

WHERE ARE THE JEWISH MIDDLE-GRADE BOOKS?

**Catriella Freedman, Madelyn Travis, Miriam Newman,
Laura Toffler-Corrie**

Description: The panel will discuss the challenges and opportunities in developing middle grade literature from the perspective of readership, writing, publishing and marketing. Catriella will share insights from four years of market testing books with tweens, including PJ Our Way's selection criteria, as well as a discussion of their three selection principles: market testing, author support, and user feedback.

Catriella Freedman is the director of PJ Our Way™, the next chapter of PJ Library for kids ages 9-11. As director, her focus is on supporting and encouraging authors to develop new and exciting middle-grade books with Jewish content. Catriella holds a BA in religion from Princeton University and an MA in Jewish studies from Harvard University, where she received the Derek Bok Award for graduate teaching. She loves teaching and has lectured widely on subjects ranging from Maimonides to Jewish peoplehood. Catriella is the author of the Melton curriculum *Foundations for Jewish Family Living* and Beit Hatfutsot's *My Family Story* curriculum. She lives in Zichron Ya'akov, Israel, with her husband, four kids, and Miles the three-legged dog.

Madelyn Travis is a member of the PJ Our Way Book Selection Committee and chair of the PJ Library Content Advisory Committee. She has a PhD in children's literature and is the author of *Jews and Jewishness in British Children's Literature* (Routledge, 2013). A children's literature consultant, journalist and editor, Madelyn has written for the *Horn Book* magazine, *Jewish Chronicle*, *Jewish Quarterly*, *Books for Keeps* and the *Ultimate Book Guides* series. She was an advisor on the new edition of the *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* and was website features editor for the British charity Book Trust, for whom she led a national research project into primary and secondary school library provision. She is also a freelance editor and has worked for publishers including Walker Books, Scholastic and Egmont. Originally from New York, she now lives in London.

Miriam Newman is an associate editor at Candlewick Press, where she works primarily on fiction for ages 8 and up. She is the editor of Amy Rose Capetta's *Echo After Echo*, Hayley Chewins's *The Turnaway Girls* (October 2018), and the American editor for Lucy Adlington's *The Red Ribbon* (September 2018) as well as novels by Alison Croggon and Celine Kiernan. Other books she's worked on include the middle-grade historical fiction *The Hired Girl*, the middle-grade fantasy *The Evil Wizard Smallbone* by Delia Sherman, and the feminist historical fiction anthologies *A Tyranny of Petticoats* and *The Radical Element*, edited by Jessica Spotswood, as well as books by Martin W. Sandler, Avi, Kathryn Lasky, and Cynthia Leitich Smith. In addition, Miriam coordinates the paperback fiction program at Candlewick.

Laura Toffler-Corrie is the author of the middle grade and young adult novels *The Life and Opinions of Amy Finawitz* and *My Totally Awkward Supernatural Crush* (MacMillan). She teaches creative writing and literature courses at Pace University and holds an MFA from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in Dramatic Writing. Laura resides in Westchester, NY with her husband, daughters and a variety of large and small animals.

The PJ Our Way Framework

Catriella Freedman

Since its creation nearly 12 years ago, PJ Library has become a powerful engagement and literacy tool, sending more than 200,000 books every month to kids ages 0-8 years old. Naturally, the question arose: why should such a successful program end at age 8? Why not expand it so that older kids can benefit from the Jewish stories that will keep them participating in the Jewish conversation? For this reason, the Harold Grinspoon Foundation created PJ Our Way, the next chapter of PJ Library, for kids ages 9-11. Now available throughout the United States, PJ Our Way currently has more than 28,500 subscribers and mails out more than 17,000 books a month, books that kids choose themselves.

And yet, a major question of interest to librarians remains: can PJ Our Way continue to engage older kids with books that they are reading independently? Will they make the connections between books and their Jewish lives? This year PJ Our Way completed a family survey of subscribers (kids) and their parents. With a 29% response rate (more than 6,000 families completed the survey), the results are considered robust. It is also important to note that this was the largest survey of kids in this age group conducted by a non-profit Jewish organization.

According to survey results:

- 96% of parents say that they and their kids have been satisfied or very satisfied with the program
- 90% are very likely to recommend PJ Our Way to friends and family
- 3 out of 4 kids would recommend the program to their peers
- 69% of kids say they have read most or all their books all the way through.

To answer our question above

- 91% of parents say that the books help their family talk about Jewish things such as traditions, values, and/or customs
- 90% have received questions from their kids about the Jewish things in PJ Our Way books
- 88% of kids say the books have helped them learn about Judaism

These results help prove that middle-grade books can continue to engage families in the Jewish conversation and that both parents and kids are able to extrapolate Jewish examples from the characters they read about.

While the survey results show the continued power of the story, the greatest challenge for PJ Our Way continues to be in finding quality Jewish middle-grade books that kids will want to read. Two issues underscore the issue: **the lack of Jewish content in middle-grade books** and **confusion in defining the category of middle grade**. Our panel participants will discuss this challenge from the point of view of a reviewer/academic, publisher, and author. Before we turn to them, here's how PJ Our Way tries to address the challenge:

1. Author Support: in partnership with PJ Library, PJ Our Way offers ways to support and encourage talented authors to write Jewish middle grade books:
 - a. Author Incentive: for each *new*, unpublished manuscript submitted that is accepted by the Book Selection Committee for use in the program, the author receives a \$5,000 award. This incentive has run since August 2017 and has allowed for the completion of eight middle-grade books (with three more on the way).
 - b. Workshops: PJ Library has sponsored the Yiddish Book Center's Tent authors workshop and retreat for emerging and mid-career picture book and middle-grade authors and illustrators.

- c. Author Israel trip: PJ Library has organized and sponsored 20 picture book and middle-grade authors and illustrators to discover Israel, its history, and the many Jewish stories found there.
2. Market testing: An integral part of book selection is feedback from kids via the Kids Advisory Committee. Kids read published books as well as manuscripts and give valuable feedback via a review template. Their feedback is integral in deciding whether or not to move forward with a book or manuscript.
3. User feedback: Subscribers are encouraged to post reviews on the website. These reviews, along with selection rates, give the book selection committee a good sense of how popular and readable the book is and helps to determine whether the book will be offered again.

The Issues of Content and Defining the Middle-Grade Category

Madelyn Travis

There are two sub-questions in the title of this workshop: what is a Jewish book and what is a middle-grade book?

Jews don't fit neatly into the discourse of diversity in children's literature. There is no shortage of books about the Holocaust, or immigration stories, so one of our aims at PJ Our Way is to find books in which American-Jewish kids today can see people like themselves or like people they know. This is a challenge, partly because publishers often define Jewishness in terms of religion and not in a wider sense to include ethnicity or culture, and also because religion is not considered a popular subject in kids' books, either with readers or with publishers.

Some Jewish authors who don't include Jewish content in their books define their Jewish identity in terms of culture and ethnicity rather than religious belief, and acknowledge that they do not feel confident about portraying a Jewish character in contemporary fiction because they believe that religious observance is the only way in which to depict Jewishness. For more Jewish characters to appear in middle-grade books, authors and publishers need to identify other ways in which contemporary Jewishness can be represented. Seeing Jewish characters in books in diverse genres, such as mystery or fantasy, would be a welcome development.

Confusion over the middle-grade boundary

PJ Our Way is for kids ages 9-11, an age group traditionally categorized as middle grade. At PJ Our Way, when we talk about middle grade, we are thinking of books like *The Penderwicks*, *Liar and Spy* or a *Series of Unfortunate Events*. But with the age boundary of middle grade shifting upwards to ages 10-14 in some publishing houses, PJ Our Way often straddles a boundary of older chapter books and younger middle grade. That makes it a challenge to find books for our older readers of 10 and 11 that don't include traditionally more young adult material, such as sexual innuendo, swearing, emotionally mature content, or sometimes just a more streetwise and mature protagonist voice. Sometimes we will work with an author to tone down some content or slightly change focus so that a manuscript becomes more traditionally middle grade; other times we will work with a publisher to remove small amounts of material that is too violent, sexual or disturbing in order to make the book suitable for PJ Our Way.