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Sylvia Firschein

Packanack Elementary School, Wayne, New Jersey

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The Multicultural Curriculum and Children's Books of Jewish Interest in the Public School*

Sylvia Firschein

*Packanack Elementary School
Wayne, New Jersey*

Abstract: Books of Jewish interest in the public school are of two kinds. They may be informational, nonfiction works, generally classified in the religion section of the library's classification scheme. Such works are useful for those who are studying about Judaism and for those Jewish children in the school who need to see themselves reflected in the collection. Works in the second category, picture books and fiction, must be chosen for their universal value. The stories must appeal to all children, regardless of race or religion. Any child must be able to identify with the characters and incidentally learn something about Judaism.

For the past ten to fifteen years, the United States has had as large, or even larger, an immigration than the "Great Immigration" which took place at the beginning of the twentieth century. This immigration is not only from Eastern Europe, but from all over the world. In the New Jersey suburban school where I serve as librarian, we have recently enrolled children from China, Japan, Korea, Pakistan, Egypt, India, Iran, Lebanon, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico.

As a result, the public school librarian of today is busy assembling a collection of multicultural books for the children to read. It is important that these children of different nationalities, races, and religions be able to see themselves in the books they read in order for them to feel a part of the "fabric of America." Furthermore, for healthy and positive interaction among cultures to occur, it is vital that people be exposed to, and be taught to appreciate,

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their differences and commonalities. One hopes that this will lead to greater sensitivity in the younger generation.

This paper evaluates children's books of Jewish interest for literary quality and how they fit into the context of the multicultural curriculum.

The Collection

Books of Jewish interest in the public school include both nonfiction and fictional works. *Nonfiction* Jewish-interest books are mostly classified in Dewey class 296, the number for Judaism in the religion class of the scheme. Informational books found here are for reference, study about the Jewish religion and culture by non-Jewish children—and also for Jewish children, whose sense of self is bolstered by having Jewish books in their school's library. This category also includes biographies of Jewish people who are famous in their respective fields. There are many nonfiction books available that are authentic, well-written, and illustrated with good pictures and photographs.

Fiction is comprised of picture books and books for older children. These are chosen for their universal appeal, that is for having themes common to all people. The characters in the story must evoke a response of recognition in the reader. A reader of any culture should be able to relate to the truth of the situation described in the book and to characters whose human qualities surmount cultural differences. In other words, these stories should transcend race and religion and, *incidentally*, communicate to the reader something about Judaism, as it is an integral part of a larger story.

Examples of the best picture books and works of fiction with Jewish content are:

Picture Books

Mrs. Katz and Tush (Polacco, 1992)

In this Passover story, a young African-American boy and a kitten named Tush help to make a lonely Jewish widow happy.

Mrs. Moskowitz and the Sabbath Candlesticks (Schwartz, 1983)

An elderly widow finds it difficult to adjust to a small apartment alone after living her life in a big house with a large family. Tarnished Sabbath candlesticks lead her to learn a secret in this charming prize-winning picture book: that busyness, creativity, and letting others in will take away loneliness.

Pearl Moscowitz's Last Stand (Levine, 1993)

Chaining herself to a tree after trying everything else, Mrs. Moscowitz tries to prevent the electric company from cutting down the last tree on her block. This picture book stresses the values of ecology and focuses on the multicultural inhabitants of a changing neighborhood.

The Ring and the Window Seat (Hest, 1990)

A ring plays a major part in a young American girl's kindness to a Jewish carpenter whose daughter is in hiding from the Nazis. This picture book is a favorite of children as young as first-grade age.

Fiction

The Christmas Revolution (Cohen, 1987)

The mystery to be solved is who knocked down the Christmas tree in the lobby of a public school. A Jewish girl's conflict about singing Christmas carols is woven into her characterization. She is

drawn to further Jewish identification when she defends a *kippah*-wearing classmate who is suspected of the crime. The story appeals to all readers despite its being about the Jewish dilemma at Christmas in a public school.

Ike and Mama and the Seven Surprises (Snyder, 1985)

Ike's father is confined to a hospital ship with tuberculosis. Ike worries about him and about not having his father at his Bar Mitzvah.

Risk 'N Roses (Slepian, 1990)

Skip leaves her retarded younger sister by herself so that she can follow her idolized friend who controls people by being a bully. The younger sister befriends a neighbor who is a Holocaust survivor and who names his prize roses after his loved ones who perished during that period.

These works of fiction entice the child to read on because they have involving stories, excellent writing, and believable characters. The reader is led subtly into learning about Jewish cultural history, beliefs, values, practices, and concerns.

In the public school there are additional opportunities for a multicultural curriculum. In our school, fifth-grade students are required to research the countries of their families' origin. Many Jewish children look for books on Israel, while others research the countries from which their ancestors emigrated.

Folklore

We try to include the folklore of the country or of the ethnic group in the curriculum. We teach a unit on storytelling to create a program that introduces folklore. There are many Jewish folktales to satisfy the needs of Jewish children. Examples of works in this genre are:

Could Anything Be Worse? (Hirsh, 1974)

A Yiddish folktale about a man who is convinced that nothing could be worse than the noise and confusion in his home. He consults his rabbi and gets some very wise advice.

The Diamond Tree (Schwartz and Rush, 1991)

A children's collection of traditional Jewish tales from many different countries.

Holidays present opportunities to read books aloud and to have them on display for circulation. Where there is an ongoing Christmas-Chanukah debate over appropriate celebrations and displays, the following books are appropriate: *The Hanukkah Cat* (Burstein, 1985); *Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins* (Kimmel, 1989); and *The Chanukah Guest* (Kimmel, 1990). These are good stories to tell or read aloud without teaching or preaching religion.

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Conclusion

There is a place for books of Jewish interest in the public school library. We find that books with Jewish content have been left out of many multicultural book lists, however. An example is:

Miller Lachmann, Lyn. *Our Family, Our Friends, Our World: An Annotated Guide to Significant Multicultural Books for Children and Teenagers*. New Providence, NJ: R.R. Bowker, 1992.

Books about Jews are listed under the heading for the country from which they emigrated, e.g., Barbara Cohen's book, *Molly's Pilgrim* (1983), is listed under "Jews in Russia."

One recently heard definition of multicultural literature is that it is literature about a racial or ethnic group that is culturally or socially different from the white majority in the United States. Jews are an ethnic group that is often culturally and socially different, as well as religiously different from the majority population of the United States; but we seem to be viewed today as part of the mainstream white population. Therefore, books of Jewish interest

have been omitted from many multicultural book lists. I propose that Judaica librarians advocate the inclusion of books of Jewish content in multicultural lists and thus see to it that these books become part of the collections of public school libraries.

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Book List

"A Coat of Many Colors: Jewish Content Books with Multicultural Interest—Pre-K through Young Adult," by Aileen Grossberg and Sylvia Firschein—in progress.

Sylvia Firschein is Educational Media Specialist at Packanack Elementary School in Wayne, New Jersey, where she teaches library skills and administers the school library. She is Chairperson of the Charles and Bessie Goldman Judaica Library at the YM-YWHA of North Jersey, which she founded in 1977. She has served as President of the Synagogue, School and Center (SSC) Division of the Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL) and established the New Jersey Chapter of AJL.