

Where Have All the Children Gone?

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Barbara Cohen is one of our most respected writers of Jewish children's literature. She won the Sydney Taylor Body-of-Work Award and the Award for the Best Children's Book from the Association of Jewish Libraries in 1981 with Yussel's Prayer. The Jewish Book Council granted her the National Jewish Book Award for Children's Literature for her book King of the Seventh Grade, and the National Jewish Book Award for Illustrated Children's Book in 1983, again for Yussel's Prayer, despite its 1981 publication date. She integrates Jewish values and the historical Jewish experience in her books without sacrificing plot, narrative or characterization. Whether writing about Jewish or non-Jewish characters, her themes give voice to universal developmental concerns, but the values expressed—freedom of choice, taking responsibility for one's self, kindness and compassion, the value of family . . . are singularly Jewish. This article, adapted from a speech delivered to the Rutgers University Children's Literature Conference in September, 1983, in which Barbara Cohen discusses the writing process and children, is followed by a bibliography of her books of Jewish content as entered in Juvenile Judaica: the Jewish Values Book Finder.

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I've been reading a good deal lately about the end of childhood. Some social scientists are telling us that the innocence of children is a thing of the past. Children are just like the rest of us now, just as knowing, just as troubled, just as burdened. Two factors have created this new state of affairs. One is the breakdown of the family. Children living in the homes of single parents not only must often take on the household responsibilities of adults, they also often become the confidants and companions of their parents, knowing far more about their emotional and financial problems than children of an earlier generation ever suspected.

The other factor contributing to the so-called end of childhood is the reach into every home, every life, of the tentacles of the mass media. What the media sell more than any other single commodity is sex. The music kids listen to, the clothes they wear, the TV shows they watch lead them into sexually precocious behavior which most adults find disturbing when they think about it, but which is so much a part of our culture today as to be virtually unavoidable, unless, like certain Chassidim or the Amish, you're willing to shut yourself away entirely from the world and live in a private, impenetrable enclave.

So where does that leave me as a children's book writer? First of all, the very form in which I create—sentences written out on a page—is old-fashioned. Second of all, I as an individual writer, have tended in my work to deal with the past. Up until quite recently, I seemed unable to write a book set in the present. Some of my novels came out of my own childhood and were set in the late forties and early fifties. Others were based on family stories, or Jewish folk material, and took place even longer ago. I was beginning to feel like a dodo—doomed to extinction. On the one hand, the TV screen was going to replace the books I love to read and write. On the other hand, my subject matter was too mild, too lacking in sensational aspects, to appeal to this new generation of grown-up kids. Soon, I was sure, no one at all would read my books, no one at all would want to publish them. I would have to hang up the towel.

But of course I haven't hung up the towel. Because like most other professional writers, I write because I want to write. I write because I need to. Dodo or not, in my more sensible and less depressed moments I knew perfectly well I was going to go on writing. I had to find a way to be "relevant" and still be true to my own values and my own concerns.

First of all, when I gave the writings of the end-of-childhood sociologists some thought, I realized that I didn't really agree with them. Childhood has never been a time of innocent joy. That idea is a myth invented by nineteenth-century sentimentalists. For most of recorded history, life was short, and for the vast majority, brutally poor. Youngsters pulled their economic weight as soon as they were physically able. They went from infancy to adult responsibilities without any stops in between. As society grew increasingly technical, children had to remain dependent for a longer period in order to acquire the education and skills needed to function usefully. But these children were even then never the innocent darlings pictured in sentimental Victorian drawings and poems. We didn't need Freud to tell us that childhood was as complex as any other period of human life. Dickens knew it, Mark Twain knew it, George Eliot knew it, Louisa May Alcott knew it.

Just as today's kids seem more hip than those of the past, so there is also no doubt that many youngsters bear tragic emotional burdens. The nature of those burdens may be somewhat different from the burdens borne by earlier generations of children. But the fact remains that the burdens have always been there.

I think that all of us who write books for children write in some way out of our own childhood—what we remember of what we felt then, what we still feel of what we felt then. The surface of the lives of today's children may be radically different from the surface of my life when I was a kid. But the emotions are the same. The longing to belong, to be accepted, to be loved. The need to find out who exactly one is. The drive to establish a sense of one's own worth. The effort to separate from and at the same time accept one's parents. The need to deal with loss, failure, death. The sense that the world is new, wonderful, fresh. These feelings were a part of my childhood. They are part of the childhood of today's children too.

When I realized that, the task of writing a "contemporary" or "relevant" novel for youngsters no longer seemed impossible. It did seem frightening, but then I'm frightened every single morning when I go upstairs to face that blank black screen, just as formidable as the blank pieces of white paper used to be when I wrote on a typewriter. The whole task is so risky, it really takes nerve to embark upon it fresh each day. But that's another story.

Once I realized that I could write a contemporary novel—that feelings hadn't changed, and I knew feelings—I needed a subject. Anyone who looks at my body of work will see that I am fascinated by kids who manage to cope with the difficulties of their daily lives by escaping, for part of the time at least, into another world—baseball for Sam in *Thank You Jackie Robinson*, and for Benny in the novel of the same name; fantasy for Rosie in *R My Name is Rosie*; books for Rachel and Rebecca in *The Innkeeper's Daughter* and *Bitter Herbs and Honey*; theatre for Judy and Jack in *Fat Jack*. Every day in the *New York Times* I seemed to be reading another article about computer games. Kids were becoming addicted. Like Lord Sandwich at the gaming tables, champions stood zapping screens twenty-four hours at a stretch. I had a brilliant idea. As a person fascinated by obsessive kids, I would write a novel about this new obsession. My agent and editor both thought it was a super, highly commercial idea.

The catch, of course, was that I knew nothing about computer games. I don't hate computers. I'm deeply attached to my constant companion, my word processor. But I'd never played a computer game. I set out to learn about them. I spent a lot of hopefully tax-deductible quarters, but the effort was a total failure. I couldn't begin to develop the kind of hand-eye coordination required to play video games with even minimal success. I turned purple with embarrassment when the seven-year olds who'd kindly

offered to assist me gave up in despair. But more seriously, I was bored out of my mind in about a second and a half.

Now, as it turns out, so were the kids, though it took them a little longer than a second and a half to become disenchanted. All of a sudden the articles in the *Times* were about the bankruptcy of video game manufacturers and parlors. Kids were quoted as saying they now preferred playing ball, hanging out at shopping centers, watching MTV or—believe it or not—reading books.

Lucky for me that I didn't write that novel about video games. It would have been published just in time for the whole craze to be over. It's one thing to be relevant, another to be trendy. What publishers look for and what's selling today may not be what they're

I write a lot of books about Jews because I am Jewish and I know a lot about Jews.

looking for and what's selling tomorrow. I know that the success of my first book, *The Carp in the Bathtub*, which was published in 1972, owed a great deal to the fact that it appeared just at the time when ethnic was in. But I didn't know that when I wrote it. Such matchings of one's own concerns and the market are to a large extent a matter of luck. Books written strictly to satisfy market requirements are not likely to be bought by publishers, simply because they lack passion. Obviously no publisher is going to buy a book he doesn't think he can sell—but that's the publisher's problem more than the writer's. We have to write books publishers think they can sell if we're to survive, but no publisher will be interested in selling a book unless it's one with which we as writers are passionately involved. It's a tricky situation. As Hugh Rawson said in the *Author's Guild Bulletin*, books are bought by publishers for commercial reasons, but written for personal reasons. They rarely have commercial value unless they arise out of personal commitment. It may be that many deeply felt books are never published. But relatively few books are published that were not deeply felt by their authors.

Back to me. If I couldn't write that video game book, simply because I couldn't manage to care about video games, what was

I going to write? That contemporary book of mine was lurking around some place if only I could find it.

I'm very concerned with the whole question of Jewish survival. This concern is reflected in many of my books. One Sukkot, while I was lunching with Rabbis Jonathan and Julie Gordon Ginsburg in New York, Jonathan briefly described an afternoon religious school student who was an absolute terror, as only a seventh grader can be, until it was discovered that his mother was not Jewish. Offered the opportunity to drop the whole business, he chose instead conversion and bar mitzvah.

I could not get this boy out of my head. Why was he the bane of his teachers' existence to start with? And then why did he make the choices he did? I invented the answers to those questions, and they turned out to be *King of the Seventh Grade*, a book about, among other things, what it means to be Jewish in contemporary suburban America.

But *King of the Seventh Grade* is not just for Jewish readers. It's a book about an identity crisis—a universal theme. I write a lot of books about Jews because I am Jewish and I know a lot of Jews. You don't start to write books about grand subjects—about love or death or war. You write books about specific people doing specific things in specific places at specific times, and hope they rise to a level of universal relevance. For me, those specific people often happen to be Jews. (Though sometimes, as in *Seven Daughters and Seven Sons* and *The Secret Grove*, they're Arabs.) You don't have to be Jewish to enjoy *King of the Seventh Grade* any more than you have to be a spider to like *Charlotte's Web*. I become angry when I hear librarians say, "We don't buy your books because we have no Jewish kids in our district." The purpose of fiction is to instruct and delight. The former goal is not achieved if all we read about are mirror images of ourselves.

In the end, I found a way to write a relevant book, which was also a book that I, Barbara Cohen, very much needed to write.

The children are still out there. The birth rate's down, so there may be fewer of them, but they're there. They're different from what they used to be, and they're also the same. We can still speak to them. But in speaking to them, it's more important for us to remember who we are than to worry about who they are. That's always been true and it still is true. As Roger Sales pointed out in *Fairy Tales and After*, the essential relationship is between the writer and his or her material, not between the writer and his or her audience. A writer can worry about the audience, but not until after she has written the book she needs to write.

BIBLIOGRAPHY (BARBARA COHEN)

AUTHOR, TITLE, ILLUS	PL (A)-PUB (B)-YR (C)-PGS (D)-PR (E)-AGES (F)	SUBJECT INDEX	SUBJECT-SUMMARY
COHEN, BARBARA QUEEN FOR A DAY.	A) NEW YORK D) 160P HIST FIC B) LOTHROP E) \$7.95 C) 1981 F) 10-14	Jews in Amer-1930 Compassion; Purim Depression; Esther Free Will; Integrity	In This Cinderella Story, The Prince is an elderly boarder, The Wicked Stepmother & Sisters-Gertie's Own Grandmother and Aunts. Gertie's Mother is insane; Her father a deserter. A chance to play Queen Esther in a school play enhances Gertie's self-image and helps her accept responsibility for her sick mother and her own future.
COHEN, BARBARA UNICORNS IN THE RAIN	A) NEW YORK D) 164P FANTASY FIC B) ATHENEUM E) \$8.95 C) 1980 F) 12UP YA	NOAH; ETHICS & MORALITY RIGHTEOUS SIN	THE WORLD HAS DETERIOR- ATED TO THE POINT WHERE THERE ARE NO FAM- ILY RELATIONSHIPS; EACH CITIZEN MUST CARRY A GUN; AND MURDER IS ROUTINE. A NEW NOAH AND HIS FAMILY BUILD AN ARK, WHICH LEADS TO THE CLIMAX OF DEATH AND REBIRTH. EXPLICIT BOY-GIRL ROMANCE. THE UNICORN SYMBOLIZES MORALS & ETHICS-ALMOST EXTINCT. SMOOTH WRITING, MOOD & PLACE.
COHEN, BARBARA YUSSEL'S PRAYER: A YOM KIPPUR STORY, MICHAEL J DERANEY	A) NEW YORK D) UNP. FOLKTALE FIC B) LOTHROP E) \$10.25 AWARD: AJL C) 1981 F) 4-8 JBC	PRAYER; PIETY MYSTICISM; SHTETL YOM KIPPUR; DERANEY	YOM KIPPUR THE GATES OF HEAVEN REMAIN SHUT TO THE ROTE PRAYERS OF THE CONGREGATION, BUT OPEN WIDE TO THE HUMBLE BUT SINCERE SONG PRAYERS OF AN UNTUTORED SHEPARD BOY, ALLOWING THE RABBI TO CHANT "NEILAH" AND BRING THE SERVICES TO AN END.
COHEN, BARBARA KING OF THE SEVENTH GRADE	A) NY D) 190 P FIC B) LOTHROP E) \$9.50 BOYS C) 1982 F) 10-14 JBC AWARD	DIVORCE; CONVERSION Jews in Amer-1980; INTERMARR; FREE WILL BAR MITZVAH	BESET BY LONELINESS, IN- SECURITY & HIS PARENTS' DIVORCE, VIC'S BE- HAVIOR WORSENS. HE SHOPLIFTS. HE LOOKS FOR A WAY OUT OF HEBREW SCHOOL AND HIS BAR MITZVAH. TO HIS SHOCK, HE LEARNS THAT BECAUSE HIS MOM ISN'T JEWISH, NEITHER IS HE. A PERFECT EXCUSE? NO! THE COLLAPSE OF VIC'S IDENTITY. INTERESTING CONVERSION IN- FO BLENDS WITH STORY, DIALOGUE, CHARACTERS
COHEN, BARBARA HERE COME THE PURIM PLAYERS! ILLUS. BEVERLY BRODSKY	A) NY D) 32P PIC BK B) LOTHROP E) \$12.00 FIC C) 1984 F) 6-10	PURIM Jews in Czech.- MEDIEVAL PERIOD ANTISEMITISM	Jews in the Prague GHETTO OF MEDIEVAL TIMES CROWD INTO REB ZALMAN'S HOUSE TO WATCH A PURIM SHPIEL, DURING WHICH THE AUDIENCE RAUCOUSLY EN- TERS THE PLAY. AFTER THE HILARITY, THEY FILE OUT, RETURNING TO A GLOOMY REALIZA- TION-LIFE IN THE GHETTO IS NOT THAT DIF- FERENT FROM ONE LIVED UNDER HAMAN. GLORI- OUS WATERCOLORS CARRY THE MESSAGE. GREAT!
COHEN, BARBARA GOOSEBERRIES TO ORANGES BEVERLY BRODSKY	A) NY D) UNP HIST FIC B) LOTHROP E) \$10.50 PIC BK C) 1982 F) 6-10	Jews in Amer-1920 Jews in Amer-IMMIG TRADE UNIONS	FANNY RECOUNTS THE DIFFI- CULT CROSSING TO AMERICA AND HER RECEP- TION AT ELLIS ISLAND, WHERE SHE IS HOS- PITALIZED. REUNITED WITH HER FATHER AND SLOWLY ADJUSTING TO AMERICA, SHE USES THE COMPARISON OF THE GOOSEBERRIES OF HER NATIVE TOWN TO THE ORANGES OF AMERI-

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COHEN, BARBARA. I AM JOSEPH. ILLUS. BY CHARLES MIKOLAYCAK.	A)NEW YORK D)48P BIBLE B)LOTHROP/MORROW E)\$9.95 C)1980 F)10-14	BIBLE PERSONS JOSEPH MIKOLAYCAK	CA AS SYMBOL OF HER AMERICANIZATION. EVOCATIVE WATERCOLORS BY BRODSKY. THE BIBLICAL JOSEPH BE- COMES FLESH AND BLOOD IN THIS STORY OF HUMAN FAILINGS AND STRENGTHS. WHILE DESIGN AND ILLUSTRATION ARE SUPERLATIVE, ONE PICTURE OF JOSEPH AND POTIPHAR'S WIFE IS VERY SENSUOUS.
COHEN, BARBARA. THE BINDING OF ISAAC. ILLUS. BY CHARLES MIKOLAYCAK.	A)NEW YORK D)UNP. BIBLE B)LOTHROP/MORROW E)\$7.95 C)1978 F)10-14	BIBLE PERSONS ABRAHAM;BIBLE; ISAAC; MIKOLAYCAK	NARRATED BY AN ELDERLY ISAAC TO THE CHILDREN OF JACOB, HIS GRAND- CHILDREN, IT EXPANDS BUT DOES NOT ANSWER THE QUESTION: "WOULD ABRAHAM HAVE SLAIN ISAAC HAD NOT GOD INTERVENED?" SMOOTHLY TOLD, WITH ILLUSTRATIONS AS DISTURBING AS THEY ARE BEAUTIFUL, (ABRAHAM POISED TO STRIKE THE RECUMBENT ISAAC).
COHEN, BARBARA. THE CARP IN THE BATHTUB. ILLUS. BY JOAN HALPERN.	A)NEW YORK D)48P PA FIC B)YEARLING/DELL E)\$10.25/.95PB C)1975 F)7-9	JEWS IN AMER-1920 PASSOVER;GEFILTE COMPASSION; KINDNESS-ANIMALS	TWO CHILDREN BEFRIEND THE CARP THAT THE MOTHER INTENDS TO CON- VERT INTO GEFILTE FISH & WHO IS TEMPOR- ARILY RESIDING IN THEIR BATHTUB. THEY UNSUCCESSFULLY TRY TO SAVE THE FISH'S LIFE. THE STORY POINTS OUT THAT JEWS DO NOT KILL FOR SPORT, ONLY FOR FOOD, AS GOD INTENDED. THE ADDED DIMENSION OF HUMOR MAKES THIS BOOK AN ALL-TIME WINNER
COHEN, BARBARA. BITTER HERBS AND HONEY.	A)NEW YORK D)159P HIST FIC B)LOTHROP E)\$8.95 C)1976 F)10-14 YA	JEWS IN AMER-1920 PASSOVER;EDUCAT ANTI-SEEN-USA INTERDATING	BECKY IS TORN BETWEEN THE DEMANDS OF HER FAMILY'S WISHES, HER OWN DESIRE FOR FURTHER EDUCATION AND THE TEMPTATION OF INTER-FAITH DATING. RE- SOLVED WITH HUMOR AND UNDERSTANDING, AN ENGROSSING BOOK.
COHEN, BARBARA. BENNY.	A)NEW YORK D)160P HIST FIC B)LOTHROP E)\$6.95 BOYS C)1977 F)10-14	JEWS IN AMER-1940 FREE WILL;RESPONS. HILLEL;MISCHLING BAR MITZ;INTEGRITY	YOUNG BENNY LEARNS RESPONSIBILITY AND THE MEANING OF FREE WILL THROUGH HIS READING OF HILLEL IN PREPARATION FOR HIS BAR-MITZVAH. HE SEES ONE CAN PLAY BASEBALL AND BE A "JEWISH MENSCH" AT THE SAME TIME. AN INSIGHTFUL, ENTERTAINING NOVEL WITH EXCELLENT CHARACTERIZATIONS.
COHEN, BARBARA. MOLLY'S PILGRIM ILLUS. BY MICHAEL J. DERANEY	A)NY D)UNP HIST-FIC B)LOTHROP E)\$9.50 PIC C)1983 F)6-10	JEWS IN AMER-IMMIG THANKSGIVING-FIC SUKKOT-FIC INDIVIDUAL	TOLD BY HER TEACHER TO MAKE A PILGRIM DOLL FOR THANKSGIVING, MOLLY'S IMMIGRANT MOTHER DRESSES THE DOLL AS AN IMMIGRANT. THOUGH THE CHILD- REN SCOFF AT MOLLY'S DOLL, THE TEACHER COMMENDS IT AND POINTS OUT THAT THE EMI- GRANTS, LIKE THE PILGRIMS, CAME TO AMERICA IN SEARCH OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM & THAT IN SUKKOT ARE FOUND THANKSGIVING'S ROOTS.

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COHEN, BARBARA. THE SECRET GROVE. ILLUS. BY MICHAEL J. DERANEY	A)NY E)32P B)UAHC F)\$7.95 C)1985 G)8-11	ISRAEL/ARAB; FRIENDSHIP; ISRAEL/ARAB BORDER CONFLICTS	A GENTLE STORY OF FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN TWO BOYS, ONE OF THEM ARAB, THE OTHER ISRAELI, WHO MEET BY AC- CIDENT IN AN ORANGE GROVE AND PLANT A TREE TOGETHER. BENI, THE ISRAELI, VISITS THE ORANGE TREE, PONDERING WHETHER HE OR AHMAD HAD EVER FOUGHT IN THE SAME WARS, WISTFULLY NOTING THE SWEETNESS OF THE FRUIT OF THE TREE THEY PLANTED TOGETHER.

The bibliography was excerpted from Juvenile Judaica: the Jewish Values Book Finder by Marcia W. Posner. (New York: Association of Jewish Libraries, 1985).



Barbara Cohen