

## 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

Brown, Joanne. "Historical Fiction or Fictionalized History? Problems for Writers of Historical Novels for Young Adults." *The ALAN Review*, Vol 26, Number 1, <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/fall98/brown.html>.

Huck, Charlotte, et al. *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*, 7<sup>th</sup> Ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001. Chapter 1, "Knowing Children's Literature," and Chapter 10, "Historical Fiction."

MacLeod, Anne Scott. "Writing Backward: Modern Models in Historical Fiction." *Horn Book Magazine*, January/February, 1998, [www.hbook.com/exhibit/article\\_macloed.html](http://www.hbook.com/exhibit/article_macloed.html).

Ozick, Cynthia. "The Rights of History and the Rights of Imagination." *Commentary*, March 1999, pp.22-27.

Silver, Linda R. "Judging Judaica." *School Library Journal*, Jan. 2002, pp. 44-45.

Tunnell, Michael O. and Richard Ammon. *The Story of Ourselves: Teaching History Through Children's Literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1985.

### 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/](http://www.ncss.org/resources/notable/)

*Our Choice*. Annual. Published by the Canadian Children's Book Centre, [www.bookcentre.ca/](http://www.bookcentre.ca/).

*School Library Journal*. Monthly. Published by Cahners Corp.

Silver, Linda R., et al. *Developing a Judaic Children's Collection: Recommended Books and Videos*. New York: Association of Jewish Libraries, 2001. See especially, History, Holocaust, Israel, Jewish American History.

## Recent Historical Fiction of Jewish Content

Dublin, Anne. *Written On the Wind*. Vancouver: HodgePog Books, 2001. ISBN: 0968689957 Pbk. For grades 4 – 6.

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.

Kacer, Kathy. *Clara's War*. Quebec, Canada: Second Story Press, 2001. 196p. \$5.95. ISBN: 1896764428 Pbk. For grades 6 – 9.

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.

Kanefeld, Teri. *Rivka's Way*. Chicago: Front Street/Cricket Books, 2001. \$15.95. 137p. ISBN: 0812628705. For grades 6 – 9.

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 18<sup>th</sup> century, is improbable.

Levin, Waldtraut. *Freedom Beyond the Sea* Translated by Elizabeth D. Crawford. New York: Delacorte Press, 2001. 264p. \$15.95. ISBN: 0385327056. For grades 8 – 10.

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.

Matas, Carol. *Sparks Fly Upward*. New York: Clarion, 2002. For grades 5 – 8.

Relationships between immigrant groups in turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

Matas, Carol. *The War Within: a Novel of the Civil War*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001. \$16.00. 151p. ISBN: 0689829353. For grades 5 – 8.

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.

Miklowitz, Gloria D. *Secrets in the House of Delgado*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001. 182p. \$16.00. ISBN: 0802852068. For grades 6 – 9.

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.

Napoli, Donna Jo. *Daughter of Venice*. New York: Wendy Lamb/Random House, 2002. \$16.95. 174p. ISBN: 0385327803. For grades 7 – 10.

An outstanding historical novel set in 16<sup>th</sup> 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.

Steiner, Connie Colker. *Shoes for Amelie*. Illus. by Denis Rodier. Montreal: Lobster Press, 2001. \$12.95. 41p. ISBN: 1894222377. For grades 4 – 6.

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.

Pressler, Mirjam. *Shylock's Daughter*. Translated by Brian Murdoch. New York: Phyllis Fogelman Books/Penguin Putnam, 2001. 266p. \$17.99. ISBN: 0803726678. For grades 9 – 12.

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.

Shalom, A. *Through the Flames of Aleppo*. Illus. by Tova Katz. New York: Mesorah, 2002. 103p. \$11.99. ISBN: 1578195381. For grades 6 – 8.

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.

Wiseman, Eva. *My Canary Yellow Star*. Plattsburg, NY: Tundra Books, 2001. \$6.95. 233p. ISBN: 0887765335 Pbk. For grades 8 – 10.

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*.