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Books Without Boundaries: Jewish Children's Books in the Secular Arena*

Carol Snyder
New York, NY

Abstract: Books with Jewish content are of universal interest and are important to individuals and to society. Through humor and personal experiences in writing and speaking about my *Ike and Mama* series, my middle-grade young-adult books, as well as my picture book, *God Must Like Cookies, Too*, I communicate to publishers, authors, and librarians the ways that my books have crossed over to the general marketplace. Why and how this came to be, and the newfound inclusion and interest of Jewish writers in the "multicultural" designation are also examined.

Introduction: Words Without Boundaries

As a New Yorker who has happily returned to her roots, I want to welcome you all to this wonderful city of diversity and culture that my husband and I love. And I want to share with you a story I heard that shows how difficult it sometimes is to decide the boundaries of what is Jewish and what isn't.

A student wrote an essay, and in it he used the word "fargin," as in "My father doesn't even fargin himself a piece of cake."

His teacher said, "I never heard of that word. I don't think it's English. I think it may be Yiddish." But the young man insisted that it was an English word he'd heard in his home all his life. The teacher handed him a dictionary and asked him to find it for her.

*Presentation at the 28th Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries, held at the New York Hilton Hotel, June 23, 1993, at a session entitled "Extending the Market: Jewish Children's Books in the Secular Arena."

He looked and looked. Finally he told her, "I'm so surprised. I can't find it. And yet on the page where 'fargin' should be, they have the Yiddish word 'farfetched'."

"'Farfetched' isn't a Yiddish word," she said. "It just sounds like it should be."

Books with a Universal Quality

From words without boundaries to my topic, "Books Without Boundaries."

When I first started writing, I was given four important pieces of advice.

Judy Blume told me to "write from the heart."

Patti Gauch told me to "be specific."

Barbara Cohen told me, "You don't have to be a pioneer to enjoy *The Little House on the Prairie* books."

And my first editor, Ferd Monjo, said, "Just write your story. We'll worry about who it's for, later."

And later, we decided that my books were for everyone—and the market targeted was never narrowed or given boundaries. I think that the above advice, combined with my own discoveries over the twenty years of my career, makes me write books without boundaries, books that have a universal quality, in which children read about and relate to other children even if they have different backgrounds.

There is a basic truth here. We all have something in common, whether we are Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform Jews—or whether we're Jewish or not. Whatever our race or ethnicity, we all were children. And so when I write, I concentrate on childhood feelings, and I write with humor whenever possible, because the child in all of us thrives on and needs laughter.

In *Ike and Mama and the Once-a-Year Suit*, my first book, published originally in 1978 by Coward McCann (then a division of The Putnam Group), and reissued in paperback in 1992 by The Jewish Publication Society, Ike had to deal with the feelings involved in deciding whether he should disobey his mama. The fact that the time is Passover, combined with my use of Yiddish words in the story, enriches the book. Jewish readers can relate to the warm memories of their heritage.

I write books to be shared by generations. The fact that there are also Irish, Polish, Italian, and African-American people on Ike's block in the South Bronx of 1918, where differences as well as similarities are valued, creates a book without boundaries. I wrote it that way because that was the story. I was not worrying about the market. I included non-Jewish characters as an integral part of Jewish family life in that neighborhood.

In *Dear Mom and Dad, Don't Worry*, one of my contemporary young-adult novels published by Bantam (1992), Carly Stern must deal with feelings of loneliness and fear as she struggles to understand the family and personal crises that complicate her life. I am Jewish and Carly is Jewish, and so of course our shared values influence the story, as does our sense of humor.

And in *God Must Like Cookies, Too*, my first picture book, illustrated by Beth Glick, and published in 1993 by The Jewish Publication Society, I explore the feelings of a four-year-old, her love for her grandmother, Shabbat services at temple, and cookies; her childlike squirminess as she tries to sit still but just can't; her thoughts about a sweet God to whom she can relate because God serves cookies after services in temple, God's house, at the Oneg Shabbat; and her creative thoughts as the beautiful music of the Reform Shabbat service fires her dreams and hopes, and inspires her self-confidence—all feelings to which children of varied traditions and rituals can relate.

In this book, I wrote about a contemporary grandmother who is active and participating fully in the world. And I wrote about a grandmother/granddaughter relationship in a temple setting rather than a kitchen. But once again, I wrote from my heart, in very specific ways, about very specific characters and places.

Authors, Readers, and Publishers

Some of my stories have more Jewish content than others. I treasure my Jewish audience. Groups like the Association of Jewish Libraries and The Jewish Book Council and The Jewish Publication Society have nurtured my writing with their support. But writing books that sell to the general market opens up doors for my books with more Jewish content as well. And as I bring mainstream publishers my Jewish audience, in turn I bring my Jewish publishers a wider audience, too.

It is only recently that I realized that Jewish authors are included in the present multicultural movement and are thus much in demand. I have received requests to speak in areas where people have never known a Jewish person, but have cooked potato latkes to welcome me.

I have spoken in temples of various affiliations, Jewish centers, public schools, libraries—and Catholic schools as well.

I write books without boundaries to open doors and reach out to all to share a heritage or viewpoint that I am proud of and comfortable with. I answer any questions and open up a comfortable dialogue so that even a shy child can inquire, "How does it feel to be Jewish?" And then I bring back to my Jewish audiences the feeling of acceptance and sincere interest that I have experienced from non-Jews.

And what do I and other authors expect from their publishers? What is my wish-list? I want my books to be marketed without boundaries, both here and abroad, to

bookstores and libraries, Jewish book clubs and Junior Literary Guild, Scholastic or Xerox, as well as to film, video, and television markets—both Jewish and general. I want Jewish publishing houses to understand and to be flexible with the ways of working with chain bookstores, which have so much influence today. I want print runs large enough to accommodate inclusion in a Reading Rainbow television show selection, and I want more affordable pricing. I want books kept in print long enough to become classics. I want to see Jewish-content books in both Judaica and fiction or nonfiction sections of stores and libraries.

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I don't think we need to preach to teach. Our heritage shows clearly how much learning comes about from telling a good story. Our children deserve quality books with literary and artistic value.

What can librarians do besides, of course, buying books and introducing them to their audiences? In setting up speaking engagements, when inviting a Jewish author to speak, also invite your local public school and public library people as guests or even as co-sponsors, to help with the honorariums and travel expenses.

Conclusion

I am a writer of stories, and I write for people. I write because I care about them and the world we live in, and because my little granddaughter will live in this world without boundaries. I want to see a marketplace without boundaries because it is important that we be exposed to and grow to appreciate one another's religions and lifestyles, both similarities and differences—all adding up to a better world to share and care about, together.

Acknowledgment

I want to thank the Association of Jewish Libraries for dedicating this program to the memory of Barbara Cohen, a wonderful writer and my dear friend, neighbor and colleague of twenty years. She would have been pleased.

Editor's note: See a related article by Barbara Cohen, "Where Have All the Children Gone?" Judaica Librarianship vol. 2 (1985), pp. 34-38.

Carol Snyder was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY, and holds a B. A. from Brooklyn College. She is the author of more than a dozen books, ranging from young-adult novels to picture books. Her most recent book is God Must Like Cookies, Too (Jewish Publication Society, 1993). She is also known for her Ike and Mama series, which draws on her own family's memories of Jewish family life in the Bronx. Ms. Snyder has received the Association of Jewish Libraries' Book Awards for two of the Ike and Mama titles. [See Judaica Librarianship vol. 3 (1986-87), pp. 62-63 for presentation and acceptance speeches.—Ed.] Carol teaches and lectures and is presently continuing her studies in illustration at Parsons School of Design. Ms. Snyder and her husband live in New York City.