

PREFACE

The challenging, enjoyable, and certainly arguable task of identifying classic Jewish children's books started for me several years ago when I was the librarian of the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland (JECC). I was asked by a religious school director to compile such a list for her – right away – so that she could ensure that the students in her school were reading literature every Jewish child should read before they grew up.

That standing-on-one-foot list, having proved itself through the test of fire with one group of students, seemed worthy of a wider audience. I submitted it to the Bibliography Bank, an online service of the Association of Jewish Libraries, so that others could make use of it. However, the idea of compiling a more comprehensive, more carefully considered bibliography stayed with me.

In 2005, I was asked by the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland to teach a professional development course for teachers and librarians. Jewish classics seemed like the perfect topic. The course became a study group, meeting four times over a period of about six months, with lots of reading between class sessions. The students were primarily Judaica librarians, with several teachers and a library school student also participating. We identified the books that we thought might have classic status, read and re-read them, discussed and debated them, and eventually came up with a working list.

This publication is the result, consisting mainly of titles identified by study group participants, with some deleted and some added by the editor. Any omissions or mistakes are strictly my responsibility; any value the list has is due to the active, enthusiastic, dedicated, and intelligent work of the study group students, who are all listed as contributors. To them, and to Maury Greenberg of the JECC for asking me to teach a course of my own design, I am very grateful.

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Great Jewish Writers

Peretz, I. L. *The Magician's Visit*. Retold by Barbara Diamond Goldin. Illus. by Robert Andrew Parker. Puffin, 1993. For grades 2 – 4.

A mysterious magician visits a town during Passover, amazing people with his spells and tricks. When he appears at a poor couple's humble home and creates a sumptuous Seder, they are fearful of his magic and entreat their rabbi for advice. The shivery sense of mystery and possible danger that runs through this story mesmerizes children, who feel the suspense and delight in learning, with the characters, that the magician's visit brought good and not evil. Excellent illustrations enhance a well-told tale.

Peretz, I. L. *The Seven Good Years and Other Stories*. Retold by Esther Hautzig. Illus. by Deborah Kogan Ray. Jewish Publication Society, 2004. For grades 3 – 8.

The stories of the Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz (1859-1915) are said to have captured the soul of Eastern European Jewry. Esther Hautzig has translated and adapted ten of these treasures for children. Each one is enhanced by Ray's smoky, evocative illustrations. Among them are "Bontsche Sweig," "The Magician," "The Seven Good Years," and "If Not Still Higher." JPS has reissued these stories in paperback from an earlier, 1984 edition. No Jewish child should miss them!

Sholom Aleichem. *A Treasury of Sholom Aleichem's Children's Stories*. Selected and translated by Aliza Shevrin. Jason Aronson, 1996. For grades 3 – 7.

Some of Sholom Aleichem's *Mayses far Yidishe Kinder* (Stories for Jewish Children) as well as those from his other works are included in this anthology. They capture the experiences of children growing up in the shtetls of Eastern Europe while also being sensitive to the universal experiences of childhood. All are written in the first person, expressing, in the translator's words, "the eternal child in Sholom Aleichem."

Singer, Isaac Bashevis. *Stories for Children*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984. For grades 2 – 6.

An anthology of Singer's stories, some first published as picture books, e.g. *Why Noah Chose the Dove* and others from a variety of sources, including *Cricket Magazine* and collections such as *Zlateh the Goat*. The final selection is Singer's well-known essay, "Are Children the Ultimate Literary Critics?" Although this is not a substitute for Singer's other works for children, it is still a fine addition to the Jewish family bookshelf.

Family Reading

Greene, Bette. *The Summer of My German Soldier*. Puffin, 1973. For grades 8 – 10.

Set in a small town in Arkansas during World War II, this is the story of a forbidden friendship between twelve-year old Patty and an escaped German prisoner of war whom she hides. Shocking in its depiction of child abuse within a dysfunctional Jewish family, the story leaves no reader untouched.

Ish-Kishor, Sulamith. *Our Eddie*. Pantheon, 1969. For grades 5 – 8.

A gripping but sad story of a Jewish family and a bitter father-son relationship. Eddie's father is uncaring of his own children, lavishing all of his affection and concern on his students. The disparity between professed and practiced Jewish values is stark. Winner of a Sydney Taylor Book Award and the first book of Jewish content for children to deviate from the happy family mode.

Polacco, Patricia. *The Keeping Quilt*. Simon and Schuster, 1998. For Kdg. – grade 3.

A family heirloom links several generations of a Jewish American family. The illustrations speak eloquently of tradition and change as the family adapts and then assimilates. Winner of a Sydney Taylor Book Award.

Rocklin, Joann. *Strudel Stories*. Delacorte, 1999. For grades 4 – 7.

Warm, humorous, and sometimes poignant stories about seven generations of a Jewish family are linked by the baking of apple strudel. Set in Europe and the United States, the stories show how traditions are made, handed down and transformed.

Taylor, Sydney. *All-of-a-Kind Family*. Illus. by Helen John. Follett, 1951 and several other editions. For grades 3 – 5.

The adventures of five sisters growing up on New York's Lower East Side in the early years of the twentieth century have been read and loved by legions of readers since they were first published. There are four sequels, all worth reading. An excellent guide to Sydney Taylor and her books can be found on the Awards page of the AJL website, www.jewishlibraries.org.

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