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Award-winning author explores what it means to be a female Jewish poet

PITTSBURGH—The University of Pittsburgh Press has just released a new collection by visionary poet and critic Alicia Suskin Ostriker. *The Book of Life: Selected Jewish Poems 1979-2011* charts Ostriker's extraordinary struggle to deal with a wounded world and find reasons for hope.

"A diaspora of passions gathers in these poems composed intermittently over thirty-odd years," Ostriker said. "My family memories arch from childhood to senior citizenship. I ponder the [Holocaust] as an illustration of how sick and sickening human beings can become but also as a window onto acts of extraordinary heroism and empathy. Brooding over the past and future meanings of being a Jewish woman, I quarrel with God as Judge and Warrior, and I seek God as the Beloved."

Ostriker said her Jewishness has grown on her "like a taste for herring, it has gone to my head like a needle in a sweatshop relentlessly stitching, it has bathed my heart like a fountain of irresistibly sweet language. I write in particular as a third-generation Jew whose grandparents and parents were Marxists and thought religion was the opiate of the masses," she explained. "To be a Jew, for them, was to bring about the workers' paradise. None of them ever made it into the middle class. . . . In my veins runs the rusty stain of desire for the impossible world old Jewish radicals dream of, from Isaiah to today. I am unable to let go of the umbilicus of hope."

Ostriker is the author of 14 poetry collections, including *The Book of Seventy*; *The Mother/Child Papers*; *No Heaven*; *the volcano sequence*; and *The Little Space: Poems Selected and New, 1969-1998*, as well as several books on the Bible.

She has received the Paterson Poetry Prize, the William Carlos Williams Award, the San Francisco State Poetry Award, the National Jewish Book Award, and has twice been a finalist for the National Book Award. Ostriker is Professor Emerita of English at Rutgers University and teaches in the low-residency MFA program of Drew University.

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