

THE JEWISH CHILD IN PICTURE BOOKS?

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(presented by June Cummins)

Description: This paper considers the depiction of American Jewish children in picture books. A survey of books featuring Jewish children reveals that most display these children engaged in activities directly related to Jewish holidays and rituals. We also see Jewish children in stories about early 20th-century immigration or folktales set in the “old country.” We rarely, if ever, see contemporary Jewish children in settings that represent their daily lives. The reasons for this exclusion are complex, ranging from the difficulty of graphically depicting Jewishness to the thornier subject of Jews’ disagreements concerning self-definition and self-presentation within American life. Jews as a group have an uneasy relationship to the multicultural paradigm for a variety of reasons, including Jewish self-perception and the perception of others. This paper explores the subject of Jewish children and picture books in the wider context of Jews and multiculturalism. It includes a slide presentation of the covers of representative picture books. Suggestions are given as to how Jewish children may be represented in trade picture books in ways that reflect both their differences from and their participation in daily American life.

Note: The contents of this presentation is based on the following article:

Cummins, June, and Naomi Toder. “The Jewish Child in Picture Books?” *Five Owls Magazine*, XV:2 (Nov.-Dec. 2000) : 38. Permission granted by *Five Owls Magazine*, a review of children's books.

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This article is titled this with a question mark and without the ubiquitous colon and subtitle because the topic under consideration is open in two important ways. The first is that this very question, the presence of the Jewish child in picture books, is one hardly ever considered, so the interrogative format is designed to provoke that consideration. The second is that once the question is asked and the search for an answer begins, it becomes clear, quite quickly, that while picture books

with Jewish themes abound, the action of the Jewish child is severely circumscribed. If one were to take Jewish-themed pictures books as representative of American Jewish experience, one would assume that Jews celebrate many holidays but do not do much else with their time. One does not see Jewish children engaging in activities and experiences that are not necessarily about Jewish cultural identity or that problematize this cultural identity, reflecting its inherent tensions as well as joys. The attempt to explain this absence opens up many difficult and uncomfortable topics.

There are several possible reasons for the exclusion of the contemporary American Jewish child doing things other than observing holidays, reasons that range from the seemingly mild “there’s no necessity for this depiction” to the harsh and scary label of “anti-Semitism.” The tangled complexity of this issue, as exemplified by the range of reactions and emotions expressed by

Jewish friends and colleagues, is inextricably bound up with the contested subject of multiculturalism. American Jews have an uneasy relationship with the multicultural discussion, for reasons which will be explained below. The missing Jewish picture book protagonist reflects and, depending on one's perspective, either exacerbates or mollifies the multicultural tension. Presented here will be findings and ideas that incorporate a spectrum of opinions held by American Jews. In keeping in the spirit of the question mark in the paper's title, a single culminating argument will not be reached; rather, a range of possible interpretations will be described so that you may reach your own conclusion. To echo a Jewish adage, feel free to share, between every two of you, three opinions!

First, we will explain the current circumstances of American picture books featuring Jewish characters or themes. Overwhelmingly, these books concern holidays and rituals, including Hanukkah, Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Shabbat, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, etc. They dominate the field to the extent that we can say they constitute it. For example, on Amazon.com, which is a good resource because you can define searches easily and it demonstrates how readily available different books are, a search with key terms "children 4-8" and "Judaism" (which is how Amazon defines "picture books about Jews") will yield 146 books—at least 100 explicitly concern holidays. Others may "mask" their preoccupation with holidays; for example, a Jewish folktale may be listed as such but might incorporate a Jewish holiday within its narrative. At the Skokie Public Library, which has a huge, renowned children's collection in a city famously and historically known for its Jewish population, books listed under "Jews-Fiction"—with the limit of "Juvenile materials" and "picture books"—have a ratio of about 8 to 1 when it comes to Jewish-content books about holidays as compared to Jewish-content books not about holidays. Significantly, visits to bookstores demonstrate that if they even have a Jewish section, virtually all the books in that section will be about holidays and ritual observance. Perhaps one or two will be biblical retellings, which many people do not even recognize as Jewish in origin, for example, the story of Noah's ark.

In addition to stories about holidays, picture books with Jewish content tend to be about two other subjects. The first is the above-mentioned biblical stories or folktales, such as those by Isaac Bashevis Singer. A fairly recent well-known example is Phoebe Gilman's *Something From Nothing*. A small set of books is about immigration from the "old country." Some examples are Patricia Polacco's *The Keeping Quilt* and Amy Hest's *When Jessie Came Across the Sea*. A small number are educational or instructive books, many of which are published by Jewish presses. Finally, there are books published by Orthodox presses; these tend to be highly didactic and feature low production values, and they are not widely available.

The emphasis on holidays in these picture books prompts examination and discussion. For many people, Jews included, this emphasis and dominance makes perfect sense. According to them, what makes Jews Jews is their observance of holidays and certain rituals (such as Bar Mitzvahs). When a Jewish parent wishes to inculcate his or her children with a sense of cultural heritage, when a non-Jewish teacher needs to teach her students about "another culture," which often happens at Christmas time, when librarians desire to set up a display that features the Jewish people, what could make more sense than trotting out the highly tangible and descriptive holidays, all of which come with symbols and customs attached (although, of course, some holidays and customs are much more recognized by the general population than are others). For

most Americans, the most obvious difference between Christians and Jews is that Jews celebrate Hanukkah instead of Christmas. What better way to point out difference than through the comparison of these two holidays? Not surprisingly, the holiday most likely to be written about is Hanukkah.

So what is the problem with this quasi-ubiquitous pattern? For many Jews, cultural identity is not defined by holiday observance alone. Even for non-religious or unaffiliated Jews, a sense of heritage may come from a variety of other sources, ranging from something as specific and contained as foods eaten to something as nebulous and big as one's feelings about the Holocaust. While both of these issues may come up in holiday books (and in fact, there has been a recent upsurge in books that combine Hanukkah and Holocaust themes), is it necessary that they be conveyed only through this format? An anecdotal story conveys the two sides of this question. A friend of one of the authors, who is also Jewish, accompanied her when she visited the local Barnes & Noble bookstore to see what sort of "Jewish books" they had. Two salespeople were helping them. When the four realized that virtually all the books were about Jewish holidays, the friend remarked that this was perfectly natural. "After all," he said, "this is how people feel Jewish and teach Jewish culture to their kids—through the holidays. This is how I see myself Jewishly—through observing the holidays." One of the clerks became quite indignant and said, "I am Jewish, and I do not define myself through holidays. I am Jewish every day and in every way. I cannot separate myself into sections, with the Jewish part going into a category called 'Holidays.'" It took some maneuvering on the part of both the other clerk and the author to make sure these two did not begin arguing stridently. This moment perfectly captured the reason why some Jews would feel comfortable with this abundance of holiday books while others would not.

What became very obvious to the authors by exploring library catalogues, searching online, talking to friends and colleagues, and surveying bookstores is that there are virtually no picture books that depict contemporary Jewish children doing things other than observing a holiday. There are no books of the kind Rudine Sims Bishop calls "culturally neutral." That is, we don't see Jewish children featured in non-Jewish situations. If a story focuses on a school play, or a substitute teacher, or a lost cat, or a car wash, we may see major and incidental characters from a variety of ethnic groups or other groups that are visually "different," such as the disabled. Surveying recently published picture books, one would surmise that most American children attend culturally heterogeneous schools, as African-American, Asian-American, and Latino children are routinely included. Many books feature characters from these ethnic groups at their lead protagonists. However, picture books do not include Jewish characters in this casual way. This reason for this exclusion may seem obvious. How *can* one depict a Jewish child? While there are stereotypical physical traits that some Jews possess, many do not have these traits, and the depiction of them may be deemed racist. Most Jewish boys do not wear kipot (yarmulkes), and most Jewish girls do not wear Stars of David around their necks, although these are both reasonable items for Jews to own and display on their bodies. Generally speaking, however, Jewish children are not necessarily recognizably Jewish based on their appearances alone.

May we comfort ourselves, then, with the acknowledgement that contemporary Jewish children do not show up in picture books because of a limitation of the format? Books for older readers, mostly novels, do focus on Jewish children in a variety of situations, some having to do with the

protagonist's Jewish identity, others not. Famous examples of books like these are Konisberg's *About the B'Nai Bagels* and Blume's *Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret*—both of these books reflect tensions associated with being Jewish (such as Margaret's feelings about having parents of two different faiths), but they both are also engaged with topics that are not about Jewish identity or observance. More recent titles do exist, although there are not large numbers of novels like these. So if we see that novels include Jewish characters, even protagonists, while picture books do not, we can argue that this is simply the limitation of the picture book format—graphic arts have trouble depicting that which refuses to be physical.

Other Jews, however, have a problem with the exclusion of contemporary Jewish children in picture books. Some link this exclusion to a perceived exclusion of Jews from multicultural discourse. The argument here is if authors and illustrators are sensitively including children of a variety of races and abilities in their books, the omission of Jews must have significance. This train of thought leads one directly to the Jewish relationship to the multicultural paradigm, which can be described, most safely, as “tricky” (Brettschneider 1).

The fact is that Jews have not been invited to the multicultural party. Many anthologies promoting multicultural literature divide themselves into sections based on different races and ethnicities, and Jews are often left out. A case in point with which many of you may be familiar is Kay Vandergrift's widely known and accessed children's literature webpages. Under “Gender and Culture in Picture Books,” (subsection: “Powerful Multicultural Images”), Vandergrift lists the ethnic categories of Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans. Jews are not mentioned. Exclusion of Jews in multicultural curricula extends far beyond children's literature. Throughout Marla Brettschneider's anthology, *The Narrow Bridge: Jewish Views on Multiculturalism*, several authors describe the current state of affairs: Evelyn Torton Beck describes the “deliberate exclusion of Jews” from multiculturalism (163), Cornel West claims, “we have much work to do in infusing and inserting the rich history and culture of Jews into the multicultural debate” (xiv), and the editor, Brettschneider, is shocked to discover that there is no book published about Jews and multiculturalism (xv)—this is why she edits this one, the first.

Many often conflicting reasons are offered for the exclusion of Jews from multiculturalism. Leora Saposnik and Ellen Osterhaus succinctly summarize the most popular reason: “Jews [are] often viewed as white, European, and successful; therefore, there seem[s] to be no need for their inclusion in multicultural efforts” (193). This attitude, that Jews have “made it” and thus are no longer an ethnic minority, belies the truth of Jewish experience in this country today. Anti-Semitism still runs amok, and the number of hate crimes against Jews rose sharply in California and New York in 1999. One of the authors moved to Skokie, IL just days before Benjamin Smith drove through the streets looking for Jews and blacks to mow down. After shooting at several Jews walking home from synagogue just a few miles from where she was doing the same activity, he murdered an African-American man who lived in her new neighborhood. Both authors have at times been the target of anti-Semitic comments and actions as have almost all Jews in our acquaintance. Clearly, today Jews as a group do not suffer the rampant racism and discrimination that other minority groups contend with, but dislike of Jews remains vital and strong, reason enough why multicultural curricula should include Jewish experience, if the goals of such curricula are to promote understanding and acceptance of difference. If intellectuals and

educators decide that Jews are no longer worthy of consideration because they have gained the status and privilege of white, Christian people in our society, then they will glibly overlook the very real exclusion and discrimination many Jews have experienced. Michael Lerner, writing in the *Village Voice*, explains the problem with constructing Jews as white and privileged: “Jews must respond with . . . determined insistence that we are not white, and that those who claim we are and exclude our history and literature from the newly emerging multicultural canon are our oppressors.” The issue of Jewish whiteness is complicated as Jews have been seen variously as non-white, off-white, and white throughout the twentieth century. For an intelligent look at the history of Jewish racialization in the U.S., see Karen Brodtkin’s *How Jews Became White Folks: And What That Says About Race in America*. To summarize her work, note that at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, expressions of attitudes such as the following were commonplace. Kenneth Roberts wrote:

The American nation was founded and developed by the Nordic race, but if a few more million members of the Alpine, Mediterranean and Semitic races are poured among us, the result must inevitably be a hybrid race of people as worthless and futile as the good-for-nothing mongrels of Central America and Southeastern Europe.” (q. in Brodtkin 25)

And here is a description of the Jewish Lower East Side published about 100 years ago:

This neighborhood, populated by the people who claim to have been driven from Poland and Russia, is the eyesore of New York and possibly the filthiest place on the western continent. It is impossible for a Christian to live there because he will be driven out, either by blows or the dirt and stench. Cleanliness is an unknown quantity to these people. They cannot be lifted up to a higher plane because they do not want to be. (q. in Brodtkin 29)

These remarks were published in the *New York Times*. Twenty years later, Jewish immigrant became “off-white” as they were able to work at jobs requiring skills that many immigrants and African-Americans lacked, but Jews were still not permitted the benefits of ethnic whiteness as they were kept out of other jobs and unions. Brodtkin explains, “Jews went into the garment industry because they could—they had the skills and those jobs were open to them. They did not become printers or transport or construction workers not because they lacked the skills but because they were not allowed into the unions which controlled the right to engage in these occupations” (63). It wasn’t until after the Second World War that Jews finally attained a more fully “white” status when they benefited from GI Bills and Federal Housing Administration loans while African Americans were still denied these opportunities.

Returning to the issue of Jews and multiculturalism, we see now the foundations of the arguments of those who claim Jews are not white and therefore should be included in multicultural ideology. At the same time, there are Jews who are very happy to be left out of multicultural discourse. Some of these believe that asking to be included calls attention to our “otherness” in ways that make us vulnerable to even more antipathy. Other Jews may reject the very premises of multiculturalism, seeing it as a system that leads to enforced quotas and the cultivation of groups’ rights, which are viewed as dangerous. Jews have been victimized by

quotas in more than one way. Historically, only a small number of Jews per year were allowed to join organizations like fraternities, sororities, country clubs, businesses, and universities. Now, quotas are seen as “proactive”—designed to let in, rather than keep out, under-represented groups. But Jews are often kept out this way because when it comes to university admissions, they are not under-represented. So a reverse quota system disallows some Jews and Asians whose numbers exceed the criteria for admission. The end result, in both cases, is that quotas keep out Jews. Multiculturalism, by and large, keeps Jews out as well. Whether individual Jews support multiculturalism, no one could claim that Jews are embraced by it.

Why are Jews left out? Compared to African, Asian, Latin, and Native Americans, Jews are white. But according to many white Christian Americans, Jews, either because they are not Christian or because they are reviled for stereotypical group traits, are not “one of us.” As we have seen, historically, Jews have been constructed as not-white, “off-white” and, finally, white, according to changing economic and social constructs. In this latest incarnation, ostensibly white, Jews thus become an invisible minority, with the word “invisible” having two meanings. We are invisible when we are not seen as having minority status except when we are being afforded its penalties, not privileges, such as being seen as a valuable culture with much to offer. We are invisible also because our difference is not racialized or physical, as it is in the case of African Americans, Asian Americans, etc., or of the visibly disabled. Without markers of difference, we are either easily assimilated or easily overlooked, as the picture book exclusion demonstrates.

This is not to say that Jews are not “seen” by the general public. But Jews are often asked—or told—to downplay their differences, to try to “fit in” with a dominant, generalized whiteness. Some Jews may prefer this “whitewashing,” desiring to fit into the mainstream in an effort to escape discrimination and prejudice. Other Jews, however, may prefer to have their specific cultural traits and characteristics recognized and valorized. Still others might not care about sharing these particular traits but sense that inclusion in multicultural curricula is necessary in order to counter anti-Semitism through exposure and education. Nevertheless Jews must be included under the multicultural umbrella because however few in number and whether by choice or assignment by others, we remain a distinct ethnic and religious group in American life.

Acknowledging that multicultural discourse should expand to include Jewish experience does not solve the problem of how picture books can depict Jews. If we want to show Jewish children as being Jewish on days other than holidays, but we cannot racialize the characters on the page, we need to tell stories about Jewish kids that reflect the experiences millions of them have every day. Here are two possible solutions to depicting the Jewish child in the picture book. First, authors and illustrators can depict Jewish characters and situations in picture books without relying exclusively on holiday-oriented narratives. For example, some children have relationships with grandparents who may tell stories about *their* parents’ immigration or the cultural aspects of their own childhoods. Others may have conflicts as a result of their parents’ intermarriage, or between themselves and non-Jewish friends. In these books, Jewishness is itself a theme. Second, some stories can include Jewish characters but not be about Jewishness. These stories might be set at synagogues, or Jewish camps, or Jewish Community Centers. Jewishness can be expressed through objects in a child’s home, mentions of activities that involve the child’s Jewish self, or a sprinkling of Yiddish or Hebrew expressions. With such

markers a story can be about subjects of interest to all children and be inclusive of Jews at the same time. We should not “tokenize” Jewish children, but find ways to incorporate them into stories of contemporary children’s lives. Excluded from multicultural curricula or not, Jewish kids are all around us anyway, and not just on Hanukkah. Perhaps the effort to express their lives through picture books will enrich not only them but all of us.

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