

Pnina Moed Kass

Children's book author
www.pninamoedkass.com

Age: You'll never get that out of me

Marital status: Divorced, three sons,
five grandchildren



■ Text by YOCHAVED MIRIAM RUSSO

Photo, courtesy.

Job description: I write all kinds of things – scripts, lyrics, ad copy, essays, magazine articles, book reviews, novels, books – but what I'm best known for are children's books, especially the stories about *Berale the Snail*.

Aliya: From New York, 1968

How did you get into this? I'd been a writer in New York, and started here as an English teacher. We moved away from the school where I'd been teaching and I decided to get back into writing. I put together a resumé, and as luck would have it, sent it to all Israeli publishers just at the time they were preparing their Hebrew books for the Frankfurt Book Fair. They needed English synopses written, so I went from that to editing and then writing myself. One thing led to another.

Where did the "Berale" books originate? I had three little sons who'd come home with snails in their pockets. Then there was a nursery song about a snail, "Little snail, little snail, come out." The idea grabbed me. I wrote the first book in 1984, then decided I'd be more likely to get published if I had more than one book, so I wrote two more. Keter agreed to publish them.

First job? At 14, as a summer clerk at a Wall Street firm.

Worst job? Maybe teaching in the south Bronx. It was tough, but I can't say I didn't like it. Once I see the paycheck, I'm okay.

High moment? When I'm signing books and an older kid comes by, grinning, "Oh I remember this!" That's fun. I love doing story hour at my grandchildren's schools, too. To little kids, an "author" is a very abstract idea. Mostly they know that authors are dead. Very little kids can't understand why I don't look like a snail. If I'm not a snail, how can I write books about them?

Low moment? When I finish a book and am waiting for a publisher to pick it up. Writing is a very lonely procedure. You're all by yourself. I worked hard to pare down the words – my children's books have only about 500 words. Within that, I have to have a beginning, a middle and an end, and somewhere a surprise. When you're limited to mostly verbs and nouns, it's not easy.

Controversial? Nothing, except maybe that snails are not kosher, although we don't get anywhere close to food in the books. There's really only one 'food' scene, a big Friday night dinner, but the only food mentioned is grandma's soup.

Most exotic thing Berale the Snail has done? Delivered mail. The postman is ill and the postmistress wants someone to deliver mail, and only Berale volunteers. But how can

a snail deliver mail? Of course he's way behind everyone else, with a pile of mail on his back that would challenge an Egyptian slave. He gets depressed – but then, clever little snail that he is, he comes up with a great solution.

Perks? I write in Hebrew, so the perk for me, as compared to Israeli authors who write in English, is that people in Israel know my name and my books. Writing for an overseas market isn't nearly as much fun.

Do you publish only in Israel? No, my books sell very well all over the world in kindergartens and Jewish day schools. I wrote a young-adult novel about a Palestinian terrorist that won a lot of prizes and has been translated into English, French and German.

Who buys? Parents, teachers, the Berale books are a hit with special education because the snail has limitations – he's slow, shy, not sure of himself. But when he overcomes, it's empowering. It assures the child that he, too, can overcome difficulties.

If not this? I'd be doing this. But really, I like to work, I'd work at anything. I'd love to work in a bookstore.

As a kid, what did you want to be? A writer – or a performer. The page is the stage.

Biggest accomplishment? Appearing in an Israeli crossword puzzle: 36 down was "Pnina Kass's snail." The only other name in the puzzle was Albert Camus. I bet more people knew my snail's name than his.

Message to would-be authors: Everyone thinks it's easy, but it's not. Writing children's books is comparable to writing haiku poetry. You have to have confidence in yourself, to know whether it's good or not. Then you have to have the persistence to do it again. And again. ■