Q&A with Deborah Kalb

Crossing the Bronx, by David Hirshberg

1. **What inspired you to write *Crossing the Bronx*, and how did you create your character, Jay?**

All my novels—*My Mother's Son*, *Jacobo's Rainbow*, and now *Crossing the Bronx*—comprise my Mid-Century Trilogy, works that illuminate the 1950s and 60s, a time framed by World War II and the Vietnam War, when Jews began to shed their outsider status, and integrate into the fabric of American society, cloaked with both its goodness and strife.

For the narrative arc of each novel, I've picked a central event and used it as the crux of the story around which all the action takes place. In the case of *Crossing the Bronx*, I've always been fascinated by the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway in the 1950s, which destroyed the Tremont area of The Bronx and was representative of the way in which governments exercised eminent domain without the input and consent of the local population. The November 10, 2019 issue of Real Archeology had a story entitled The Cross Bronx Expressway and the Ruination of The Bronx, and the New York Times published an article on September 8, 2022 that gave an in-depth analysis of the destruction of the local community. I was hooked.

Since The Bronx was an ethnically diverse borough, setting a story about the Jewish, Italian, Black, and Puerto Rican people whose lives were disrupted gave me the opportunity to write about how the 'little people' are affected by the (oftentimes callous) decisions of government officials and business interests.

The main male character—Jay—was not the first character I created. His father, Ike, was conjured up first, and once I wrote the following paragraph (which originally was the opening of the novel in an early draft), Jay emerged.

> My father was a *dago*-Jew, more Italian than Heeb. deVenezia, from the original ghetto. Orphaned, which may explain his lust for acceptance by those in power and his rage when he beat the shit out of me. Or maybe not. Let's face it, I'm not the shrink. He was the only Jew in the orphanage with a hundred Catholic kids, and it was his good fortune that he had the physical characteristics to stand up for himself. At twelve, he pried a crucifix off one of the walls and used it to pound the daylights out of a kid four years older who'd taunted him in front of the others on account of his circumcised dick. That night, so he said, he got rid of Isaac and became Ike—the self-described Ike the Kike. How's that for balls?

I had the idea from the beginning that Ike (né Isaac) would have two sons, so naturally they were named for Jacob and Esau (Jay and Eric). Jay's persona and the story flowed from there.

2. **How did you research the novel, and what did you learn that especially surprised you?**

After reading the above-mentioned two articles, I dug in to learn more about the construction of the expressway and its fallout with the people of the community. And, also, living in New York, I had some familiarity with different sections of The Bronx going back to my childhood. What surprised me was the rapaciousness of the interests that were aligned to construct the expressway and the depth of the extraordinary disruptive effect on the local community. It's one thing to read about a few people whose homes were seized by eminent domain, but an entirely different matter when one recognizes that 40,000 people were displaced, hundreds of businesses had to be located, and most of all, a sense of community was utterly destroyed. One friend of mine commented that it was the 20th century version of Pompeii. Obviously an exaggeration, but there are similarities.

3. **The author Esther Amini described the novel as "both timeless and timely." What do you think of that assessment?**

Esther's comment strikes at the heart of the book, in that it implies that the kinds of events that are recorded in the novel (both real and fictitious) have gone on forever, and are evident today. The anecdotes are always different, but they speak to the same issues of the 'little people' against 'city hall' and the obstacles that ordinary people face when confronted by government and business interests that appear to have all the power.

Esther's description is also relevant to the romantic relationship between Jay and his girlfriend Francesca, as well as the friendly relationship between Jay and Francesca's brother. And, too, it recognizes the oftentimes tumultuous intrafamily relationships that don't always end with all parties celebrating a 'kumbaya' moment.

As it is said, "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" – the more things change, the more they stay the same.

4. **What do you hope readers take away from the book?**

The book can be read on three levels: (1) The story of what it was like to have lived through the Depression and World War II era, and into the one that emerged after 1945—a society that was being altered almost unknowingly into something that would turn out to be significantly different in terms of social activism and ethnic politics; (2) A metaphor for what is going on in cities today, in terms of the conflicts between 'ordinary people' and powerful politicians and business interests; and (3) How a Jewish family emerges from dysfunction to find its way despite daunting implacable obstacles in its way.

5. **What are you working on now**

I have written drafts of screenplays for both *Crossing the Bronx* and *Jacobo's Rainbow*. A screenplay is a completely different can of worms compared to a novel. Very challenging, but I am highly motivated.

6. Anything else we should know?

Crossing the Bronx is a 1950's fiction depicting the clashing of cultures, as well as the intersection of politics, business, and community – a metaphor for today.

Recent events that deal with the interconnected worlds of political and financial corruption are generally framed as two-dimensional stories of good vs. evil, many times without shades of gray, and frequently have a political angle to them as portrayed in the media. In *Crossing the Bronx*, the narrative digs down to give a full picture of the complexity of behaviors, and how the decisions—that have both intended and unintended consequences—are made by those who are powerful and connected, as well as by those who are just 'regular folks'.

Persuasively illustrating how the world really works, *Crossing the Bronx* captures the essence of what drives us forward under the most daunting of circumstances.

While the novel exposes the underbelly of the criminal and political world, evidenced by brutality, rapaciousness, and a never-ending desire to seek retribution, the love story between Jay and Francesca counter-balances the grimness to show how some people can overcome the odds stacked against them by their birth and places of origin. Smart, savvy women (Francesca, Jay's mother Rebekah, Francesca's grandmother Daniela Lagana, and Jay's therapist Dr. Silverman) provide a strong counterbalance to the lies, thefts, beatings, concealments, murders, and prejudice evidenced by some of the men.

In addition to sustained tension-filled action, *Crossing the Bronx* is a story of romance, commitments, and beliefs, told with perceptive insights and humor. The characters come to life in a realistic fashion to illustrate who we are, how we behave, and what causes us to change.

It is intended to generate the kinds of reader reactions that audiences have when watching movies such as *On the Waterfront, The Usual Suspects*, *and Gone Baby Gone*.