

**S**crambled Eggs, published this year by Five Star, is Sag Harbor resident Boris Robert Riskin's newest novel. It is fast, funny, smart and sexy, a must read for all aficionados of who-done-its. Our hero, Jake Wanderman, a Shakespeare quoting retired teacher, gets caught in a scramble of eggs, the Faberge not chicken variety, and for reasons only Riskin's convoluted plot can adequately unravel, embarks on a quest to return the eggs to their rightful place, wherever that is. As the story moves along, that place becomes a moving target. Wanderman races from the Hamptons to Brooklyn to Moscow and back to the Hamptons, with stops in Sag Harbor, as he backs into a hilarious mix of danger, big money, Russian Mafia and crafty illicit trades in antiques.

Riskin, now 77, has been writing all his life. His career as a successful businessman, selling women's clothing at the Sweater Joint in partnership with his wife Kiki, was an avocational interlude.

The original seedbed of his storytelling was the extended and encompassing family he grew up with in Brooklyn. His father had immigrated from Russia, and after his first wife died he returned to Russia to marry her sister, Riskin's mother, and bring her to Brooklyn. Riskin's early world was a chorus of voices in English, Russian and Yiddish that included his grandmother, aunts, uncles, older sisters and 30 cousins. The voices were accompanied by his father's mandolin, as well as his father's jazz, which was regularly countered by the operas his uncles loved. Big, happy meals, which followed Orthodox Jewish tradition while his grandmother was alive, scented the air with the aroma of roasting chicken, garlic drenched poucha, long simmering cholent—always with potato pancakes that Riskin could sneak right off the frying pan. If times were hard and money was in short supply, Riskin doesn't remember it. He remembers unending stories, jokes and laughter. His story telling skills emerged from this fertile soil, though it took some time for him to recognize them.

Riskin came to his vocation in the army, of all places, courtesy of a commanding officer with a literary bent who recognized his talents and encouraged him to write. The GI Bill took him to the University of Michigan, where he wrote his first published story for a Cornell literary magazine called Echo. A year in France at the Sorbonne followed. Writ-

## OUR TOWN

BY LOIS UNDERHILL

# Bob Riskin's Way With Words

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ing short stories became a way of life for him, pieces that were published in small literary magazines.

In 1951, back in the embrace of his Brooklyn family, he met Kiki on a blind date. Instantly and mutually smitten, they married the next year. Kiki was a painter (who later became a sculptor) and they shared a love of the arts. They spent a year traveling in Europe. Riskin added French and Spanish to the medley of languages he had grown up with. Words, words, words. His short stories continued and life seemed perfect.

The Riskins' happiness reached an apogee in 1958 when Faith, their adopted daughter, joined their family, and Riskin in the same year had a story published in the *New Yorker*. Titled "Ennui," it drew on Riskin's Paris years and told of an affair between an American man and a French woman, their fleeting attachment made achingly poignant by the effervescent air of the city of light.

By 1961, when the Riskins adopted their son Herold, Riskin's stories, never a financial bonanza, had to take second place to more lucrative pursuits. He had been working for a furniture manufacturer, when Kiki's father came up with a women's sportswear concept and the Sweater Joint

partnership was born. It was a happy but demanding avocation that left limited time for writing.

When the Riskins retired to Sag Harbor in 1990, they resumed their interrupted life in the arts. Riskin had written three serious novels and was working on a fourth. He dealt with family relationships through the generations, relationships weighted with pain and anguish as well as love and laughter. Riskin says he wasn't trying to write the Great American Novel, but one suspects these books were four cousins of the Great One. However, no publisher was interested in the Great One or its cousins.

Finally, Riskin decided to get away from the serious stuff for a while and turn to more lighthearted fare, books which he calls entertainments, borrowing the term from Graham Greene. He had always loved to read who-done-its, so he married his entertainments to the mystery genre, called on his Russian heritage and Brooklyn roots, and Scrambled Eggs was born. In developing his hero, Jake Wanderman, he paid homage to a dear friend Bernie Beckerman, a renowned Shakespeare scholar now deceased, and made his hero a retired teacher of Shakespeare. Quotes from the bard comment ironically on Wanderman's quest. Riskin tried out his new creation on his colleagues at the Ashawagh Hall Writers' Workshop which is led by the redoubtable Marijane Meaker, and credits the comments and criticisms he received there for the development of the work in its final form. Scrambled Eggs promptly found a publisher and now has also found a host of enchanted readers.

As Riskin says about his alter ego Wanderman, he tried to "come across like a New York guy in the know." It's an apt description of Riskin's voice in Scrambled Eggs.

Another Wanderman quest is in the works, but only Riskin and his computer know where the Shakespeare quoting sleuth will wander next.

You can hear Riskin read from Scrambled Eggs at Ashawagh Hall, Springs (Fireplace Road) on Tuesday, August 2 at 5:30 p.m. and join him and his colleagues of the Ashawagh Hall Writers' Workshop, for a reception afterwards.

**LOIS BEACHY UNDERHILL** is the author of "The Woman Who Ran for President, the Many Lives of Victoria Woodhull," and is herself a past beneficiary of the Ashawagh Hall Writers' Workshop's wisdom.