

Leading Israeli Children's Authors

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Judging by the number of children eagerly leafing through attractive juvenile books for sale—from Beersheba in the south to Kiryat Shmonah in the north—one may conclude that Israel truly is the “Land of the Book.” This is further underscored in the enthusiastic reception for new and old titles alike in the children's section of libraries. A good example of active involvement with books is seen in the Tel Aviv public library's juvenile wing, *Bet Ariela* (Ariela's House), named for a patron's deceased daughter. *Bet Ariela* displays book illustrations drawn by boys and girls and puppets of story characters created by them for Israeli television contests.

Through media exposure, awards, and other forms of recognition, Israel encourages its capable authors. To motivate more reading by young people, the government pays for leading children's writers to tour the land, going to schools, libraries, recreation or cultural centers—even to remote meeting halls, as on a kibbutz or in a border settlement. The four Israeli children's authors interviewed for this article are so prominent that they have all participated in such tours and have drawn inspiration from them.

Uriel Ofek

The first interview is a fireside chat in Herzlia, a Tel Aviv suburb, in Uriel Ofek's comfortable home. Uriel Ofek, a long-term editor for Masada, a juvenile book publisher, was the first Israeli to get his doctorate in children's literature after being a scholarship student in Toronto, Canada. In 1976, he won international acclaim for his books, plays, literary encyclopedia, translation of classics, and anthologies—all for young people—by receiving the Hans Christian Andersen Certificate of Honor of the International Board on Books for Young People. In 1978, the U.S.-based Association for Library Service to Children also recognized him in Boston as its May Hill Arbutnot lecturer.

During Israel's 1948 War of Independence, Uriel Ofek was a Palmah soldier imprisoned

by Arabs. He learned to understand Arab soldiers, and projects some of this understanding in *Smoke over Golan, a Novel of the 1973 Yom Kippur War in Israel*, published in English by Harper and Row. This is an account narrated by ten-year-old Eitan Avivi about life in the Golan Heights on his family's isolated farm and on the nearby war front with Syria. He attends “the world's tiniest school” with a female soldier as his tutor. Survival is the book's primary theme, as the story tells how Eitan manages alone on the farm during the war. Eitan's Syrian house guest, Saleem, stays until the boy's family returns, so peace and friendship are important in this war story.

Devorah Omer

Living not far from Ofek is author Devorah Omer, a third-generation Israeli whose husband manages Habimah, the renowned Hebrew theater. Her best-known titles, mainly intended for adolescents who are good readers, include many award winners. As an example, she won the Yatziv Prize for *The Diary of Tamar* (in Hebrew), which deals with pupils she encountered in her nine years of teaching.

Autobiographical aspects also figure in *The Border in the House* (in Hebrew), which received third place in 1968 for the Twentieth Anniversary Prize given to mark two decades since Israel's establishment. Born on a kibbutz near an Arab settlement, the author laments that she was not taught Arabic.

Omer's most factual account of her childhood is *Direct Hit* (in Hebrew), an adult book which reports that she was eleven years old when her mother was accidentally killed by British soldiers in training. The British told Omer that her mother had committed suicide, but through a private detective, the author learned who had actually shot her.

Omer won the Lamdan Prize for *The Gideonites: the Story of the Nili Spies in the Middle East*, and she later received the Haifa Prize for her stage adaptation. The book, published in English by Funk and Wagnalls, is a biography of Sarah Aaron-

son, whose family lived in Palestine in 1905. She joined the Nili underground to overthrow cruel Turkish rulers and help the British, then based in nearby Egypt. She took her own life in 1917 after the Turks had tortured her, not long after the disappearance of another martyr, Absalom Feinberg, whom she loved.

Omer often writes tragedies about courageous Israeli lovers, for heroism is revered in a land on constant alert. Omer's biography, *Love till Death* (in Hebrew) is about Zehara Leviatov, Israel's first aviatrix, killed in 1948 at the age of twenty-one. Her boyfriend, Shmuel Kaufman, son of a famous professor, died two years earlier in military training. This book won the 1981 Ze'ev Prize from the Ministry of Culture and Education, Israel's most prestigious children's literature prize.

Before the Ze'ev, Omer won the Prime Minister's Prize of 100,000 pounds (about \$25,000) for her body of work, including such teenage biographies as *Rebirth*, issued in English by the Jewish Publication Society. Also recipient of the London Prize, *Rebirth* is about Eliezer Ben-Yehudah, who revived the use of the Hebrew language in Israel.

Galila Ron Feder

Galila Ron Feder, a thirty-five-year-old bank manager's daughter, is as popular as Devorah Omer with Israeli young people. She has forty-four books to her credit (all in Hebrew to date). She writes quickly in the first person, peppering dialog with slang. For seven years, Feder and her husband, a policeman, cared for ten foster children, mainly Moroccan Jews—whom she calls “the second Israel.” Her foster children are models for her characters, though she no longer is a foster parent and has two young children of her own. She tells the interviewer, “Other children's authors in my country are concerned with the first Israel. I'm the only one writing from the point of view of the second Israel.”

Feder's narrator, in her initial series of nine books, is Zion Cohen, a Moroccan boy



Children's Book Display at the Jerusalem Book Fair.

whose father is in jail and whose mother is a prostitute. Zion lives in the Bet Shean community with his grandmother until, at

age eleven, a social worker places him in Haifa with the Sharonis who have a natural son named Nir. When Mrs. Sharoni has a

second son, she sends Zion to a kibbutz. He runs away, returns to his grandmother, and begins to associate with criminals. Af-

ter social workers place him in a home with nine other foster children in Jerusalem, he shows he can be a good student. By the ninth book, Zion is seventeen, has girlfriends, and is about to enter the Israeli army.

In sequels, Feder switches from Zion's viewpoint to that of Nir, beginning with *A Brother and a Half*, a *Diary of Nir Sharoni*. (The title refers to Nir's natural brother and to Zion, his "half brother.") A pianist, Nir does not relate to Zion, who would rather play football than go to concerts. At times, Nir is even jealous of Zion's athletic prowess.

Most of Feder's books are parts of series. One of her series consists of ten books, each an account by a different child participating in the underground seeking independence from Britain. An easy-to-read series is about the adventures of Feder's seven-year-old daughter and her friends, featuring a redheaded would-be detective named Gingi.

Feder's most acclaimed book not in a series is the junior novel, *Masada*. (She hopes it will soon be published in English.) Two years after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, Hebrew zealots garrisoned themselves in the Masada fortress built by King Herod. It took the Romans two years to conquer them. The author imagines that, in the year 72, three Hebrew children and two women escaped from Masada. The story is narrated by one of the children who eluded the Romans before his fellow zealots committed suicide. Knowing that the leaders had suggested suicide as the only way to avoid Roman slavery, the child explains why the courageous zealots took their own lives.

Uri Orlev

Writer Uri Orlev is a resident of Jerusalem, and, like Uriel Ofek, a recipient of the Hans Christian Andersen Certificate of Honor from the International Board on Books for Young People. He wrote his first book, *The Beast of Darkness* (in Hebrew) for Israeli radio stations. The narrator, a boy afraid of the dark, talks with a make-believe "Beast of Darkness." The Beast takes messages from the lad to his father, who was killed in the Yom Kippur War. Though the boy imagines replies from his father, he gets no clear answer to the question: Should his mother marry one of his father's kind army buddies? When the man sits in his father's chair, the boy cries. Orlev finds most readers do not want remarriage, but orphans and teachers disagree. This is a timely book for a war-scarred land.

Uri Orlev's own war scars are revealed in his books. He is a Warsaw Ghetto Holocaust

survivor whose father, a physician, raised him and his brother among Poles. His largely autobiographical young-adult book, *The Lead Soldiers*, is published in English by Taplinger. As the story begins, eight-year-old Yurik (Uri's fictional name) and his brother, six-year-old Kazik, are not even aware they are Jewish, having attended Catholic schools until the German prohibition. Their father is recruited into the Polish army and their mother eventually dies, so the boys are raised by their father's sister. The boys pray, "Hail, Mary" as stormtroopers approach. Though the aunt purchases Palestinian passports for the brothers, stormtroopers send them to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. For two years, the boys suffer acute hunger, getting relief in the camp by playing with lead soldiers. Yurik writes a diary called "Maybe," because he tells Kazik "maybe" they will survive. In 1945, fourteen-year-old Yurik and twelve-year-old Kazik are saved, sent from Belgium with Youth Aliyah to a Palestinian kibbutz. The aunt and uncle resettle in South Africa.

Orlev's *The Island on Bird Street* is another Holocaust book, published in English by Houghton Mifflin. This survival story is about a boy, Alex, aged eleven and a half, whose father asks him to wait in a bombed-out Bird Street building on the edge of the ghetto. He stays there during the harsh winter of 1943-44 with a white mouse as his only friend. The boy scavenges for his needs in the abandoned ghetto and spends long hours observing Polish life across the street.

The Island on Bird Street is receiving wide recognition. It is the winner of the Association of Jewish Libraries Sydney Taylor Award for the best children's book of 1984 and of the 1985 Mildred L. Batchelder Award of the American Library Association for the best children's book published in a foreign language and republished in the U.S. in English.

A Holocaust theme of rejection enters into Orlev's rhyming picture storybook, *Granny Knits* (in Hebrew). The verses describe a lonely grandmother who knits a home and two grandchildren. When she tries to enroll the children in school, teachers will not accept wool beings. Rejected, the grandmother unravels everything, takes knitting needles in hand, and moves elsewhere to create grandchildren anew in a more accepting environment.

Holocaust memories unite author Uri Orlev and his brother, now a New York businessman. Distance separates them, however, for Uri Orlev, married to a dance therapist, is firmly planted in Israel.

Summary and Conclusion

Traces of Orlev's background and that of three other leading Israeli creators of children's books are apparent in their original stories. Three interviewees were born in Israel, though in different settings: Uriel Ofek in a village near Tel Aviv, Galila Ron Feder in middle-class Haifa, and Devorah Omer in a kibbutz near the Jordan River. Uri Orlev, a Polish immigrant, records the Holocaust: Galila Ron Feder often writes from the Moroccan Jewish viewpoint; and both Uriel Ofek and Devorah Omer promote friendship between Arabs and Jews. (As yet, there is no prominent Arab children's author in Israel.)

It is unfortunate that not all of these marvelous books which reflect contemporary Israeli life are available in English. It is important to raise a generation of American Jews who will be sympathetic to Israel and will actively support that country in its struggle to survive. There is no better way to encourage this attitude than through the reading of translated Israeli children's literature. By identifying with the characters that these prize-winning authors have created, young people in America can better appreciate Israelis and understand their problems.

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Dr. Jaqueline Schachter Weiss was an Associate Professor, specializing in children's literature, before her early retirement from Temple University. Her interviews with Israeli authors are similar to the videotaped ones she conducts in the U.S. She is a moderator of the ongoing "Profiles in Literature" series which features fifty-eight outstanding creators of books, mainly for young people. The series is enjoyed internationally. She is the author of Prizewinning Books for Children (D.C. Heath, Lexington Books, 1983).