

# DOUBLE CROSSING

Tal, Eve. *Double Crossing*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press, 2005.

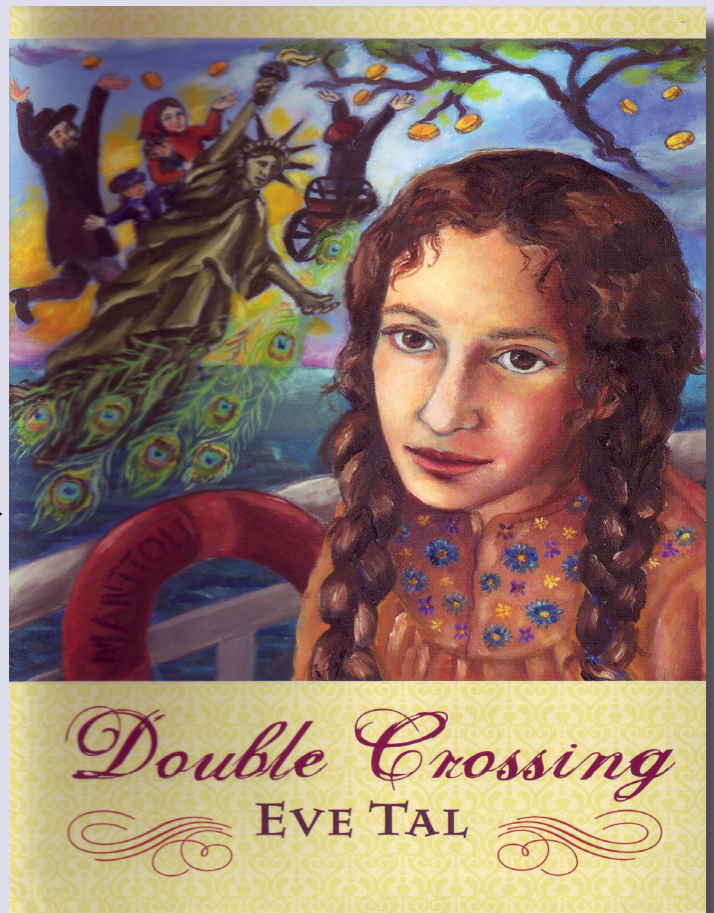
## FIRST OPINION

### Shtetl to Promised Land: Eve Tal's *Double Crossing*

C. Beth Burch, Professor, School of Education,  
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Raizel Balaban, the protagonist of Eve Tal's *Double Crossing*, is like many eleven-year-old girls anywhere, any time. She helps her mother at home, she loves her brothers and sisters, and she adores her papa. She is smart and has a thirst for learning. She loves to tell stories, and she makes friends easily. She daydreams about the future, and she is brave, though she doesn't know it quite yet. Raizel Balaban is not, however, just any eleven-year-old girl: she lives in a Russian shtetl (small Jewish village) just after the turn of the twentieth century; she can neither read nor write because only boys go to school; her family is Jewish—and Orthodox. Because of persistent and virulent anti-Semitism, Russia is at this time a dangerous place for Jews, and Raizel's family decides to emigrate to America for somewhat mysterious reasons. When it turns out that the Balabans can afford only two tickets—one for an adult, one for a child—Raizel is the child who gets to go with her father. This book is the story of their exodus from Russia to the Goldenh Medinah, the Promised Land, America.

Tal's book gestures to Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*, published in 1911, a classic immigration story. Antin's memoir, like this young adult novel, also begins in Russia with the story of a precocious Russian Jewish girl engulfed in the darkness of anti-Semitism, shtetl life, and poverty. Both books end with their protagonists on the American shore, in Boston. Like



Raizel, Mary Antin is ten to twelve years old when she arrives in America; both Mary and her fictional counterpart Raizel are extraordinarily bright and perceptive—quick learners. Yet, while it is likely that *Double Crossing* is inspired by the Antin story, Raizel's story veers from Mary Antin's in its emphasis on the journey itself—on escaping Russia, waiting in Antwerp for the boat, the crossing, and the surprise across the sea.

Tal's focus on the journey and the crossing is appropriate since these parts of the story force Raizel to grow up and to confront the influences of home, family, religion, and gender. These are among the brightest threads in the tapestries of our identities, and these are likewise the important themes driving young adult fiction. This book can rightfully assume a place in the canon of young adult literature on this count alone. But Tal has also written an authentic historical novel about the now-lost world of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Eastern European Jewry, with just enough information so that the young reader is informed rather than overwhelmed, both intellectually and psychologically. The years 1890 to 1920 were those of massive Jewish immigration to the United States from Eastern Europe—from Russia especially—where there really were endless pogroms against the Jews, particularly in rural areas such as those where Raizel, Tal's protagonist, lives. Jews (and others) were forcibly inducted into the czar's army. Poverty was ubiquitous. Girls like Raizel were not educated because it was thought that only boys needed to know Torah and girls needed to know how to run the home and manage the family. Families did of necessity split up, sometimes even permanently, so that some family member (usually the father) could pursue a better life for all. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) was real. The more comfortable middle class Jews in Antwerp are based on real prototypes, German or Western European Jews, who were typically more assimilated than their Eastern European counterparts. The commandments of kosher are real, as is the anguish that Rev Balaban feels at breaking them and becoming an altogether different kind of Jew.

Two things, however, mar *Double Crossing*. First, Raizel's storytelling borders on the excessive. Yes, the stories she recounts help to define her character and establish her love of narrative. Raizel's retelling of Jewish folktales also helps to preserve them and make them more accessible to a new generation. Embedding the stories in Raizel's story does give them new life, but there are just too many of them. Second, the book begins to lose steam too early in the plot. By the time Raizel and her father actually arrive in Boston, the reader may be thinking, "Enough already! Just let them get to the Promised Land without any more tzuris [grief, annoyance]!"

Readers of this book will need to know some vocabulary words specific to this story (Torah, pogrom, synagogue, kosher, treyf) and may need some help in understanding the religious references and allusions in the text. Tal does a fine job of defining most unfamiliar terms parenthetically, and she offers even more assistance (and a teacher's guide) on her web site: <<http://www.eve-tal.com>>. These tools and the fact of Raizel's universality—she will be appreciated by young female readers everywhere—make this book an important tool for promoting cross-cultural understanding, as well as an absorbing read. *Double Crossing* is poised to become an important text in the young adult literature canon.

## SECOND REACTION

**Forging Identities: The Immigrant Experience  
in *Double Crossing*****Charles A. Elster, Professor, Sonoma State University**

Among the many stories that are told by characters in Eve Tal's novel *Double Crossing* is one about a traveler who discovers the mythic River Sambatyon. On the other side, in glowing garments, live the Lost Tribes of Israel. Because the river spouts boulders during the week and is quiet only on the Sabbath, when it is forbidden for Jews to travel, it can never be crossed. This story looks back to a seminal Jewish myth, the crossing of the River Jordan into the Promised Land, and forward to the immigrant experience of the book's main character, eleven-year-old Raizel Balaban, as she prepares for her forthcoming trip to America in 1905. For her, living as an illiterate eleven-year-old in a village in the Ukraine, the voyage to America is as fantastic as that across the River Sambatyon.

Beginning the novel, the experienced reader of children's fiction about the Jewish immigrant experience wonders which of the book's themes will dominate. Will it be the immigrant story? The story of family relationships between siblings, between parents, between parents and children? The *Bildungsroman* coming-of-age story (Jewish girls are traditionally Bat Mitzvah at age twelve, earlier than boys)? The story of an imaginative, illiterate child yearning to read in a rigidly gendered world (Raizel's father compliments her love of learning, then adds it is wasted on a girl)?

Tal provides a realistic account of life for Jews in the Pale of Settlement and of the discomfort and uncertainty of their journey. Raizel and her father travel from their village in the Ukraine, by wagon, by foot, by crowded train to Antwerp, and then in steamship steerage class to New York. Raizel recounts the voyage's vivid sights and sounds (her first train), smells, tastes, and feelings (rotting fruit, her first ice cream, and an icy river).

What comes most strongly to the fore is the development of the main character's identity. She struggles with fear and learns courage; she struggles with the conflict between the traditional Jewish ways of her father and the "modern" Jewish ways represented by her new friend Reuben. She struggles with her female identity (she had wished she were a boy). She grows from a child to an adult as she cares for her sick father during the ship voyage. Finally, she struggles to understand the non-Jewish world where non-Jews can be sometimes threatening, sometimes helpful. She seeks a common humanity to link her experiences to the experiences of others. Parallel to Raizel's story is her father's; he must abandon his traditional practices in order to be accepted as a "modern American."

Raizel's talent as a storyteller is central to her identity. Reuben tells her that when she tells stories, she is "a different person." She must consider how to harness this talent and how to make it legitimate (she had promised her mother before she left home not to tell stories). As Raizel herself remarks, "life is more complicated than stories." Raizel's first-person voice is lively and engaging. She is full of affection and enthusiasm (for her family and home village), frustration (at not being able to go to school), self-doubt, and humor. There is the pleasure of storytelling, and the pleasure of the parental proverb: "God gave us two ears and one mouth so we can listen much and talk little."

The Jewish experience of immigration from the Old World to the New in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is familiar to American readers and consumers of popular culture. The world of the shtetl is familiar from the stories of Sholem Aleichem, the "Yiddish Mark Twain," which have been adapted into the musical and movie *Fiddler on the Roof*. Raizel's father, a vendor of pots and pans, travels with horse and wagon, much like Aleichem's Tevye the Dairyman. These experiences also resemble those by Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer, who emigrated from Poland to New York in the 1930s but continued to write in Yiddish, especially those in *Naftali the Story-Teller and His Horse Sus* and *When Shlemiel Went to Warsaw*.

The story of fleeing and hiding immediately before and during the Holocaust is familiar to American readers. (Several of these novels are listed at the end for the reader.) But the story of the vast Jewish immigration in the half century before the Holocaust is less commonly told, as is the "double crossing" of those immigrants who were rejected at Ellis Island. Tal describes the voyage of Eastern European Jews to escape segregation, economic and social restrictions, pogroms, and enforced conscription. It is recognized by many American Jews as a Founding Myth, as Plymouth Plantation has become the Founding Myth for Americans at large. In fact, that was the third and largest of four waves of Jews immigrating to America from Holland (1600-1800s), Germany (1850s-1870s), Eastern Europe (1880s-1910), and Soviet Russia (1970s). Raizel's story is also part of the universal story of immigration that continues today. It is a story of finding a new home and a new identity while attempting to preserve some of the old.

As they travel from the Old World to the New, Raizel and her father both grow up. They lose some of their former selves and, most painfully, learn that breaking commandments to preserve life, even lying to succeed, is part of growing up in an imperfect world. With its vivid story and multiplicity of themes, Tal's book should appeal to young readers, both those with knowledge of the Jewish immigrant experience and those with little knowledge. Teachers might consider pairing the book with accounts of other migrations, such as the migration of Mexicans depicted in Pamela Munoz Ryan's *Esperanza Rising*, or with less complex retellings of the Jewish-American experience, like Rosemary Wells's *Streets of Gold*.

**Note: Special thanks to my daughter, Aiden Elster for sharing her collection and knowledge of historical fiction listed in the following section.**

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