

12-31-2006

# The Quest for Excellence in Jewish Children's Literature


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### Recommended Citation

Banks, Cheryl and Silverman, Lisa. 2006. "The Quest for Excellence in Jewish Children's Literature." *Judaica Librarianship* 12: 69-78. doi:10.14263/2330-2976.1098.

# The Quest for Excellence in Jewish Children's Literature

CHERYL BANKS, ELLEN COLE, LINDA SILVER, AND LISA SILVERMAN

## ABSTRACT

When book selectors, book award judges, and reviewers seek to identify excellence in Jewish children's literature, they must look beyond the accepted criteria for literary and artistic quality. This article discusses that criteria and focuses on the special elements that contribute to excellence in the Jewish content of books for children and teens.

## INTRODUCTION

When evaluating children's books of Jewish content, book selectors, reviewers, and book award judges always look for outstanding literary and artistic quality. The children's literature of any religious or ethnic group approaches excellence only if it is on par with what is professionally recognized as the best of children's literature in its broadest contemporary form. Mediocre books of Jewish content are published for children every year, the result of two main factors: small Jewish presses have fewer resources than the large, secular publishers, and many Jewish books are written for primarily didactic purposes. There may be a need for this kind of book but it should be recognized for what it is, not conflated or confused with quality literature, and certainly not given Jewish book awards!

Adults who evaluate books of Jewish content have an added challenge. At the same time as they are judging a book's literary and artistic excellence, they are also assessing the merits of its Jewish content. Few books will meet *all* of the criteria for excellence discussed below. The books of Jewish content that librarians select for their collections should meet most of these criteria, however, with the Jewish content elements as important as—and to some, more important than—the general literary criteria.

## JEWISH CONTENT

Evaluating Jewish content in children's books requires attention to the following elements, listed here in alphabetical order:

- ◇ Accuracy
- ◇ Age-appropriateness
- ◇ Authenticity
- ◇ Depth of Jewish content
- ◇ Positive focus and values
- ◇ Sensitivity

### Accuracy

The least that can be expected of all children's literature is accuracy in dates, spelling, the identification of objects, and empirically verifiable facts. The editing of children's books is often careless, and authors do not always have command of the facts that they are attempting to weave into or present in their writing. Disreputable pseudo-scholarship and politically partisan writing, such as the kind that biases so many books against Israel, is not absent in books for young people. Information should be selected and interpretations made in ways that balance conflicting points of view. If the author has a point of view, or is trying to prove a point, then that should be made clear; to do otherwise is to deceive young readers who cannot be expected to know the opposing view—or even that opposing views might exist.

Because of the pluralistic nature of Judaism, points of view are expressed when, for example, a book features a female rabbi. Reviewers should point this out, as it influences readership. Historical events or processes should not be distorted, as they are when invalid comparisons are made between the victims of the Holocaust and the persecution of the Knights Templar in Vivian Vande Velde's *A Coming Evil*, or when moral equivalency is drawn between the Holocaust and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The absence of accuracy, solid research, and reputable scholarship is not always easy for anyone but the specialist to detect; so, reviewers and award judges should keep reliable reference sources on hand to consult.

### Age-appropriateness

There is general agreement in the fields of psychology and education, on the importance of developmental appropriateness in the cognitive and emotional development of children. Until the ages of eight or nine, children best perceive the concrete and literal; so, books for this age and under should be characterized by short sentences, playful language, simple and uncluttered grammatical structure (often including alliteration, rhyming, humor, and repetition), and

concepts that are complemented by clear, concrete, and visually comprehensible illustrations.

In recent years, publishers have begun to expand the audience for picture books by publishing books in which the subject matter has become more serious or abstract, the theme and language more sophisticated, and the illustrations somber and dark. Indeed, the Holocaust, in which death, forced parent-child separation, and deprivation were commonplace, has become a favorite subject for books of this type. As a result, there are many books cannot accurately be called "picture books," because that term connotes early childhood. Illustrated stories about the Holocaust, among other Jewish experiences and narratives, are too complex, too frightening, and too grim for young children. The biblical story of the binding of Isaac is one example; Jo Hoestlandt's Sydney Taylor award-winning story, *Star of Fear, Star of Hope* is another; and many librarians consider David Wisniewski's Caldecott award-winning version of the Golem tale another. It is suggested here that books like this be called *illustrated books* to distinguish them from picture books for younger children.

## Authenticity

The best of Jewish children's literature reflects Jews and Judaism without sentimentality or distortion. Genuine portrayals of Jewish characters, Jewish life, or Jewish beliefs avoid stereotypes, such as illustrations depicting all of the Jewish characters with big noses or gratuitously sprinkling Yiddish throughout the narrative to establish its Jewish content. Positive content is desirable but not always possible, as in a Holocaust memoir about a child who resents being Jewish because it has made her life miserable, or in a novel like Shulamit Ish-Kishor's Sydney Taylor award-winning *Our Eddie*, about a bitter father-son relationship. Authenticity is achieved when individuals are shown interacting with Jewish belief, tradition, history, and practice in a manner that is both realistic and respectful, although the point of view may be critical or satiric. For example, Rivka, in the Sydney Taylor award-winning *Rivka's First Thanksgiving*, by Elsa Okon Rael, challenges the rebbe's initial decision about Jews celebrating Thanksgiving and succeeds in changing his mind. *When the Chickens Went On Strike*, Erika Silverman's version of a Sholem Aleichem story, gently satirizes the tradition of *kapores*, so beloved by the villagers and so hated by the chickens. In contrast, Eve Bunting's *One Candle* shows a Jewish family at a *treyf* holiday meal and distorts the meaning of the Holocaust, its subject, by projecting Hitler's lethal hatred onto many people besides Jews. Although intended to arouse an emotional response, the story is essentially—if accidentally—disparaging of the Jewish experience.

If Jewish questions underlie a book's theme and if the author attempts to answer them in a Jewish context, then the result is likely to be authentic. This will eliminate from consideration such seemingly natural as Bible stories when non-Jewish interpretations of their meaning are given, and it will include so negative a Jewish self-image as that found in Anita Lobel's memoir of her child-

hood during the Holocaust, *No Pretty Pictures*. However, it will also include stories, like some attributed to the Hasidic masters and many folktales, that have no explicit Jewish content but that imply or assume a Jewish setting, characters, theme, and audience. Good examples of this are Anne Redisch Stampler's *Something for Nothing* and Shelly Fowles's *The Bachelor and the Bean*.

## Depth of Jewish content

There is considerable variation in the depth of Jewish content found in children's literature. Evaluators must consider if that depth, or lack thereof, is appropriate to the particular book or detrimental. A work of historical fiction about medieval Spanish Jews would quite likely concentrate on Jewish issues and characters, although the main character might not be Jewish, as in Gloria Miklowitz's *Secrets in the House of Delgado*. On the other hand, historical novels in which the main focus is *not* on Jews, such as Donna Jo Napoli's *Daughter of Venice* or her Sydney Taylor award-winning *Stones In Water* would, appropriately, have Jewish subplots. The Jewish content of a survey of Jewish history or a biography of a Jewish leader would be central, while in a biography of a Jewish person whose life's work lay outside of Judaism, the depth of content will depend on the individual subject plus the author's selection of details and intent.

Catherine Reef integrated Jewish content into her Sydney Taylor award-winning biography of Freud entitled *Sigmund Freud: Pioneer of the Mind*. She was able to do this authentically because although Freud was an atheist, his career, his life, and his worldview were thoroughly Jewish. The same cannot be said for the contemporary architect Frank Gehry; so, the Jewish content of Jan Greenburg's and Sandra Jane Jordan's biography, *Frank O. Gehry: Outside In* is minor. Reviewers had high praise for the Gehry book, but Jewish book award committees did not consider it a contender because its Jewish content was so slight. This is a legitimate difference, because the purpose of a book review and the purpose of a book award are not the same.

The nature of contemporary Jewish life also affects the depth of Jewish content found in children's books, especially fiction. There are many mainstream novels in which Jewish characters are involved in secular story lines. The characters are identified as Jews—explicitly, as in the illustrations for Stephanie Spinner's *It's a Miracle*, or implicitly, as with the dialogue in Esther Hershenhorn's Sydney Taylor award-winning *Chicken Soup By Heart*. Names, foods, religious observances, immigration histories, even dialect may or may not be given any special attention. These stories acknowledge Jews as part of the established community by *not* emphasizing their religious identity. The reader meets these Jewish characters and, then, on with the tale! Plot development, denouement, and climax do not depend on the character as a Jew but on a person who happens, incidentally, to be a Jew.

This type of story has a place in Jewish libraries. Mainstream works accurately reflect the lives of many Jewish-American children. The portrayal of acculturated Jews in stories for children verifies the actuality of their own lives

and sings a paean to the success of Jewish acceptance in a multicultural society. When readers read an engrossing story, must they notice the religion of the protagonist? Readers do not doubt the veracity of fictional Christians if they are not portrayed as celebrating Christmas or eating ham or going to church. Why must Jews always be seen eating latkes at Hanukkah, celebrating the Seder, and performing a mitzvah at every turn of the plot? It is enough for readers to recognize Jewish characters who reflect universal Jewish values but whose part in the story does not involve the observance of Jewish holidays, prayer, synagogue attendance, or use of Hebrew. Several recent good examples of mainstream novels are *Stolen Words*, by Amy Koss; *Understanding Buddy*, by Marc Kornblatt; and *The Moxie Kid*, by Lois Ruby.

### Positive values

Much has been written about the positive nature of Jewish values, from entire books to summaries and lists. AJL's Internet guide, *The Jewish Valuesfinder*, reflects this interest in a values-driven children's literature by identifying, title by title, the values inherent in each book's content. Below are some statements drawn from the extensive writing about values, each expressing some aspect of their importance.

"I believe that a values-oriented literature makes distinctions between what is false and what is true, what is good and what is evil. True for whom? Good for whom? For humanity . . . A values-oriented literature tells the reader, 'L'Chaim—choose life.'"

*Levitin, 1993, p. 26*

"Stories create opportunities for readers to consider values that guide human action in both the imaginary context of the story and the real context of their lives . . . the whole curriculum of schooling is, at a bedrock level, about the same thing: how we should conduct ourselves as human beings in relation to one another . . . literature embodies a major part of the reasons, explanations, suggestions, and models that young people need if they are to own the values of their culture."

*Estes, 2001, p. 507*

". . . Jewish books—whether they are humorous and light, or grappling with serious matters—should have something Jewish to say to their readers. And to me, 'something Jewish' means that, in some way, a book is plugged into the central nervous system of Jewish lore and knowledge, that it looks to Jewish sources for direction, and that it starts from the premise that the foundation of Jewish truth and wisdom—i.e., the Torah—is our unwavering focal point."

*Ganz, 1993, p. 23*

“Basic to all the higher religions are ideals corresponding closely to those described as Jewish. Non-religious, as well as religious, ethical thinkers have expounded the worth of humility, truth, love, and compassion. If the adjective ‘Jewish’ is used the intention is to suggest: (a) that these values receive a special kind of emphasis in the Jewish tradition, a Jewish way of looking at them, and (b) that they are no remote ideals but are a real, vital force in the lives of Jews.”

*Jacobs, 1995, p. 474*

“[Jewish values] are found in our texts, in our teachings from ancient times to the present, in the beliefs and behaviors that characterize the Jewish people, in the qualities that enabled our survival, and in the ideals that we teach our children. Explicitly naming these values as Jewish honors our past, expresses pride in our heritage and suggests to others, our children included, that Jewish values are an esteemed and trustworthy guide to the Jewish future.”

*Linda R. Silver*  
*The New Jewish Valuesfinder,*  
*[www.ajljewishvalues.org](http://www.ajljewishvalues.org)*

## Sensitivity

Jewish children have the right to expect that literature for and about them promotes understanding and respect for their traditions. The use of Christocentric terms, like Jesus Christ, A.D. and B.C., or Old Testament is inappropriate; instead, Jesus, C.E. and B.C.E., and Hebrew Bible should be used. Christian interpretations of Bible stories and immigration stories, or nonfiction that stresses assimilation are insensitive to Jewish readers. Although Jews have been largely excluded from the multicultural discourse, the demand for cultural sensitivity that pervades that discourse applies to books of Jewish content, as well as to books about the African-American, Asian, Native American, or Latino experience.

Jewish children’s literature contains few depictions of children and families who are not white and of Ashkenazic origin. Yet, there are a growing number of Jewish children being raised in multicultural homes—children who consider themselves Jewish but who have a parent who is Asian, African-American, Latino, or any other ethnicity imaginable. There are also cultural differences within Jewish families. Perhaps the family has intermarried, and cultural differences for a child are those that stem from having two sets of grandparents honoring two different religions. Another group of racially diverse Jewish children are those who have been adopted by two Jewish parents. Rarely is a picture book found portraying Jewish children who do not have Caucasian features. An exception to this is Leslie Simpson’s *The Shabbat Box*, in which one child has darker skin than the others. It is important that authors and illustrators embrace this small but significant group of Jewish children of diverse races and backgrounds. For their parts, adults judging excellence in Jewish children’s literature must be aware of the need for greater diversity.

## LITERARY AND ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE

This discussion of the quest for excellence in Jewish children's literature has concentrated so far on the particular—on Jewish content and those elements by which it is evaluated. Turning to literary and artistic excellence, there are many books and other sources that discuss these criteria at length. Our personal favorite is the standard text, *Children's Literature in the Elementary School* (7th edition), edited by Charlotte Huck, et al., and published by McGraw Hill in 2001. We recommend that everyone who seriously seeks to identify excellence in Jewish children's literature, including, of course, reviewers and award judges, own a copy. Another highly recommended source for understanding and evaluating art and design in children's books is the section called "Artspeak" on *School Library Journal's* Internet site: [www.slj.com](http://www.slj.com).

### Criteria for Selecting Fiction

- ◇ What kind of book is this (historical fiction, life cycle story, and so on), and what can the reader anticipate from the title, dust-jacket illustration, size of print, illustrations, and chapter headings?
- ◇ Characterization: Is characterization believable, convincing, and multi-dimensional? Is there character development or growth?
- ◇ Point of view: Is it appropriate to the purpose of the book and to the developmental level of the intended reader?
- ◇ Plot: Is it believable, engaging, suspenseful, well constructed, and age-appropriate?
- ◇ Setting: Where does the story take place; how does the setting affect the action, characters, or theme; and does the story transcend the setting to have meaning to today's children?
- ◇ Style: Is the writing style appropriate to the subject and natural to the characters? What is the overall mood: reverent, cynical, depressing, hopeful, etc? Are factual details accurate and blended smoothly into the story?
- ◇ Theme: What is the theme, the "big idea"? Is it age-appropriate, and does it emerge naturally from the story or is it imposed and didactic?

### Criteria for Selecting Picture Books

- ◇ While literature should stretch readers' imaginations, are the story and illustrations developmentally appropriate for the intended reader?
- ◇ Does the book appeal to young children, or is it written and illustrated for older children or adults?
- ◇ How is the theme developed through words and pictures?
- ◇ In which ways do the illustrations help create meaning from the text?



- ◇ Are the illustrations accurate and consistent with the text?
- ◇ What medium has the illustrator chosen to use, and does it reflect or enhance the mood of the story?
- ◇ Is the style of the illustrations appropriate for the story?
- ◇ Does the format seem appropriate to the content?
- ◇ How durable are the paper and binding?
- ◇ Do the format and overall book design expand on the theme or content of the book?

### **Criteria for Selecting Nonfiction**

- ◇ Accuracy and authenticity: What are the author's qualifications to write a book of this type? Are the facts accurate according to other sources? Is the information up-to-date? Are generalizations supported by facts? In the case of folklore and traditional literature, are sources given and explanatory notes included?
- ◇ Content and perspective: Is the subject adequately covered? Are the content and format age-appropriate? Is the content presented objectively, or does it favor a particular point of view or ideology? If so, is that point of view made clear to the intended reader?
- ◇ Illustrations and format: Do illustrations clarify and extend the text? Are they accurately presented and clearly captioned? Does the total format contribute to the clarity and attractiveness of the book?
- ◇ Organization: Is the information structured clearly and coherently, with appropriate subheadings and easy-to-use reference aids, such as table of contents, index, bibliography, glossary, and chronology?
- ◇ Style: Is the content presented clearly, in an age-appropriate manner, and in language that is vivid and engaging?

### **WHAT THE EVALUATOR BRINGS TO THE PROCESS**

- ◇ A broad knowledge of children's books and a deep knowledge of Jewish children's books.
- ◇ A critical approach that does not make judgments based on reasons external to the book, such as rejecting it for an award because it is likely to win another award, or projecting personal issues into one's critical judgment.
- ◇ A love of books—but a tough love that does not praise the mediocre, ignore weaknesses, or award anything less than the best.

- ◇ The attitude of a critic, not a censor. A primary question in the evaluator's mind should be "What will children gain from this book?" and not "How will children be harmed by it?"

A brochure entitled *Excellence In Jewish Children's Literature: A Guide for Book Selectors, Reviewers, and Award Judges* (New York: Association of Jewish Libraries, 2003) is available. See [www.jewishlibraries.org](http://www.jewishlibraries.org) for ordering information.

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## INTERNET RESOURCES

- The New Jewish Valuesfinder, [www.ajljewishvalues.org](http://www.ajljewishvalues.org).  
 School Library Journal "Artspeak," [www.slj.com](http://www.slj.com).

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Ellen G. Cole, librarian of the Levine Library of Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles, is a well-known reviewer of Jewish books for children and adults. She is the current co-editor of the Children's Section of the *AJL Newsletter*, a past chairperson of the Sydney Taylor Book Awards and a speaker on children's books and creating home Jewish libraries. Ellen served two terms as president of the Association of Jewish Libraries of Southern California. She is the honored recipient of their 2001 Dorothy Schroeder Award for outstanding service to the field of Judaic Librarianship. Ellen received her M.A. from the Johns Hopkins Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, her B.A. from Goucher College, and her library training from Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles.

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Lisa Silverman is the Library Director of the Sinai Temple Blumenthal Library, in Los Angeles. She was formerly a day school librarian for many years. She organizes the yearly West Coast Jewish Children's Literature Conference, held at Sinai Temple in February, serves as a consultant to new synagogue librarians, and reviews children's books for the *AJL Newsletter* and *Jewish Book World*. She also represents the Jewish Book Council as a children's literature consultant for national Jewish book fairs.