

Cover Story, or How My Book Got Featured in US News & World Report

I first got the feeling that something odd was happening with my historical novel, *Rashi's Daughters: Book One – Joheved*, on Monday, March 6, 2006, when I checked my Web site and saw that the number of hits was twice the usual amount. And the visitors weren't from an area where I'd spoken recently, but from all over the country. Intrigued, I logged onto Amazon and sure enough, my ranking had gotten significantly higher.

The next morning my Web site was getting hits like never before and Amazon had my book in the top 1000 for the first time ever. What the heck was going on?

The answer came a couple of hours later when I got a phone call from Sharon Goldinger, my book shepherd (the expert consultant who guided me through the publishing maze, giving advice on selecting and working with editors, designers, printers, distributors, publicists, etc.). This normally unflappable woman was very excited. Sitting in her car in Borders' parking lot, she had just opened the current issue of U.S. News & World Report to read the cover story about changes in book publishing. When she thumbed through to the article, a color photo of *Rashi's Daughters* with the caption, "Girl Power: with critical kudos, a little literary novel from a small house can do quite nicely," was staring back at her. It took up at least a third of the article's first page.

I was as astonished as Sharon. I had no idea how the first book from Banot Press, the publishing company my husband and I started last year, had managed such a publicity coup. I remembered that a photographer from U.S. News & World Report had phoned me a month earlier, asking for a copy of my book for a possible article about the book publishing industry in the wake of the *A Million Little Pieces* debacle. But she knew nothing about why *Rashi's Daughters* had been singled out, only that her boss had given her my name and phone number. I had overnighted the book to her with no expectations whatsoever and continued with my life.

By the time the photographer emailed me, two days after Sharon's call, to tell me about the issue with my book's photo in it, I had bought every copy I could find and told nearly everyone I knew. And sharing the news is what led to my learning how this amazing piece of good fortune had occurred. It turned out that Ellen Frankel, editor-in-chief of the Jewish Publication Society, was friends with the author of the U.S. News article. Ellen and I met years earlier at a Jewish studies conference, when *Rashi's Daughters* was merely an outline, and she became one of my first supporters. Ellen insisted that she had never discussed my book with her friend, but she would ask her to contact me. Between the reporter and photographer, I was able to piece the back-story together.

It all started in the spring of 2005, when I read on the Yahoo Jewish Book Marketing group Listserv that the religious books editor at Library Journal was looking for Jewish fiction. My publicist, Carol Fass of New York, was just sending out galleys, and she sent one to that reviewer. The other big-time publications ignored *Rashi's Daughters*, a first novel from a small, unknown press, but Library Journal gave it a very nice review.

Since I am also a member of several other Yahoo groups that focus on small press publishing, fiction writing, book marketing, and so on, I saw another post from Library Journal later that summer, this time asking for successful first novels. Again I alerted my publicist, who sent more copies. *Rashi's Daughters* was then chosen as one of LJ's Summer-Fall 2005 Best First Novels.

The description read: "Good news for a small press with a terrific title: this account of an 11th-century Jewish woman who dares to study the Talmud sold out of its first printing of 3000 copies two months before publication, and the second printing is disappearing fast. No surprise there; *LJ*'s reviewer declared this book 'extraordinary.'"

The U.S. News reporter had learned about my book not from our mutual friend Ellen, but from that writeup in Library Journal. When the magazine asked her for examples of successful efforts by small presses as possible illustrations for her article, *Rashi's Daughters* was one of twelve books she suggested.

Now comes a part that has nothing to do with luck. Back when Banot Press was getting started, we decided never to skimp on production, and we hired Lightbourne, an award-winning design firm, to create the cover for *Rashi's Daughters*. Nearly everyone who sees the book raves about the cover, which looks fabulous with its bright red splash of color across the center, yet is easily readable in black and white and when reduced on a bookseller's Web site. (I'm amazed at how many book covers fail these last two tests.)

So why did *Rashi's Daughters* get chosen out of the twelve books on the reporter's list? It was because the art department of U.S. News liked its cover best, the photographer told me later. So even though we didn't win any awards for cover design (we did win the Benjamin Franklin for Best New Voice – Fiction), that cover got our book into a national newsmagazine with more than 2 million readers, which resulted in selling out our fourth printing and having to go back for a fifth in April.

How did I parlay this article in U.S. News into more sales? By spreading the news everywhere: notifying my distributor and my publicist (who in turn notified the buyers at the major chains and their media contacts), audiences at my speaking engagements, my friends and family, and posting the news and a link to the article on my Web site. And when I told folks at PMAU about my amazing experience, they asked me to write about it for you.