

What Is a Jewish Book?

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There is a lively and ongoing discussion about what exactly makes a book a Jewish book and a parallel discussion amongst Jewish writers as to whether they think of themselves as specifically Jewish writers. There is, not surprisingly when speaking about anything Jewish, no unanimity.

We have long prided ourselves on being the People of the Book. As Spanish Jewish scholar Ibn Tibbon wrote in the 12th century:

Cover your bookcases with rugs and linens of fine quality; preserve them from dampness and mice and injury; for it is your books that are your true treasure.... Make books your companions; let your bookshelves be your gardens: bask in their beauty, gather their fruit, pluck their roses, take their spices and myrrh. And when your soul be weary, change from garden to garden, and from prospect to prospect.

But when we talk about wanting to celebrate Jewish books, what are we referring to? How do we decide what makes a Jewish book Jewish?

In some cases, it's self-evident — works on Jewish religion and ethics, books on Jewish history and culture, books written in Yiddish or Hebrew, biographies and autobiographies of major Jewish figures.... We would never question whether these books are Jewish — and, I would like to think, regardless of who wrote them.

In the years I spent editing Holocaust survivor memoirs, it was self-evident that these painfully written works are Jewish. And it's not only because they are about the traumatic history of the Holocaust. It is also because the authors are Jewish to their very core. Whether observant or secular, they are steeped in a Jewishness, a Jewish life and sense of self that weaves itself through their writing.

But as a member of the Canadian Jewish Literary Awards jury and a former publisher of Jewish books, I often find myself engaged in conversations about what makes a book Jewish. My usual answer, perhaps unsatisfyingly, is that it depends. We'll just know whether it is or is not a Jewish book when we read it. But it's not always that easy — as I've said there's not always consensus. A book by a Jewish author writing about a Jewish topic or about Jewish characters in a work of fiction? Yes, clearly. A non-Jewish author writing about a definably Jewish subject? Probably. A work by a Jewish author that has little or no Jewish content? Probably not — you can see that I'm still hedging my bets. Things get even harder when we talk about whether a book is "Jewish enough." I'm a little sensitive on that subject: as a Jew raised without any Jewish education or religion or even a clear Jewish identity, with a great-grandmother who told my father not to marry "the shiksa" (my mother) because she was an assimilated secular German Jew, yes it raises my hackles. How much of the content of a book has to be Jewish before it is Jewish enough? 25%? 50%? 80%?

In a work of fiction, what if the main character is not Jewish but the important secondary character is and the historical context is one of self-evident importance to Jewish history and culture — for example, the Holocaust. Do we have to count the number of words given to the Jewish character? Or the number of times there is a Jewish cultural reference?

I recently read an article in the online Jewish magazine *Tablet* by Leah Koenig that asks the question “What Is ‘Jewish Food’?” Along with discussions of gefilte fish and blintz recipes, the author writes that one question that comes up more often than any other is: “How exactly do you define Jewish food?” Acknowledging that the question is really complicated, she notes that “Jewish cuisine is often reduced to a short list of latkes, pastrami, matzo ball soup, and other Eastern European hits.... But in reality, Jews have moved around a lot throughout history—by choice and by force.... As a result, Jewish cuisine is at once profoundly global, deeply regional, and...often not exclusively Jewish.” Growing up in the Indian city of Kolkata in the 1930s, with immigrants from Iraq and Syria, cookbook author Flower Silliman says that “We had dishes from the past and we saw what our neighbours were making and what looked good, and we invented a new dish. That is how recipes evolve.”

Leah Koenig also notes that, historically, “kashrut has provided a natural perimeter for Jewish food — a constant — a sacred through-line.” But there are no rules of kashrut for Jewish writers or for Jewish books.

In his 2015 article “It’s a Small, Small, Small Press World” in *Tablet*, about where American Jewish writers are finding homes these days, and why, Adam Kirsch argues “...there is a definite sense today that Jewish writing has become a genre of American fiction, rather than the main event, as it was in the palmy days of Roth and Bellow.... The classics of American Jewish literature were largely about Jews wrestling with or trying to escape their background, which meant that they were versions of the universal American experience of immigration.... Today, on the other hand, Jewish writers tend to be more Jewishly knowledgeable, more interested in actual Jewish communities and Judaism itself — which means that their writing’s primary appeal is to other Jews....”

I agree with the need for small Jewish presses these days — as today’s larger publishers look more narrowly for megahits with “guaranteed sales,” the opportunities for writers of all communities outside the mainstream get smaller and smaller. But I don’t agree with some of his assertions about what constitutes a Jewish book or what makes a writer Jewish. In describing French Nobel-prizewinner Patrick Modiano’s book *Pedigree: A Memoir* Kirsch writes “Modiano’s Jewishness is central to his family story — his father narrowly escaped deportation during the Occupation.... But it feels wrong to call him a Jewish writer, since he does not engage explicitly with Jewishness or Judaism.” He then goes so far to say that “He is about as Jewish a writer as W. G. Sebald, who was a Christian.” You see? How can it be both ways? Modiano may or may not identify as a Jewish writer (I don’t know) but I would have no problem thinking of *Pedigree* as a Jewish book when the author’s “Jewishness is central to his family story.”

What I’ve learned — and I speak only for myself, not for the whole jury — is that it is possible for a Jewish author to bring a *je ne sais quoi*, what I would call a Jewish sensibility to her or his writing, regardless of the quantifiable Jewish content. It might be the rhythms of the language, a smattering of Yiddish or Yiddish syntax, a certain sense of humour. In the Jewish Book Council blog, *The Prosen People*, David Ebenbach writes that “for me as an author, Jewishness does not have to be *the* question,

or even *a* question, in every story. I ask any question my fiction leads me to ask. But I also recognize that, when I do so, I'm doing it sort of Jewishly. Bagels or no bagels."

These aspects of a book are more difficult to quantify and more difficult to agree on. We all bring our own backgrounds, sensibilities, language history, and ears to the books we read. It's as subjective as looking at a piece of art or listening to a piece of music. And even if you can identify a book as Jewish, will it be definably Jewish to a non-Jewish reader? Does it matter?

Iranian-American writer Azar Nafisi, best known for her book *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, talked in a 2015 CBC interview about the "importance of literature — fiction and nonfiction — in building a democratic community of readers.... It allows readers to be curious about themselves and the world, in finding ways to connect to the world." I would argue that Jewish books not only give expression to the multiplicity of Jewish perspectives but also make connections between those varied aspects of being Jewish and the broader community. We not only celebrate Jewish books with the Canadian Jewish Literary Awards, but we celebrate books that bring their Jewishness — however defined — to the broad republic of readers.

I'd like to conclude with some thoughts from Hugo Rifkind, a member of the *Jewish Quarterly Wingate* literary prize jury. This annual prize was established in 1977, to honour "the best book — fiction or nonfiction — to translate the idea of Jewishness to the general reader." In a 2016 article in *The Jewish Chronicle*, Rifkind notes that with the *Wingate* prize — like the Canadian Jewish Literary Awards but unlike many other literary prizes — the whole concept of eligibility is a judgment in itself. "What," he also finds himself asking, "makes a book a Jewish book? Does it have to be a book by a Jew, or can it simply be about Jews? Does it have to be a book by one person, but with two opinions, and perhaps three cars? Or, could it be a fairly universal book, of equal interest to all, but merely with a Jew in it? Page 173: a door opens, enter a man in a yarmulke. Is that enough? All Jews are interested in the Holocaust, probably, but does that mean all books about the Holocaust are Jewish books?"

Rifkind also goes on to observe — not surprisingly — that to serve on the jury of a Jewish book award requires some degree of self-examination. "One thing on which Jews — and not just Jews — have many, many opinions," he writes, "is the question of what being Jewish (or sometimes just Jewish-ish) actually means."

I'm not going to wade into that question tonight. For me, it's enough to ask the questions about what makes a Jewish book Jewish. And I don't pretend to have all the answers.