

QUEST FOR THE BEST: Setting Standards and Criteria for Jewish Children's Literature; the New Jewish Valuesfinder

Linda Silver

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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INTRODUCTION TO THE BROCHURE

This panel discussion will single out four essential aspects of judging books of Jewish content. Our remarks will be based on a recent brochure, published by the School, Synagogue, and Center (SSC) division of AJL called "*Excellence in Jewish Children's Literature: A Guide for Book Selectors, Reviewers, and Award Judges*." Each of you should have a copy of the brochure to refer to as we talk. Copies of it may also be downloaded from the AJL website.

Cheryl Banks will moderate the panel. Cheryl will speak first, about the issue of age-appropriateness. I will speak about authenticity, Ellen Cole about depth of Jewish content, and Lisa Silverman about sensitivity. Following this, I will briefly review how AJL's New Jewish Valuesfinder can help you in your quest for the best and then we will have questions.

The impetus to the writing of this brochure came from our recognition that too many Jewish children's books are mediocre and that a higher standard is needed. In short, achieving excellence in literature for Jewish children is the goal. Why? Simply put, children are curious but uncritical readers. Only books of outstanding literary and artistic quality have the power to satisfy that natural curiosity and lead it to further exploration, deeper understanding, awareness of all of life's possibilities, and sensitivity to the experiences and values that make us self-reflective and affirmative Jews. One of your handouts gives several quotes that express the need for excellence; I urge you to read the full articles or books from which they are taken.

AUTHENTICITY

AJL Convention 2004

Monday, June 21, 2004

Session III-3 1:45-3:15 PM entitled *Quest for the Best*

Prepared by Linda R. Silver

“True to one’s own spirit, personality, or character”

“Trustworthy or genuine”

Preferred over “positive content” because a book can be authentic but yet not paint a positive picture of its characters. The Bible is an authentic portrayal of Judaism but it often puts Jews in a very negative light.

Two examples of books that are authentically Jewish but not positive:

OUR EDDIE by Sulamith Ish Kishor (Winner of a Sydney Taylor Book Award)

THE SUMMER OF MY GERMAN SOLDIER by Betty Greene

Two examples of books that are of Jewish content but inauthentic:

ONE CANDLE by Eve Bunting (Sydney Taylor Honor Book 2002)

KADDISH FOR GRANDPA IN JESUS’ NAME, AMEN by James Howe (Starred review in Booklist May 2004)

An outstanding example of authenticity:

BRUNDIBAR by Tony Kushner and Maurice Sendak (AJL Notable Book 2003)

WHY ONLY THE BEST WILL DO

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Fanny Goldstein, writing in 1946 about the “aims of children’s literature,” described them as:

The development of an appreciation for ethics; the distinction between right and wrong, an awareness of the intrinsic value of virtue, and morals; a perception of beauty, the development of normal emotions and responses and finally an integration with the world at large...to read and enjoy books is to live fully – to watch with alertness life’s unraveling of future events.

Goldstein, Fanny. “The Jewish Child in Bookland,” *Jewish Book Annual*, Vol. 5, 1946-47

Bruno Bettelheim, writing in 1977 about the struggle for meaning and children’s literature:

If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives...For a story truly to hold the child’s attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. In short, it must at one and the same time related to all aspects of his personality – and this without ever belittling but, on the contrary, giving full credence to the seriousness of the child’s predicaments, while simultaneously promoting confidence in himself and in his future.

Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment*. Vintage/Random House, 1977

Dr. Wendy Mogel, quoted in 2004 about the reading needs of the modern Jewish child:

Books must touch the soul of the reader. ‘Children deserve books in which art comes before message...Sometimes Jewish children’s literature focuses on moral lessons, making for pedantic storytelling. We can transmit values more effectively by truly engaging young readers. Children like books that touch the richness of the unconscious. Dark and scary images are both exciting and comforting to them because they depict their daily experiences – giants! abandonment! witches! falling down a hole! – in the context of long standing truths....I’m a great advocate of scary books, with which children can empower themselves to deal with darkness.

Estrin, Heidi. “Jewish Books for Jewish Children,” *AJL Newsletter*, May/June 2004

USING AJL'S NEW JEWISH VALUESFINDER

www.ajljewishvalues.org

IN YOUR QUEST FOR THE BEST

Selection Policy:

- ✓ Only books of Jewish content. Minor or marginal Jewish content is noted in the annotation
- ✓ Only recommended books. They range from outstanding to useful
- ✓ Critical comments are included in the annotation

Who Selects Titles for the Valuesfinder Database?

They are selected by the editor based on:

- Her own reading and reviewing
- Reviews from the AJL Newsletter and Jewish Book World
- Sydney Taylor Book Award committee members' reviews
- Suggestions made to the editor by Valuesfinder users

What's in the Valuesfinder?

- ✓ A database of currently 700 books of Jewish content for children and teens; more are added regularly
- ✓ A book bag feature for compiling lists and bibliographies
- ✓ Current Jewish book award winners and Notables
- ✓ News about Jewish children's literature and recommendations of articles to read
- ✓ Links to other sites pertinent to Jewish children's literature

Searching the Database

- ✓ Click the Search Database button on the Homepage
- ✓ Read the Search tips
- ✓ Search by author, title, subject, value, illustrator, and ISBN; refine your search by award winner, grade level, date of publication, or publisher

- ✓ Click on a title to read the full record, including critical annotation
- ✓ Select titles to put in your book bag

What titles are currently in the Valuesfinder?

- ✓ Click the Search Database button on the Homepage
- ✓ Put the cursor in the title field
- ✓ Press Enter and a full list of titles will appear

What values are used in the Valuesfinder?

- ✓ Click the Search Database button on the Homepage
- ✓ Put the cursor in the values field
- ✓ Press Enter and a list of all of the values will appear

What subjects headings are used in the Valuesfinder?

- ✓ Subject heading are based on Weine
- ✓ Follow the instructions above, with cursor in subject field

Questions, Comments?

- ✓ Send an email to the editor by clicking on the Contact Us page and filling out the form

www.ajljewishvalues.org