



No Vacancy

Tziporah Cohen

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In Tziporah Cohen's *No Vacancy*, an eleven-year-old leaves New York City after her parents buy a rundown motel upstate.

At the Jewel Motor Inn, in New York's Finger Lakes region, Miriam shares a grimy room, painted a color "halfway between macaroni and cheese and rotting bananas," with her toddler brother. She guesses it'll be a long, lonely summer of babysitting, motel renovations, and chores, all far away from her friends.

Then Uncle Mordy comes to help, and Miriam makes friends with Maria, the motel housekeeper, and Kate, whose grandparents own the diner next door. Kate and Miriam hatch a scheme to bring customers to their families' struggling businesses. Their plan works, though the subterfuge troubles Miriam, as do other turbulent events with her family members and new community.

Miriam is a delight, both sarcastic and complex. She works through tense scenes involving her swimming phobia and her mother's unexplained antipathy toward Maria. Miriam also learns to be more comfortable with her own identity, but not before scarfing down untold numbers of grilled cheese sandwiches at the diner, bluffing that she doesn't eat bacon because she's vegetarian (false), not because she is Jewish (true).

Additional sensitive plot layers portray differences between types of Judaism, showing how people of different faiths, languages, ages, and backgrounds can have respectful and close relationships. Miriam's complicated feelings toward a motel guest in a wheelchair results in thoughtful passages about the nature of disability, prejudging others, and being honest with yourself and those you love.

Descriptions of grape pies, lazy summer bike rides, and diner banter are redolent of small-town life. *No Vacancy* has a moving, dramatic conclusion that leaves Miriam understanding more about life and herself and feeling more connected to her new community.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (September / October 2020)

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