

Learning to Matter

Ellen Handler Spitz

Looking for Me ... In This Great Big Family

by Betsy R. Rosenthal

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 176 pp., \$15.99

NEAR THE MIDPOINT of *War and Peace*, Tolstoy grapples with the reasons for Napoleon's fateful invasion of Russia; he ruminates on the causes of war and, by extension, the factors that impact the course of history. In a celebrated passage, he posits the willingness or unwillingness of a minor French corporal to enlist for a second tour of duty. Juxtaposing this seemingly inconsequential choice on the part of an unknown soldier with the intrigues of the British and with Napoleon's famous refusal to withdraw his army beyond the Vistula, Tolstoy makes his point: the smallest factor counts.

In this Tolstoyan mode, a slender new children's book called *Looking for Me* might well be regarded as genuine history tempered with poetic license. It was written by Betsy R. Rosenthal, who is a former civil rights attorney. The story she tells is her mother's. The book portrays the eleventh year of a little girl named Edith Paul, whose change of surname from Polansky pleases the child because, as she says, "Paul" rhymes with many words, but "Polansky" rhymes with none. Edith is "number four" in a family of twelve children in southeast Baltimore. Sifted from memories recounted by the author's mother over a period of twenty years as well as recorded interviews with Maryland-based aunts and uncles, *Looking for Me* zeroes in on the year 1936. What was it like to be a child in the aftermath of the stock market crash? How did everyday life feel if you were poor, urban, Jewish, with immigrant grandparents—Bubby Etta from Russia and Bubby Anne—and a larger-than-life president (who makes a token appearance as a putative savior when an unpaid debt threatens to rob the family of its home)?

Children play stickball, dodgeball, marbles, jacks, watch Popeye cartoons and Buck Rogers flicks on weekends at the Roxy. They eat kosher hot dogs "lathered with mustard, like shaving cream on a man's face" and caramel apples on a stick and slices of pie snatched from their father's diner. On Rosh Hashanah, the girls wear white gloves and envy the too-expensive Mary Janes of visiting New York cousins. With only three records for their basement Victrola, they play "Some Day My Prince Will Come" until their overworked father descends in a fury and snaps the record in two because he cannot stand hearing it one more time.

Rosenthal braves the challenge of writing in a child's voice, a move that often fails in children's books because it so quickly rings false. Rarely can adults, even supremely gifted writers, cross the chronological divide, go back in time, and get it right. Yet Rosenthal tells Edith's story in the first person, and in verse. She chooses verse because it conveys her most natural voice, she says, and because it seems to her more open, and informal. It also, I would add, feels closer to a young child's own unadorned speech, which certainly can be oracular. Burrowing in with canny sensitivity, Rosenthal scoops up childhood truths with both hands and offers them in detail after detail: the miseries of wearing "hand-me-down down down

down downs,” of waiting behind brothers and sisters to go to the toilet, of sharing a bed with two others so that the little girl finds feet in her face and no room to spread her arms “wide/ and lie/ at a slant.”

Buried in pages of this book, a nine-year-old of my acquaintance is uncharacteristically ignoring his plate of warm spaghetti. He refuses to stop reading. He wants to remain in Edith’s life where, far more quickly than she herself does, he hones in on her honesty and courage. Ordinarily he doesn’t like books in verse, he says, because their authors seem more interested in poetry than stories, “but this one is different.” He likes the way Edith finds out who she is in her “way-too-big” family. This is well put, for with Rosenthal’s verse, we enter and occupy Edith’s resilient mind and sturdy body and we learn from each human being in her entourage and from every encounter, whether comic or tragic.

In early spring, just before Passover, Edith’s little brother Melvin dies of acute bronchitis, sweet Melvin, who held her hand with his sticky fingers and called her “Eediff.” The children are playing marbles on the sidewalk; an ambulance arrives; Melvin is gone. Edith’s father hunches over, her mother leaves a trail of tissues, gives each child a penny, and sends them outside. Until now Edith has thought her family way too big, but she tells her teacher Miss Connelly that from now on it is “one too small.” Her hand feels empty. She watches tears fall on a shirt as her mother irons late into the night, and Edith longs for words “to help her iron/ her sadness away.”

Assigned at the start of the school year to write a poem about her family, Edith pens a terse stanza about everyone, including her parents, but she forgets herself. Readers may remember Christopher Robin, who also forgets himself, after dutifully blessing all the others at his bedtime prayers, in A.A. Milne’s poem, “Vespers.” But Miss Connelly points out the omission, and she tells Edith to go home and think about who she is. Gradually throughout the year, in the midst of her hectic, overcrowded, overworked household, supported by a father who toils long hours at a diner and does not know how old she is, and a mother who helps him and, exhausted after over a dozen pregnancies, has difficulty remembering Edith’s name, Edith struggles to find out who she is beyond “number four.”

In the largely Polish Catholic neighborhood near Baltimore’s Patterson Park, a fellow called Jimmy Lenchowski chases her each day after school and calls her a “Jew bagel.” He yells that she “killed Jesus Christ.” Terrorized, she finally stands up to him after her Bubby Etta, swaying with eyes closed (“to see the past better”), recounts in detail the persecutions of the old country and informs her that here, in America, she is no longer afraid. With these words to brace her, Edith informs Jimmy Lenchowski, when he next appears, that she couldn’t have killed Jesus because she “wasn’t even born then,” and adds for good measure that if he doesn’t leave her alone her brothers will come for him. “I have a lot of them.” Today this accusation of Christ-killing reads perhaps as a placeholder for racism, gender bias, homophobia, and bullying behavior of every kind.

After Melvin’s death, her mother stays home, and Edith must work in the diner each day after school and sometimes even after dark to close up. Miss Connelly begins to worry and asks her to stay after school one day for a talk. Edith unlooses the floodgates to her kindly teacher and explains about her little brother’s death. Miss Connelly tells her that she is a smart and observant girl who should go to college one day, and Edith, to whom no one has ever spoken such words, becomes “a bubble blown full with Miss Connelly’s words.” Returning home, she floats into the parlor until her father tells her sourly that

girls don't need college and she'll work at the diner until she gets married. "His words pierce me, and I burst," Rosenthal writes.

But her Bubby and her Mom pledge to help her, and in the end she wins an award at school, the first child in her family to do so. Sitting onstage at graduation, she envies the other winners whose families have come to celebrate them. Her father doesn't even know what grade she's in, she thinks, and her Mom is too sad over Melvin. When the principal calls her name "in a deep serious voice," she suddenly hears "an ocean of wild clapping." There, at the back, "like a mirage," she sees her whole family, her Mom and Dad, all her sisters and brothers, and both of her *bubbies*. Edith learns that, like Tolstoy's thousandth corporal, she matters.

Ellen Handler Spitz is Honors College Professor at the University of Maryland (UMBC). Her most recent book is Illuminating Childhood. She writes regularly about children's literature for The Book.