

WHY CAN'T FISH DO WHAT HE LIKES?

Twelve-year-old Fishel “Fish” Rosner doesn’t like regular “boy” things. He hates sports and would prefer to read or do crafts instead of climbing trees or playing hockey with his friends. When Fish asks his bubby to teach him to knit, she tells him to go watch the game with his zaida. And instead of dance class his mom enrolls him in water polo. All of Fish’s interests are considered “girly.” But he doesn’t get why that’s a bad thing. Why does everyone else get to decide what Fish should or shouldn’t do?

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FISH OUT OF WATER

Joanne Levy

Orca currents

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Published in Canada and the United States in 2020 by Orca Book Publishers.
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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Fish out of water / Joanne Levy.

Names: Levy, Joanne, author.

Series: Orca currents.

Description: Series statement: Orca currents

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20200175955 | Canadiana (ebook) 20200175963 |

ISBN 9781459833753 (softcover) | ISBN 9781459826601 (PDF) |

ISBN 9781459826618 (EPUB)

Classification: LCC PS8623.E9592 F58 2020 | DDC jc813/.6—dc23

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020930592

Summary: In this high-interest accessible novel for middle readers, a twelve-year-old boy is frustrated that he's not able to do the things he loves because they're too "girly."

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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 Gettyimages/Francesco Carta fotografo

Author photo by Tania Garshowitz

Printed and bound in Canada.

23 22 21 20 • 1 2 3 4

Chapter One

“Let’s go for ice cream.”

My five favorite words in the entire world.

I turned away from the TV, which I wasn’t really watching anyway, and looked up at my grandmother. She had been cleaning the kitchen after lunch but was now standing in the doorway, smiling. Her purse was over her shoulder, and her keys were in her hand. Ready to go.

“Yes, please, Bubby!” I jumped up off the couch. I was thankful for ice cream, but maybe even more for something to do.

Every Sunday I went to my grandparents’ condo for a visit. It was pretty boring most of the time. I love them and all, but we never do anything.

They don’t like the kind of movies I like. They don’t want to go anywhere. And I hate watching sports, which seems to be the only thing my grandfather ever has on the TV. I guess my dad liked sports when he was alive. My zaida assumes that as a boy and his grandson, I do too. Out of respect, I watch when I visit. He seems to like it when we watch together. Most of the time, I just tune out.

Zaida was sitting in his big brown lounge, leaning way forward, very interested in the baseball game on the big screen. He obviously hadn’t even heard the magic words.

“Zaida?” I barked to get his attention. “Come on. We’re going for ice cream!”

Bubby shook her head. “He won’t want to come.”

Zaida glanced away from the TV to look at me. “You sure you don’t want to stay here and watch the game? It’s a nail-biter!”

“I’ll be back later,” I said. “You can catch me up.” I didn’t want to hurt his feelings.

“Suit yourself.” He shrugged. “Bring home some chocolate mint?”

“Sure,” Bubby said, jingling her keys. “Come on, Fishel. I need to stop at the yarn store too.”

When we got to the front door, I worked my feet into my sneakers and followed her out.

We got into the elevator to ride down the eleven floors and then two more to the parking garage. “Do you need something special from the yarn store?” I asked. Because she always seemed to have lots of yarn at home.

“Yes.” She sighed. “More sock yarn. One of my friends asked me to make a pair for her granddaughter’s tenth birthday. On top of all the ones I’ve promised everyone else.”

My grandmother was famous for her socks. She knitted them from special yarn and each pair was one of a kind. Well, two of a kind, I guess.

Each year at Hanukkah, I got three pairs that she had knitted just for me. Each set had a different pattern but was always made in my favorite colors—purple, pink and green. She spent hours and hours making them, her knitting needles click-clacking. It was kind of amazing actually. Sometimes I watched her knit, the yarn looping over the needles. Over and over. Her hands moved so fast they were a blur. More and more of the sock appeared below her needles, and the ball of yarn got smaller and smaller. It was like watching magic happen.

Then she’d get weird about me staring and tell me to go bug my grandfather.

When I wore the socks she made for me, I felt special. Like she was sending love and hugging my feet. Sounds weird, I know, but it's not really.

I thought my grandmother loved knitting. But her sigh made me wonder if something was wrong. "How come you don't seem happy about making them?"

She gave me a small smile as we got to the car. "Oh, I am. I just wish I didn't have so many requests."

"People love your socks, Bubby."

"They do. Not a terrible problem to have. Thank goodness they last a long time too—otherwise I'd never sleep. I'd spend every hour knitting to replace them as they wore out!"

We drove around and around up the ramp of the parking garage to get out. It made my stomach roll, almost like the rides at the fair.

We were out in the sunshine before she spoke again. "So, Fishel, have you decided on your bar mitzvah project yet?"

Ugh. Wasn't it enough that my mom and

Rabbi Seigel kept asking me if I'd figured it out yet? Apparently not. Everyone needed to know.

"Not yet," I said. "There's so much to do to prepare for my bar mitzvah. It feels like a full-time job."

You have to learn to read a part of the Torah in Hebrew and help your family plan your party. You also have to do a mitzvah—good deeds—project. It's not like in school either, where they tell you what assignment to do. You have to pick your own charity project. Something you're interested in.

My best friend, Seth, had decided he was going to collect used hockey gear. Then he'd give it out to kids who couldn't afford new equipment. He had said I could do it with him and that it would be fun to work together.

There was just one problem. I didn't like hockey. Or any sports. I didn't like watching them or playing them. The point of the project was to give of yourself to your community. Something meaningful.

Smelly old hockey equipment didn't feel all that

meaningful to me. Doing Seth's project with him would be my backup plan. One I hoped I wouldn't need.

But time was running out. All the other kids had picked their projects already. The rabbi had said I only had until our next class to decide.

"You'll think of something," Bubby said. "Maybe you could help serve at a soup kitchen or collect for a food bank."

"I guess," I said. Both of those things were important. But did I want to do either of them? Did I have something special to give to a soup kitchen or food bank? Not really.

Bubby turned on the radio and hummed along to the music as she drove. I looked out the window, thinking.

"Will you grab a basket, please?" Bubby said when we got inside the yarn store.

I was amazed at all the different kinds of yarn on the shelves lining the walls. So many colors! So many types! Thin, thick, fuzzy, soft, scratchy—how did a person decide?

My grandmother knew exactly what she needed. She walked straight over to the section marked Sock Yarn.

Of course.

She began tossing balls of yarn into my basket, muttering. “Two pairs for Fern. One for Silvia. Oh, and three for Frank’s grandkids.”

By the time she was done, the basket was nearly overflowing with yarn, in almost every color—black, red, brown, dark green, navy blue and even multicolored.

“Whoa!” I said. “How many pairs do you have to make?”

“Don’t ask,” she said as the clerk rang up the bill. The very big bill. I wondered if her friends paid her for the yarn.

When I asked her if they did, she smiled and shook her head. “My socks are a labor of love—I love making them for people, and they love receiving them. It feels good to give them away.”

“Maybe I could help you,” I said.

Bubby laughed. “Oh, Fishel. If only.” She gave me a side hug.

As she handed the clerk her credit card, I got an idea.

A great idea. A really amazing, perfect, super-special idea.

BAM. Just like that, standing in the middle of the yarn store, I’d come up with my mitzvah project.