

**Live Chat with Ruth Behar, LUCKY BROKEN GIRL, Feb. 22, 2017**  
<http://penguinrauthors.earlyword.com/lucky-broken-girl-live-chat/>

**Nora, EarlyWord**

We will begin our live online chat at 5 pm, Eastern with Ruth Behar the author of the novel *Lucky Broken Girl*, to be published by Nancy Paulsen Books on April 11, 2017.

Below is the publisher's summary of *Lucky Broken Girl*:

“This semi-autobiographical story is told from the perspective of a Cuban-Jewish girl, Ruthie Mizrahi, beginning shortly after Ruthie and her family emigrate from Castro’s Cuba to New York. Ruthie is just beginning to gain confidence in her mastery of English and enjoying her reign as the hopscotch queen when a car accident leaves her in a body cast and confined her to her bed for a long convalescence. As Ruthie’s world shrinks because of her inability to move, her powers of observation and her heart grow larger and she comes to understand how fragile life is, how vulnerable we all are as human beings, and how friends and neighbors can sweeten even the worst of times. This powerful story of a young girl’s strength and resilience is full of color, light, and poignancy, and will stay with readers for a long time.”

*Lucky Broken Girl* has been getting positive early reviews:

Kirkus, starred review: “In the 1960s, Ruthie Mizrahi, a young Jewish Cuban immigrant to New York City, spends nearly a year observing her family and friends from her bed ... A poignant and relevant retelling of a child immigrant’s struggle to recover from an accident and feel at home in America.”

Booklist: “...From facing feelings about the boys who caused her accident, to finding herself in painting and writing, to learning that she isn’t slow just because English isn’t her first language, Ruthie faces everything with an impressive inner strength. Fans of character-driven middle-grade novels, particularly those looking for diverse books, should be easily charmed by Behar’s story, which is inspired by her own childhood as a Cuban immigrant in 1960s New York...”

School Library Journal: “...a sweet and thoughtful read, slowly but strongly paced, and filled with a wealth of detail that makes the characters live. Both poetic and straightforward, this title will appeal to young readers with its respect for their

experiences and its warm portrayal of a diverse community ...Hand this to fans of Rita Williams-Garcia and those who loved The Secret Garden.”

I see chat participants gathering! You can send your questions through at any time. They'll go into a queue, and we'll submit as many of them as we can to Ruth before the end of the chat. Don't worry about typos – we'll forgive yours if you forgive ours. Don't bother correcting a typo unless you think it changes the meaning of the comment.

The book is also being released in audio by Listening Library.

Our moderator is JoAnn Jonas, the former selector of children's and young adult books for the San Diego County Library System and former manager of the Early Childhood Research Center of the New York Public Library. She has served on the ALA Newbery, Caldecott, and Wilder Committees as well as the Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Award. She has been a judge for the Nick Jr. Best Books of the Year and has reviewed children's books for School Library Journal, Booklist, Shelf Awareness and Read Kiddo Read.

Say hi, JoAnn

**JoAnn Jonas**

Hi Everyone...thanks for joining in today's author chat!

Today's author, Ruth Behar, has written many adult books about her Cuban roots, including THE VULNERABLE OBSERVER and AN ISLAND CALLED HOME. Today we will be talking with Ruth about her first middle grade novel and autobiographical story, LUCKY BROKEN GIRL, coming out in April of 2017. Please say hi to Ruth and let us know where you are chatting from...

**Comment From Frida Fan**

Welcome from Connecticut!

**Comment From kimsbookstack**

Hi Ruth!!! Thanks for talking with us

**Comment From Judy Blue**

Signing in from Hoosierland! Hi. Thanks for doing this!

**Comment From Blue Stocking**

Hi from Boston.

**Comment From Beryl B.**

Looking forward to the chat.

**Comment From SKL Librarian**

Looking forward to sharing this books with our students

**Comment From minn. librarian**

I love meeting authors in the chat!

**Ruth Behar**

Hi, what a pleasure to meet all of you!

**JoAnn Jonas**

Let's jump right in Ruth, what made you want to write this story?

**Ruth Behar**

LUCKY BROKEN GIRL is a story I've been waiting to tell for years. But Ruthie's story got buried inside me. I was too busy with travels and adult writing. About four years ago I sat down and started writing in Ruthie's voice. I was channeling this young girl's voice and, to my surprise, the writing took off. I realized I wanted to write the story because it's a unique mix – a Cuban girl's coming of age in New York combined with the experience of being an invalid for a year. I wrote it from the heart, barely aware that I was writing, and that was liberating.

**JoAnn Jonas**

Was it difficult to “tell your story” mixing the “real events” and the fiction?

**Ruth Behar**

Since I was writing about my childhood, which took place long ago, I couldn't tell the story without mixing in some fiction. Characters had to be brought to life, conversations had to be invented, and I had to conjure the setting. But most of all, in fiction you craft a story out of amorphous experiences. You mythify, you fantasize about how things might have been. But I tried to be true to my feelings as a young girl– the fear and uncertainty, but also the joy of discovering books, art, and coming to accept the metamorphosis I underwent as I became a girl who loved to be quiet and read and think.

**JoAnn Jonas**

As I read, I wondered how much of the story was autobiographical and how much fiction?

**Ruth Behar**

There is a mix of autobiography and fiction in my book. I was a Cuban immigrant girl and I did really spend a year in bed in a body cast. That core of the story is true. And most of the characters are based on real people. But there are elements that are fictional, where I move into magical realism. For example, I imagined that our next-door neighbor, Chicho, had an apartment decorated with piñatas that were filled with confetti. And though the main character, Ruthie, is based on me, she isn't totally me; she's wiser, more thoughtful, more sassy than I ever was, then or now.

**Comment From kimsbookstack**

Were you the invalid? Did your family come from Cuba?

**Ruth Behar**

Yes, I was an invalid for a year, confined to my bed in a body cast. And I came with my family from Cuba as a little girl.

**Comment From Frida Fan**

The minute I heard the title and read a bit about the book, I thought of Frida Kahlo. Was that the title from the beginning?

**Ruth Behar**

Yes, Frida Kahlo is an inspiration. In an early draft, I had used the title "The Accident," but that felt too general, so I thought about a better title. "Broken Girl" occurred to me. That didn't seem totally accurate because my protagonist, Ruthie, healed and felt lucky to have learned so much about herself in the course of her sufferings. So I added "Lucky" before "Broken Girl" and decided that should be the title. I was certain my publisher would change it, since it's an unusual title; it makes you stop and think. But fortunately everyone liked it.

**Comment From kimsbookstack**

I think you must be one strong lady to have gone through that and come out the other side. Your story touched me to the core and I was openly crying — can't imagine how it will affect MG kids.

**Ruth Behar**

Thank you, Kim, I didn't feel I was strong, but maybe in retrospect I was.

**JoAnn Jonas**

What was the most challenging thing about being in a full body cast? For a YEAR of recovery!

**Ruth Behar**

Having to depend on my mother and other family to take care of me was the most challenging thing about being in a full body cast. Also, as I describe in the book, I had to watch what I ate because I couldn't gain weight or the cast would rub up against my skin and cause welts. I remember being denied an extra bowl of spaghetti! I felt as if I was in a very tight girdle all the time.

**Comment From Blue Stocking**

The title is kind of like the opposite of "Poor Little Rich Girl," so I think it works that way.

**Ruth Behar**

That's an interesting comment about the title — "Poor Little Rich Girl" is a great example of how a contrast works well to catch the complexity of a person's life.

**JoAnn Jonas**

Ruth, back to how it felt... Ruthie felt so dependent after the accident; she could not walk, go to the bathroom, or eat without help. Everything changed in her life and she had to learn to cope with her new limitations. She was so dependent on everyone, especially her Mom, can you talk a bit about your memories of this?

**Ruth Behar**

I remember vividly how awful I felt having to stay in bed and ask my mother to help me with my most basic needs – washing, going to the bathroom, dressing, eating. I was used to being independent, to going outside and playing with other kids. I was the oldest of the grandchildren and was used to being looked up to by my brother and cousins. I was a translator for my mother at the grocery store and in day-to-day life because I learned English before she did. After the accident, I was unable to play these leadership roles and it was very humbling.

**JoAnn Jonas**

Yes, humbling and just tough for any kid...

**Ruth Behar**

Exactly, very tough, feeling like you're a baby again.

**Comment From Blue Stocking**

I'm curious how you manage to write a character that is you, but different. A bit of wish fulfillment?

**Ruth Behar**

Writing a character that is me and not me was a challenge but also fun. Wish fulfillment is a good way to describe it.

**Comment From kimsbookstack**

How did your family feel about the book once they read it?

**JoAnn Jonas**

Have they read it Ruth?

**Ruth Behar**

I haven't shown the book yet to my whole family. Only my husband and son have read it so far. I am waiting for the pub date to give it to my parents and other family. I was afraid that if I received any critical comments I might not be able to let it go.

**Comment From kimsbookstack**

Sorry if I opened up a can of worms. As a mom I just couldn't help that feeling of frustration that you both had. She was used to depending on you and now you were dependent on her.

**Comment From minn. librarian**

Not only did you capture the helplessness of being bedridden but also how others expectations of how suffering should be handled

**Ruth Behar**

Thank you for that comment — yes, there was a lot of exasperation in my family that I wasn't healing fast enough. I almost felt like it was my fault.

**JoAnn Jonas**

There are tremendous examples of diversity in this book...Ruthie and her Jewish Cuban family, Ramu and his Indian family, Danielle and her Belgian family, Chicho from Mexico, Ruthie's sets of grandparents, and neighbors, and even the hospital workers... Talk about the diversity in your story.

**Ruth Behar**

Living in a diverse community was very much the way I grew up in Queens, New York. There was my big fat Jewish Cuban family with whom I was very close and their circle of friends who we saw all the time. But I realized as I wrote that there were many other people around me of different nationalities and ethnicities. Their presence enriched my life and gave me a sense that I was part of a larger mosaic of peoples and cultures. Writers sometimes focus too much on their own ethnic group and fail to see the wider range of cultural communities that surround them. I wanted to be sure that my story drew upon all the cultural influences I learned about as a child through the presence of friends and neighbors.

**Comment From Jami W.**

What a great point about writers often concentrating on their own ethnic group!

**JoAnn Jonas**

Diverse books are always important for young readers, and LUCKY BROKEN GIRL is a great example of seeing many cultures in positive ways. Ruth, you also tackled many feelings of immigrant families. That is such a relevant “hot topic” in our country today. What do you hope your audience can take away about immigrants from your experiences?

**Ruth Behar**

I think cultural isolation happens in certain communities, but not in NY where you rub shoulders with people of many different backgrounds.

**Comment From Jami W**

You just opened my eyes up. I never thought about how immigrant cultures can affect EACH OTHER as well as the dominant culture. THANKS!

**Comment From kimsbookstack**

Isn't it nice to live in a world where we can all learn and appreciate each others similarities and differences — the great thing about NYC

**JoAnn Jonas**

Amen!

**Ruth Behar**

I think immigrants are daring and courageous risk-takers and visionaries who leave their old homes with the hope of finding a better home elsewhere. A majority of

immigrants are parents who want to give their children a chance at a more fulfilling life. That was true for me. I never forget how my own successes are the result of all the sacrifices my parents made as immigrants, working hard, saving, holding on to our culture while also trying to embrace the new world of America. We should take pride in our immigrant heritage in the United States and embrace new immigrants as well. They bring vital energy to our society and teach us about the beautiful diversity of humanity.

**JoAnn Jonas**

Yes, so true. It was also wonderful sharing Ruthie's prayers throughout the story, and that she prayed to many deities. Such a learning moment for young readers.

**Ruth Behar**

I enjoyed writing Ruthie's prayers. I didn't want her to be religious in a too formal or fanatical a way, but to be open to different forms of spirituality. Everyone wanted to give her spiritual energy and she was in a position where she needed all the help she could get. I wanted young readers to feel they can have a clear religious identity but this doesn't mean they can't share in the religious traditions of others. That respect seemed essential for me to convey, and the prayers were a fun way to do it.

**Comment From minn. librarian**

Did you consider writing this as memoir not as a novel? Why have the main character have your name?

**Comment From Beryl B.**

Why did you name your character after yourself? Did that help with the writing?

**Ruth Behar**

I gave the main character my name to show it was based on my life but that Ruth and Ruthie are now different people — the adult woman and the girl are tied by a kind of rope, that was how I imagined it.

**Comment From Frida Fan**

I wanted to ask that, too. I also wondered if your editor was OK with your using your own name.

**Ruth Behar**

No one questioned my character being called Ruthie. It's not a name anyone calls me now. In my family, I'm Ruti.



**JoAnn Jonas**

Ruth do you have any pictures of you as a child or of the old neighborhood that you could share?

**Ruth Behar**

Yes, let me share some photos!  
With my younger brother. Before the accident.

**JoAnn Jonas**

The hopscotch Queen of Queens !

**Ruth Behar**

Playing in the snow! We hadn't seen snow till we came to NY!

**JoAnn Jonas**

That looks like fun! What interesting things we learn in new homes!

**Comment From kimsbookstack**

Your dad looks like he was enjoying it more than you and your brother!

**Ruth Behar**

Yes, I think my father got into snow more than we did — it's always a big deal when Cubans encounter snow after a life in the tropics!

**Comment From Jami W**

It's kind of killer to see her hopeful expression, knowing what's coming.

**JoAnn Jonas**

Thanks for the great pics!

**Comment From Blue Stocking**

Did you actually have the go-go boots?

**JoAnn Jonas**

I wondered that too Blue Stocking!... Go-go boots!?

**Ruth Behar**

Oh yes, I had go-go boots!

**Comment From kimsbookstack**

I had white vinyl go-go boots that I would sleep with! I understood the attraction!

**Ruth Behar**

Kim, glad to hear you understand the passion for go-go boots!

**JoAnn Jonas**

Ha, how wonderful!

A bit of a spoiler alert here... I was glad that Ruth was able to overcome her fears, as well as her physical healing. Right up to the end Ruth struggled with her anxieties and fears about being the girl she used to be.

**Ruth Behar**

Yes, that's true. Ruthie does struggle with anxieties and fears to the end of the story. The accident and the year of immobility have left a mark on her psyche. Those who have been traumatized always carry their wounds forever, even after they heal. I wrote the final note to address that memory of trauma.

**Comment From Frida Fan**

I found your note at the end moving. What made you decide to add it?

**Comment From Blue Stocking**

In the epilogue, you mention a 9 year-old girl who gave you helpful suggestions for the book. That's amazing! Good for you for being open to them.

**Ruth Behar**

Yes, the daughter of a close friend, Arianna, was an important reader of my book. That's when I knew I was really writing for young readers. It was beautiful.

**JoAnn Jonas**

A reminder there is an Educator's Guide available to you all at this link:

<http://www.penguin.com/wp-c...> Check it out! There is so much to discuss in this book!

Did you find writing for a middle grade audience different than writing for adults?

**Ruth Behar**

I've spent my whole career so far writing for adults. It was a big shift to write for a middle-grade audience. What was wonderful about the process was that it was very organic. I began to write in the voice of a ten-year-old girl and the story poured

out. I let go of the adult frameworks and loved being able to inhabit the world of a child, with all the innocence and vulnerability and clarity.

### **Comment From Blue Stocking**

What was it like working with your editor? And how did you find an editor?

### **Ruth Behar**

My agent gave me some great comments on the manuscript and I drew upon those to revise it before it went out to editors. There was only one editor I dreamed of working with, and fortunately she chose to accept my book. Editing was a back-and-forth process. She gave me comments and I revised, then she gave me more comments, and I revised some more. I think we did that about four times. She said that my manuscript was very far along, that it really didn't need much work. But for me, that was the most intense editing I'd ever experienced! I was so grateful to work with my editor. She helped me to see when scenes could be expanded and when characters needed to get a spot in the limelight. The process of editing was exciting—I could see the story deepening before my eyes. It was like I'd written a coloring book and I was going back and putting beautiful, dazzling colors into all the outlines I'd drawn and animating the story with each revision I made.

### **Comment From kimsbookstack**

Great visual about the editing process!

### **JoAnn Jonas**

Ruth, tell us about your writing process...do you write every day? Tell us what your writing routine looks like?

### **Ruth Behar**

I wish I could say I write everyday, but I don't. I read everyday, that's for sure. But serious writing for me happens in binges, when I have a story that's taken off and I can't bear to be away from it, or when there's a deadline and someone is waiting anxiously to read what I've written. When I'm deep into the writing I'll write day and night. I love that feeling of being possessed by a story. When the spirit doesn't move me, then I write notes, read, daydream, and just wait.

### **JoAnn Jonas**

Did being such an avid reader after the accident make you want to be a writer like in the book? When did you become a writer? Do you have another "day" job?

### **Ruth Behar**

I became an avid reader after the accident and that had a lot to do with my wanting to be a writer. Books were my friends; they helped me get through moments of solitude and uncertainty. So I wanted to write them too, to offer that magic to others. I started thinking I was a writer in my teens. When I went off to college I got into anthropology and decided I'd do my writing from that perspective, as a traveler, as someone who celebrates cultural diversity and bridges to other places and people. And so I became a professor of anthropology; that's been my day job for three decades. But I always held on to the dream of writing a novel, and with *Lucky Broken Girl*, I was able to fulfill that dream.

**Comment From kimsbookstack**

That explains why you have great insight into groups of people!

**Comment From Blue Stocking**

How did you know who your "dream editor" was?

**Ruth Behar**

I read a book I loved, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, and looked to see who Jacqueline Woodson's editor was, and thought that she— Nancy Paulsen— would understand my book more than anyone else.

**Comment From Blue Stocking**

Hurrah, BROWN GIRL DREAMING — good choice.

**Comment From Beryl B.**

I can imagine that a lot of this was tough to write, but probably cathartic. What did you have the most fun writing?

**Ruth Behar**

The writing was cathartic, but you're right I had fun writing it too. The character of Chicho was so delightful and playful. And I loved the moments with Danielle and the cream puffs.

**JoAnn Jonas**

How long did this book take to write, from first draft to finished novel?

**Ruth Behar**

It took about four years from start to finish.

**JoAnn Jonas**

Will you be doing author visits in libraries and schools to promote your new book?

**Ruth Behar**

Yes, I will be doing author visits. I have a few events lined up, and hope to receive invitations to do more.

**JoAnn Jonas**

Time is flying, Folks, time to get your last questions in to Ruth, before we close the chat...

What is the best way to reach you? And will you SKYPE?

**Ruth Behar**

I'm available to Skype. Here's the link to my website: <http://www.ruthbehar.com/>  
Here's my email: email: ruthbeharauthor@gmail.com

**JoAnn Jonas**

Thanks Ruth, great to know...

**Comment From SKL Librarian**

Love the cover. I kept looking back at it as I read Ruthie's story. Brave choice not to show the main character. Did that worry you at all?

**Ruth Behar**

I love the cover too. I think not showing the main character will allow readers to imagine themselves as Ruthie. We all have a bit of Ruthie inside us.

**JoAnn Jonas**

Can you tell us what you are working on now?

**Ruth Behar**

I am working on a new middle grade novel. The story takes place in Cuba at the start of the Revolution, between 1959-1961, and the protagonist is a tomboyish Jewish girl who supports the rebels and is heartbroken when her parents send her out of Cuba. It is loosely based on the life story of one of my cousins.

**JoAnn Jonas**

Gosh, sounds wonderful! I will look forward to seeing that!

**Comment From Beryl B.**

Glad you educated kids on Frida Kahlo. I imagine her story meant a lot to you.

**Ruth Behar**

Definitely, Frida Kahlo is a guardian angel of my book.

**Comment From SKL Librarian**

Have you spent time in Cuba?

**Ruth Behar**

I have traveled to Cuba many times over the last two decades. I ran a semester abroad program there a few years ago.

**Comment From SKL Librarian**

Wow — wasn't that before the ban on travel to Cuba was lifted?

**Ruth Behar**

Travel to Cuba was permitted for educational purposes and still is.

**JoAnn Jonas**

Ruth, What do you hope readers will take away from this book?

**Ruth Behar**

Most of all, I hope readers will feel drawn in by the story and find a connection through their own vulnerability. I'd love for the book to offer hope to all who have been wounded in one way or another and who seek to heal and accept who they are after recovering. For young readers, I truly hope the book will offer them a story about overcoming obstacles and coming out stronger for it.

**JoAnn Jonas**

Thanks so much Ruth, sadly we must say goodbye for now. Thank you so much...

**Comment From minn. librarian**

Thank you so much for sharing your process with us.

**Ruth Behar**

THANKS to everyone!

**Comment From SKL Librarian**

Thanks for all your great insights.

**Ruth Behar**

I appreciated all your thoughts and comments.

**Comment From Beryl B.**

So long. This was so much fun.

**Comment From NMLibrarian**

Thank you!

**Comment From Blue Stocking**

Best of luck with this and your NEXT book!

**JoAnn Jonas**

Best of luck on this and the next book!

**Nora, EarlyWord**

Thanks, Ruth, for joining us today. And thanks to the participants for your great questions.

**Ruth Behar**

Thank you all so much!