

All-Of-A-Kind Family, Not Anymore/High Holidays and Beyond *Mira Reisberg*

Description: There is a need to write Jewish children's books that speak to the recent fascinating and much discussed poll of the American Jewish community by the Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. This first major survey of American Jews in more than ten years finds a significant rise in those who are not religious, marry outside the faith, and are not raising their children Jewish. How will the Jewish community (and by extension, Jewish libraries) cope with these changes and how will good Jewish children's books help us succeed in raising Jewish kids?

While the High Holy Days and Holocaust related stories make up a large share of Jewish-themed children's literature, there is also a growing body of published books that tap into Jewish culture through humor and exploration of cultural values and identifiers such as social justice themes, Chelm stories, and Yiddishkeit books. This presentation explores these books and their value in education.

Dr. Mira Reisberg is the founder of The Picture Book Academy (www.picturebookacademy.com). Following the success of her students, she was mentored by Karen Grencik of Red Fox Literary to found her own agency, Hummingbird Literary. Mira's PhD is in Education and Cultural Studies with a focus on children's literature.

Hullo everyone, It's very exciting to be here with so many of my landsman, which means fellow countrymen or fellow Jews in Yiddish, my first language. I'd like to start by spending a couple of minutes talking about why I'm passionate about Jewish children's literature and multicultural kids books in general.

Growing up in Australia, the only people who looked like me in children's books were the wicked witch or the ugly stepsisters. I grew up in Australia because Australia was one of the few countries that wanted Jews after the war as a source of cheap labor.

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As the daughter of holocaust survivors, I was raised with the prime directive to help make the world a better place and have been involved with multicultural literature as a university professor, a teacher and mentor to many others, and as an award winning illustrator and writer.

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Now as the director of The Children's Book Academy and as a Literary Agent, I help others get published. So I'm going to be speaking to you both as librarians on the lookout for good Jewish themed books and as children's book creative yourselves. So without further ado here is my presentation! I'll be going fairly fast but don't worry, I've set up a link for you at the end, to join our Academy tribe where you'll get access to free webinars and all sorts of goodies and a copy of this presentation if you like!

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I'm also a researcher with a penchant for excess so I decided to try to focus just on contemporary non-holocaust or non-religious Kid Lit with an exception for Yiddishkeit. But that was just about impossible, so instead I focused on recently published children's books loosely organized into these overlapping categories.

- 1) Fiction
- 2) Spirituality
- 3) Slice of Life
- 4) Nonfiction
- 5) Humor/ Yiddishkeit

But first a quickie disclaimer, this is by no means a comprehensive list. It couldn't be. In some ways this is a golden era for Jewish kid lit and in other ways we could do much better. And now for the show...

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There's a fabulous range of fiction stories with Jewish characters or Jewish themes. These books range from science fiction to tushy stories to hip young adult novels dealing with holocaust in very contemporary ways. Now clearly, Tushy could also fit in the humor section, but as these are Jewish books, that category was already pretty full.

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We have paranormal orthodox fantasy books, graphic novels with heroic heroines, and Jewish/Christian boundary crossing novels that deal smartly with interfaith attraction and anti-semitism. How hip is that? The key here is that most kids versed in popular culture, want hip and groovy, and these kinds of approaches also have cross-over appeal to non-Jews who we also really need to be connecting with in the battle against racism.

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So moving on. Many Jewish fictions stories incorporate or encourage aspects of Jewish religion or spirituality as these books here do.

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I love how enticing so many newer Jewish kids books are as seen in these joyous books here. And I also love that the concept of mitzvah's or doing good deeds is done so playfully in these two examples. These are not didactic preachy books wagging fingers as "must do" but rather are like the old rabbis who taught the aleph bet by coating the letters in honey to show the sweetness in learning.

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Here are a few more fresh contemporary examples of spirituality or religious kid's books. The last one Honeky Hanukkah is interesting because it's actually a song by Woody Guthrie with a fascinating backstory, repurposed into a picture book. Shabbat Puppy for very young children, could easily also fit in our Slice of Life category as Noah and his grandpa explore the concept of Sabbath Peace along with Noah's puppy.

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Next up is probably my favorite category. Perhaps because I love Yiddish or the mamenloschen. Many of the books in this category, such as Can Hen's Give Milk?, descend from the great tradition of Chelm stories, which according to Ruth VonBernuth date back to the 1500's. Ziggy's Big Idea is all about Jewish inventiveness and is about one of our greatest inventions – the bagel.

While Oy, Feh, So? – Well say no more! – Lot's of fantasy, fun, and sang froid in these three books.

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Here are some other favorites worth sharing that are either good for a giggle or highlight the Yiddish experience in some way such as Rifka Takes a Bow about the old Yiddish Theater days in New York.

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Now for our Slice of Life – or the lives of everyday Jews, which also sometimes strays into the nonfiction. Mira (no relation) In The Present Tense is fiction but it deals with the core experience of life and death in a 12 year old Jewish East Indian girl's life. Julia's Kitchen also deals with death, anxiety, and another core Jewish element – food, while I Live With My Mommy, is all about divorce in a Jewish family. These stories, while providing interesting reading, also provide valuable instructives for kids navigating the treacherous terrain of growing up.

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In this set of slice of life story books Zayde Comes to Live is a beautiful meditation on death through the eyes of a young child. Mendy of Siberia is part of a fascinating series of nonfiction stories about Jewish kids around the world. While Always an Olivia is an intriguing true-life story told from an elderly black grandmother's perspective about the family's Jewish heritage.

Slide 14 Finally we end this section with some Jewish biographies. I particularly want to point out how contemporary these books look, starting with a cartoon-like graphic novel, a hip retro look and a retro digital painting. Personally I think Kar-Ben has some of the best designed and illustrated Jewish kid's books and I promise I wasn't paid to say that.

Now before I complete this presentation, I'd like to a little about the where we could do better areas of Jewish publishing and this part is speaking particularly to children's book writers and illustrators or aspiring writers and illustrators as well as to some of the publishers among us. Being a critical agent, editor and teacher, that part is sometimes in the quality of the writing or the illustrating and the design. Many of the books that I read preparing for this presentation had prosaic writing or plots or mundane illustrations or outdated design. If you are a writer or illustrator, I encourage you to infuse your stories with poetic devices like alliteration, assonance, consonance, metaphor, simile, onomatopoeia, and so much more. Think about the narrative arc a hero goes through and raise the stakes. Show your hero's insecurities or deficits that later become assets, make your obstacles successively more challenging, make us root for your character on their journey. For illustrators, move outside your comfort zone and experiment with new techniques like collage and mixed media or stylize your characters so they are cuter and hipper like many of the characters in Kar-Ben's books These approaches will open more doors for you. And if you are open to exploring your creative side or deepening your knowledge of children's books while making them, do check us out at the Academy.

New York editors, many of whom are Jewish, would love to publish more Jewish books but these days with bigger publishers, those submissions need to be just about perfect. Personally, I'm looking for hilarious, secular non-rhyming writers or illustrators or better yet

author/illustrators. If that sounds like you, please query me at query@hummingbirdliterary.com with the words hilarious Jewish Libraries writer in the subject line.

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So just to do a quick wrap up, I'm delighted to say Jewish children's literature has entered the 21st century with style and substance. If I'd had these books growing up my life would have been very different. So I just want to say Mazeltov to all the Jewish children's book creative, publishers, and librarians that have helped make this happen as well as the Jewish and non-Jewish parents and children that have supported them. And if you are a very beginning to multi-published children's book creative do check us out at the Children's Book Academy.

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Thank You and here's where you can get a copy of this PowerPoint.