

QUEST FOR THE BEST: SETTING STANDARDS AND CRITERIA FOR JEWISH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE; THE NEW JEWISH VALUESFINDER

Evaluating the Age-Appropriateness of Picture Books

by

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Description: A panel of four librarians who developed the new SSC brochure "Excellence in Jewish Children's Literature: A Guide for Book Selectors, Reviewers, and Award Judges" will discuss important aspects of that guide. They will focus on age-appropriateness, authenticity, depth of Jewish content, and sensitivity. These criteria will be treated conceptually and practically with good and bad examples presented. The use of AJL's "New Jewish Valuesfinder" as an aid to identifying excellence will be included.

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The words "picture book" conjure up images of a book with delightful and enticing illustrations, simple language, and a child sitting on a grown-up's lap, reacting to the pictures as the adult reads the accompanying text. Picture books are an important part of Judaic literature, and help to convey, for younger children, Jewish values, rituals, and family life. When choosing a "picture book" for younger children, however, the librarian or teacher must exercise caution when judging the age-appropriateness of its content and/or illustrations.

There is general agreement in the fields of psychology and education on the criteria for developmental appropriateness in the cognitive and emotional development of children. Until approximately the ages of 8 or 9, children can generally perceive only the concrete and literal. Therefore, picture books for children until that age must be developmentally appropriate, with short sentences, playful and age-appropriate language, simple and uncluttered grammatical structure (often including alliteration, rhyming, humor, and repetition), and single or multi-dimensional concepts, complemented by minimal, informative and concrete (not abstract) illustrations which are easily identified by the young reader.

In recent years, the publishing industry has implicitly begun to expand the audience for picture books by publishing books in which the subject matter has become more abstract, the language and theme more sophisticated, and the illustrations often too scary or dark for younger readers. Indeed, the Holocaust has become a favorite theme for publishers of picture books. As a result, although this genre of literature can correctly be described as picture books (i.e. narratives accompanied by vivid illustrations on each page), many of these books are inappropriate for young readers

In judging a picture book for its age-appropriateness, the book's theme, contents, and illustrations must be taken into consideration. Although illustrations may be powerful and compelling, even award winning, with the use of bright colors and vivid depictions, they can also be sinister or scary, and as a result, inappropriate for young children. Sophisticated words and concepts often accompany such illustrations, reinforcing the fact that they should not be read to younger children. Death, parent-child forced separations (found in many Holocaust-themed books), inexplicable violence (e.g. the biblical "sacrifice of Isaac" story), unexplained disappearances, are all "over the heads" of young children, and should not be part of their reading experiences. Picture books about the Holocaust, therefore, are, by definition, problematic and ill advised for young children under the age of at least 8 (some might even say up to the age of 10), because they do not have the emotional or cognitive capability to comprehend the moral ambiguities and atrocities of the Holocaust.

Developmentally, young children are not capable of understanding abstract concepts, and should not be expected to. Reading should be a rewarding experience, not confusing or terrifying. The purpose of bringing literature into the life of a child is for the pleasure of reading, of learning, of preparing them for a future of literature. It is counterproductive and unnecessary to introduce language, themes, topics, or illustrations that will only serve to disturb or alienate children. Why are we anxious to introduce concepts and events to them before they are ready? What purpose could it serve?

Older children have more sophisticated cognitive skills. Therefore, such Jewish-themed books as *The Golem*, by Wiesniewski (dark and terrifying), *Star of Fear*, *Star of Hope*, by Jo Hoestlandt (painful and sad), or even *Tikvah Means Hope*, by Patricia Polacco (which vividly depicts homes that are burned to the ground) can serve as jumping off points for discussion and

inquiry. But these “picture books” contain sophisticated language and themes, including death and destruction, emotional themes such as fear and guilt, the terrifying prospect of parents unable to protect their children, and complex historical themes such as the blood libel or the Holocaust. These books are, therefore, unacceptable for younger children.

Clearly, the word “picture book” has taken on a broader meaning in today’s literature, and requires more careful evaluation when determining the appropriateness of these books for younger children.