

**Two Authors, One Vision:
Fact and Fiction in Children's Books
Jacqueline Dembar Greene
Author of
*Out of Many Water and One Foot Ashore***

Jacqueline Dembar Greene is the author of 18 fiction and non-fiction books for young readers. *Out of Many Waters* and *One Foot Ashore* were named Sydney Taylor Honor Books. Other awards for the novels include "Books for the Teenage," from the New York Public Library, and the American Booksellers Association "Pick of the Lists."

When I was searching for a publisher for my first juvenile historical novel, called *The Leveller*, I sought advice from an experienced author. She declared that publishers weren't interested in historical novels. As the early rejections piled up, I began to

think she was right. But eventually, the book found a home, and since then, the publishing landscape has improved.

There is a resurgence of interest in historical fiction, and an awareness of its significance to young readers. School systems are building entire curricula around literature, combining history, reading, writing, art, music, science and math around one time period, with a novel at the core of the program. They are turning their students into curious readers who become excited by events of the past.

Like Norman Finkelstein, who writes biographies and non-fiction about historical events, I begin by researching a time period. I immerse myself in every aspect of life, from the clothes people wore, the games they played and food they ate, to the way they looked at the world around them.

But I'm never ready to write until I have conceived of a character that will make the moment come alive. There is no story until that character can pull the reader into a living, breathing world, filled with people they can get to know well, and whose desires and dreams they can share. When a reader turns the last page of one of my novels, I want them to feel as if they have just stepped out of a time machine, and have truly experienced the excitement, and felt the passion of a significant event that happened long ago.

Our modern world is filled with sound bites and visual stimuli that fill children's senses with what is most immediate and fleeting. I write books with the hope that young readers will create their own images, as they connect to the past and discover a sense of their own

lives as part of a continuum. This experience takes the misused word “interactive” and gives it true meaning.

When Norman and I look for a book ideas, we’re both searching for an interesting event or time period. I have come across some of my most valuable source material while reading books about Sephardic Jews, trying to learn more about my own family’s history. As a product of a household where my grandparents were born in Greece, but always referred to themselves as Spanish, and spoke Ladino, no one ever fully explained our heritage.

In one old history book, I read one sentence that told how the Jews of Tudela, Spain, in the year 1114, camped on the outskirts of the city until the new king realized their importance, and offered them his protection. This much was history. But when I researched the Jews’ occupations, a story began to form. The Royal Bakery was in the Jewish Quarter. Food for the imagination! All the merchants who traveled the world bringing back exotic spices, silks and tapestries were Jewish. The Royal Physician and the court astronomer were Jews. Eventually, I decided the story should be told through the eyes of the self-centered king, and I had more than history and facts. When I wrote *Butchers and Bakers, Rabbis and Kings*, I had humor—and a story.

Another picture book, *What His Father Did*, used the background of Herschel of Ostropol to weave fact and fiction together. The Ukrainian villages of Minsk and Pinsk become more familiar than they ever would with a pin on a map, and the hay wagons, milk carts, and village shops allow a modern child to enter into a past life.

But of all the books I have written, the two historical novels, *Out of Many Waters* and *One Foot Ashore* represent the deepest commitment of time and research. Both are set in 1654, a momentous year for American Jews. They tell the fictional stories of 12-year-old Isobel Ben Lazar, and her 16-year-old sister, Maria, swept up in the continuing oppression of the Portuguese Inquisition.

Like Norman, I began by researching the 1600s. One hot summer, I sat in the old American Jewish Historical Library surrounded by heaps of books. I read accounts of how children of suspected *conversos* were kidnapped by the Inquisition and sent to remote colonies in the New World, where their parents could never find them. The outward reason was to remove the children from any corrupting religious influence, but in reality, they were slaves.

My motherly instincts kicked in when I read of these atrocities. I couldn't help wondering what happened to these children. Many of them died of tropical diseases and overwork, but I never found out what happened to the survivors.

As I sat in the library one day, I was enthralled to read about the Jews who fled the Dutch colony of Recife, Brazil when it was captured by the Portuguese. In April, 1654, sixteen ships left the harbor heading for Amsterdam with Calvinist and Jewish passengers aboard. Part way through the voyage, one ship became separated from the others during a storm. The ship was attacked by Spanish privateers, who kidnapped its twenty-three Jewish passengers. As they made their way to Spain to sell these captives to the Inquisition, a second battle ensued and the privateers were conquered by a French ship. The Jews were rescued and eventually deposited in New Amsterdam. They became the first group of Jews to unwittingly settle in America—facts I had never known.

As I sat in the library, I suddenly envisioned two fictional sisters as clearly as if they had entered the room and sat at my desk, asking me to tell their stories-- so I did.

Out of Many Waters tells of Isobel's escape from a Brazilian monastery, and how she ends up with the group of 23 Jews who first settled on America's shores. The book is packed with historical details, but it also takes readers by the hand, brings them on the voyage, and lets them experience their heritage as if they, too, settled in New Amsterdam with the first Jews.

Research for the companion novel, *One Foot Ashore*, brought me to Amsterdam, where I walked on the sandy floor of the Portuguese synagogue, traveled the narrow 17th century streets, and walked through Rembrandt's home, just across from his best friend, Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel. This book is Maria's story, as she tries to discover the fate of her younger sister, and locate her parents.

Because Rembrandt lived in the heart of the Jewish quarter, hobnobbed with leaders of the Jewish community, and used the Sephardic Jews as models in his paintings, the book draws on details about his life in Amsterdam in 1654. More importantly, it lets the reader walk in Maria's shoes, becoming part of Rembrandt's family, rediscovering her Jewish heritage, and imagining how one family might have been affected by the Inquisition's long arm.

In both books, I use personal feelings and experiences to enhance the characters. The books are read in numerous classrooms

as a core curriculum. Yet, the best feedback I receive is when young readers tell me that the stories made them cry—and laugh—and imagine. Then I know that they have walked into Isobel's and Maria's world, and that they have truly traveled through time.

For more information, or to contact author Jacqueline Dembar Greene, please visit her website: www.jdgbooks.com