

In Media Res: *Journey of Strangers*

Elizabeth Zelvin

In medias res, (Latin: “in the midst of things”) in narrative technique, the recommended practice of beginning an epic or other fictional form by plunging into a crucial situation that is part of a related chain of events; the situation is an extension of previous events and will be developed in later action. - *Encyclopedia Britannica*, available at <http://britannica.com>

I must have heard the term *in media res* as a college English major a hundred years ago, but it made an impression on me as a fiction writer when I was working on *Voyage of Strangers*, my first historical novel. Its protagonist was Diego Mendoza, a young Jewish sailor who accompanied Columbus on his first two voyages to the Indies. Diego's sister Rachel became a second point-of-view character.

Journey of Strangers begins when Diego and Rachel return to Spain, heartsick about the destruction of the Taino people and determined to find their family. The Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 have been driven across Europe by changing policies and the complications of war. I conceived *Journey* as a sequel to *Voyage*, expected the same publisher to take it, and assumed the majority of my readers would read it already knowing and in some cases loving Diego and Rachel.

I always planned to enlarge my canvas by alternating Diego's first-person narrative chapters with third-person chapters from the point of view of at least one other character, presumably Rachel. But in the course of my research, I came across another story that I felt impelled to tell: the abduction of two thousand Jewish children by the King of Portugal, who sent them as slaves to the isle of São Tomé off the African coast to work the sugar plantations. So I created Joanna, one of those two thousand children.

I wrote my story with Diego narrating Chapter One and subsequent odd-numbered chapters and Joanna taking the lead in Chapter Two and the even-numbered chapters. When I was ready to submit it to my publisher, I learned that they were dropping the series. I decided to submit it to the Kindle Scout program, which offers a contract for e-book publication with an advance and royalties to authors whose work receives enough "nominations," ie votes, over a period of thirty days from "scouts," ie the general public, who have read a significant excerpt from each candidate. The excerpt is 26,000 characters, fourteen pages in the case of *Journey*. But in fact, I had to grab the reader with the first two paragraphs, so that they would click on "Read more" and proceed to the rest of the excerpt.

It was clearly a moment when *in media res* was the only possible strategy. Diego's first chapter is delightful, if I say so myself: endearing characters, sparkling dialogue, hints of the tragedy behind them and the dangers yet to come. But Joanna's first chapter grabs you by the throat, or I hope it will. Even more compelling, it actually happened. Some of the details, like the mother throwing herself and her child into the sea to drown, come from contemporary Jewish sources.

Okay, not quite contemporary, and there's no hard evidence it happened. But this is the way Jewish tradition has remembered it for five hundred years.

In the commotion on the Lisbon docks, Joanna stood like a statue. Simon's hand, sticky from the handful of dates that had made their hasty breakfast, clung to hers. She felt no fear, although all around her, women were screaming and children bawling as the king's soldiers wrenched them apart. Her anger filled her to bursting.

A mother, on her knees, hugged a soldier's legs, pleading, "Take me instead! I will be your slave, I will do anything!" She seized his sash and clung to it.

"Take your hands off me, woman," the soldier said. "It is the king's will."

The sash ripped, and the woman fell to the ground, where she lay pounding her fists against the sodden boards of the dock, moaning, "No! No! No!"

A child of four or five kicked at a soldier's booted shin, his chubby face mottled with rage.

"I won't go with you! I won't!"

The soldier backhanded him across the face. The blow sent the child sprawling. The soldier picked him up by the scruff of the neck and tossed him at a passing priest.

"Here's another for you." He dusted an invisible speck from his collar. "The king wants them saved for Christ. Were I a less pious man, I would wonder why he bothers."

A young woman who sold oranges in the market, her eyes streaming with tears, clutched a girl who could not have been more than two to her breast. As Joanna watched, she leaped into the sea with a wail of despair.

A line of soldiers shoulder to shoulder extended their pikes to form a moving barrier as they advanced, pushing back a mob of shrieking parents. A gray-bearded rabbi pushed aside the pike at his chest, intoning curses in Hebrew until he was seized, shackled, and marched away.

They were picking the little ones, who soon would not remember that they had ever been Jewish. Surely at twelve she was safe, too big to interest them. But Simon was only eight. He was tall for his age, a beanpole of a boy and growing fast. Please, Ha'shem, she prayed, let them overlook Simon.

Her father, his second wife Riva, and her two small half-brothers stood not far away, a pretty little family group with their arms around each other. As she watched, her breast beginning to swell with the familiar resentment, a soldier pressed his pike against her father's chest, pushing him and Riva back.

"Here! We'll take these two. Come along, no dallying! We'll make good little Christians of you in no time."

"No! No!" Riva shrieked.

Shmuel and Benjamin began to cry.

"Not my babies! No! Ezra, do something!"

That was so like Riva, Joanna thought with contempt. She had been demanding that others do something, while she enjoyed the drama of her own emotions, since the day Father had brought her home, two years after Mother died.

Father made a feeble attempt to pluck at Riva's sleeve as she flew at the soldier, pounding on his chest in its impervious corselet. The soldier let go his grip on Benjamin to box her ear with a careless fist. She fell to the ground, sobbing, as another soldier scooped Benji up, grabbed

Shmuel in an iron grip, and hustled both boys away to where the black-clad priests droned over their baptismal basins.



Elizabeth Zelvin's latest **new work** is her Kindle Scout winning historical novel, *Journey of Strangers*, a sequel to *Voyage of Strangers*. Her short stories have appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, a variety of anthologies including *Sisters in Crime* New York's *Murder New York Style* series, and *Mysterical-E* among other e-zines. Liz's work has been nominated three times for the Agatha Award and for the Derringer Award for Best Short Story. A standalone story, "A Breach of Trust," was listed among fifty top stories in *Best American Mystery Stories 2014*. The entire Bruce Kohler series **of mystery novels and short stories** and *Breaches & Betrayals: Collected Stories*, bringing together **non-series** stories previously published in print journals, e-zines, and anthologies, have recently appeared in new e-editions.