

INTRODUCTION

When evaluating children's books of Jewish content, book selectors, reviewers, and book award judges always look for outstanding literary and artistic quality. Equally important is the merit of the book's Jewish content. Few books will meet all of the criteria for excellence identified in this guide but the books of Jewish content that librarians select, reviewers praise and judges award should approach the highest standards in both general literary criteria and those applied to Jewish children's literature.

JUDGING JEWISH CONTENT

Accuracy

Accuracy is essential in dates, spelling, identification of objects, and empirically verifiable facts. Interpretations are based on reputable scholarship. Conflicting points of view are balanced. The author's point of view, if partisan, is clearly stated. The depiction of historical periods, events or processes is not distorted or over-simplified. Careful research and editing are evident.

Age-appropriateness

A distinction must be made between "picture books", i.e., those aimed at younger readers, and "illustrated books,"

which are for older readers. Picture books are usually characterized by short sentences, playful language, and concepts complemented by clear, concrete illustrations. In illustrated books, the subject matter is more serious or abstract, the theme and language more sophisticated, and the illustrations may be somber or dark.

Authenticity

Jewish beliefs, characters, settings, and experiences should be portrayed without sentimentality, distortion or stereotyping, in words or illustrations. Authenticity is achieved when individuals are shown interacting with Jewish belief, tradition, history, and practice in a manner that is both truthful and respectful, although the perspective may be satirical or critical. Sometimes, there will be no explicit Jewish content, as in stories by the Hasidic masters that imply or assume a Jewish setting, characters, theme or audience.

Depth of Jewish Content

Contemporary Judaism is pluralistic and this is reflected in children's books. The content may range from fully observant to marginally Jewish. In the former, Torah values are central and virtually all aspects of life are portrayed from a Jewish perspective. In more mainstream books, Jewish individuals are found in

secular stories. Setting, theme, plot development, climax and denouement do not depend on the character as a Jew but on a person who happens to be Jewish.

Positive Focus and Values

Jewish values are those that have special emphasis in the Jewish tradition and are often tied to Jewish texts. However universal they may be, there is a particularly Jewish way of looking at them and they are a vital, living force in Jews' lives. Whether serious or light-hearted, Jewish children's literature should have something Jewish to say to readers. While positive content is desirable but not always possible, a positive Jewish focus will tell the reader "L'chaim, choose life."

Sensitivity

Literature of Jewish content should promote respect for and understanding of Judaism. The use of Christological terms like "A.D." and "Old Testament" should be avoided, along with Christian interpretations of the Bible and proselytizing. It should also be recognized that not all Jews are Caucasian or Ashkenazic in origin. Sensitivity to this issue includes an awareness of cultural and racial differences among Jews, as well as differing levels and forms of Jewish observance.

JUDGING LITERARY AND ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE

Fiction

- Characterization
- Point of View
- Plot
- Setting
- Style
- Theme

Non-Fiction

- Accuracy and authenticity
- Content and perspective
- Illustrations and format
- Organization
- Point of View
- Style

Picture Books

- Age-appropriateness
- Book design
- Format
- Harmony between words and pictures
- Illustrations extend and enhance the story
- Illustrations are technically accomplished
- Illustrations are original, not trite or commercial

Illustrated Books

- Accuracy and authenticity

- Age-appropriateness (usually for older readers)
- Format and design are appropriate to content
- Illustrations are integral to plot, subject, or theme.
- Well-written and engrossing narrative.

RESOURCES

- *AJL's New Jewish Valuesfinder:* www.ajljewishvalues.org
- "Artspeak" on *School Library Journal's* website: www.slj.com
- *Children's Literature in the Elementary School, 7th Ed.*, edited by Charlotte Huck, et al (McGraw Hill, 2001).
- "Judging Judaica" by Linda R. Silver, *School Library Journal*, Jan. 2002.

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EXCELLENCE IN JEWISH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

**A Guide for Book
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