

## WHAT IS – AND WHAT ISN'T – A JEWISH BOOK?

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The AJL Newsletter reviews books of Jewish content, but because what that means is less clear than it used to be, the question needs to be revisited. Dov Noy, the director of the Israeli Folk Archives and Nina Jaffe, a Sydney Taylor Award winning author, have both described the characteristics of a folktale Jewish and that description has been extended to all of the books for children and teens reviewed in the AJL Newsletter. The characteristics are, very simply, Jewish time, Jewish setting, Jewish characters, Jewish theme, and/or an assumption on the author or teller's part that the meaning will have particular resonance with Jews. The Jewish books for children and teens reviewed in the Newsletter need not have all of these characteristics but they must have some of them. Once reviewers establish that a review book meets at least some of these criteria, they then are asked to evaluate it not only in general literary terms but also by taking into consideration such issues as reputable scholarship, age-appropriateness, authenticity, depth of Jewish content, positive value or focus, and sensitivity to Jewish concerns. (See "[Excellence in Jewish Children's Literature: A Guide for Book Selectors, Reviewers, and Award Judges](#)" on the AJL website.)

Two past Sydney Taylor award winners for younger children provide good examples of how these descriptive and evaluative criteria are applied. The word "Jewish" is never used in either Esther Hershenhorn's *Chicken Soup by Heart* or Aubrey Davis's *Bagels for Benny*. But in the latter, the Jewish content is obvious by virtue of the setting – the Holy Ark of the synagogue where Benny leaves his offerings to God - and in the theme, which is that in doing mitzvot or good deeds, we thank God by helping to repair the world. It could never be mistaken for anything but a Jewish book, even though its message also resonates with readers who are not Jewish (as most outstanding Jewish books do.)

The Jewish content of *Chicken Soup by Heart* is less obvious. There are no characters who are identified as Jewish, nothing about the apartment setting that implies a Jewish place, and no reference to Jewish time, such as a holiday or life cycle event. A hint is given by the name of the elderly woman, Mrs. Gittel, for whom a little boy makes chicken soup when she is sick, just as she makes it for him when he is sick. The stories he remembers about Mrs. Gittel as he adds ingredients to the soup have Jewish resonance, however, as does Mrs. Gittel's speech, which is Yiddish inflected. Moreover, the theme of caring for the sick conveys an important Jewish value. There is little doubt that both of these picture books have strong, albeit varying degrees, of Jewish content.

A growing trend in books from secular publishers, especially those for teens, is to merely identify or, even more merely, to suggest that a character is Jewish and nothing more. In *Notes from a Midnight Driver*, a 2007 Sydney Taylor notable book for teens, the only hint that one of the characters is Jewish is that he spouts Yiddish. The possibility that he is Jewish is irrelevant to the book's plot or meaning – any ethnic group with some

distinctive speech pattern would do. There are no expressly Jewish values in the book, either; it is a cute, wholesome, but Jewishly-neutral story. Much the same can be said of another new teen novel called *Brand X: The Boyfriend Account*. In it, the reader is told that the main character is Jewish but that is the sum total of the Jewish content. No aspect of the setting, plot, point of view, or theme has any Jewish resonance; it too, is Jewishly neutral. Both of these novels will be enjoyed by teenage readers but by only the loosest definition of the term “Jewish content” could they be considered to be part of Jewish literature. We may regard this incidental Jewishness as a sign of Jews’ acceptance into the mainstream of society - the ascendancy of the melting pot model over the one of cultural pluralism – but in the melting pot, the differences that define us as a people disappear. In both practical and philosophical terms, should the Jewish review media review books whose Jewish content is non-existent?

This question pertains as well to books on subjects that are important to Jews but that in and of themselves have no Jewish content. Peace is such a subject. There have been several recent children’s books that promote the blessings of peace in a completely universalistic manner. With perhaps one or two exceptions, no religion is opposed to peace. But despite the fact that Judaism cherishes peace, that alone does not make a book “Jewish.” As reviewers and book selectors, it is important for us to preserve the integrity of a genuinely Jewish literature by making these distinctions.