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Why Are There So Many Holocaust Books for Kids?

By Marjorie Ingall

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Doug Chayka

Every year, the Association of Jewish Libraries presents its Sydney Taylor Book Award to the most "outstanding books for children and teens that authentically portray the Jewish experience." At this year's ceremony, on June 29, not a single children's book about the Holocaust won a gold medal. As one of the judges, I consider this a triumph.

Here's why. Unfortunately, to "authentically portray the Jewish experience" all too often means to "focus on the Holocaust." In the 53 years since the award's establishment in 1968, 105 children's and young adult books have won gold medals; of these, 31 are about

the Holocaust. (That's almost 30 percent, if you're doing the math.) Looked at another way, there were just 23 years — fewer than half — in which a Holocaust book was not among the gold medalists.

Why this obsessive attention? First, the Holocaust sells. Presumably most of the purchasers of these books are parents, schools and libraries seeking to edify the youth — though certainly many kids adore reading about history and horror. (Ask Jewish millennials about their childhood love of "The Devil's Arithmetic," a middle-grade time-travel novel in which a bratty tween girl opens the door for Elijah at her family's Passover Seder and is transported to an Eastern European shtetl in 1942, where she learns not to be such a jerk. Four-word spoiler alert: Redemption through gas chamber.)

More and more Jews seem to base Jewish identity on the Holocaust. In 2020, 76 percent of respondents in a Pew Research Center survey of American Jews (up from 73 percent in 2013) said that "remembering the Holocaust" was essential to being Jewish — more than the number who rated essential leading a moral and ethical life, working for justice and equality in society, being intellectually curious, continuing family traditions or observing Jewish law. With violence against Jews on the rise worldwide — and the fact that 66 percent of millennials don't know what Auschwitz was — it's certainly vital for non-Jews to understand our tortuous history, full of expulsions and hatred, even if more recently it's also been characterized by prosperity and comfort.

Yet by focusing so relentlessly on the Holocaust, we're telling kids, Jewish and not, that the worst thing that ever happened to us is the cornerstone of our collective identity. Are we trying to scare Jewish kids into loving their Jewishness? Trying to guilt non-Jews into refraining from slurs and attacks? How's that working out for us? And how, precisely, are we making Judaism *appealing* to Jewish children when the primary story we share about our selfhood is that we were victims of mass murder?

Though the Holocaust books that have won Sydney Taylor awards are mostly excellent, the truth is that excellence in Holocaust books is rare. *Most* Holocaust kidlit is, in fact, godawful: age-inappropriate (why do we need a picture book about a cat witnessing Kristallnacht?), misleading (the vast majority of Jewish families were *not,* in fact, reunited after the war, yet children's books need happy endings, so …) and based on elisions of fiction and fact (the king of Denmark did *not* wear a yellow star in sympathy with the Jewish community; a famous Italian bicyclist probably did *not* save 800 Jews).

And too many focus on noble Christians rescuing passive, helpless Jews. We don't need more righteous-gentile books; none will improve on Lois Lowry's flawless "Number the Stars," anyway. They're the equivalent of white-savior narratives in Black literature. Show us Jewish resistance fighters, ghetto combatants, smugglers and spies! And *genug* with the well-meaning but lazy young adult novels that use the Holocaust as an atmospheric, high-drama backdrop for a love story, providing emotional intensity without true gravitas. Let's not even discuss the popular young adult novel about a teenage girl death-camp survivor in a dystopian alternate timeline who develops shape-

shifting powers from Mengele-like experiments, falls in love with a hot Axis boy and enters a transcontinental motorcycle race so she can kill Hitler at the victory ball.

And, oy, "The Boy in the Striped Pajamas." Nine-year-old Bruno is the son of a Nazi commandant, yet he has no idea what his dad does or even what a Jew is. He befriends a Jewish boy, Shmuel, who somehow manages to slip away from his daily activities in Auschwitz to hang out with Bruno at an unelectrified, unguarded fence. This tale isn't heartwarming; it's a lie. Jews who managed to reach those (in fact, electrified) fences hurled themselves against them to commit suicide. Bruno would have known what Jews were; by 1935, 60 percent of German boys were members of the Hitler Youth. Bruno would not have thought the people in "striped pajamas" were on vacation; real inmates looked like walking skeletons. And the majority of 9-year-old boys were gassed on arrival at Auschwitz, so Shmuel probably wouldn't have been there at all.

Even nontrivializing, fact-based Holocaust books are problematic because there are so *many.* The Sydney Taylor Book Award committee read 146 books this year; 32 were about the Holocaust. Among those from the big five publishers and Scholastic, though — meaning books with the most prestige and highest production values — 11 of 44 (25 percent) were Holocaust-related.

Did 2020 really need *five* gleaming new children's books about Anne Frank? The young woman who wanted to be a writer, who edited and re-edited her diary with the hope of publishing it after the war? Let's give her the respect of letting her speak for herself instead of handing kids, too soon, picture books that simplify and flatten her story and pre-empt her own moral and narrative power.

It's a shame that an award named for a woman whose work was so full of joy and fun so often goes to books about sorrow and genocide. Sydney Taylor (1904-78) was the author of the beloved All-of-a-Kind Family series, featuring five little girls on the Lower East Side at the turn of the last century who fire off Roman candles (whatever those are!) on Independence Day, take streetcars to Coney Island, adore the Seward Park librarian, wear costumes for Purim. Their family is poor — Pa runs a rag shop — yet the descriptions of food and fashion are mouthwatering. Chickpeas from a street cart, presented in a whirled paper cone! Candy by the half a penny! Delicious broken crackers!

Jewish and non-Jewish kids alike deserve such lively, luscious writing and low-stakes conflict, not just stories about trauma. And all kids should get to see themselves in books. Holocaust stories focus almost exclusively on Ashkenazi Jews, although the American Jewish population is increasingly diverse. The Pew survey found that 17 percent of U.S. Jews now live in households in which at least one person is Black, Hispanic, Asian or multiracial; among Jews in the youngest cohort, ages 18 to 29, 15 percent identify as nonwhite, compared with 4 percent of Jews 50 and over.

Publishers: Give us books about a Black Orthodox Jewish kid who solves mysteries, about college students debating Israel and Palestine, about keeping kosher at a state

fair, about a Jewish girl on a harsh desert planet who rescues a fugitive droid and saves the galaxy. Give us biographies of important Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Give us more and better contemporary stories in which Jewishness isn't the problem or even the main subject, but rather a facet of the protagonist's nuanced identity. Parents, teachers, librarians: Buy these books!

Happily, this year's Sydney Taylor gold medalists are a brilliant bunch. There's a vibrant picture book about a little boy, a kitten and a diverse Seder; an autobiographical middle-grade novel about a turtle-loving kid dreading his bar mitzvah service project and his upcoming surgery for a facial deformity; a young adult memoir in graphic novel form that's a hilarious and moving meditation on grief and an exploration of the comfort found in Jewish ritual. The silver medalists include a poetic meditation on Miriam rescuing her baby brother Moses, a book about contemporary Jewish kids — one with white skin, one with dark skin — doing yoga, a folklore-filled medieval fantasy with a dragon-savvy Jewish girl protagonist, and more. There's just one Holocaust book among them. And that seems just right.