New Psychological Thriller Explores the Lure of Destructive Cults for Some of the Jewish Community's Most Idealistic and Accomplished Young People

By Susan L. Rosenbluth, TheJewishVoiceAndOpinion.com, Englewood, NJ

Throughout history, cults have captivated the public imagination. These spiritual communities offer a total sense of belonging—along with equally total enthrallment. My newly released novel, *Blurred Vision* (Red Adept Publishing), explores why Jews, in numbers out of proportion to their representation in the general population, seem especially drawn to these destructive groups that demand all-consuming passion for the strangest of doctrines.

As the award-winning editor of *The Jewish Voice and Opinion*, I spent years interviewing former cult members and their families, as well as rabbis, psychologists, deprogrammers, and law-enforcement officials. My series on cult recruitment, deprogramming, and recovery appeared in my publication and others affiliated with the American Jewish Press Association.

Those true-life stories became the foundation for *Blurred Vision*.

Port Authority

While each family's experience was gripping in its own way, it was in Port Authority where I learned about the one that convinced me to write the book. A journalist friend of mine was doing a story there when she insisted I come into the city from New Jersey to meet her. "You can thank me later," she said.

Today, Port Authority looks like a shopping mall, but in 1985, it was a cesspool, home to drug addicts, prostitutes, pickpockets, and worse. When I met my friend, she had a rather nice-looking young boy with her. I figured him for 14 or 15, 16 at the outside, and all of him too thin, sapling thin. He looked like he needed nothing as much as a square meal and a good night's sleep.

He told me he had fled from one of the more destructive cults I had written about, a particularly litigious outfit into which he had been born. His mother, he said, had remained with the cult, and, he added, she was Jewish, which he knew meant he was too.

A Kosher Meal

When I asked him how he was providing for himself, he explained that he was living in Port Authority and earning what he needed by working as a male prostitute, a skill that particular cult was infamous for inculcating in its members. Was he willing to be interviewed? Yes, of course, he replied. All he wanted in return was a kosher meal.

I couldn't believe it. The boy was selling his body to the highest bidder, but he wanted to eat kosher? Naturally, I said yes and took him to Lou G. Siegel's a few blocks away.

At one point, while we were eating—and I was busy scribbling notes—I looked at him and my instinct to draw him closer to Judaism kicked in. "You know," I said to him, "you don't have to stay out here on the streets of New York, alone and unprotected. I know many people who would not only give you a kosher home but would consider it a privilege to do so."

He seemed to consider that briefly, so I pushed. "Would you like to come back to New Jersey with me?"

It took him a moment to tell me he wanted to think about it, which made sense. We arranged to meet the next day in Port Authority—but he never showed up, and I never saw him again.

Maybe Not a Word Was True

I tried to follow up, speaking to the local police, who all but laughed at me. One said, "Do you know how many runaways we get here? What makes you think he was even telling the truth? It sounds like you got rooked into feeding a kid who just wanted a good expensive meal."

I can't deny the possibility that the officer was absolutely right. To this day, I have no idea if a single word that young boy told me was true.

But for more than 40 years, he haunted me—and, after receiving encouragement from, among others, the superb writer, Cynthia Ozick, I made him a protagonist in *Blurred Vision*.

Favorable Press

Set along the Jersey Shore in 1987, the novel deals with the havoc wreaked by a cult when a young woman, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, is lured into joining. The ramifications pit an African American police detective and his Jewish partner, haunted by the death of a child he couldn't save, against a Jewish teenage runaway from the cult and its violent messianic leader, who will stop at nothing to reclaim the boy—even murder.

Grounded in procedural realism, *Blurred Vision* is a tense psychological thriller about justice perverted, faith abused, and the devastating cost of trauma to the survivors. It's also about the blessings of families forged by love rather than blood, resilience, and unlikely human connections.

The book has garnered favorable press reactions and reviews, most notably from the Jewish Book Council, where Dr. Amy Neustein called it "impossible to put down and impossible to forget...an essential read for anyone interested in the resilience of the human spirit when fighting its way out of the darkness of institutional captivity."

Words of Praise

Perhaps one of the most gratifying parts of having written a book like this is the wonderful advance praise it has received from people I greatly admire. Ms. Ozick said my "long-standing commitment and passion for the substance of *Blurred Vision*, with its significant and alarming theme, has come to fruition in prophetic fury and faith," and actor, director, and author Saul Rubinek (people remember him as Donny Douglas, the marital attorney on *Frasier*; Lon Cohen on *A Nero Wolfe Mystery*; and Louis B. Mayer on *The Last Tycoon*) called it "a powerful, deeply human story about intergenerational trauma, redemption, and the bonds that make us brothers…a crime novel with the heart of a literary masterpiece."

In a joint statement, Joseph Occhipinti, director of the National Police Defense Foundation, and Detective Joe Walker, National Association of Black Law Enforcement Officers, said, "*Blurred Vision* captures the sensitive issue of cops and PTSD. The book will go far to improve relations between the African American and Jewish communities as well as between Christians and Jews."

Available on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Walmart, and from Red Adept Publishing, *Blurred Vision* has made me feel as if I'd somehow finally given that boy I met in Port Authority a home—or maybe saved another one from being victimized by a cult.