

THE
BOOK
OF ELSIE

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JOANNE LEVY

orca currents

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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Published in Canada and the United States in 2022 by Orca Book Publishers.
orcabook.com

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: The book of Elsie / Joanne Levy.

Names: Levy, Joanne, author.

Series: Orca currents.

Description: Series statement: Orca currents

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20210346671 | Canadiana (ebook) 2021034668x |

ISBN 9781459834248 (softcover) | ISBN 9781459834255 (PDF) |

ISBN 9781459834262 (EPUB)

Classification: LCC PS8623.E9592 B66 2022 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021948625

Summary: In this high-interest accessible novel for middle-grade readers, Elsie comes up with a plan to save her local synagogue.

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Orca Book Publishers gratefully acknowledges the support for its publishing programs provided by the following agencies: the Government of Canada, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Edited by Tanya Trafford

Design by Ella Collier

Cover artwork by [Stocksy.com](https://www.stocksy.com/)/Léa Jones

Author photo by Tania Garshowitz

Printed and bound in Canada.

25 24 23 22 • 1 2 3 4

For Tanya, fierce and smart.

Chapter One

“I am going to be so fierce!”

I was so happy that I spun around and around. My hand was high in the air, holding the pretty scarf I’d just found on the twenty-five-cent rack.

Score!

It was a Saturday afternoon and I was with my best friend, Grace. We were shopping at our favorite thrift store. We came here almost every

Saturday afternoon. We loved searching for new stuff every week. You never knew what kind of treasures you'd find.

But even if we didn't find anything good, Grace and I always had fun. We loved picking through the racks of old clothes.

I was always on the lookout for cool things, but now I was on the hunt for my Queen Esther costume. I'd wear it to the Purim party at my synagogue, Temple Beth El, next month.

Abba was working on my dress. I hadn't seen it yet, but I knew it would be awesome. He was a costume designer at a theater, so he knew all about costumes.

I couldn't wait to see it. He'd tried keeping it a surprise, but I'd bugged him so much he'd finally brought home a swatch of the fabric. So now I knew it would be made of a rich green velvet. But nothing else. He was planning a big reveal.

I had the mask I'd made last year and had found the perfect sandals the month before. Now all I needed was a scarf and a crown.

And I had just found the perfect scarf. For only a quarter! It was green with gold fringes and would match the dress. Everything was coming together.

"This is the last piece I needed for my costume," I said to Grace. "Other than the crown. But I won't get one of those here."

"That would be an epic find if you did!" Grace said. "Can you imagine? Like, if some royal donated their crown by accident or something? Or it fell into their donation bag?" Grace was always thinking up stories.

"That would be awesome." I twirled again, loving how the filmy scarf floated behind me. "I guess I'd have to return it. But *after* the party."

Grace nodded. "Obviously."

“Anyway, I can get a pretend crown at the dollar store. As long as I’m fierce like the queen. That’s what matters.”

Grace laughed. “And beautiful. You said Queen Esther was fierce *and* beautiful.”

I stopped twirling before I got dizzy. I draped the scarf around my neck and gave my bestie a bright smile. “Obviously. Queen Esther was fierce and beautiful. That’s how she saved the Jews and became a superhero.”

Grace rolled her eyes. “Elsie, they didn’t have superheroes in those days.”

“She was as close to a superhero as you get. If they made a movie about the Purim story, Gal Gadot would play her.”

Grace nodded. “She’s totally fierce.”

It was no secret that Grace and I loved Gal Gadot as Wonder Woman. We’d each watched all the movies she was in a million times. It also wasn’t a secret that I wanted to be Gal Gadot. Or that

Grace had a crush on Gal Gadot. Who could blame her?

“Anyway...” I started looking through the racks for more treasures. “I can’t wait for the party.”

“You’ve been planning for it forever,” Grace said.

“Since last year’s,” I said. “Purim parties at the temple are so epic. Last year Rabbi Alisha gave out a prize for whoever made the most noise when they said evil Haman’s name. And there’s lots of yummy food. Of course, there’s also the costume contest.”

“Which you will win.”

I nodded. I was determined to win this year.

“Purim sounds like so much fun.” Grace pouted a little.

“It is,” I said. “But you get Easter with all the chocolate and everything. Plus Christmas.”

“Well, you get Hanukkah with doughnuts and latkes.”

“That’s true.” I pulled a mint-green shirt off the rack and held it up against my chest.

Grace made a face. “That color is no good for you,” she said. “You’re too pale. It would look great against my dark skin. But you need darker colors.” Grace always knew so much about colors and fashion.

I held the shirt out toward her. “Want it?”

“No thanks.” She shook her head. “Not my style. I’m just saying the *color* would work on me.”

I put the shirt back.

“I wish we could do some of those fun things *together*,” she said. She pulled a hoodie off the rack and held it up to herself. When I shook my head, she returned it. “I like to dress up.”

“We get to dress up together for Halloween,” I said.

Grace sighed. “Halloween is months away. I wish I could go to your Purim party. I’d probably be the only Black Wonder Woman there.”

“Probably.” I put my arm around her and gave her a side hug. “And I wish you could go too. But it’s only for temple members.”

“I know.” Grace sounded so sad.

Suddenly I got an idea. Rabbi Alisha was always talking about community outreach. She said that learning about non-Jewish people *and* teaching them about *our* customs was a good way to build a community where everyone was loved and respected.

Maybe letting my best friend come to our Purim party was a sort of outreach.

Hmm. I’d ask Rabbi Alisha at Sunday school. But I didn’t want to get Grace’s hopes up, just in case. So I kept my idea to myself.

I paid for my scarf and then we walked three blocks to the dollar store.

When we got inside, we went past the Easter section. Even though it was still only February and Easter was in April, the store had all the stuff

out already. There was a whole row of yellow, pink and green. Baskets, colored fake grass, plastic eggs and everything bunny and baby chicken. I didn't know a lot about Easter, but it was a really colorful holiday. That was nice. Chocolate was involved, which made it even nicer.

We went through the store to the party section at the back. It bummed me out that there wasn't a specific section for Jewish holidays, but I was used to it. Our friend Sana, who is Muslim, said there wasn't a section for her people either.

In among the cheap toys there were plastic crowns hanging on pegs. I sighed. They weren't fierce. Or real. Definitely not the kind of thing the winner of the Purim costume contest would wear.

Grace pulled one off the peg and frowned at it. "It's funny that an ugly plastic crown is more expensive than that fancy scarf you got at the thrift shop."

“I know,” I said. “And it’s not even nice. Maybe I can make something better.”

“I bet you can,” she said. “You’re crafty.”

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“We can get some chocolate Easter eggs to eat on the way home.”

I gave her another side hug. “You always have the best ideas.”

She grinned at me. “When it includes chocolate I do. What do people eat at Purim?”

“My favorite are these special cookies called hamantaschen.”

Grace stared at me. “Haman—what?”

I slowed down the word and sounded it out for her. “Ha-man-tasch-en. It’s Hebrew, I think. They’re shaped like triangles and have different jam fillings. My bubby makes really good ones.”

“Oh, your grandmother is a great cook,” Grace said. “Maybe someday I can try them.” She sounded hopeful.

I couldn't wait to get to Sunday school to ask Rabbi Alisha if Grace could come to the party. The more I thought about it, the more excited I got.

I couldn't have known then that everything was about to fall apart.