

The yiddishkeit of a Boston detective

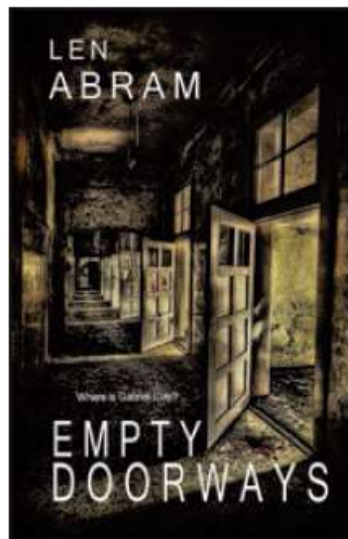
By Brett M. Rhyne
Advocate staff

BOSTON – Local author and correspondent for The Jewish Advocate Len Abram has written detective and historical fiction. His latest detective novel is “Empty Doorways,” set in contemporary Boston; we took a few moments to speak with him about his latest work.

The Jewish Advocate: In “Empty Doorways,” Boston Police Detective Ben Schwartz and his partner Al Di Natale are called in to help search for a missing black student from Mattapan. How Jewish is Schwartz?

Abram: In his sense of humor, his appreciation of life’s ironies, his warmth, his intelligence and intuition, his struggle with his faith, to my mind, he’s Jewish. His wife Evie and he belong to a synagogue, but he’s mostly a High Holidays Jew, who finds comfort a few times a year when he says Kaddish for those he mourns.

As for as “Empty Doorways,” there is an historical connection between the black community, its struggle for civil rights, and the American Jewish community. It’s appropriate that Schwartz helps lead the search for the missing Gabriel Clay.



“Empty Doorways”
by Len Abram,
Foundations Book
Publishing (2019);
amazon.com

TJA: What brought you to this subject?

Abram: Years ago, I taught at a tough inner-city school in Boston,

eighth grade. On a parents-teachers night, a black mother pointed to her tall son and said, “Mr. Abram, please learn my boy.” Her wish that I help educate and maybe influence her son stayed with me.

Gabriel Clay is a tall, black, 12-year-old, now missing. Parents and grandparents in Boston and elsewhere hope for the best outcome for their youngsters. In some neighborhoods, this means not to succumb to drugs and violence. In “Empty Doorways,” the streets of the novel, the destructive environment, work against young and old alike. Schools like Gabriel’s help. So does the church Gabriel’s grandmother attends. And the police do their best. But the streets have great power and influence.

TJA: The character Ty Douglass, the wounded black soldier, graduated from Gabriel Clay’s charter school. He returns to Mattapan to receive a prosthetic, and he takes part in the search. Were you in the military?

Abram: I was a civilian teaching service men and women courses in writing and literature. I was stationed in the Far East: Japan, Korea, Thailand and Taiwan – along with a brief tour in Bermuda with the Navy. At times, I rode helicopters to get to my classes. I spent a year on Okinawa teaching Marines how to write. I’ve been to Landstuhl in Germany, where Douglass is taken after his wounding in Afghanistan. Marine sergeant Donald Hamblen’s memoir about his

return to service after a severe wounding impressed me when I read it overseas. I used the book in my novel.

TJA: Schwartz and Di Natale are also in your first novel, as is the taxi driver from “Empty Doorways,” Sasha.

Abram: In “The Medallion,” they have a couple of cases, one involving the taxi driver from South Station, Sasha Denisov. The other is a cold case, the murder of BU medical professor, Sue Hardwick. Schwartz says Kaddish for her each year and looks at the evidence once again. This time, he gets lucky.

My stories often use Boston as their settings. I like our city, its history, its different cultures and its unifying principles. The gold-leafed cupola on the State House atop Beacon Hill may represent our highest ideals, which we try to reach.

TJA: The central character in your historical novel, “Debris,” is a Jewish woman from the Ukraine. How did you start this project?

Abram: The Leslie Lindsey Memorial Chapel at 15 Newbury memorializes Leslie Lindsey and her

husband. They died on their honeymoon, passengers on the British ship Lusitania, sunk by a German submarine. The tragedy of 1915 helped bring America into World War I. The chapel started me thinking about a book.

Spies on the New York docks identified the contraband munitions Lusitania carried, which made the ship a target for German submarines. One of those spies is the character Hannah, a young Jewish woman from the Ukraine, whose life as a spy was one more choice she has to make in order to survive.

Many of my relatives were from the Ukraine and lived through anti-Semitism, war and revolution. Some made it to America and some to Israel. I listened to their stories growing up. I titled the novel, “Debris, a Novel of Love, War and the Lusitania,” because out of debris, what’s left after tragedies and setbacks, people like Hannah rebuild their lives.

TJA: Any plans for another book?

Abram: Detectives Schwartz and Di Natale are not done solving crimes.

EXCERPT

‘Ch. 45: Detective Schwartz Goes to Shul’

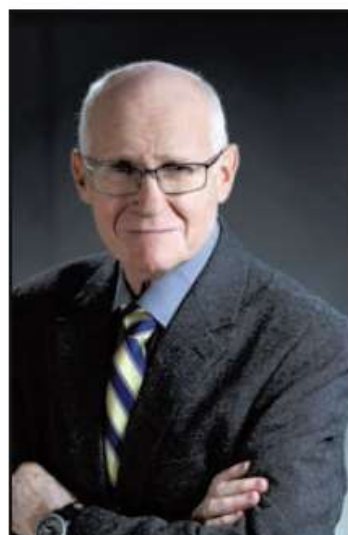
By Len Abram

This excerpt from “Empty Doorways” appears about two-thirds into the story.

The synagogue was on his way to work. Every year, Schwartz came for his mother and father’s memorial service, to say the Kaddish prayer for them. He also came once a year to say the same prayer on Sue Hardwick’s anniversary. She had been murdered near BU Medical Center. Di Natale and he had solved that case, cold for a decade. This morning, Schwartz was hoping to attend a service, but the temple office looked closed, and all the doors to the building shut. He could hear someone, a custodian maybe, around in the back.

Small bronze letters next to the name of the synagogue, Congregation Beth Shaddai, said, “The Gates of Prayer Are Never Closed.” That may be true, Schwartz thought, but they were well locked. So said the Abloy Protec, a first-rate deadbolt, that kept the front door shut and a premium electronic alarm on alert. The red eye of a camera over the entrance was staring at him. He knocked.

The custodian waved at him through the door window, typed in a code, and opened up. Schwartz thanked him. The Rabbi was on his way, he said. The other men and women, mostly retirees like



Len Abram

himself, would arrive soon. Schwartz didn’t correct him. He was not retired, just tired, an old joke that took some of the sting out of sliding down the slope to old age.

Schwartz sat in the back pew and waited. Dr. Susan Hardwick had been killed a dozen years ago to keep something secret. The killer was serving 25-to-life at Shirley. Last year, Schwartz stopped off at Mt. Auburn Cemetery where Sue was buried. He ran into her daughter, now in her late twenties, married, and pregnant. Goodness, Schwartz thought, what Sue wouldn’t have given to see what a beautiful

daughter she had? And she’d be a grandmother. For all the good that it did, and he hadn’t a clue if it did any, he said this prayer.

Rabbi Stein did a quick count as the attendees wandered in. The custodian was right. Mostly retirees with time on their hands, along with some younger people, grieving a recent death. Schwartz joined the others in the Kaddish.

The service ended. Rabbi Stein reminded the attendees about the next services and a holiday coming up. They left as quickly as they arrived. The Rabbi walked down the pews to sit next to Schwartz. Did he know that Schwartz had something on his mind?

“Detective ... Detective, sorry. Baruch Haba. Welcome. You come once in a while to say the Kaddish for someone, right?”

“Schwartz. Hi, Rabbi Stein, I forgot my name tag.”

The Rabbi laughed. “We’re all made in Lord’s image, right? That’s so we can recognize each other.”

“Even murderers?”

“People lose sight of their inner worth. It’s glib for me to say it, but they follow false gods, not the right One. How are things?”

“I’m good, thanks. My wife comes here more often than me.”

“Yes, Eve Schwartz. Give my regards. I’m listening. Detective, whenever you want to talk.”

“How do you know I needed to talk?”

“A rabbi learns to read faces. One of our most famous books in Jewish thought is supposed to be a guide for the perplexed. You look perplexed.”

“After nearly 20 years in the police, I can’t shake this feeling that I am going to have to take a life soon.” He opened his jacket. The Glock was tucked against his hip.

“I have never used this weapon in my job, hadn’t even thought of pulling it out until the Marathon bombing,” Schwartz said. “We stopped a vehicle, my partner and me, with two young guys in it, resembling the two terrorists on the run,” Schwartz said. “My partner pulled his. I put my hand on my gun still holstered. It was a false alarm.”

“You didn’t have to use it, then.”

“No,” Schwartz said, “but I will. My gut is telling me that the world has changed. For many

people, it changed forever. So why not me? Police work was applying my reason, my training, my understanding of people, in solving crimes. I arrested plenty of people in my career, some of them really bad, and my gun stayed in the holster.”

“Isn’t that good? You’ve applied your intellect and intuition. The law should settle the fate of the accused.”

“Rabbi, I don’t like shooting, because I didn’t think I needed it. I arrest criminals, not shoot them. But now I practice for real. In my job, I have witnessed dozens of deaths. To kill someone seems unendurable.”

“The commandment is ‘Thou shalt not murder’, not ‘Thou shalt not kill’. It is not a sin to defend ourselves and others.”

“Sin or not, Rabbi, you have to live with it,” Schwartz said.

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