

BEYOND FAYE KELLERMAN: POPULAR JEWISH FICTION IN YOUR LIBRARY

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Description: Bring readers of popular fiction into your library with great Jewish mysteries, thrillers, science fiction, and historical fiction. Find out who the best authors are. Learn readers' advisory techniques that will help you recommend specific titles to your library patrons. Bibliographies will be available.

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This morning I'm going to talk about 2 things: how to do readers' advisory work in synagogue libraries with readers who enjoy popular fiction and how to find that popular fiction for your collection.

What is readers' advisory work?

Reader's advisory work connects readers and the books they enjoy reading. As librarian at my synagogue, members of my congregation often ask me to suggest a good book. "What should I read?" they ask. "I just finished *The Red Tent*—what else do you have that's good like that?" Or, "I didn't like *The Red Tent* at all—it's not my kind of book, can you recommend something else?" Or, "I'm going on a trip and I need a good book to take along to read on the plane." I assume you get questions like that, too. What I'll be talking about this morning is how you can help your congregants discover the fiction they love to read in their synagogue library. And although I'll be referring mainly to genre fiction, these techniques can be used with all literature.

Why should we do readers' advisory work?

Library work has always been about bringing readers and books together. In my own synagogue library, I want congregants to think of the library as an alternative to their public library—a place where they can fill all of their reading needs, informational and recreational. I want my synagogue library to be a place where books are discussed, where good books can be readily found, in a library that I believe is easier and more friendly to use than the public library. I want to expand readers horizons and help them follow their reading interests from one kind of fiction to another and to non-fiction as well. And, I hope that by encouraging these things I can contribute to creating community in our congregation.

What is genre fiction?

Genre fiction is any sizable group of novels that have similar characteristics and appeal; these are books written to a specific pattern. This is not meant in any way to be disparaging or judgmental, but to mean that when we read genre fiction, we have some expectations. For instance, if we pick up a mystery, we expect to find there's been a crime, usually murder, and the perpetrator needs to be found. There's a puzzle at the heart of a mystery. A thriller will have a strong element of

suspense; real or threatened violence; and involves secrets, deceit, treachery, and questions of trust. Science fiction will take place in some imagined period of time. Historical fiction will recreate an earlier time. In a romance novel, the love interest is the primary focus of the plot. Beyond these basic patterns, the author's imagination sets the limits. Jewish fiction exists in all genres.

What is not genre fiction?

Fiction that doesn't fall into one of the many genre categories is often called literary fiction or mainstream fiction. Language is very important in literary fiction; readers may refer to these books as "well written." Character development is very important while action may play a secondary role. Plots are often open-ended and ambiguous and may deal with philosophical questions. Literary fiction often leaves reader with issues to think about in relation to their own lives. It is the fiction that receives critical evaluation in review sources like the *The New York Times Book Review* and merits consideration for literary awards.

What is Jewish fiction?

For the purpose of this talk, Jewish fiction means novels that deal with Jewish themes or have a Jewish setting, and are almost always written by Jewish authors. Some familiar examples from the mystery genre: Sharon Kahn's series *Ruby the Rabbi's Wife*, about the widow of a rabbi who solves murders among members of her congregation in Texas. Synagogue politics and personalities mix with familiar Jewish food. There are 3 titles currently available: *Fax Me a Bagel*, *Never Nosh a Matzo Ball*, and *Don't Cry for Me Hot Pastrami*. Another example: Alan Dershowitz's legal thriller *Just Revenge*, which examines the guilt of a Holocaust survivor who takes revenge on a former concentration camp guard now living a quiet life in Boston. The action of Janice Steinberg's *Death in a City of Mystics* takes place in the holy city of Safed, Israel and involves a teacher of Kabbalah. It is not necessary here to have a detailed discussion of what is a Jewish novel, since ultimately you will be making that decision for yourself in your selection policy based on your institution's needs. The bibliographies I've prepared as handouts include a selected group of titles in the genres of mystery, thriller, and historical fiction, that are based on this definition of a Jewish novel. I've put the lists together with synagogue libraries in mind. They are titles where characters are more than nominally Jewish and/or Jewish themes are given more than lip service. In other words, if a character identifies him or herself as Jewish, and there are a few Yiddish words in the novel, but that's the extent of it, then I'm not sure it's Jewish literature. I limited the authors to American writers, meaning U.S.; there may be a few Canadians, but no British or other Commonwealth writers and there are no translations. The bibliographies will be available from the AJL Bibliography Bank after this convention.

How can we suggest novels to our library patrons?

By becoming familiar with genre fiction, and having conversations about what the reader enjoys in novels, based on something called appeal characteristics. A reader may say to you, "I really enjoyed Benjamin Liss's *Conspiracy of Paper*, do you have another good novel like that?" Even though you may have read *Conspiracy of Paper* and enjoyed it, you can't answer that question until you know what the reader liked about the novel. The important thing is to get the reader

talking by asking open-ended questions. The question to ask is not “what do you like to read,” which asks the reader to articulate something they may not be able to do on the spur of the moment. Ask instead, “what did you read recently and what did you enjoy about it?” In the case of *Conspiracy of Paper*, the reader might stress the historical setting, or that the character of Benjamin Weaver was appealing—the independent, feisty loner, making his way in opposition to his family, inventing his life as he goes along, tough but principled. Or, the reader may have been very curious about whether or not Weaver would solve the puzzle of his father’s murder. Maybe reading about the situation of Jews in England in that time period, or learning about the London underworld and the financial markets was the main interest. Possibly the realism of the story was appealing, the fact that it was violent and gritty.

The appeal elements of a novel

These comments reveal something about what characteristics of the novel appealed to the reader. I will define different types of appeal characteristics so that you can start to think about them in relation to your own reading, and use them when you talk to readers. What I am about to discuss is adapted from several excellent books on readers’ advisory work as well as my own experiences. If you want to read further, look for the books by Joyce Saricks on readers’ advisory work: *Readers’ Advisory Service in the Public Library* and *The Readers’ Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction* published by ALA, and also an excellent book called *Now Read This* by Nancy Pearl, and the recent *Now Read This II*, both published by Libraries Unlimited. When you read a book you enjoyed and you describe it to someone else, you will probably focus on one or possibly two of the following appeal characteristics: plot, character, pacing and setting. Readers are not usually looking for a novel on a certain subject; they want a book with a certain “feel” to it. If someone tells you they enjoyed *The Bee Season* that doesn’t mean they want another book about a spelling prodigy whose mother is a kleptomaniac, but it may mean that the reader enjoys novels with interesting and unusual characters. If I talk to a friend about why I enjoy Marissa Piesman’s Nina Fischman mysteries, I’m likely to talk about Nina’s hilarious social commentary about New York thirty-somethings rather than about details of the stories. If you think about how you would describe the last novel you enjoyed, chances are you will use one or more of those appeal elements.

Plot

In a story where plot is the primary appeal, readers may say “I just loved the story, I couldn’t wait to find out what happened next, it kept me up late, it was such great entertainment.” In a plot-driven novel, the story dominates; the reader wants to know what happens next. The novel can be fast paced, like a thriller, or more leisurely, serious drama, or soap opera, action-oriented, or a psychological study. Examples from Jewish genre fiction of plot-driven novels would be the thriller *The Shadow Man* by John Katzenbach. This is a particularly terrifying story about a Holocaust survivor in present-day Miami who is murdered by a man who had been a “catcher” for the Nazis in World War II. The police, of course, don’t believe this is possible, but Sophie’s survivor friends know that they are next on the Shadow Man’s list. Another example is Rochelle Krich’s mystery *Till Death Do Us Part*, about an Orthodox woman whose husband won’t give her a divorce, a “get,” and then when he is murdered, his wife is considered a suspect.

Character

In a story where character is the primary appeal, the characters seem so real that we expect to meet them. In a character-driven novel, characters can be developed in different ways. Do we get to know the characters gradually or do we recognize them right away because they have some stereotypical features? Is there a main character and everyone else is of little importance, or are all the characters well developed? Do we learn the story from a character's point of view or the author's? Is the story told in the first person, third person, or by an omniscient narrator? Is the character developed over the course of a series? In series mysteries, for instance, character is often the appeal. People become so caught up in the personal lives of characters that they are more eager to find out what is going on in their personal lives than in the mystery. The development of characters over several novels is more common now than ever and makes readers into loyal fans. Publishers love series because they generate sales. Series mysteries are now often on the bestseller list because readers want to know what's happening to their favorite characters. A Jewish series that I am particularly fond of is the Abe Lieberman mystery series by Stuart Kaminsky. Lieberman is a tough, compassionate, aging cop in Chicago who isn't above pushing the limits of the law to make things work out right. He has an Irish partner, Bill Hanrahan, whose drinking sometimes gets in the way of his job, and Abe covers for him. They refer to themselves the Rabbi and the Priest. Lieberman has a complicated family life: his daughter keeps getting married and divorced and coming back home with her kids and Abe's synagogue wants him to serve on committees. Another example from historical fiction: *That Year of Our War* by Gloria Goldreich, about Sharon Grossberg, a teenage girl growing up in Brooklyn during WWII, whose mother dies of cancer while her father is serving overseas. She is taken in by her mother's sisters and as everyone waits for news of loved ones in the War, Sharon grows older and wiser as she learns about love, death, and betrayal. *Sabbathday River* by Jean Hanff Korelitz, a legal thriller, is shaped by the personalities of the principle characters in a very engrossing way.

Pacing

Pacing may be the first element you are aware of when reading because it has a physical effect: you may find a book a relaxing read or a stimulating one. When readers talk about books they enjoyed because of the pacing, they may say: "It was 600 pages but I was so engrossed I didn't notice how long it was." In books where fast pacing is key, the author may jump into the action and move it along with short sentences, short chapters and lots of dialogue. Or the author may take time revealing the characters and the plot, building and enriching the flow of the story. The plot may follow a straight path, or there may be flashbacks, or multiple points of view. In the thriller *Zaddik* by David Rosenbaum, the reader jumps right into the thick of the plot with a murder and the tension doesn't let up until the end. In the thriller *The Thirteenth Hour* by Barbara Sofer, two women, an Israeli and a Palestinian are pressured into working with the Mossad and the PLO. In this novel, the tension builds slowly and steadily, as the author takes the time to develop the characters of the two women and their family situations. It may be that since the author takes the time to develop the situation in such detail, the slow buildup of tension may be more satisfying to some readers. Pacing is typically slower in historical fiction and readers may have expectations for a more leisurely read. They are willing to spend the time the author takes to set up the story and build a fully realized world. Some historical fiction examples are *As*

A Driven Leaf by Milton Steinberg, set in the first century C.E. where the author brings the reader into the world of the Sanhedrin and Roman politics, and Jewish philosophical debates in that era, or *The Family Orchard* by Nomi Eve which gradually, through the use of letters, photos and even textbook excerpts, builds to give a picture of a family's history. In the recently reprinted historical novel *Quiet Street* by Zelda Popkin, there's a very skillful use of pacing. In that novel, Popkin writes about the residents of a street in the Rehavia neighborhood of Jerusalem for the six months around the creation of the state of Israel in 1947. If you graphed the pacing and buildup of tension, it would be a continuous upward motion as we get to know the characters and live with their escalating fears.

Frame

This is a complex appeal characteristic that refers to the context of a novel. For example, Gay Courter's historical novel *Flowers in the Blood* is set in Victorian India in the Jewish community, in Calcutta. This setting really characterizes the book; the customs of the Indian Jewish community, the exotic lifestyle of the heroine and the people she meets, the opium trade that makes her family rich, are all part of an unusual frame that distinguishes this novel. Some novels are rich in this kind of detail and readers may be looking for novels where they learn something while reading. Another example is *The Jerusalem Diamond* by Noah Gordon, which has a great deal of information about the history of Jews in the diamond business. Frame also refers to the tone in which the story is written, which may be anything from bleak to suspenseful, upbeat, humorous, magical, or romantic. The atmosphere may seem foreboding or menacing, or more evocative in some other way. Lillian Nattel's *The River Midnight* owes a lot of its effectiveness to the tone the author sets, the magical, mysterious world of the village where anything can happen, and frequently does. The Joshua Rabb mysteries by Richard Parrish have a bleak tone that matches the desert landscape where they are set.

Using the appeal characteristics with readers (plot, character, pacing, frame)

When we think about these appeal characteristics, we are measuring or evaluating books not by literary or critical standards, but by readers' perceptions. This allows us to talk to readers about books without making judgements about what people read. Focusing on the appeal of a book allows you to remember and retrieve more about the books you have read than if you just focused on plot. We need to be able to describe books the way they naturally affect us as readers.

The key to successful reader's advisory work is in:

1. Reading a book with an eye to its appeal. What are the book's best features? What features about the book might limit its appeal to certain readers, e.g., sex, violence, language, subject matter?
2. Grouping books with other titles that have similar appeal. What other books are like this book? What other books would appeal to the reader who enjoyed this one? Is it a genre book? With practice, this technique can be applied to books only heard about, not read.
3. Considering how a book fits into a genre. It is helpful to recognize the subgenres within a genre and how authors within a genre are similar or dissimilar. Readers may like mysteries about private investigators but not humorous amateur detectives. Historical fiction fans may

enjoy family sagas but not if they are overly romantic. The thriller genre has many subgenres: legal, medical/scientific, espionage, corporate, political, techno, and military, each with their own fans.

If you become conscious of these elements as you do your own reading, when you speak to readers, you will find it easier to make suggestions. Obviously, you can't possibly read all the fiction you have in your library, but you'll find as you think more in these categories, you can pick up clues as to appeal characteristics from reviews. Some of the words reviewers use will help you to characterize works to some extent, even though you haven't read them. You can also pick up a great deal from spending a few minutes examining a book. How much dialogue is there as opposed to description? From reading the first few pages, you can get a sense for how quickly the author lays out the expository material and how the characters are introduced. The length of sentences, paragraphs, and chapters will give you a sense of the pacing. How has the publisher positioned the book, i.e., are there references to other authors for comparison? When you talk to readers about what they like about books, you will hear their descriptions of what was plot-driven, character-driven, fast-paced, etc. so you can learn about other authors and titles.

When discussing books, ask what appealed to the reader and rephrase their responses in terms of the appeal characteristics. The interview gives you an opportunity to learn something about the reader's taste in books so you can start to make suggestions. Feedback from your suggestions helps to refine your understanding of that reader over time. It also lets that reader know that you enjoy talking about books, and you'll find that you'll have more of those conversations. You may want to start a file connecting authors and titles, or create bibliographies that would connect authors and titles. You can bring readers in by connecting authors in your library to secular authors a reader might like. For instance, readers who enjoy Ken Follett's fast-paced historically-based political thrillers might also enjoy thrillers with a Middle Eastern theme that have significant Jewish content, like *Spy Dance* by Alan Topol, or *The End of Days* by Moris Farhi. There's an online reference tool called *Novelist* that makes connections among novels and authors. You may have access to it at your local public library. At the bottom of each title listing on Amazon.com there are subject headings that can be used to search for additional related novels. The way fiction is grouped in a library can be daunting to someone coming in to find a "good" book from their perspective. Try grouping genres together, using labels and displays. Watch what circulates to learn where to focus your buying. Talk to your readers, let them recommend. If you don't know about a genre, ask fans of the genre about a few good titles so that you can make recommendations. Read a few titles to get a sense of what the appeal of the genre is.

How to find the popular fiction for your collection

Since Jewish popular fiction is not always reviewed in the sources that review Judaica (*AJL Newsletter* and *Jewish Book World*) you need to go farther afield to find it. You can find it reviewed in the four standard library review sources: *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal*, *Booklist*, and *Kirkus Reviews* by scanning those journals periodically at your local public library. Once you have identified authors, then you can keep tabs on their books on Amazon.com or Barnes & Noble.com, through author websites, genre websites, or Jewish book websites.

In genre fiction, titles that are initially published in hardcover don't remain in hardcover very long. Initial hardcover sales of genre come from libraries, from people buying books as gifts, or from diehard fans who must have the newest title from their favorite author. The long term sales for publishers come from paperbacks. Even in paper, genre titles go out of print fairly quickly, so you need to decide whether you are willing to spend more money to have the hardcover during the initial period of popularity, or if you can wait and buy the inexpensive paperback edition. Since these titles do go out of print even in paperback, you need to stay current about what is available. It is possible to find out of print titles if you are creative and persistent. Used book sales in your community, specialty book stores, and donations from congregants may turn up copies. Sometimes good older titles are reprinted. Meredith Tax's two excellent historical novels *Rivington Street* and *Union Square* were recently reprinted by the University of Illinois Press in sturdy paperback editions. Syracuse University Press, The Feminist Press, and Behrman House sometimes reprint some of the good older Jewish fiction. Jewish Contemporary Classics, an audiobook publisher, is a good source for Jewish books on tape and CD.

In summary, I've tried to provide some new ways to think about genre fiction, so that you can make it part of your library and bring readers to it. I hope you find these readers' advisory techniques helpful and that I've given you some food for thought, both in my talk and through the bibliographies. If you have any questions, please feel free to talk to me after this session or to email me. I love to talk about Jewish books. Thank you.

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