Historical Fiction for Young People:
An Author and a Librarian Talk About
The Process and the Product

Linda Silver

Description: Historical fiction will be presented from two perspectives—the author’s and the librarian’s. The author (Anne Dublin) will discuss: source of ideas; the process of doing research; the balance between fiction and historical facts; creation of characters and situations that are relevant to young people today. The librarian (Linda Silver) will speak about: criteria for evaluating this genre; selection tools; what makes an historical fiction book “Jewish.”

Linda Silver has selected children's books in public libraries, school libraries, synagogue libraries, and for the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland, where she is the librarian. She reviews and writes about children’s materials of Jewish content for national and local publications and is the editor of Developing a Judaic Children’s Collection: Recommended Books and Videos (AJL, 2001) and of a forthcoming new edition of Marcia Posner's Juvenile Judaica. She is a former chair of AJL’s Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee and has served on the Newberry-Caldecott Award committee. Her MLS is from Case Western Reserve University. She can be reached at mailto:lsilver@jecc.org.

Criteria for Selecting Historical Fiction

1. Must be a good story and good history.

2. Story is accurate and authentic. Does not distort the known facts. The Cross By Day, The Mezuzah By Night by Siegel is an example of Jewish historical fiction riddled with errors and misinformation.

3. Fact and fiction are blended so that factual background is subordinate to the story.

4. Background information is provided so that readers can distinguish between the fact and the fiction of the story.

5. Background details are authentic in keeping with accurate information about the period.

6. Story accurately reflects the values and norms of the culture depicted.

7. Different points of view on the issues of the time are presented or acknowledged.
8. The dialog conveys a feeling for the historical period without being artificial. The dialogue reflects character as well as setting.

9. The narrative style is appropriate to the setting.

10. The theme provides insight and understanding into today’s problems as well as those of the past.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Background Reading


Selection Aids

AJL Newsletter. Quarterly. Published by the Association of Jewish Libraries.

Booklist. 22 issues per year. Published by the American Library Association

Jewish Book World. 3 issues per year. Published by the Jewish Book Council.

Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People, annual list; available at www.ncss.org/resources/notable/

Our Choice. Annual. Published by the Canadian Children’s Book Centre, www.bookcentre.ca/

School Library Journal. Monthly. Published by Cahners Corp.

Recent Historical Fiction of Jewish Content


Set in Toronto in 1954, this is the story of a child of Holocaust survivors growing up in a new country. Sarah’s voice has an authentic child-like ring and the details of everyday life in the ‘50’s are vividly and accurately blended into the story. Hurricane Hazel and the destruction it caused are the central historical elements.


Portrays the contradictions of imprisonment in Terezin, where art and music flourished amidst starvation and terror. The main character is an adolescent girl from Prague who is deported to Terezin with her family.


Defying her parents and disguised as a boy, teenage Rivka sneaks out of Prague’s Jewish Quarter to explore the wonders of Prague and its surroundings. While Rivka’s desire to escape the strictures of ghetto life is believable, the plot of this novel, set in the 18th century, is improbable.


A teenaged Jewish girl fleeing from the Inquisition disguises herself as a boy, gets hired onto Columbus’s crew, and becomes his cabin boy. Their homoerotic relationship is just one of several twists to a complex and improbable plot.


Relationships between immigrant groups in turn of the 20th century Winnipeg, Canada are explored in this rather unfocused novel based on the author’s family’s experiences. As a foster child in a Ukrainian household, teenaged Rebecca learns to overcome her timidity and make her own choices.


After General Grant issues an order expelling all Jews from territories under his control, Hannah Green, a Southern belle in the making, begins to question many of the values she took for granted, including slavery. The plot is engrossing, the portrayal of Jewish life in the South during the Civil War era is authentic, but the style is mannered.


In a gripping story about “New Christians” and the Inquisition, the author captures the terror of the times and the varying degrees of Jewish loyalty among members of one family.

An outstanding historical novel set in 16th century Venice. Donata, the heroine, resists the constraints society imposes on women and seeks both experience and education. Experience takes her to the Jewish Ghetto, where she falls hopelessly in love with a young Jewish man who doesn’t know her true identity. Education gives her literacy and admission to the University of Padua, where she will study for a doctorate in philosophy. Based upon a real woman and exemplary in its blending of historical background and fictional details.


The setting is the Huguenot village of Le Chambon sur Lignon in Vichy controlled France. Lucien is considered too young to engage with the rest of his family in rescuing Jews but he befriends a little girl whom they are hiding, making wooden shoes for her so that her “city shoes” won’t give her away. When the shoes are ready, Amelie is gone – sent away for her own safety. Lucien has never known her real name and never sees her again. A poignant story, told and illustrated with grace.


A serious and thought-provoking story set in the Venice Ghetto, this retells Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* from the point of view of its Jewish characters. Shylock is a proud and bitter man whose betrayal by his daughter, Jessica, and his humiliation by Christians lead to his flight from Venice. The ghetto is portrayed as both prison and refuge and Shylock’s suffering as not uncommon for Jews.


After the United Nations voted to partition Palestine between Jews and Arabs, government sanctioned riots broke out in many Arab countries. Ezra, an eleven year old Syrian Jewish boy living in the city of Aleppo, must brave the mob violence to get help for his pregnant mother while his father and uncle guard the family home. A pedestrian style dilutes the suspense but the setting is rare in historical fiction.


As the Nazis and their eager Hungarian fascist allies tighten the noose around the neck of Hungarian Jews, teenage Marta struggles with her family to stay alive. Her risky romance with a Christian boy who resists the Nazis ends sadly despite the intervention of a real hero, Raoul Wallenberg. This serious novel is even more polished than the author’s previous *A Place Not Home.*