

# chestnut hill local

## Word Mavens Reveal ‘Stuff Every Grandmother Should Know’

by Len Lear

Feb. 15, 2019 - Joyce Eisenberg and, and Ellen Scolnic, aka “The Word Mavens,” are area residents who have written three books, including one that was released Feb. 12, *Stuff Every Grandmother Should Know* (Quirk Press). They have also written many gently humorous, non-political essays about domestic slice-of-life events, sort of like the late syndicated columnist, Erma Bombeck. For example, in one essay about motherhood, they wrote in part:

“When we recall our childhood dinners, we remember salmon croquettes, Creamettes and frozen green beans. In those days, there was only one option for dinner. No one was allowed to be vegan, lactose intolerant or allergic to peanuts. Moms fell into different camps: ‘If you don’t like it, don’t eat it.’ ‘I’m not cooking three different dinners tonight.’ ‘You can’t leave the table until you clean your plate.’

“When we became moms, we vowed never to make our kids stay at the table until they cleaned their plates. That was such wrong, old-fashioned parenting! We’d even serve extra sides so each child had ‘something’ they liked: a bowl of plain mashed potatoes — no chives, no pepper, no strange flecks on top — and a separate bowl of Tater Tots for the child who hated mushy things.

“But like our moms, we would forget which kid liked what. When Michael came home

from college, we’d proudly serve up a heaping bowl of creamed spinach only to be reminded: ‘I hate creamed spinach. Andy’s the one who likes it!’”

When I asked Eisenberg and Scolnic what was their “local angle” for the Local since they both live on the lower Main Line, they replied, “One of us lived in Roxborough when she was first married, which is only two miles from Lafayette Hill. Our favorite place to eat breakfast is Cake in Chestnut Hill. One daughter took years of ballet lessons at Wissahickon Dance Academy in Germantown. One dog can claim residence in Ambler because she often spends weekends there with one brother-in-law. One sister lives in Plymouth Meeting, and we’re good friends with one of your favorite columnists, Elise Seyfried.” Who would not want to write an article about such local authors?

Regarding their latest book, the one about grandmothering, what’s interesting is that neither Eisenberg nor Scolnic is a grandmother. “Between us,” Eisenberg said, “we have five adult children in their prime baby-making years, but we’re both still waiting for admission to the Beloved ‘Bubbes’ (Yiddish for ‘grandmothers’) Club.

“But not being actual grandmothers didn’t stop us. When we authored our first book, the best-selling Dictionary of Jewish Words, we had to define more than 1,500 words in Yiddish and Hebrew — and we don’t speak

either language ... We made lists of words, we read other books, we interviewed experts, and we looked ‘stuff’ up. Gathering intel on grandmothers would be way more fun.”

Here are a few of the things they learned in their research:

- “The times have been a’changing. Your grandchild may have a single parent, two mommies or two daddies. And while many couples have gender reveal parties to let you in on their secret, many others choose gender neutral names, like Riley, Blake and Skyler to keep you guessing.
- “Many rules have changed, too, since we last changed a diaper ... Still, we successfully raised five children to adulthood — and they drank water from the garden hose and rode bikes without helmets. We just try not to brag about it.
- “Hope that the parents are the type who are just grateful that you brought the kid back alive and not the type who restrict sugar intake and your delicious homemade chocolate chip cookies.”

One thing the co-authors learned in their research is the superstitions that still persist in some other countries to allegedly help grandparents to protect their grandchildren:

- From China: Don’t dress your baby in clothes with monkey prints. It could give the baby the monkey’s negative traits like stubbornness, impatience and fussiness.
- From Greece: Don’t let a new baby look at him/herself in a mirror, or his/her soul will be stolen.
- Many cultures have a belief about safeguarding against the evil eye by not praising the baby. For example, in Bulgaria parents pretend to spit and insult the baby by saying things like “May the chickens poop on you.”

*“Stuff Every Grandmother Should Know” is available in hardcover and eBook formats in gift shops, Barnes & Noble Books and online at Amazon.*