Session for Association of Jewish Libraries June 2023
EXCELLENCE
IN JEWISH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION
When evaluating children’s books of Jewish content, book selectors, reviewers, and book award judges always look for outstanding literary and artistic quality. Equally important is the merit of the book’s Jewish content. Few books will meet all of the criteria for excellence identified in this guide but the books of Jewish content that librarians select, reviewers praise and judges award should approach the highest standards in both general literary criteria and those applied to Jewish children’s literature.

JUDGING JEWISH CONTENT

ACCURACY
Accuracy is essential in dates, spelling, identification of objects, and empirically verifiable facts. Interpretations are based on reputable scholarship. Conflicting points of view are balanced. The author’s point of view, if partisan, is clearly stated. The depiction of historical periods, events or processes is not distorted or oversimplified. Careful research and editing are evident.

AGE-APPROPRIATENESS
A distinction must be made between “picture books”, i.e., those aimed at younger readers, and “illustrated books,” which are for older readers. Picture books are usually characterized by short sentences, playful language, and concepts complemented by clear, concrete illustrations. In illustrated books, the subject matter is more serious or abstract, the theme and language more sophisticated, and the illustrations may be somber or dark.

AUTHENTICITY
Jewish beliefs, characters, settings, and experiences should be portrayed without sentimentality, distortion or stereotyping, in words or illustrations. Authenticity is achieved when individuals are shown interacting with Jewish belief, tradition, history, and practice in a manner that is both truthful and respectful, although the perspective may be satirical or critical. Sometimes, there will be no explicit Jewish content, as in stories by the Hasidic masters that imply or assume a Jewish setting, characters, theme or audience.

DEPTH OF JEWISH CONTENT
Contemporary Judaism is pluralistic and this is reflected in children’s books. The content may range from fully observant to marginally Jewish. In the former, Torah values are central and virtually all aspects of life are portrayed from a Jewish perspective. In more mainstream books, Jewish individuals are found in secular stories. Setting, theme, plot development, climax and denouement do not depend on the character as a Jew but on a person who happens to be Jewish.

POSITIVE FOCUS AND VALUES
Jewish values are those that have special emphasis in the Jewish tradition and are often tied to Jewish texts. However universal they may be, there is a particularly Jewish way of looking at them and they are a vital, living force in Jews' lives. Whether serious or lighthearted, Jewish children’s literature should have something Jewish to say to readers. While positive content is desirable but not always possible, a positive Jewish focus will tell the reader “L’chaim, choose life.”

SENSITIVITY
Literature of Jewish content should promote respect for and understanding of Judaism. The use of Christological terms like “A.D.” and “Old Testament” should be avoided, along with Christian interpretations of the Bible and proselytizing. It should also be recognized that not all Jews are Caucasian or Ashkenazic in origin. Sensitivity to this issue includes an awareness of cultural and racial differences among Jews, as well as differing levels and forms of Jewish observance.

No matter how young they are, children are deeply concerned with the so-called eternal questions: Who created the world? Who made the earth, the sky, people, animals? ... Children think about and ponder such matters as justice, the purpose of life, the why of suffering. They often find it difficult to make peace with the idea that animals are slaughtered so that man can eat them. They are bewildered and frightened by death. They cannot accept the fact that the strong should rule the weak. ... If I had my way, I would publish a history of philosophy for children, where I would convey the basic ideas of all philosophers in simple language. Children, who are highly serious people, would read this book with great interest. In our time, when the literature for adults is deteriorating, good books for children are the only hope, the only refuge. Many adults read and enjoy children’s books. We write not only for children but for their parents. They, too, are serious children.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Stories for Children* (pp. 337-338)

**Adventure**
Gidwitz, Adam. *The Inquisitor’s Tale. Or, the Three Holy Children and Their Magical Dog.* New York: Dutton, 2016. (grades 4-6)

**Animals**
Singer, Isaac Bashevis. *Naftali the Storyteller and His Horse, Sus; and Other Stories.* Illustrated by Margot Zemach. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1976. (grades 2-6)

**Antisemitism**

**Bilingual / Multilingual Jewish Children’s Literature (English Plus)**

**Education / Philosophy**
Folktales (Old and New) Told and Retold

Graphic Novels

Humor and Foolishness

Immigration

Inclusion

Jews of Color
Gidwitz, Adam. The Inquisitor’s Tale. Or, the Three Holy Children and Their Magical Dog. New York: Dutton, 2016. (grades 5-6)


Justice / Social Justice


Zalben, Jane Breskin,. A Moon For Moe and Mo. Illustrated by Mehrdokht Amini. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge, 2018. (preschool - grade 2)

LGBTQ+


Nature / Environment


Peace
