

## A Conversation with **JENNIFER S. BROWN** Author of **MODERN GIRLS**

**Dottie's two romantic interests—Willie and Abe—are opposites of each other politically, religiously, and societally. Did you ever question Dottie's romantic fate or did you know from the beginning what would happen with Dottie's love life?**

Both Willie and Abe are appealing in some ways—Willie is debonair, an intellectual; Abe is kind hearted, a lover of New York's cultural life. Yet Willie is a bit of a rogue and Abe rather old fashioned. I put myself in Dottie's shoes, imagining life with each of them and also a life lived alone. But of course, ultimately, Dottie didn't have the control she would have liked; the dynamics of dating in the 1930s favored men. Dottie's situation at the conclusion was the natural culmination; given all she had done earlier, I didn't see how she could have ended up any other way.

**Was Camp Eden real?**

Not only was Camp Eden real, but my grandparents met there in the early 1930s. Socialist summer camps for adults became popular in the 1920s, as Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe waned. Different Jewish labor organizations developed these camps out of fear that without new immigrants, the leftists groups might decline in numbers. Not much is written about Camp Eden in particular, so the one I describe in **MODERN GIRLS** is an amalgamation of a number of different Jewish socialist camps. Writer Michael Gold described one of them, Camp Nitgedaiget, in an article in *The Nation* in 1929: "No one can come to this camp who is a boss or who owns a business of any kind. But any wage earner, and this includes intellectual workers, can come at the low rate of fifteen dollars a week. He is given clean linen and two woolly blankets and can climb to his tent among the trees to rest until the camp gong brings him down for dinner."

**Did your personal family history influence the novel in any other ways?**

Because I had spent so long researching my own family, I understood the process of immigration and becoming a citizen and the difficulty of bringing family over once quotas were tightened. Over the years, I heard tidbits that I built stories around. For instance, I had heard my great-grandmother had attended a demonstration in Ukraine and was trampled by a horse. That was the entire story. So I built upon it, adding details, placing Rose in the midst of it, and a scene of the novel emerged.

**What do you think Dottie's and Rose's beliefs might be if they were alive today?**

While the word "feminist" would have been alien to Rose and Dottie, there is no doubt in my mind that, if they were alive today, both would be politically active, unabashedly feminist, and champions of reproductive rights. I do think the two would be in constant battle with each other—Rose would clearly be a Bernie Sanders supporter, while Dottie would be a Lena Dunham-loving die-hard Hillary Clinton fan. Shabbat dinners at their house would be vociferous affairs.

**What "darlings" did you cut out of the novel? In other words, what interested you that didn't make it into the final novel?**

While researching **MODERN GIRLS**, I discovered fascinating historical details that I longed to include, but I didn't want to weigh the story down with too many facts. For instance, Dottie's brother Eugene was named for the Socialist politician Eugene Debs. Some scenes were written but cut, because they didn't serve the greater purpose of the story, such as one deleted scene where Rose was flipping through one of

Dottie's magazines, marveling at the new-fangled kitchen appliances and horrified by their cost. I also had a scene in which Willie has dinner at Dottie's apartment, and he meets the entire family. As much as I liked that, it didn't make it through my rewrites.

**What did you do to get into a 1930s mindset when you were writing?**

To properly focus on the 1930s, I began by making a Pandora station with music from the era. Watching movies also helped me considerably. One of my favorite movies is the original *The Women*, which helped me picture how the upper class might have lived. The dialogue from the movie is delightful, and it's where I learned the term "unswallow." To try and understand how Rose would have spent her days, I attempted (emphasis on *attempt*) to bake the delicacies she would have made, using an old cookbook of my grandmother's. I tried to eschew the modern conveniences—such as my Kitchen Aid—but soon learned I don't have the upper body strength to pound dough. My results weren't always pretty, but generally speaking, they were delicious.

**What made you want to write about the 1930s?**

I suffer from a sense of nostalgia for time periods I never lived. Much like the character in Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*, I have a habit of romanticizing the past. By writing about it, I have a chance to live it. Losing myself in the past allows me to experience what, on the outside, appears to be a simpler life, yet I gain a greater appreciation for the freedoms I have as a woman living in the 21st century.

**Did you start with an outline of the plot or did you start with the characters and see where they took you?**

**MODERN GIRLS** began with Dottie. I pictured a young woman, striving for better things in life, who unexpectedly gets pregnant. But that was all I had; when I started writing, I wasn't even sure who the father of her baby was nor was I certain of the location. For a brief period, Dottie lived in Newark, New Jersey. As Dottie's—and then Rose's—story began to take shape, it was clear to me exactly who the father was and what Dottie would do.

**The city of New York is an integral part of MODERN GIRLS, almost a character itself. Do you see yourself continuing to write about New York?**

New York fascinates me because the city houses every ethnicity and social strata and has an incredible history. There's a feeling that absolutely anything can happen in New York. I will continue to write about New York, but that said, other locations also call to me—such as Miami Beach and New Orleans—and I imagine they will also appear in future novels.

**What authors have influenced you?**

My grandfather, Nathan Brown, was an avid reader and a frustrated writer, and he opened up new worlds of literature for me. When he gave me his copy of *Winesburg, Ohio*, by Sherwood Anderson, I was astounded at the depth and layers in the beautifully crafted stories. My grandfather also introduced me to my perennial favorite, Dorothy Parker, and though her life was tragic, I romanticized her and her life at *The New Yorker* and at the Algonquin Round Table. My grandfather avidly read Hemingway, and while my feelings for the author have vacillated between love and hate, his writing affected me as I developed my own style. Of course, over the years, many, many authors have influenced my life and my writing, but listing them all would be a daunting task. Every time someone asks me to name my favorite books, the list changes, and spend hours later thinking, "Why didn't I include *that* book!"