

Rainbow writer

With her first book in Hebrew for adults due to be published soon, British-born Naomi Shmuel is continuing her tradition of bridging cultural gaps

• By BATSHEVA POMERANTZ

The books of British-born Naomi Shmuel were the first children's books in Hebrew to introduce brown-skinned heroes into children's stories, heroes Ethiopian immigrant children could identify with and feel proud of.

The writer has a personal connection with the Ethiopian community, since her husband, Emmanuel, is Ethiopian. Most of her books deal with the issue of cross-cultural transition in one way or another. Many of them are used today in schools and preschool programs to foster cross-cultural understanding and tolerance.

Most of her 14 books are in Hebrew for children. However, her upcoming book, *Beten Mele'a Dma'ot* (A Belly Full of Tears) – the manuscript of which recently won her the 2012 ACUM literary prize – is her first Hebrew-language book for adults.

"I had doubts whether I could write a book for adults in Hebrew, but being awarded this prize is encouraging," she says.

ACUM – the Israeli Association of Composers, Authors and Publishers of Musical Works – is an organization that protects its members' rights to their work, and it offers annual prizes in various categories.

On its website, the group praises Shmuel's writing, saying that although "the way to acceptance is long and difficult," she "dares to build a bridge of hope over the difficulties and limitations. The book's beauty is in its great restraint, its gentleness, similar to a watercolor painting.... With clear and compelling language, with courage, the author Naomi Shmuel reawakens an entire world that stares us in the face, but for most of us is strange and elusive."

A Belly Full of Tears is based on a true story – one of many that tragically make headlines every few months – about an Ethiopian woman murdered by her husband. Although the author interviewed



Shmuel is working to improve learning environments in heterogeneous classrooms. (Courtesy)

the victim's family while researching the book, they cannot be identified.

The story – which is optimistic and respectful of the culture, and is not judgmental – occurs on two levels: the family's attempts to cope with the

tragedy, and life in Ethiopia before their immigration to Israel.

"I dedicated the book to the memory of all the Ethiopian women murdered by their husbands. The book is meant to help people – Ethiopians and others

– understand the issue better," the writer says. "I expose the problems as an observer. I don't pretend to have all the answers."

SHMUEL, WHO lives in Ma'aleh Adumim, was born in England, the youngest of four children. Her mother, writer and poet Karen Gershon, was born in Germany and came to England on the Kindertransport (see box). In 1968, Gershon and her husband, Val Tripp, a non-Jewish art teacher, came to Israel with three of their four children. Shmuel adjusted to life in Israel, but because her father was unhappy here, returned to England in 1973.

After completing a degree in anthropology at London University, she reflected on her identity.

"I felt I had to return to Israel to figure out my Jewish identity," she says. "I don't think I had answers when I returned here, not until my children were born, and I had to decide how to raise them. I came to the conclusion that the glue that keeps family together is tradition."

She met her husband while working for the Jewish Agency in the Kiryat Gat absorption center. He had come to Israel on foot by way of Sudan in 1983.

"I'm often asked how my family accepted him, but the question should also be about how his family accepted me," she points out. "After all, I was considered a 'farani' [foreigner] by the Ethiopians. Both our families accepted us."

They got married in 1986 and have four sons. The two recently became grandparents.

In recent years, Shmuel, who works for the Immigrant Absorption Ministry's Student Authority, has been a guest author at schools in Jerusalem and throughout the country, often lecturing at schools with both Ethiopian and native Israeli students. A principal from a school in Beersheba told her that because of her books, the Ethiopian children felt more integrated.