

# Flu Fighter

With her new novel, the author of *Bee Season* tackles the 1918 influenza epidemic. by Karen Valby

**M**yla Goldberg, author of the 2000 best-seller *Bee Season*, keeps an Edgar Allan Poe action figure on her desk. He reminds her of her childhood. "You know how some kids like playing house?" she asks. "I would pretend I was writing a novel. My favorite thing to do was write horrible stories with terrible things happening to people. I've just always been morbid!"

Bicycle helmet on her lap, short hair sweetly ruffled, Goldberg, 33, relaxes in a sunny Brooklyn diner near the house she shares with her cartoonist husband, Jason Little, and their 18-month-old daughter. The success of *Bee Season*, about a Jewish family's implosion as the daughter ascends through the spelling bee ranks, was like "winning the literary lottery," she says. Unwilling to stick with a proven formula and eager to escape labels like "Jewish novelist," Goldberg says that for her follow-up she "set out to write as different a book as possible."

She succeeded: **Wickett's Remedy** (Doubleday, \$24.95), the result of five years of research and writing, follows Lydia, a young Irish Catholic in Boston who struggles to survive the deadly 1918 flu epidemic. But when Goldberg showed a draft to friends, they told her the characters were flat. "I scrapped the whole thing," she says, sticking out her tongue and crossing her eyes. "I was trying to write characters who were different than myself, but the trick is you still have to invest them with little pieces of you. In the second go-around I realized the things I had in common with Lydia were curiosity and ambition and motivation."

Goldberg will need to call on that motivation this fall. This month, she and her Brooklyn-based, all-woman indie rock



band the Walking Hellos will record their first demo (she plays the accordion and banjo, and splits singing duties), and then

she'll embark on a 15-city reading tour. And in November, the film adaptation of *Bee Season*, starring Richard Gere and Juliette Binoche, hits theaters.

A movie buff and amateur screenwriter, Goldberg toyed briefly with writing the screenplay. "But I know enough about how film production works to know that I would write it and then they'd go do whatever they wanted," she says. Her friend, *Motherless Brooklyn* author Jonathan Lethem, helped her make peace with *Bee Season's* trip to the big screen, she says, assuring her that "if it's a good movie, people will say, 'Oh, this makes me want to read the book!' And if it's a bad movie, they'll say, 'Oh, the book was better.'" Goldberg exhales, then adds with a laugh, "Words to live by." ■