

# Does The World Need Another Story About Leaving Religion? Yes — Mine

*Lynne Meredith Golodner*

I started writing [Woman of Valor](#) in 2011, giving it the title of *Unorthodox*, before I knew [there was already a book by that name](#) soon to become a TV series.

At the time, I was three years out from divorcing my first husband and miles away from living the Orthodox Jewish life I'd committed to before I met him. I was remarried to a man I loved, who was fun and funny and the best lover I'd ever been with.

## **It wasn't the first time I'd tried to write a novel.**

In 2000, I spent nine months writing three mornings a week at a coffee shop, churning out a manuscript about three young Jewish American women who move to Israel, [explore their spirituality](#), and become friends. After five beta readers offered helpful, critical feedback, I shoved it in a drawer. When I took it out five years later, I spent months revising, then sent it around for a read, despairing at the still-needs-work responses I received.

Clearly, I wasn't ready to face the hard work of writing novels nor did I have the stick-to-it-ness required to complete a readable book that is ready to be in the world.

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## **The experience of writing a book, though, was fun.**

The characters came alive, taking over the keyboard. I'd review a chapter and think, "Who wrote that?" It's like they were alive and hovering behind me, little fairies dictating into my ear.

As a journalist in New York, Washington, D.C., and Detroit, I was good at creating short pieces from research and interviews. After earning my MFA in creative writing, I'd written six nonfiction books and two collections of poetry that small presses swooned over and eagerly published. Fiction was the bigger hurdle.

## **This novel got off to a great start but stalled after sixty pages.**

I just didn't know where the characters were going or how the story would pan out. My main character was an Orthodox Jewish woman who lamented her life and yearned for her secular roots.

I left it alone and focused on the marketing company that I had started when journalism went south during the economic crisis. When I returned to the manuscript in 2021, I didn't like her at all.

## **There are plenty of books, movies, and TV series about people resisting rigid religious communities.**

Some of the best-known Jewish ones include [Unorthodox](#) (the book and [the TV series](#)), [My Unorthodox Life](#), and Naomi Ragen's [An Observant Wife](#).

In the Christian world, there are Amazon Prime's four-part docuseries [Shiny, Happy People](#), Rachel Held Evans' New York Times bestseller [Searching for Sunday](#), Tara Westover's [Educated](#), [Escape](#) by Carolyn Jessop, and Martha Beck's [Leaving the Saints](#), just to name a few.

The world doesn't need another whiny book about how hard it is to be religious.

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## **I spent a decade wearing only skirts and covering my hair to signify my marital status.**

When I left Orthodoxy after my 2008 divorce, I wasn't fed up with the rules or the philosophies. It was (some, not all) people that made it hard for me to love being religious.

Sometimes I still miss the quiet of the weekly Sabbath, when I'd invite people to dine in my home and stay for hours in [lively conversation](#).

I [still love the sensory rituals](#) — lighting candles on Friday nights to wave in the Sabbath peace (using my great-grandmother's brass candlesticks that came from Eastern Europe when she emigrated), making challah bread and smelling its sweetness as it rises in my oven, preparing dishes that my grandmother made like matzoh ball soup, gefilte fish and brisket, and presiding over a full table during Passover, extracting meaning and thought from the text.

The bones of my story were good. Characters with possibility, settings with intrigue. So I sat with it again, seeing through new eyes how the story might unfold.

## **This fall, *Woman of Valor*, will be published — my first novel and ninth book.**

*Woman of Valor* features Sally, a young woman in Chicago who chooses to become religious in Judaism. She has a spicy, loving marriage — [with great sex scenes](#), if I do say so myself! — and loves being a mother and a member of her religious community.

When her son is abused at his school, the community's reaction surprises her. Just then, her college boyfriend comes back into her life, finding her online as old lovers do, apologizing for breaking her heart and wanting to rekindle their romance. The story follows Sally's journey as she contends with challenges and obstacles and makes decisions she can live with,

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## **I've come to love writing novels.**

My second novel should be out in the fall of 2024. I'd like to write a book a year for the rest of my

life if I have it in me. Early feedback is encouraging me to keep going — beta readers are in love with Sally and her story and the early raw pages of my next title, too.

Some might say it's the great American dream to write a novel. Many people have fantastic ideas — the challenge is turning an idea into a book-length work that is polished and compelling.

### **I plan my novels now, instead of writing by the seat of my pants.**

The characters still talk to me and redirect the story, but that's OK. Planning makes writing faster, more coherent, and more fun. I no longer get stuck in a saggy middle, and I produced a pretty solid first draft of the next book in just under three months.

I don't look for approval from others. I write the story I want to write.

### **Writers as a species tend to be nice, supportive, and generous.**

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[Many have become mentors](#), read early drafts, and advised me on publishing. They've become great friends, too, and I pay it forward, helping aspiring writers whenever they ask.

Everywhere I go, I talk to local authors, read books about local places, and ask questions about the process of writing. We are a global community of true friends and shining voices.

I'm no longer a journalist. Most of my time is spent coaching and teaching writers, many of whom struggle to believe their words are valuable or that [their voices matter](#). After decades of being told writing is a losing proposition — you can't make a career out of it, no one will pay you to write, it's a nice hobby — it's a lot of work to gain the confidence that writing is a worthwhile pursuit.

It is. There's nothing like reading a book that transports you to other places, times, and worlds. Books that invite you inside the mind of a person you'll never meet or be and learn how they think. Books that present ideas you might never consider.

### **Daring to believe my story is worth my time was the best move I've ever made.**

I love my life now. Who knows if I'll make money at this, but showing up as my best self and doing work that I love has transformed my days into vessels of meaning.

And there's no going back now.

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