

Keeping Young Readers Turning the Pages

Judith Rovenger



The first duty of a writer is to keep the reader turning the pages.

— Isaac Bashevis Singer

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE, like adult literature, exists within the context of its time. So it is important to consider, while noting some of the literary trends of the last decade, the impact popular culture and events have had on children's books and children's reading patterns. American children, like their parents, are very busy. And they are bombarded by choice. The Internet, instant messaging, iPods and cell phones, along with homework, sports, and other after-school activities — not to mention television and movies — all compete with reading for children's time. Somehow, reading has managed to survive, and not just as a book report assignment.

J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* deserves some credit for revitalizing the joy of reading and reinvigorating fantasy as a genre. This young wizard captured the minds and hearts of readers and non-readers alike. Reading became, somehow, a not-just-for-nerds pastime. Books and reading made the agenda of dinnertime conversation as well as television news.

Inspired partly by Harry and partly by Oprah Winfrey's book clubs for adults as well as libraries' on-going efforts to nurture a love of reading in the young, a proliferation of book clubs and book discussion groups for young readers have sprung up around the country. Most libraries either offer reading groups or would be happy to launch one. And the Internet may actually be motivating some reading as it stimulates children's curiosity.

Book series continue to be a reading staple, with updated versions of the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew as well as newer titles — plot driven, predictable and addictive, creating a habit for passionate reading.

The number of children's books published annually has increased over the decade, growing from 6,000 children's books published annually in the mid-1990s to around 13,000 in 2003. Similarly, there has been an increase in both the number of Jewish publishers and the number of children's books of Jewish interest published. This is due in part to the economics of children's publishing and partly to an

increased ethnic awareness and interest in honoring diversity in stories for the young.

One notable trend at some Jewish publishers is a move to be gender neutral in language, especially in reference to God, and to depict children in gender neutral roles.

Bookstore chains, price club outlets, and Internet bookstores exerted enormous pressure on editorial decisions as the library market became less lucrative. Short-term publishing with its eye on the mega hits seemed to drive many publishers, as opposed to building backlists, once the staple of children's publishing, intensifying the ever-present tension between art and commerce in publishing. This means editors must walk further out on limbs to publish titles they believe in, ever mindful of the pressures of the bottom line. It means more series titles, sequels, and books with tie-ins to movies and toys.

Amidst this surge of books is the growing numbers of celebrity titles sucking up attention and shelf space. With few exceptions, these titles add only to America's love affair with celebrity and do little for literature. Especially unfortunate are some of the hit songs turned into picture books. Many are nostalgic in tone, an emotion more relevant to adults, and seem to be an odd choice for children, to whom they are marketed.

On the other hand, nonfiction is experiencing a golden age, with enticing picture book biographies for the youngest and appealing photographs and facsimiles to illuminate texts for older children. Literary nonfiction titles compete with drier curricula-driven books for children's attention and offer reading rewards beyond their usefulness in answering homework assignments.

At the same time, edgy, sometimes unsettling books for youth continue to push the envelope in content, style, and format — exhibiting a frankness and respect for its young audience or, depending on your point of view, drowning them in grim, bleak, and vulgar landscapes. Books about dysfunctional families, abuse, and violence in schools and families, as well books reflecting a range of sexual behaviors (although accurately reflecting the world of some youngsters) can be intense and

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April 2005

Nisan 5765

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sometimes disturbing reading. For the most part, these books also contain images of resilience and inspiration. Graphic novels, novels in verse, and novels with multiple narrators and time shifts offer young readers new narrative pathways into stories.

Make no mistake, wonderful books for all ages continue to be published. What has become more challenging, however, is identifying them amidst the mediocre or banal in this crowded field. Thirty percent of children's books don't get reviewed and many titles receive only one assessment. Recommendations by children's specialists vie with marketplace bestseller lists in further tilting the power toward the side of commerce.

The events of 9/11 brought a yearning for comfort, a desire to escape, and a need to understand and make sense of life in the face of uncertainty. Against a backdrop of terrorism, national polarity, and international unrest, as well as the everyday concerns and triumphs

of growing up, writers and artists fashioned stories to entertain, comfort, and challenge children. One of the most unique is *Six Million Paper Clips*, a true story addressing intolerance through the examples of the Holocaust. Even before 9/11, authors were telling stories of resilience and hope set during the Great Depression. Simms Taback set his award-winning picture book in a *shtetl*, while Mordicai Gerstein's exquisite *The Man Who Walked Between Two Towers* is set in the recent past of Ground Zero, celebrating one man's dance on a high wire between the Twin Towers.

The stories that captured the attention and the hearts of children over this last decade — a decade with one foot in the 20th century and one in the 21st — have one thing in common. Whether looking to the past or into worlds created entirely from imagination, they kept young readers turning the pages and deepening their vision of themselves and our world as it might be. 

Wrestling with Reading

Joanne Baker

"EVERY CHILD IS a good reader once he or she has found the right book," responded a dear friend and vice principal of a west suburban middle school when asked if it is possible to teach our students to love reading. While I don't disagree with her assessment, the time for reading, and the inclination of adolescents to spend what little free time they have doing so, is rapidly diminishing in a world of audiovisual media and gadgetry.

All young children love being read to and love to read, evidenced time and again in any home with youngsters. This love of reading and love of books is set long before children enter school. Thus, the salient question is: once children become students, what are we educators doing to foster this love of books and reading or, what are we doing, unconsciously, to suppress it?

Speak to teachers. Many rightfully believe that they are not responsible for teaching children to love reading; it is, rather, the parents who set the stage for their own children. Another friend and former colleague who teaches middle-school English, suggests that in the same way that today's parent must make a conscious effort to organize the family to eat dinner together, they, too, must set aside

time for reading together as a family. With iPods, IMs, VCRs, DVDs, TVs, land phones, cell phones and message machines turned off, parents must deliberately make old-fashioned pick-up-a-book-and-read-time an essential part of each week.

But once children are in school, can we keep the early childhood reading flame oxygenated by choosing the right books for our students? Should we allow more time to read in school? Perhaps "study hall" should be replaced with "reading hall," a time and place in which students and teachers, collectively, share the quiet power of books — especially in Jewish schools, where reading books and texts is not only a skill to be developed, but also an ancient passion to be sustained in our Jewish children.

Perhaps it is not the love of reading we seek to keep alive, but the love of books. I occasionally wonder if some teachers inadvertently destroy their students' love of books by the assignments given to cultivate the reading experience. Most teachers are women, and regardless of our conscientiousness and sensitivity to the books we choose for our classes, we do not *really* know how male students react or feel about those choices. Recognizing the variable

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