Writing what you know: Often a great notion

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For the longest time, I avoided writing about my family. My husband, who knew all about my interesting childhood, couldn’t fathom why I’d waste “such a gold mine.”

“Nobody will believe it,” I’d tell him, then quote, “Life can be as strange as it wants, but fiction has to be believable.”

He’d shrug, muttering about how “you can’t make this stuff up.”

I had written three novels for young readers, none about my life in particular, though my first came the closest. That one, How I Survived My Summer Vacation, is about a boy who wants to be an author.

The next two, The Girlfriend Project and Nothing, are, respectively, about a boy who wants a girlfriend and a boy who develops bulimia. “My family, startled by the subject matter of the latter, asked for several assurances that I was not, in fact, writing from experience. I was not.”

But I’d never written a novel about a girl. Or, more specifically, a girl who was born in Israel, lives in immigrant poverty, and tries desperately to understand the American dream.

And I never thought I would, until I met the late Paul Zindel, renowned author of The Pigman, at a writing luncheon. Offhandedly he commented that all of his books are autobiographical.

“Do you feel your family is angry with you for writing about them?” someone asked.

“Yes,” he replied casually. “But then they ask me who’s playing them in the movie.”

The making of this documentary, K*ke Like Me, Jamie Kastner asks, “Why do I still feel somehow threatened when people ask me if I’m Jewish?”

Throughout the movie, he is reticent to answer that question. He loses his drive to poke fun at every other in-group, his sense of humor tinged with a palpable current of longing.

The late Paul Zindel, renowned author of The Pigman, at a writing luncheon.

The making of this documentary, K*ke Like Me, tells Kastner to numerous venues, including New York, Jerusalem, London, Paris, and Berlin. In Brooklyn, he is welcomed warmly by members of Chabad, and he meets non-Jews in Germany who love Jewish culture — especially klezmer music — but subsequent travels reveal completely different attitudes. Particularly disturbing is his visit to Paris.

“Are people really getting killed just for being seen as Jews? Haven’t Jews been peacefully integrated here since the war? Am I now going to get kidnapped on my way for a croissant?” he asks. He is given a tour of a synagogue embedded in a building indistinguishable from any other on the street, secured by an electronically locked door, purposely hidden after an arson attack. Worse, Kastner is told to visit the suburb of Sarcelles, where the locals are purportedly tolerant and peaceful, only to find prevalent anti-Semitism. After establishing a rapport and engaging in a respectful debate with a group of youths, he asks them, “What would you think if I told you I was Jewish?”

Quickly one replies, “If you’re Jewish, we don’t like you.”

Kastner tries to explain he means himself personally the person they’ve just spoken with amiably for several minutes — and not Jews in general. “If you ever get the chance, you’ll screw me over... That is what a Jew is like,” the kid asserts.

Kastner interviews not only strangers on the street, but famous personalities, including Pat Buchanan, English journalist Richard Ingrams, and Israeli writer Abraham Yehoshua. He meets the infamous German journalist Lea Rosh, who helped to found the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, and has done everything to take on a Jewish identity (i.e., change her name, dress appropriately, etc.) except actually convert.

He visits not just random points of interest, like the Shmultz Brewery, home of He’Brew, “the Chosen Beer,” but also locates indispensable to any study related to Judaism, such as the Western Wall and Auschwitz. Entering the late he loses his humor sadly disaffection, delivering dark quips, forgetting his relaxed, deadpan inflection. He loses his drive to poke fun at every turn and, for a person whose Jewish identity is ambiguous at best, his uncharacteristic reaction to the camp reveals what could be construed as either a lack of emotional maturity or a stronger connection to his Jewish heritage than even Kastner realizes.

Which is it? Throughout the picture he reiterates, “Why do you want to know?”

“Well, probably because it might explain why I made this film in the first place, as well as the choices he made in presenting its pernicious message. Sometimes the subject of a documentary speaks for itself and sometimes it needs a narrator like Kastner to provide a voice. Perhaps he wisely recognizes that if, at the end of K*ke Like Me, the viewer is still hung up on whether or not he is really Jewish, then maybe the documentary has a voice that it does not need.

K*ke Like Me was recently released on DVD by Kino International.