

What I Read to My Son When the World Is on Fire

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November 6, 2023



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Last May, my husband and I invited a Palestinian friend for Shabbat dinner, and when he asked what to bring, I requested a book about his homeland for our 7-year-old son. Because this friend is lavishly generous and wasn't sure of our child's reading level, he showed up with a gift bag of titles about Palestinian children and their experiences, ranging from picture books to a four-volume series of middle-grade novels.

In the wake of the devastating atrocities committed by Hamas on Oct. 7 and the subsequent weeks of violence in Gaza, I have found myself reaching for those books.

Children's books, which present subtle truths in simple terms, offer a valuable tool in retaining our moral bearings, especially amid a maelstrom of grief and rage. These books, in their simplicity and brevity, can grant polarized communities access to each other's stories, reminding us of our shared humanity and common interest in finding a way toward peaceful coexistence.

In the books I read with my son, I saw the Palestinian children's authors of today doing something I recognize from my research on the Yiddish children's literature of the previous century: striving to help children make sense of the world they stand to inherit while writing a better world into being.

The canon of Yiddish literature that I've studied draws on books and periodicals created from 1900 to 1970 on four continents under a range of political auspices — including socialism, communism, labor Zionism and just plain Yiddishism — by an array of educators, high-culture authors and specialized children's writers. These writers built exciting fictive worlds for their readers to escape to and aspire to — while urging them to endure and redress persistent, real-world social problems, such as income inequality and perennial antisemitic violence.

The Yiddish writers of a century ago described magical Sabbaths and capricious rulers, the distinctive joys and sorrows that inflected Ashkenazi Jewish history and identity, without losing sight of ice skating and schoolroom dramas — in other words, the sorts of frolics and fears that pertain to childhood all over.

Yiddish stories emphasize the ways children can act ethically and carry their culture forward. Instead of reinforcing conventional nationalism, these works followed the general tendency of Yiddish literature, art and film to explore how culture might define a nation. Keenly interested in faraway civilizations, Yiddish children's literature sought to offer its readers what the educator Emily Style calls window and mirror: reflections of their own experiences and apertures onto the experiences of others. Over decades and across oceans, these writers counted on their stories to turn *vilde khayes* (the ungovernable “wild things” that Maurice Sendak imported into the English lexicon) into specimens of ethical humanity capable of *mitlayd* (compassion, literally, “suffering with”).

Narrative fiction is an exceptionally potent means for conveying others' suffering and cultivating empathy, and children's literature is no exception; adults who fail to appreciate the seriousness of this literary enterprise, or worse, attempt to restrict or ban it, trivialize the processes whereby children learn to think and feel — and so alienate themselves from influencing the future.

An entire generation of Israelis and Palestinians, as well as those abroad who care about their fate, are now at risk of further losing faith in the possibility of peace. At this critical moment, children's books can help in two important ways: First, they establish a realm where we can bear witness to one another's pain, fear and joy. In “Sitti's Secrets” by Naomi Shihab Nye — a gentle, poetic evocation of a Palestinian American girl's visit to her grandmother and cousins who live “on the other side of the earth” — the sustained note of exilic longing is tempered by joyful connection. In Hannah Moushabeck's “Homeland: My Father Dreams of Palestine,” a Palestinian father refashions memories of his youth in the Old City of Jerusalem into bedtime stories for his daughters. Amahl Bishara's 2005 “The Boy and the Wall” is set closer geographically to the conflict and offers a child's-eye view of the separation barrier erected in the West Bank. A colorful book in English and Arabic, it was created with children living in the Aida refugee camp near Bethlehem and, naturally, reflects their confusion and pain at life under unending occupation — and communicates that to its readers.

These are titles I want my own child exposed to. And I want non-Jewish families to read books that represent our full humanity, in all our particular Jewish vulnerability and joy. As the cultural critic Marjorie Ingall has noted, Holocaust themes are overrepresented among titles about Jews from American mainstream publishers, while many Jewish children’s authors and librarians feel that everyday Jewish life in Israel is underrepresented. I’d like for American readers to have broader access to depictions of Jewish flourishing, including in Israel, as in Janice Hechter’s “Adventure Girl: Dabi Digs in Israel.” To be seen in our wholeness and complexity and to see others in the same way — this is part of what these books can offer.

But children’s literature fosters more than just basic awareness of the similarities and differences in our shared humanity: It conjures a realm where we can imagine — together — something better than what is. “Daniel and Ismail” by Juan Pablo Iglesias is pitched to children ages 3 to 6 and tells the story of two boys, one Palestinian and one Jewish, who overcome their parents’ objections to form a friendship on the soccer field. The plot subtly acknowledges that a new generation will have to figure out how to make peace and that it is possible for children to lead us.

The books are plentiful and inviting. They were created to write a better world into being: Now we must use them to read a better world into being. While these tales are important for the sake of young readers, they are just as critical for us adults to share. Those of us watching the news with a sense of despair need these stories, both their gentleness and their moral fierceness. The reasons for anguish pile up in body bags. Our souls are crushed by the seeming impossibility of democratic majorities to hold their leaders to account — to demand dignity, safety and peace for all throughout the region.

Children’s literature can’t solve these problems. But it creates an arena in which to dream, an essential redoubt for rational hope. And without hope, nothing good will come.

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