

## All-of-a-Kind Family, Not Anymore/High Holidays and Beyond *Sylvia Rouss*

**Description:** There is a need to write Jewish children's books that speak to the recent fascinating and much discussed poll of the American Jewish community by the Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. This first major survey of American Jews in more than ten years finds a significant rise in those who are not religious, marry outside the faith, and are not raising their children Jewish. How will the Jewish community (and by extension, Jewish libraries) cope with these changes and how will good Jewish children's books help us succeed in raising Jewish kids?

While the High Holy Days and Holocaust related stories make up a large share of Jewish-themed children's literature, there is also a growing body of published books that tap into Jewish culture through humor and exploration of cultural values and identifiers such as social justice themes, Chelm stories, and yiddishkeit books. This presentation explores these books and their value in education.

**Sylvia Rouss** grew up in California and first began writing for the children in her preschool class. As an early childhood educator, she was the recipient of the *Samuel Glasner Creative Teaching Award* and the *Grinspoon Steinhardt Award* for excellence in Jewish education. Sylvia credits the children in her classroom for her inspiration. She is the author of more than 40 books including the Sammy Spider series, as well as The Littlest series. She received the National Jewish Book Award for her story, *The Littlest Pair* and won a Sydney Taylor Honor Award for *Sammy Spider's First Trip to Israel* and *Mitzvah the Mutt*. *Sammy Spider's First Shavuot* and *Tali's Jerusalem Scrapbook* were named Sydney Taylor Notable Books. Sylvia resides in Los Angeles with her husband Jeff and has three adult children and three grandchildren. Besides writing and editing, she maintains a busy schedule that includes lecturing and book readings throughout the United States, Europe, and Israel.

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I want to thank Susan Dubin and the Association of Jewish Librarians for allowing me to be present today on this distinguished panel. Thank you also to our moderator, Joni Sussman, with whom I have a long standing professional relationship. I will keep my comments short because I am used to addressing three year olds with a limited attention span.

As a young child, I was charmed by All of a Kind Family, amused by the stories of Chelm and captivated by the Diary of Ann Frank. As a teenager, I was intrigued by

Exodus and Oh Jerusalem. And as an adult, I finally read The Mouse in the Matzah Factory.

It wasn't until I became a Jewish educator, that I was exposed to Jewish literature for the youngest in our community. As an educator and later as an author, I have always maintained that Jewish education is an important component of Jewish survival. The presence of quality Jewish books for parents, educators and librarians to share with children is integral to their development of a positive Jewish identity and Jewish literacy.

As a young teacher, I was idealistic and made it my mission to make a small difference in the struggle for Jewish continuity. Assimilation, then as now, was a concern. I remember one December when I overheard several of the children in my class discussing the Christmas displays

at the local mall and the beautiful lights adorning the homes of their non-Jewish neighbors. There was such excitement in their voices and some even said they wished they could celebrate this special holiday.

I had been telling them the story of Hanukkah using the holiday books that were available at the time. There were few age appropriate books like . Many books were didactic in their approach and in the retelling of the Hanukkah story. The language was too sophisticated for young children and I had to adapt the text. Other books focused on the symbols related to Hanukkah but didn't really tell a story to engage children.

Unfortunately, despite all my efforts, the children's enthusiasm for Hanukkah did not match their excitement about Christmas. I didn't want to compete with Christmas. I just wanted to find a way to engage the children and help them see the beauty of our Jewish holidays. One evening, as I was flipping through the TV channels from Frosty the Snowman to Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer to the Little Drummer Boy, an idea took hold in my mind. Maybe I could create a Hanukkah character that would engage children.

I know that Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus but for me it also celebrates the birth of Sammy Spider. For those of you unfamiliar with Sammy, he is the outsider who lives in the home of a contemporary Jewish family and sees the beauty of Jewish celebrations and wants to be a part of them. When he wants to spin a dreidel like the little boy in the story, he is told, "Spider's don't spin dreidels. Spiders spin webs." I didn't realize at the time that Sammy would become a favorite with Jewish children and this catch phrase was later adapted for every holiday story I have written about him.

Just last year Sammy celebrated his 20th birthday and currently, there are 20 Sammy books and more to come. His holiday adventures have translated into Dutch, French and Spanish and there is a Sammy plush toy to delight young children.

Other books, I have written, in particular the Littlest series, have focused on holidays, values and biblical themes.

Sometimes, reviewers criticize my stories because they don't touch on every aspect of a Jewish holiday. For instance, in Sammy Spider's First Hanukkah, I made a reference to the Maccabees and the miracle of the oil, but it is not the focus of the story. It continues to be my belief, that Jewish learning does not take place in vacuum and that every book does not need to address every detail of a holiday. Redundancy does not reinforce Jewish learning and purely didactic approaches do not engage children.

My goal has been to write stories that children and their parents will enjoy and my hope has been that they will inspire and encourage less observant Jewish families to bring Jewish observances into their homes.

However, I think the Pew report is a sign that we need to re-examine our current Jewish children's literature and make certain that we are sensitive to the diversity of our Jewish

community. Many of the themes and topics of current stories target the Ashkenazi Jewish experience, including Sammy Spider.

I remember when my story, *The Littlest Candlesticks*, was published I received a long distance phone call from a dad thanking me for having a child of color depicted in the story; someone his daughter could relate to. I understood from his personal story how important it is to validate all Jewish children.

This point was reinforced for me when I was a teacher at a school that had a large percentage of Persian Jews. Although, the children enjoyed Sammy Spider stories, it was obvious that they came from homes with cultural differences from the Shapiro family that is highlighted in my stories. I came to recognize that their experiences were vastly different from my own, not only culturally but religiously, as they observed Sephardic traditions. I realized how important it was to re-evaluate Jewish children's literature to make certain that we meet the needs of our changing and diverse Jewish community.

Books about the holocaust and shtetl life are an important part of our past but so are stories about the persecution of Ethiopian Jews and the struggles of Middle Eastern Jews. Stories steeped in the past are part of what defines us but they are not the totality of who we are as a people.

Stories that focus on Jewish life and family experiences in today's world are also important and need to be addressed. It is imperative that we attract the next generation of Jewish writers from our diverse Jewish communities to share their experiences, ideas and creativity.

Unfortunately, Jewish publishers must assess books by their marketing value and not all stories have the potential for a wide readership if they target specific Jewish populations. PJ Library has impacted publishing by giving publishers the incentive to publish niche books that might otherwise never go to print. Their surveys demonstrate that today's young Jewish parents want stories about contemporary Jewish life. They don't want to be defined as victims of persecution but as a people who have survived adversity. Many are unaffiliated Jews who view themselves as part of a global society and whose Jewish identity is based on the importance of learning, compassion for others and justice for everyone.

I recently had three manuscripts accepted by PJ Library for their collection of books. One is about the rescue of Ethiopian Jews and airlifting them to Israel, another is about the celebration of the minor holiday of Lag B'Omer and the third is about the young King David. A new publishing house, Apple and Honey Press an imprint of Gefen Publishing House, the largest English language publisher in Israel, is publishing the books for PJ Library. I became their Editor in Chief and we hope to attract a new generation of Jewish writer to address the needs of our ever changing population. If any of you here today wish to submit a manuscript, I would love to read it.

As librarians I'm sure you understand, as I do, how you can impact our changing population. Just as *All of a Kind* family charmed me as a child of recent immigrants, today's libraries should reflect stories that are relevant to today's diverse Jewish population. The stories should appeal to

Jewish children from a variety of backgrounds and Jewish observance. Additionally, they should depict Jewish life, not just in Israel and America, but in every part of the world where a Jewish community thrives. Ours is a joint effort with a common purpose. Jewish librarians, educators, authors and publishers must work together on the goal of meeting the challenge of educating and assuring the continuity of our ever diverse Jewish population.