Evaluating Jewish Representation in Children's Literature

A Guide for Libraries

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About

Jewish people represent approximately 0.2% of the world's population. For some children, books may be their first exposure to Jews and Judaism.

Judaism is more than a religion, it's a culture. Traditionally, Jews do not proselytize. We have no wish to promote Jewish sacred texts or to teach non-Jewish readers to practice Judaism, but we do encourage you to include Jewish books in your collection in order to educate and empathize. Jews simply want to be seen and understood, as all people do.

It is important that Jewish window books offer an authentic portrait, free from stereotypes and disinformation. This guide will assist you in selecting the best Jewish books for your collection, in order to build bridges across cultures and create a healthier society.
What to Look For

Books Showcasing Jewish Diversity

#JewishBooksAreDiverseBooks

Jews have always been marginalized and Jewish books belong everywhere that diverse books are being discussed. The Jewish community itself is also very diverse. According to GlobalJews.org, 20% of America’s 6 million Jews or 1.2 million are African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian, Sephardic, Mizrahi, mixed race and growing. In recent years, Jewish children’s literature has started to reflect this reality. A balanced collection should include books reflecting the white Ashkenazi Jewish experience, but should also include depictions of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, and non-white Jews, as protagonists as well as side characters.

Jewish representation should also be sought for other intersectional forms of diversity such as gender/sexual identity and physical or neurological disabilities.

See The Book of Life’s LibraryThing catalog of Diverse Jewish Books for juvenile titles featuring Jews beyond white Ashkenazi identity. Click Tags to see all categories.
The majority of Jewish holiday books published for children are about the festival of Hanukkah, giving the false impression that Hanukkah is the Jewish Christmas and is a major event in the Jewish year. In reality, Hanukkah is a minor holiday, not nearly as important as Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, or Passover. Commercial forces have distorted public perception of the importance of this topic within the Jewish community. Libraries should include a variety of Jewish holiday books in their collections, and even more importantly, should include books unrelated to holidays. Jews are Jewish all year round.

The Association of Jewish Libraries' Holiday Highlights booklists, published each spring and fall, will help you find the best Jewish holiday books for children, and will assist you in finding quality titles about holidays beyond Hanukkah.

100 Jewish Children's Books for the Family Book Shelf, published by the Association of Jewish Libraries in conjunction with the Jewish Grandparents' Network, suggests Jewish books on a wide variety of topics.
Approximately 50% of juvenile books with Jewish content are about the Holocaust. The Holocaust was an important event that had a huge impact on the Jewish community, and we must never forget. However, the drama and pathos of Holocaust books has made them an easy sell for publishers, which has created a snowball effect. It’s important to understand that the number of Holocaust books available does not represent the importance of the topic in modern Jewish life.

While we advise balancing out your collection with non-Holocaust books, the Holocaust books you do include should be of the highest quality. See the Association of Jewish Libraries' "Selected Holocaust Literature for Youth" and listen to the "Everyone Loved It But Me" podcast episode on The Boy in the Striped Pajamas, a book that we do not recommend.
Books That Treat Israel Fairly

There is a great deal of controversy and misinformation surrounding the modern state of Israel. Finding reliable information about it can be confusing and difficult. Jews around the world hold a variety of opinions on the subject, as do the Jewish and non-Jewish citizens within Israel itself. When evaluating books about Israel for your collection, please consider the following:

• Is information about Israel presented in an unbiased and factual way?
• Is Israel judged more harshly than other nations, in terms of its right to defend itself or its treatment of its ethnic populations?
• Does the book make its political position clear? Is the point of view of the author easy to ascertain? Does the book have an agenda?
• What is the author’s background? What is their authority on the subject of Israel?
• Diaspora Jews are not responsible for the policies of Israel. They may have opinions on it, as anyone may. They may feel a special connection to Israel, as anyone can feel a connection to the land of their ancestors. But Jewish and Israeli is not the same thing, and conflating the two is inaccurate. Avoid materials that suggest that diaspora Jews have any responsibility for the policies of the Israeli government. Also be aware that Israeli private citizens should not be held responsible for the actions of their government.

For unbiased news about Israel, see the websites HonestReporting, CAMERA (Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting and Analysis) and StandWithUs.
Avoid Antisemitism

Antisemitism is a paranoid mentality that uses Jews as the ultimate scapegoat, a false oversimplified explanation for the world’s complex societal problems. For a detailed definition of antisemitism, please visit the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. For current examples and context, see The Antisemitism Project.

The ongoing conspiracy theory of antisemitism is propped up by a number of myths. The following list of stereotypical myths is taken from the Anti-Defamation League’s “Antisemitism Uncovered: A Guide to Old Myths in a New Era.” It is important to be aware of these lies so that they can be recognized for the falsehoods they are when encountered in literature or elsewhere. After each myth listed below, we present you with the facts.

Books that perpetuate any of these myths should be avoided.

1 **MYTH**: Jews are dangerously powerful, controlling the media, the weather, the government, or other ethnic groups.
   **FACT**: Jews have no special power over anything or anyone.

2 **MYTH**: Jews are loyal only to other Jews, and diaspora Jews are loyal to Israel over their home countries.
   **FACT**: Jewish tradition regards all human life as sacred, Jewish or gentile. Diaspora Jews are loyal citizens of their home countries.
3 **MYTH:** Jews are greedy and rich, relentless in pursuit of wealth and miserly with what they possess.

**FACT:** Approximately 20% of US Jews live in poverty. Job restrictions in the Middle Ages forced Jews into the field of money-lending, creating a negative association between Jews and money.

4 **MYTH:** The Jews killed Jesus.

**FACT:** Christian leaders, including Pope Paul VI, have officially declared that this idea is baseless and that Jews should not be held responsible for the death of Jesus, who was killed by the Romans.

5 **MYTH:** Jews sacrifice Christian children to use their blood in religious rituals (this lie is known as “the blood libel”).

**FACT:** Jewish religious law forbids consumption of any blood, human or animal.

6 **MYTH:** The Holocaust didn’t happen, or happened but was not a big deal.

**FACT:** Thousands of government documents, eyewitness testimonies, admissions of guilt, photographs, film footage, and written records clearly show that the Holocaust devastated the Jewish community and was an official Nazi policy intended to eradicate Jews completely.

7 **MYTH:** The state of Israel is uniquely evil among the nations of the world and has no right to exist.

**FACT:** Israel was recognized as a nation by the UN in 1948. It is a tiny country the size of New Jersey, and is the only democracy in the Middle East. It is no more good or evil than other democracies attempting to live up to their ideals.
Collection Development Goals

- There should be books about Jews in your collection that are written by Jewish authors.
- Your collection should include intersectional diverse Jewish representation (see Diversity section, page 4).
- You should have books about the modern Jewish experience, not just books portraying Jews during Biblical times or living in a long-ago Eastern European setting. Among your history or historical fiction books, you should have titles that show Jewish life in a wide variety of time periods.
- You should have books showing Jewish geographical diversity (i.e. beyond New York). Jews live all over North America and all over the world. See “Jewish American Heritage Month Reading Recommendations” for examples.
- If your collection includes biographies, you should have books about Jewish historical and contemporary figures, both famous and lesser-known.
- Among the Jewish books in your collection, how many are related to the Holocaust? How many are related to other forms of persecution (the Spanish Inquisition, pogroms in Eastern Europe, etc)? Seek to balance such books with depictions of Jewish joy.
- Among your Holocaust books, how many portray Jews purely as victims? Seek out books that show Jewish agency and resistance during WWII.
Individual Title Evaluation

(modeled on “Evaluating Muslims in KidLit” by Hijabi Librarians):

- Does the work reflect an understanding of Judaism’s own intellectual tradition? Are topics viewed from a Christian gaze of spirituality, cultural, or faith practices? What sources are centered and how does this affect the reader’s understanding of Jews and Judaism?
- Do characters and depicted communities have agency, or are they portrayed as victims of forces beyond their control?
- How is religiosity portrayed? Is there nuance when it comes to the practice of Judaism? Does the narrative set up a false moral binary between religious and less practicing or secular characters? Is religious practice used to indicate negative and/or archaic views?
- Are Jewish characters multi-dimensional?
- Beyond sharing Jewish identity or heritage, does the author’s own lived experience speak to other parts of a character’s identity? Is the author’s religious identity being conflated with cultural and/or ethnic heritage?
- Where appropriate, is there backmatter that explains and differentiates religious practices, especially where they are unique to particular cultures? Are cultural and religious concepts presented and explained in a way that is developmentally appropriate?
- For books about Israel, does the work reflect an understanding of the complex history of Israel?

Consider hiring a Jewish sensitivity reader if you need assistance.
The Bechdel-Wallace Test measures representation of women in film, and the Riz Test evaluates the portrayal of Muslim characters. The Puppy Test is a similar rubric meant for evaluating Jewish children’s books, inspired by Daveed Diggs’ music video “Puppy for Hanukkah.” While there are many fine Jewish books that are too serious or too complex to pass this particular test, it does offer a shorthand for thinking about individual titles of Jewish kidlit. If all four questions can be answered “yes,” a book passes the test.

1. Does this story avoid harmful representation of Jews?
2. Is the Jewish content in this story accurate?
3. Does the story center a Jewish point of view?
4. Does this story depict Jewish joy?
Resources

Along with links provided throughout this document, these sources will help you find high quality, authentic Jewish books for children and teens.

- The Association of Jewish Libraries offers professional development, publications, and events relating to Jewish literature for children and adults
- "Love Your Neighbor" booklists recommend Jewish books for ALL young readers
- The Sydney Taylor Book Award recognizes the best Jewish children's and teen books each January
- The National Jewish Book Award includes juvenile categories, winners announced each January
- Canadian Jewish Literary Awards include a youth category, winners announced each October
- The Sydney Taylor Shmooze mock award blog reviews Jewish juvenile books year-round
- AJL News & Reviews, quarterly newsletter of the Association of Jewish Libraries, reviews books
- Jewish Book Council offers reviews on its website
- The Book of Life podcast has audio interviews with authors of Jewish children's and young adult books
- Jewish Books For Kids...And More blog has author interviews
- The Whole Megillah blog has author interviews and writer resources
- The Jewish Kidlit Mavens Facebook group is a discussion forum about Jewish kidlit
- PJ Library (picture books) and PJ Our Way (chapter books) offer free Jewish books for children
All Grown Up

Some of the resources listed on page 13 include Jewish material for adults. Here are additional links to help you find quality adult Jewish titles.

- **Nice Jewish Books**, a podcast about Jewish fiction
- Association of Jewish Libraries **Fiction Award**
- Association of Jewish Libraries **Reference & Bibliography Awards**
- Association for Jewish Studies **Review**
- **The Jewish Review of Books**
- Jewish Quarterly **Wingate Literary Prize**
- **The Sami Rohr Prize**
- **Natan Notable Books**
- **The Edward Lewis Wallant Award**
- Hadassah Magazine book reviews
- The American Library Association **Sophie Brody Medal**

NOTE: Please avoid "Messianic Jewish" materials, which can often be recognized because they refer to Jesus as Yeshua. These are not authentic Jewish books. Messianism is actually a form of Christianity, not Judaism.

Questions or comments? info@jewishlibraries.org