

## Skirt monologues

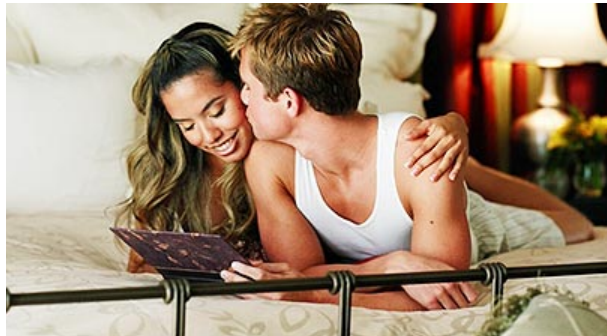
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**Liat Rotner's enthusiastic fans don't know that their favorite writer is a 20-year-old religious woman. But don't worry, it's her strategic decision**

Ronen Tal

By age 14 Liat Rotner knew that she wanted to be a writer, she just didn't know exactly how it would happen. In her youth she used to write about one story a month, sharing the fruits of her creative talents with her sister and a few close friends. By the time she reached high school, her teachers tried to help her self-publish a novel, but Rotner decided to wait until she felt her writing had matured more.

"I've been writing since I was eight and I wanted to wait until I wrote a good enough book that a publisher would pay me for, and not the other way around. But when I wrote 'One Summer Together,' my first published book, I told myself that's it - the time has come."



**Is it Okay to touch? (Illustration: Visuals/Photos)**

And waiting paid off. This week 20-year-old Rotner is publishing her third book for adolescents "Winning Big." "One Summer Together" and "Let Me Grow Up in Peace," Rotner's first and second books, earned her a large fan base among Israeli teenagers.

While most children her age are debating whether to work as waiters or go traveling abroad, Rotner maneuvers between interviews and visiting book week to sign copies of her novels for her loyal fans.

### Strategic decision

Not many of Rotner's readers know that a young religious woman, who lives with her parents in Netanya and is preparing to start university studies at Bar Ilan's Humanities Faculty this fall, is the author behind the books they enjoy so much.

In her three published novels, it is hard to find clues hinting at her observant lifestyle – a conscious, strategic decision on her part intended to expand her reading public as much as possible.

"There isn't such a big difference between secular and religious," she muses. "If I were to



write that the heroes wear kippahs or observe tradition, secular readers wouldn't identify."

### **The plot: Youth love triangle**

Her three books were published by the Yedioth Ahronoth press. The stories take place at the "Maor" co-ed boarding school, against the pastoral backdrop of northern Israel.

Her first two books focused on the love triangle of Tomer, Inbal and Itai. In her third book, "Winning Big," the spotlight is turned to other characters: Bar, Itai's new girlfriend, discovers that he had loved Inbal before falling in love with her; her friend Shiran falls in love with a kippah-wearing youth named Tzahi – quite a challenge considering the fact that Tzahi avoids physical contact with girls; meanwhile Noah, the classy Barbie-doll-like girl, falls prey to sexual harassment by one of her teachers, Ronen.

Rotner makes sure to tread cautiously on the line separating the religious and secular worlds, and isn't eager to present herself as a religious author.

"The secular have a lot of stereotypes about the religious. If you write that I'm a National Religious young woman, readers will immediately assign me a list of characteristics: right-wing, supports settlements, studies in a religious girls' school, goes to be a bible teacher, mother of ten without a television at home and living in a settlement that is about to be evacuated."

### **In your new book, religious and secular meet in a love story that develops between Shiran and Tzahi, and they struggle with the rule forbidding males and females to touch.**

"I decided to have a confrontation between the two worlds and observe the similarities and differences. Because the religious too are involved in Israeli culture, listen to music and go out. The difference is that with us, the sexes aren't allowed to touch. Every time I've spoken to secular people, they didn't understand how a girl and guy can be in love and not touch each other. It seems absurd to them because physical contact, not to speak of sexual contact, is viewed as a crucial part of romantic relationships. So I chose to include the issue in the book, and I intentionally made the side avoiding physical contact the male, who is supposed to be the one with more urges".

### **And how, in fact, do people really deal with this?**

"We're talking about a population that is used to it, but it's still hard. On the other hand, a girlfriend of mine told me that particularly because she and her boyfriend can't touch, the spiritual relationship gets stronger."

When it comes to her secular heroes, Rotner is a little more lenient. She lets them enjoy kissing, hugs, but they never go all the way.

"This is a book for adolescents and I want to maintain some innocence," she says. "Though I do admit that it's happening in the world around me - I've had many secular friends, both male and female."

### **Is it nice to be successful author at age 20?**

"I don't see myself as a star. In the beginning I was afraid that it would spark jealousy and make people feel threatened, I was afraid I would be treated like a show-off because I get interviewed, so I stopped telling people when I'm going to be on TV. Luckily, writing books isn't something that makes people jealous. Most girls my age don't want to be writers anyway; they want to be models or television announcers.