

AUTHOR'S CORNER: HOLLY-JANE RAHLENS

By [Joanne Intrator](#) | November 18, 2019 | [1](#)



(Holly-Jane Rahlens.
Photo credit; Heike
Barndt)

[Holly-Jane Rahlens](#)
graduated from my
alma mater, [Forest
Hills High School](#) in

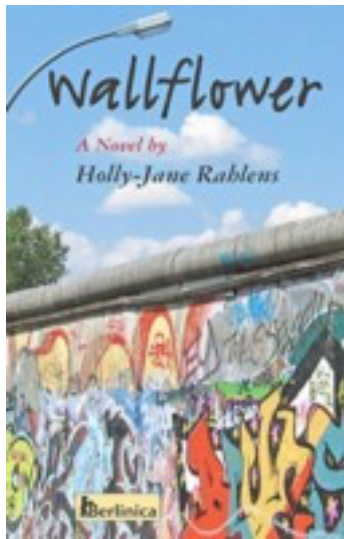
Queens, but ran off to Berlin where literary stardom found her, so if you understand predetermination, you'll know why the two of us had no choice but to do this blog interview.

An enchanting excerpt from Holly-Jane's novel BECKY BERNSTEIN GOES BERLIN is — (*zwar*) — at this [link](#).

And to see the [trailer](#) for the film MAX MINSKY AND ME — adapted by Holly-Jane from her book PRINCE WILLIAM, MAXIMILIAN MINSKY AND ME — go [here](#).

For this interview, I communicated with Holly-Jane Rahlens mainly about WALLFLOWER, her charming tale of young love in Berlin at the time the nasty old Iron Curtain was going *auf Nimmerwiedersehen*, that is to say,

"Bye, Felicia."



In WALLFLOWER, you do a marvelous job of staying "on voice" as Molly Beth Lenzfeld, the teenaged narrator. How easily did that come to you while you were writing the book?

Young voices come easily to me, in dialogue as well as in first-person narrations: Molly, 16, in *Wallflower*; Nelly, 13, in [Prince William, Maximilian Minsky and Me](#); Renée in [How to Really Kiss](#), etc. I remember my adolescent years vividly. I'm sure that helps. I have a girlfriend who can't remember anything from high school. That seems crazy to me. Who are we, if not for our memories? I remember everything – well, almost: sweating over my math midterm in 10th grade; the way my insides used to jump when when I was in the 8th grade and saw that guy I had a crush on standing at the top of the stairs; the pure rage I felt when my father raided my savings account; my annoyance with knee socks that never seemed to stay up – especially in the winter (panty hose had not yet become common). I remember so much and somehow, magically,

I seem to know how to put those experiences into words, sentences, dialogue, and narration.

Actually, when I think about it, most voices come easily to me, even the adults. My [Becky Bernstein](#), a woman in her early 40s, narrates two of my novels, and it came easily. In [Infinitissimo](#) I even have a young man from the far future narrating a book. He's reading the diary of a young girl from the early 21st century, a kind of first-person narration. She ages in the book from a thirteen-year-old to 21-years old. I think I captured her "voices" too. It's magic.

I wonder if my bi-lingualism attuned me to voices. When I first came to Germany I did not speak German, so maybe listening very very hard to get the gist of what was being said, helped me develop a heightened sense of dialogue.

I also think working in radio helped me understand how to stay "on voice." If you want people to understand you on the radio, you need to express yourself simply and to the point. Long, flowerly sentences don't work well in that medium.

Several times in Wallflower, Molly Beth makes remarks to the effect that before the fall of the Berlin Wall, East Berlin was right around the corner from where she was in the West, but it had might has well have been a different planet. When you were living in West Berlin in the pre-[Wende](#) period, did you have

that feeling about the East?

Admittedly, the East was not on my radar. I had been living in West Berlin for over 17 years when the Wall fell. I could probably have counted the times I'd been to East Berlin during that time on one and a half hands. Maybe three or four if you counted all the times we drove the delegated transit routes through the East to get to West Germany or back to Berlin.

To me, in the 1970s and 1980s, the East was one big, fat, dark blob of mystery. The people were different, the newspapers were different, the money was different (their coins felt like play money), their fashion was different. And their government, of course, was different. Their music. Their food. The way the city smelled.

When I wrote *Wallflower*, ten years ago, in 2009, 20 years after the fall of the Wall, I can't say that East Berlin was as strange to me as it had been during the days that the Wall stood, but it was still a mystery to me. I rode the subway and S-Bahn where the entire book takes place, time and again, back and forth, trying to see it the way Molly might have in November 1989. Many of the things in the East that felt alien to me way back when I first came to Berlin in 1972 were still there in 1989: (ghost stations, [Mitropa](#) restaurants, Intershop kiosks, the strict border control, the cheap, rough toilet paper). I easily slipped all of that into my story. Molly is a stranger in a strange land, and, actually, Mick, the boy from the East

who she meets and grows fond of, is, in the West, also a stranger in a strange land.

What inspired you to make Mick's mother a *Besamungstechnikerin* — a cow insemination technician?

So funny! When I started writing the book, I was planning on creating a sequel, a Part Two, as I knew I would make Part One, *Wallflower*, open-ended. The book ends a few minutes before Molly accomplishes her "mission," which is to visit her mother's birthhouse in East Berlin. The reader has to decide for him- or herself if Molly, who is set to leave Berlin in two days, will ultimately decide to stay in Berlin now that she has met Mick. The story takes place on Thanksgiving Day and we're kind of certain at the end of the book that Mick will come to Thanksgiving dinner. But what happens after that? My idea was to center the sequel around that dinner, with the entire second book taking place in the apartment. I wanted Molly's widowed father and Mick's single mother to come together at that dinner. (Unfortunately, I never wrote Book Two.) Even so, I laid the groundwork for that book in *Wallflower*.

Molly's father is a chemistry professor. I wanted Mick's mother to be able to relate to his work, but to have a more practical occupation. I thought maybe something in biology. A doctor or a nurse seemed too easy an answer, I wanted something that said a bit more about East

Germany.

I'd been reading a lot about East Germany and going through tons of photography books about the East. In one of them there was a photograph of an insemination technician with all her equipment, her muddy boots, her test tubes, etc. The second I saw it, I knew it was right because it would allow me to say a bit about "agricultural cooperatives" in East Germany, as foreign to Molly (and kids today) as lunar topography.

My intention with this book was manifold. I wanted to tell a great story about the meeting of two worlds; I wanted to tell an intriguing boy-meets-girl; I hoped to capture the excitement of those days after the fall of the Wall and make it palpable for readers today who may not have experienced it; I hoped to re-awaken old memories in those who had experienced it; and I wanted to inform young readers about an important historical moment and inform them about the East German Way of Life. Mick's mother, the *Besamungstechnikerin*, falls into the last intent.

The WALLFLOWER scenes in which Molly nearly loses her lunch over the all-pervasive stink of cabbage are delightful. Please, however, tell us about some of your favorite current-day restaurants in Berlin.

In the 80s and 90s, before I had my child, I used to go out all the time. I was very up-to-date with all the new

restaurants, the best spots for a late-night meal, where to get the greatest bagels, greatest cocktails, the greatest French food, East Prussian food, Korean, Austrian, you name it. But then I had a baby and everything changed. These days the baby is all grown up and getting his Master's in Computer Science in Zurich. Both my husband and I work at home. We like to go out for lunch. We like it tasty, quick, and fresh. Right near us is a nice place that makes brilliant salads and has a changing daily special. It's called exactly how we like lunch: Fresh and Easy. Or we go to the Turkish restaurant around the corner called [Istanbul](#). They have the greatest grilled meatballs ever, called Köfte.

We live in Berlin's Charlottenburg district where there is an abundance of Asian restaurants along Kantstraße. But my favorite Chinese restaurant is in Wilmersdorf, a 15-minute-walk from my house: HotSpot. I always order M6 at lunchtime: Gongbao-Jiding (but not too spicy, please). And right in my building (which also happens to be across from the lovely green market between Pestalozzistraße and Goethestraße at Krummestraße on Wednesdays and Saturdays) is the Italian restaurant [Biscotti](#). We go a lot on Saturdays, noontime, on market day, for panini or spaghetti. And we go there evenings too, when we're willing to spend a little more. It's a great place for business meetings as you can hear yourself talk.

The scene where Molly tells the non-Jewish German Mick about the Jewish custom of leaving a stone at a

loved person's grave is very touching. How often does it happen that you tell a non-Jewish German about a Jewish custom and they are moved by what you've told them?

It never happens to me – maybe that's why I wrote that scene. 😊

But seriously: I don't think it's only the Jewish custom and its symbolic importance that moves the reader, although it definitely plays a role. That scene has a huge build-up. It comes toward the end of the book after the reader has already been with Molly a couple of hours. The reader knows almost everything he or she needs to know in order to fully experience that scene. They understand Molly and they have a pretty clear picture of who Mick is. They sense how difficult it is for Molly to talk about her mother. But she does talk about her and that's what moves us, I believe. She has found someone she can trust. So, you see, the reader is ripe for tears here and ... well ... I milk it. But in a good way. It's not corny or sentimental. It's, as you say, touching.

I cried when I wrote that scene, sitting at my computer, tears dripping all over my keyboard. It was glorious. And I knew it was right. And I knew that everything came together right there, at that moment.

You have recently been involved in a WALLFLOWER speaking/reading tour as part of celebrating the 30th

anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. In what ways does public reaction to WALLFLOWER differ today in comparison to how the book was received when first published?

I'm reading a lot in schools, grades 8-12, sometimes in German, sometimes in English, and sometimes even bilingually (I perform Molly's narration in English and the dialogue in German). I wrote the book ten years ago. I don't see a big difference between 2009 and 2019 in terms of how students react. Ten years ago they knew little about East Germany and today perhaps even a little bit less. But once you involve them and they get caught up in the story, they seem to enjoy it. They empathize with the characters and compare the lives of the characters with their own lives and try to understand how things were different then from now and why. Their teachers tell me there's always a lot to talk about after the reading.

When I read for adults who experienced living with the Wall, either in the East or West, they appreciate the trip down "memory lane."

But obviously the further away we move from 1989, the harder it gets, especially for kids, to understand how two Germanys lived side by side. It seems crazy to them that there was a wall running through Berlin. And I get it. Totally.

Please feel free to add whatever else you would like readers to know about your work.

For many years I wrote realistic, authentic stories in the here and now: *Becky Bernstein Goes Berlin*, about a young New Yorker's experience in Berlin during the years 1970-1992; [Prince William, Maximilian Minsky and Me](#) – the story of a 13-year-old Jewish girl in modern Berlin; *My Big, Little Life*, which takes place in New York in the early 1960s and tells the story of three young girls, their families, their dreams, and how history became a part of their lives; *Wallflower*, etc.

One of my favorites is [Stella Menzel and the Golden Thread](#), a novel for readers 9 and up, but a book that was also written to be read aloud to children 6 and up. It's a modern rendition of that old Jewish tale "Joseph was a Tailor." But instead of Joseph, she's Josephine and she's Stella's grandmother. She tells her granddaughter the story of their family's heirloom, a blue satin wall tapestry that over the years keeps on getting smaller and smaller. Initially a tapestry, it becomes a curtain, then a tablecloth, then a piano shawl, and in Stella's possession it becomes a blanket, then a dress, a blouse, etc. Stella's story becomes a part of the heirloom's history. It's about roots and the golden thread that connects us all.

But starting around 2010 I began thinking about other genres and thoroughly enjoyed writing my novel [Infinitissimo](#), which can be considered science fiction. It

unfolds in the far future, in the year 2264, and explores the life of a young historian, Finn, an expert in 21st century youth culture, who is tasked with decoding and translating the handwritten diary of a thirteen-year-old from 2003 into English from the dead language German. In the middle of testing an edu-tainment virtual reality game geared to students that teaches 21st century culture, my protagonist comes face-to-face with the girl whose diary he's translating. It's a mystery that needs to be solved.

I absolutely adored creating a future world with its good and bad points, its food, its clothing, how people live, how they commute, travel, study, and even talk.

This book has been published in English by my German publisher and is being used in German classrooms in English, 10th grade and up, but I would love more than anything for it to find a mass market publisher in English. It deserves to be read by more people than "just" students of English in Germany. I also think it would make for a terrific mini-series. Any producers reading this? 😊

Holly-Jane Rahlens' WALLFLOWER is [here](#) on Amazon.
The author's website is [here](#).

Holly-Jane is [here](#) on Facebook, and [here](#) on Twitter.