

# Bibliotherapy and Loss: Separation, Divorce, and Death in Jewish Children's Literature

At the Association of Jewish Libraries Convention held in Livingston, N.J., on June 23, 1987, Dr. Joanne E. Bernstein and Merrily F. Hart presented a program on "Bibliotherapy and Loss: Separation, Divorce, and Death." An abbreviated report of Dr. Bernstein's remarks is followed by Merrily Hart's paper and bibliography.

## Children and Loss

**Joanne E. Bernstein**  
Brooklyn College  
Brooklyn, NY

Many changes in a small child's life involve loss. At an early age, children are fascinated with disappearance [loss], and return. Peek-a-boo is a game that infants love to play. The concept/phrase "all gone" fascinates and delights children as they experiment with making things disappear. They discover that some things don't reappear. Children's tears at mother's disappearance for an evening out, or for work, are heartfelt. The security that she will return as promised develops slowly. Going to bed, going to nursery school, and a haircut all involve loss. Death is, of course, the ultimate loss.

In a frequently quoted pioneering study, Maria Nagy (1959) explored the child's concept of death. Children aged three to five deny the finality of death. They regard it as a separation or departure and expect the return of the loved object or person. Sometime between the ages of five and nine, children begin to see death as a permanent event.

Children go through many of the same reactions to separation and death as adults do. Initially they feel shock; they may have severe somatic symptoms including sleep loss, lack of appetite, and shortness of breath. The child may initially deny the loss, as previously described, or feel anger, fear, embarrassment, and depression.

The child's curiosity about death must be satisfied. Children may want to touch a dead bird, or dig it up after burial to find out what happened to it. Behavior that at first might seem morbid or gruesome is natural childhood investigation. Finally, children experience and exhibit sadness, but their behavior is not like that of mature adults. The phrase "short-sadness span" has been used by Martha Wolfenstein (1965) to describe children's abbreviated mourning behavior, in which they dip in and out of grief.

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## Bibliotherapy and the Judaica Children's Librarian

**Merrily F. Hart**  
Fairmount Temple  
Cleveland, Ohio

What is Bibliotherapy? As a librarian friend of mine asked, "Is that when someone has a problem and you give them a book about it?" In the broadest and simplest terms it is, but it is usually more inclusive. Bibliotherapy is "the use of books to influence total development, a process of interaction between the reader and literature which is used for personality assessment, adjustment, growth, clinical and mental health. It is a concept that ideas inherent in selected reading material can have a beneficial, even therapeutic effect upon the mental and physical ills of the reader" (Good, 1969, p. 58). In bibliotherapy, the counselor or librarian provides guidance in the solution of personal problems through directed reading.

Everyone can be helped through reading. Bibliotherapy includes the self-examination and insights that are gained from reading either fiction or non-fiction. Reading can be self-directed, selected by an adviser, or even accidental. It can be used to create a richer, healthier, more integrated life if:

1. The author communicates with the reader.
2. The reader understands and responds with conscious awareness.
3. Attitudinal and/or behavioral changes occur, either self-induced or with the help of outsiders.

In its most formal manifestation, a team consisting of a trained therapist, librarian, and possibly others provide therapy, books, and discussion. In a more informal situation, it may be something closer to the familiar concept of "reader's adviser."

Books offer the opportunity to cope with a problem in private. In reading fiction, the child can identify with the character in private. Books provide catharsis and help the child realize he isn't the only one who has this problem, he isn't alone, he isn't different from everyone else. Stories extend possible solutions, lend insight.

Adult self-help books are currently very popular. Books used in bibliotherapy provide a variety of types of self-help. The first step in coping with the fear and imagination surrounding an event is to understand the reality. The events surrounding death can be explained. The decay of the body and the ceremonies practiced can be described.

The facts are never as awful as the story the child's imagination supplies. The adult must also admit that he does not always know the answers.

The adult guide does have certain responsibilities. The librarian or guide must show a good sense of timing when providing the books and must be available for discussion when needed. The guide must have read the book. (I never put anything on the shelves in the children's room that I haven't read.)

Jewish children's librarians working in synagogues and schools can have special impact as book consultants for bibliotherapy. As a first step, they can build a book collection including titles that address life's problems. They can inform teachers, counselors, psychologists, and rabbis of particular books that deal sensitively and effectively with these problems. They can advocate the use of books as tools in the process of therapy. Finally, they can learn to lead discussion groups in concert with a trained therapist.

There is a growing awareness and interest in bibliotherapy. The Ohio Library Association publishes a newsletter prepared by the Task Force of the Outreach and Special Services Division. Doris Robinson in the Cuyahoga County Public Library system frequently prepares brochures on specific bibliotherapy topics.

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## BERNSTEIN

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Adults can help children through the stages of mourning, allowing them to express their grief. In the first phase, youngsters must experience the pain as they test and accept the reality of their loss. In the second stage, they decathectize [rid themselves of emotional attachments to] memories related to loss. They may discuss past experiences or look at pictures of the friend or relative who has moved or died, and remember the bad times along with the good. In the third phase, the child begins to build substitute relationships for the absent friend or relative. Young children look toward the adults in their lives for support and guidance, and with that support, they can cope with their crisis and go on with life.

(Summarized by Merrily F. Hart.)

## References

Nagy, Maria. "Child's View of Death" in *Meaning of Death*, edited by Herman Feifel. New York: McGraw Hill, 1959, pp. 79-98.

Wolfenstein, Martha; Kliman, Gilbert, eds. *Children and the Death of a President*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965.

Dr. Joanne E. Bernstein is Professor of Early Childhood Education at Brooklyn College in New York.

## HART

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Two excellent sources of titles for use in bibliotherapy are:

Bernstein, Joanne. *Books to Help Children Cope With Separation and Loss*. 2nd ed. New York: Bowker, 1983.

An annotated book-length bibliography with an excellent introduction.

Dreyer, S.S. *The Bookfinder: When Kids Need Books*. Circle Pines, Minn., 1985.

Contains a useful index with very specific subject headings such as: loneliness; separation anxiety; limb—missing; marriage—inter-religious; grandparent—living in home of, etc. Over 1000 books (90% fiction) are indexed.

Both these books are currently being updated.

The following bibliography of Jewish titles relating to loss includes the themes of aging and death, family disintegration, family conflict and divorce, moving and relocation, alienation, and loss through illness. Some titles, although informative, will only be useful in a few cases. The many stories of immigration convey the sense of dislocation and the alienation that is also felt in shorter relocations. Books on the Holocaust that deal with loss and separation have been omitted, because the Holocaust is such an overwhelming topic that it smothers other themes in a novel (Meir, 1987). Many good bibliographies of Holocaust books for young readers are available.

## References

Good, Carter, ed. *Dictionary of Education*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1969, p. 58.

Meir, Rachel, "Introducing Holocaust Literature to Children," *Judaica Librarianship* Vol. 3 No. 1-2 (1986-1987), p. 65-67.

## Bibliography on Loss in Jewish Children's Literature

\*=Particularly useful for bibliotherapy.

### I. Aging—Senility—Death

\*Benjamin, Carol Lea. *Nobody's Baby Now*. New York: Macmillan, 1984.

When Grandma Minnie moves in with Olivia's family, Olivia is displaced and distressed, but she soon comes to adore and appreciate her grandma in this story about first love and growing up. After strong resistance, Olivia accepts her grandma's physical deterioration and the necessity of her move to a nursing home. For age 10-14.

\*Blue, Rose. *Grandma Didn't Wave Back*. Illustrated by Ted Lewin. New York: Dell, 1978.

Debbie's beloved grandma becomes forgetful and a bit senile. Debbie finds it difficult to accept the fact that grandma must move to a nursing home. For age 8-12.

\*Caseley, Judith. *When Grandpa Came To Stay*. Greenwillow, 1986.

Excellent picture book for preschool and early elementary grades with a story about Grandpa coming to live with the family after Grandma has died. Minimal Jewish content, but well integrated into the story.

Chaikin, Miriam. *I Should Worry, I Should Care*. Illustrated by Richard Egielski. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.

Molly and her immigrant family have just moved to a nice new apartment in Brooklyn, but Molly misses her old friends and has to adjust to her new life. The death and funeral of a retarded adult neighbor whom Molly has befriended, form a chapter in the book. For age 7-12.

Clifford, Eth. *The Remembering Box*. New York: Holiday House, 1985.

A lovely story with lots of Jewish content and a warm and realistic relationship between a young boy and his grandma. Her death provides a good point for beginning a discussion about death. For age 8-12.

Derman, Martha. *The Friendstone*. New York: Dial Press, 1981.

Sally's summer in the Catskills in the 1920s, her friendship with Jewish Evie, and her special relationship with her tolerant great-grandmother help her to outgrow the prejudices of her parents. Despite some stereotyping of Jews, the treatment of Sally's great-grandmother's death and Evie's helpful discussion of Jewish mourning practices rescue this book. For age 8-12.

Geller, Norman. *I Don't Want To Visit Grandma Anymore*. Illustrated by Albert Tomlinson. Auburn, ME: Norman Geller, 1984.

A didactic and wordy story about visiting a recuperating grandma in a nursing home. The black and white pictures are useful, but not wonderful. For age 8-12.

Girion, Barbara. *A Tangle of Roots*. New York: Scribner's, 1979.

A moving novel that describes the pain and suffering of a 16-year-old at her mother's sudden death. Includes a description of Jewish mourning customs and Jewish values. Inter-dating is condoned. For age 12+.

\*Gordon, Sol. *When Living Hurts*. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), 1986.

An excellent guide for the teenager on feelings, loss, and coping.

\*Grollman, Earl, ed. *Explaining Death to Children*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.

Excellent essays on children's attitudes toward death. Chapter 9: "The Ritualistic and Theological Approach of the Jew."

Grollman, Earl. *Suicide*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.

For those in a position to prevent suicide, this simple, informative book includes a section on Judaism's view on self-destruction.

\*Grollman, Earl. *Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970, 1976.

A simple book to read with children age 4–13, with lots of information for parents. Although the author is a rabbi, there is minimal Jewish content.

\*Herman, Charlotte. *Our Snowman Has Olive Eyes*. New York: Dutton, 1977.

Ten-year-old Sheila discovers that it's wonderful to have Bubbie living with the family, but then must cope with the loss when her aging grandmother leaves. For age 8–12.

Kaplan, Bess. *The Empty Chair*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

The story is set in a Jewish family in New York in 1937. Mama dies in childbirth, and the two children have to cope with a hard-working insensitive father and an interfering aunt. Papa remarries, and eventually everyone adjusts. Covers a lot of territory, but also discusses emotions, feelings, etc. For age 11+.

\*Pomerantz, Barbara. *Bubby, Me, and Memories*. New York: UAHC, 1983.

Prize-winning picture book on grandma's death with expressive photos. For age 5–11.

Provost, Gary; Levine-Freidus, Gail. *Good If It Goes*. New York: Bradbury Press, 1984.

In this entertaining sports book, David's Bar Mitzvah takes on new importance as his beloved grandfather's health fails. Inter-dating is condoned. For age 10–14.

\*Ruby, Lois. "Frail Bridge." In *Two Truths in My Pocket*. New York: Viking Press, 1982.

A sensitive and helpful story of a young girl's reaction to her senile great-grandmother's death and funeral. For age 11+.

\*Sherman, Eileen Bluestone. *The Odd Potato*. Illustrated by Katherine Janus Kahn. Rockville, MD: Kar-Ben Copies, 1984.

An excellent Hanukkah story that focuses on the recent death of Rachel's mother and the need for life to continue. For age 6–10.

Spero, Moshe Halevi. *Zaydeh*. Illustrations by Marilyn Hirsh. Simcha Publishing, 1984.

A story book concerning death, illustrating all the aspects of Orthodox observance. Great emphasis placed on *tehiyat ha-metim*, the awakening of the dead at the coming of the Messiah, so it will be useful for Orthodox families only. Includes a good essay for parents. For age 5–12.

\*Syme, Daniel B. *Death and Mourning, Part I & II*. New York: UAHC, 1986. *The Jewish Home*, Parts 51–58.

Reprinted from Rabbi Syme's column in *Reform Judaism*, these pamphlets thoroughly explain all the customs and beliefs surrounding death in Judaism. Jr. high level.

\*Wolitzer, Hilma. *Wish You Were Here*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985.

Fairly lighthearted story for 5th–8th grade. Bernie's father has been dead two years, and his mother is remarrying. His adjustment to his father's death and resistance to the marriage is well described. The end may be too pat, but Judaism plays an important role in his adjustment.

## II. Separation: Family Conflict or Disintegration—Divorce

Benson, Paulette; Bissell, Sherry. *Divorce in Jewish Life and Tradition*. Denver: Alternatives in Religious Education, 1977.

This 17-page workbook, an ARE mini-course, works with the emotions and feelings involved in divorce and also explains the traditional Jewish positions on divorce. For age 10+.

Cohen, Barbara. *King of the Seventh Grade*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1982.

Vic, son of divorced and inadequate parents, struggles with his life and Jewish identity in this Bar-Mitzvah year story. For age 12+.

\**Keeping Posted*, Oct. 1981.

Jr. high magazine published by the UAHC, this excellent issue is devoted to divorce, including children's discussion of divorce in their family, the Jewish view on marriage and divorce, and a bibliography (now a bit dated).

\*Pomerantz, Barbara. *Who Will Lead Kiddush?* Illustrated by Donna Ruff. New York: UAHC, 1985.

A picture book that addresses the problems of divorce through a story. For age 4–8.

Ruby, Lois. "Inscriptions in Stone" and "Strangers in the Land of Egypt," in *Two Truths in My Pocket*. New York: Viking Press, 1982.

Two well told stories, one focusing on father/son conflict in a religious family, the second concern-

ing a boy who lives with his divorced mother, and his relationship with a Black Jewish family, especially the daughter. For age 12+.

Sachs, Marilyn. *Call Me Ruth*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982.

This prize-winning story focuses on Ruth, who loves her new life in America. She struggles to decide who constitutes a "good American"—her mother, a union organizer who has been jailed and whose manners, hands, and language seem coarse or her refined, beautiful, and narrow-minded teacher. The death of her father is well-handled, but the focus is on the mother/daughter conflict. For age 10–14.

\*Syme, Daniel B. "Jewish Divorce: Some Biblical History." *Reform Judaism*, Fall 1982, p. 38.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Jewish Divorce: In the Mishnah and Talmud." *Reform Judaism*, Winter 1983, p. 42.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Jewish Divorce: The Rights and Responsibilities of Husband and Wife." *Reform Judaism*, Spring/Summer 1983, p. 31.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Jewish Divorce: The Get." *Reform Judaism*, Fall 1983, p. 45.

Good series on divorce in Judaism. For age 12+.

## III. Separation: Moving—Emigration—Being an Outsider

Bernstein, Joanne. *Dmitry: A Young Soviet Immigrant*. Photographs by Michael Bernstein. New York: Clarion Books, 1981.

An optimistic, but realistic photo-essay on the adjustment of a Soviet family to modern American life and the difficulty of finding jobs commensurate with their education and suitable housing without government help. For age 10–14.

Blue, Rose. *Cold Rain on the Water*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979.

A sad and depressing story of a current-day Soviet immigrant family in New York, and the loneliness of being strangers in a country where there is freedom, but also drugs and crime. The younger members of the family find their way, but the story ends with the violent death of the father. For age 12+.

\*Chaikin, Miriam. *I Should Worry, I Should Care*. Illustrated by Richard Egielski. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.

See description in Section I.

Cohen, Barbara. *Gooseberries To Oranges*. Illustrated by Beverly Brodsky. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1982.

A beautifully illustrated story of leaving the old land and coming to America. The emphasis is on the adjustment of the 8-year old heroine to her new home. For age 6–10.

\*Cohen, Barbara. *Molly's Pilgrim*. Illustrated by Michael J. Deraney. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1983.

Molly, a recent immigrant from Russia, must cope with the laughter and teasing her foreign accent and different attire elicit. The charming illustrations and thoughtful teacher make this a very satisfying story, especially for Thanksgiving. For age 5–12.

Derman, Martha. *The Friendstone*. New York: Dial Press, 1981.

See description in Section I.

Fisher, Leonard E. *A Russian Farewell*. New York: Four Winds Press, 1980.

This historical portrayal of the anti-semitism and violence that drive the Shapiro family from Russia in the early 20th century conveys the pain of leaving home. For age 10–14.

Hull, Eleanore. *The Summer People*. New York: Atheneum, 1984.

Genevieve Rosenthal's uncertainty about her Jewish identity and her fear that her Christian friends in the summer town don't really accept her cause her pain and nearly cause the rejection of friendship in this slow-paced, episodic novel. For age 12+.

Ish-Kishor, Shulamith. *Our Eddie*. New York: Pantheon, 1969.

Set in England in the early part of the century, this is a sad and touching story of a boy's conflict with his rigid father, and his death from a neuromuscular disease.

Kushner, Arlene. *Falasha No More*. Illustrated by Amy Kalina. New York: Shapolsky Publishers, 1986.

In telling the story of an Ethiopian family, the author also helps children understand what it means to be "different." For age 6–12.

Lasky, Katherine. *Pageant*. New York: Four Winds Press, 1986.

An unsatisfying story that focuses on an assimilated Jewish girl's feeling of rebellion against the posh WASP school she attends, society in general, and her occasionally unsatisfactory relationship with her parents. For age 12+.

Lehrman, Robert. *Juggling*. New York: Harper and Row, 1982.

Howie's love for soccer leads him to a team where he feels young and alienated. There's lots of graphic sex in this growing-up story. For age 13+.

Meir, Mira. *Alina: A Russian Girl Comes To Israel*. Photographs by Yael Rozen. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society (JPS), 1982.

A lovely photo-essay about a new Israeli—nine-year-old Alina—who came from the Soviet Union, and the problems of adjusting to life in a new country. For age 6–12.

Pitt, Nancy. *Beyond the High White Wall*. New York: Scribner's, 1987.

Libby must cope with disappointment at her father's handling of the crises in their lives, and must come to accept the idea of leaving her beloved home and friends in the Ukraine. For age 11+.

Ruby, Lois. "Inscriptions in Stone" and "Strangers in the Land of Egypt." in *Two Truths in My Pocket*. New York: Viking Press, 1982.

See description in Section II.

Sachs, Marilyn. *Call Me Ruth*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982.

See description in Section II.

Sherman, Eileen Bluestone. *Monday in Odessa*. Philadelphia: JPS, 1986.

A modern-day immigration story that focuses on Marina's reluctance to leave her home and forego the Odessa story-telling contest, despite the increasing difficulties her family faces. For age 12+.

#### IV. Separation: Illness and Handicaps

\*Cohen, Floreva. *My Special Friend*. New York: Board of Jewish Education, 1986.

A photographic essay of the friendship between Doron and Jonathan, a child with Down's syndrome. For age 5–10.

Girion, Barbara. *A Handful of Stars*. New York: Scribner's, 1981.

Julie, stricken with epilepsy as she enters high school, is overprotected by her family. Her grandmother plays an important role in helping the whole family adjust to the illness. For age 12+.

\*Goldreich, Gloria. *A Season of Discovery*. New York: Nelson, 1976.

During her Bat Mitzvah year, Lisa helps ease the dying days of a Holocaust survivor and comes to terms with her ambivalence toward her retarded twin brother. For age 10–14.

\*Gould, Marilyn. *The Twelfth of June*. New York: Lippincott, 1986.

In this upbeat story, best friends Janis and Barney have a lot to cope with: pressures from Barney's psychologist mother and his piano teacher, and his upcoming Bar Mitzvah. Janis must deal with cerebral palsy, and the overprotection of her family. Her grandmother, who suffers a stroke, helps her. For age 10–14.

Hautzig, Deborah. *Second Star To the Right*. New York: Greenwillow, 1981.

Leslie struggles to understand and combat her anorexia, and to understand her mother, a Holocaust survivor. For age 10–16.

\*Levitin, Sonia. *A Sound To Remember*. Illustrated by Gabriel Lisowski. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979.

In this tender story with lovely pictures, slow and awkward Jacob is given the honor of blowing the shofar. With the compassion and assistance of the rabbi, he succeeds. For age 6–9.

\*Ruby, Lois. "Forgetting Me, Remember Me." in *Two Truths In My Pocket*. New York: Viking Press, 1982.

Retarded Tracy is the member of her family who learns and values the traditions of Judaism. For age 12+.

\*Ruthen, Gerald C. *Daniel and the Silver Flute*. Illustrated by Marlene L. Ruthen. New York: United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education, 1986.

A variation on an old Jewish tale, in which the tune of a retarded boy opens the gates of prayer. For age 4–10.

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*Merrily F. Hart is the Librarian at The Arthur J. Lelyveld Center For Jewish Learning at Fairmount Temple, Cleveland, Ohio and the Chairman of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee of the Association of Jewish Libraries.*