

# Of Bookworms and Bookends: A Look at the Jewish Children's Book Market

By C. B. Weinfeld

Times sure have changed. When I was growing up (roughly two decades ago), Jewish books (and their authors) were a precious rarity. Every new book was treated like a long overdue guest from out-of-town. There were only a handful of Jewish libraries around, and the only way to read the new book before it became "old news" was to buy or borrow it from a friend or neighbor. Once the acquisition was made, the book would be read again...and again...and again.

Some of the Jewish books available for children in those days were downright charming although far from polished. A case in point: the soft-cover series starring *Fishele and Fraydele*, the adorable preschool-age brother and sister. *Fishele and Fraydele's* parents and extended relatives doted on them and made sure not to miss an opportunity to extol the virtues of living a religious life. Every aspect of the holidays and *mitzvot* was vigorously celebrated. Though the books were soft-cover and handwritten (yes, the entire text was laboriously written by hand and Xeroxed), they were a staple of Jewish libraries.

The *Dov-Dov* series was slightly more professional. These stories centered on a dashing young hero named *Dov-Dov Diamond* whose escapades kept us awake way past our bedtimes. *Dov-Dov* and his gang of fun-loving friends were

somewhat more realistic than the perfectly well-behaved *Fishele and Fraydele*, and were, therefore, a novelty.

Every year or so, another four or five new books would hit the shelves, and we'd eagerly wait for them to become available at the school library. Yet, in all fairness to the Jewish publishing companies in existence back then, book publishing was an expensive, cumbersome process.

Fast-forward 20 years. These days, I frequent the bookstores with the same yearning and interest, although my priorities have changed: now I search for meaningful books for my own children. Thankfully, there's plenty to choose from. New children's books pop up on the shelves each week, or so it seems. There are dozens of new titles for children and young adults including fiction, nonfiction, inspirational material, and periodicals. Indeed, a trip to the local Jewish bookstore yields nearly as many choices as a trip to the kosher supermarket!

What accounts for the burgeoning industry of quality Jewish children's literature? One answer is the growth and success of several large Jewish publishers, including ArtScroll/Mesorah, Feldheim Publishers, and Hachai Publishing. Moreover, with the enormous advances in technology, the entire publishing process—from writing to designing to printing—is cheaper and easier.

One of the most prolific children's writers these days is Miriam Elias, the author of numerous teenage novels including *All Because of Raizy*, *Families*

*Etc.*, and *The Other Side of the Coin*. Meticulously researched, Elias's books penetrate the typical teen mind and address important adolescent struggles. Some of the issues her books cover include adjusting to stepfamilies, becoming religious, and dealing with classroom cheating. In her most recent novel, *What Avigayil Found*, published by ArtScroll, Elias describes a young girl's determination to turn an abandoned hut into a cozy cabin, and, in the process, her transformation from timid and insecure teenager to self-confident young adult.

Libby Lazewnik, whose name is familiar to most Jewish readers, began writing roughly 15 years ago, and hasn't stopped since. Lazewnik has a unique writing style that grabs your attention from the very first page and holds it throughout. Over the years, she's produced a remarkable array of books, including mysteries, short stories, and several adult novels as well. Her latest novel, *The Judge*, has been dubbed the "Jewish John Grisham Book." Full of suspense and intrigue, the book centers on a judge whose wife was killed under mysterious circumstances. Raising his children alone, the judge finds out that the same killer is now after one of his children.

A children's writer in a category of her own, Yaffa Ganz is the spirited author of over 40 children's books. Regarded as a pioneer in the world of Jewish children's writers, Ganz is the creator of *Savta Simcha*, the memorable grandmother with the big black bag who has enchanted Jewish chil-

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dren for years. In fact, Savta Simcha recently celebrated her twentieth anniversary. In a frank trans-Atlantic conversation with Ganz, the celebrated author described what compelled her to create this eccentric *bubbe*. “I started out by telling my children stories by the bucketful. Savta Simcha was

According to a prominent Jewish book distributor, “We’re talking about roughly 100 books released annually in the overall Jewish market, versus thousands, or tens of thousands of releases in the secular market.

Prominent secular publishers such as HarperCollins or Scholastic publish

in total. If I’d counted the hours it took me to research and write the book and worked as a housekeeper instead, I would have made more money.”

And yet, financial considerations aside, Jewish children’s writers keep churning out new books. “The royalties are nice,” said a well-known author,

## *What accounts for the burgeoning industry of quality Jewish children’s literature?*

actually a hilarious character by the name of Yenta Hochenshpretzil. She’s a bit of my grandmothers, Mary Poppins, and bits and pieces of some interesting ladies I’ve met.”

Ganz’s latest book, *Savta Simcha and the Roundabout Journey to Jerusalem*, published by Feldheim Publishers, has Savta Simcha and her clumsy brother Nechemya take readers on a tour around the world.

In 1990, Ganz was awarded the prestigious Sydney Taylor Body-of-Work Award from the Association of Jewish Libraries for the “totality of her work and outstanding contribution to the field of Jewish literature for children.”

One of the few Orthodox writers whose books speak to Jewish children of all denominations, Ganz recalls that one of the nicest compliments she ever received was from a librarian at a Reform temple who had all of the Savta Simcha books. “She told me that these were books that the kids could relate to. They were never on the shelves because they were constantly being read,” said Ganz.

“I like to think of my books as Jewish, rather than just belonging to one sector,” Ganz added.

Despite the remarkable growth of the Jewish children’s book market, it pales in comparison to the secular one.

several hundred titles a year. We just can’t compete with those numbers.”

Or with those royalties. The typical advance for a widely respected secular author, whose books can be expected to sell half a million copies, should suffice to keep him comfortable for awhile. As for the Jewish market...

“What advance?” laments one respected author. “I’m lucky if I see my check months after the book is out. My latest book sold 6,000 copies, (a respectable amount in the Jewish market) and I received royalties of \$6,000

“but there is nothing more gratifying than knowing you made a difference in a child’s life.” **JA**



*The memorable grandmother who has enchanted Jewish children for years, Savta Simcha recently celebrated her twentieth anniversary.*