

# STORIES TO TELL

## Author Amy Hest on New York, Writing, and Love

Amy Hest likes to walk. She walks along the streets of her Upper West Side neighborhood in New York City. She walks her daughter's puppy in Central Park. She walks home from her son's apartment in Tribeca. She walks north along the Hudson River and Riverside Drive, where her grandparents once lived. She walks to the bagel store, where they put aside burnt onion bagels for her each day.



Amy Hest

"I love New York!" she says. "My long walks keep me happy and entertained. Rain or shine, I am always exploring around the city: the neighborhoods and houses, the streets and shops and parks, and especially the people. I watch everyone. I am an excellent spy!"

### Growing up with books

Amy hasn't always lived in New York City. Amy did her growing up on Long Island, in a small house on a small street called Rugby Road, where she did a lot of reading. "My mother, who was a teacher and who read more books than anyone I know, took me to our town library. Often! I followed her around the grown-up section for a while. Then she followed me around the children's section. I was always on the lookout for books about girls my age. Girls like me! My mother had a knack for pulling just the right book off the shelf, saying, 'I think you might like this one, Amy . . . take a look. . . .' She knew books! She knew me! She was a good picker!"

When she was 16, Amy applied for a job at her library. Every day after school, she knocked on the office door of the library director and said, "Please, may I be a library page?" Every day, the director responded, "I'm sorry, but I have a large stack of applications for page positions, and yours is at the bottom." Amy kept coming, and knocking, and asking.

"Finally," she recalls, "he told me that he had moved my application to the TOP of the pile on the condition that I would promise to stop coming into his office to ask for a job." Amy got the job. "Not to brag, but I was a super library page. All these years later, I still remember where almost every book belongs in the Dewey decimal system."

### Becoming a writer

Amy looked around for other talents she might possess. She tried dancing. ("I was a terrible dancer.") She tried ice skating. ("I was a terrible skater.") She tried quite a few musical instruments. ("I was a terrible musician.") Secretly, of course, she had already decided in the second grade to become a writer. "I liked stories, and making up stories, and books and libraries and notebooks. I liked to type. Plus, I liked the notion that I would one day be famous. Surely, I thought, all writers were famous!"

After college, Amy earned a master's degree in library science, and became a librarian in the New York Public Libraries. She eventually moved to children's book publishing, and began to write her own stories, still in secret, until her first book was published in 1982.

More than forty books—and over 1,000,000 copies sold—later, including *The Purple Coat*, an ALA Notable Book, winner of the Christopher Award, and a Reading Rainbow book; *When Jessie Came Across the Sea* and *Kiss Goodnight*, both winners of the Christopher Award, *In the Rain with Baby Duck*, a Boston Globe-Hornbook Award winner, and a host of New York Times Bestsellers, Best Book and Editor's Choice titles—Amy still finds and tells stories that resonate. "I simply write the stories I would have wanted to read when I was a child," she says.



Amy Hest in love

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Author Amy Hest on New York, Writing, and Love (continued)

## Everyday things, extraordinary stories

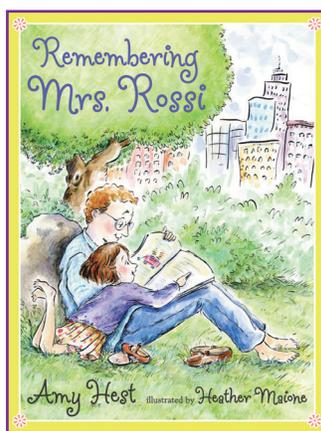
Amy Hest's stories are of everyday things—sleepovers, grandparents, swimming lessons, and best friends who move away. “My stories take shape,” she says, “when I find myself in a character. Then I know how they feel and how to tell their story.” Reading Amy's stories mirrors her work as a writer. We find ourselves in her stories. We say, “Yes, that is exactly how it is.” Amy Hest takes readers to the extraordinary within the familiar.

At Amy's writing desk, an idea becomes a story when she writes a good first sentence. “I may sit at my desk for months without writing a decent sentence. In the case of *The Private Notebook of Katie Roberts*, it took me a year to write the first sentence (yes, one year!). I typed nothing that whole year, except bad first sentences. And finally, finally, one day I liked my sentence, which turned out to be two words long: ‘Hello, Notebook!’”

## A new book on love and loss

In her new book, *Remembering Mrs. Rossi*, her character Annie, Mrs. Rossi's daughter, told Amy what to write. “My most important ‘writer's tool’ during the three years in which I worked on this story was a teeny little picture of my mom with me, aged 8. Each day I looked at the picture and then I imagined a little girl sitting beside me while I typed. She would tell me her name (Annie Rossi), her age (8), and where she lives (440 Riverside Drive, Apt 10B). In time, she told me about her mother. Mrs. Rossi was a teacher. (My mother was a teacher, too). Her mother went to the library often. (My mother went often, too, and read more books than anyone else I know). Annie's mother ate ice cream in her blue bathrobe on the couch at night. (My mother had a blue robe, too). Annie's mother died. (My mother died, too). Our stories blend.”

*Remembering Mrs. Rossi* introduces 8- to 12-year-old readers to a family that lives in New York City. Professor Rossi teaches a few blocks away at Columbia University, Mrs. Rossi teaches sixth graders at the nearby Louis Armstrong School, and Annie is in third grade.



**Remembering Mrs. Rossi**  
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They live in a tall brick building on Riverside Drive and spend their summers at a cottage on the beach. When, one fall day, Mrs. Rossi dies unexpectedly, Annie and her father must grope their way forward through the first year without her.

In Amy Hest's study of loss and recovery, we feel sorrow most deeply as the story begins. As the characters find their way, and with the help of Mrs. Rossi's students who miss her too, we also discover that sadness and joy can coexist. For while sorrow never truly leaves, neither does love.

“I don't think of *Remembering Mrs. Rossi* as a story about grief,” Amy says. “It's a love story. Although Mrs. Rossi is never on the page, she is always there in the story. If you're lucky, the person you love is always there.”

## How words transform readers and writers

*Remembering Mrs. Rossi* is also a story about the power of writing. Annie and her father are sustained through the year by a book of memories about Mrs. Rossi written by her sixth grade students. Each composition reveals another layer of their teacher, of Annie's mother, and another way in which her life made a difference.

Amy Hest is also teacher. Sometimes her students are grown-ups (at Bank Street College of Education and at New York University) and sometimes they are children. But when she talks to them about writing, the message is always the same: “Write from your heart. Write from your very own point of view. Write something that is deeply personal, that means something to you. If you are not thrilled and excited about what you've written, throw it out and start again.”

Writing is all the excitement Amy needs. She writes, reads, swims her daily laps, and walks endlessly. “You never know when something you see will wind up in a story. Everything is a possibility. No matter how many times I walk up and down these streets, I am never bored.”

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