict in the Middle East. I don't live in that part of the world, and neither do the villagers. Instead, they work to create peace with each other and reconcile.

**There's a lot of humor in the book. Do you think THE COUNCIL OF WISE WOMAN ever goes too far? Does comedy undermine the human stories?**

Not at all. Humor softens hardship. Foolishness makes us laugh at how seriously we take ourselves.

When Mrs. Chaipul asks Oma Levitsky, the village's eldest, "Are you suffering?" the older woman replies, "Just this conversation."

In my version of The Village, they've made complaining – better known as *kvetching* – into an art form, and have an annual contest to celebrate it.

I love how they turn what could be the worst thing into the best.

As Beyoncé says, there's a tendency for art to be about just one thing. It makes marketing so much easier. The genre dictates the story. Some books and authors are good at hammering home a theme, or maintaining a singular (often dark) tone.

But my life isn't like that. There are days and stretches of pain, challenge, anxiety or depression. And there are days when the sun is out, the food is good, and the company makes me laugh.

Can't we – if only in fiction – have it all?

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312 Pages (more or less)

Fiction · Magical Realism

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Softcover · \$€ \$29.99 · £24.99 ISBN 978-1-940060-63-7

audio · \$14.99 ISBN 978-1-940060-64-4

ebook · \$9.99 ISBN 978-1-940060-65-1

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