

Helping Synagogue and Day School Students Write Book Reports

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So many Jewish Book Month reading motivation projects include book reports, but unless the librarian gives the student some instruction, the book report will probably be a rehash of the plot and a quick critique on the order of: "It was a very good book." Following is an outline that has worked well with students of Beth Am Day School using the Temple library.

Writing a Book Report for a Work of Fiction

Elements of the Report

A book report tells what a book is about and what you think of it. Elements that should be included in a report on a work of fiction are: (1) plot or main story; (2) characters; (3) setting; (4) point of view; and (5) style and tone. Your discussion and evaluation of the book concludes the report. Tips on each of these elements follow.

Plot

When discussing the plot, you must decide on a focus—what it is you plan to emphasize. You cannot describe everything that happens in the book. Some plots appear natural; others are contrived—filled with unlikely coincidences. Some books do not have much of a plot. They are mainly about one individual's challenge or conflict, and how he or she resolves it. In that case, you will be writing mostly about one character in the book.

Characters

Are the characters memorable? Do they seem to be real people or are they symbols for "good," "bad," "religious," or "non-believer?" Are they always the same? Are they little more than puppets? Do they develop within the story? Does anyone's personality change within the course of the book? How do the characters relate to one another? Is the dialogue believable? Do they remind you of anyone you know?

Would you remember them next week? Next year?

Setting

Is the setting important to the story or could the story happen anyplace, anytime? If the setting is important, could you draw it on paper or in your mind from the author's description or the character's reaction to his surroundings?

Point of View

The point of view (who is narrating the story) should be discussed if it is not the usual, objective view—that is, the author as narrator. If a character is the narrator, it's called a subjective view, and this fact should be part of your report. Also mention if you notice that the point of view shifts from one to the other in the story.

Style, Tone, and Form

Style relates to the texture of the language and its use—formal, old-fashioned, or slang. Is there a rhythm in the language that reminds you, for example, of the Bible, of Yiddish? Does the author use picture-making descriptions—"The river Vistula foamed, its waters muddied by sacrifice"; or "there was nothing wrong with the sky that some strong soap wouldn't cure, and still our pilot took off"? *Tone* relates to whether the narrator is telling the story with anger, amusement, or sympathy. *Form* deals with whether the story is told through a diary, letters, or a retelling of another story, such as a prose version of a poem or play. Does the author tell the story straightforwardly or does he employ flashbacks?

Discussion of the Theme

What does the book communicate to you, apart from the plot? For instance: Have you learned about growing up with a handicap? Of having to compete with a new step-brother? That courage means spiritual strength as well as muscle and daring? Why

Jews will struggle to observe a religious holiday even when it could mean their life? That humility and piety are valued more than prideful knowledge? That wealth, alone, does not bring happiness, but compassion toward others often does? What the book (or the author) says to you between the lines is called the *theme*. Different books with different plots may still have the same theme.

Writing the Report

Write your fiction book report in the present tense. The form and language should not be casual.

Do not begin your report with "This book is about . . ." or you will be obliged to tell the whole story in one sentence. Here is a better way to begin: Describe the main plot, the setting, and the main characters in the most specific way possible. Do not write: "A boy and his family are immigrants, and the book begins as they look for a place to live." This is too vague. Be specific. Tell where the family came from; why they left; where they are now; who the family members are and how many; what their names are; the type of home they are searching for. . . . Ask yourself questions about the book, as above, and then write out the answers. Your answers will form the outline of your review. They will also help you support your conclusions and your final statement about the book. You will have the facts on which to base your viewpoint. You have to support your conclusions, not just say that "it was interesting," but that "it was interesting, because. . . ."

In your evaluation, quotations can be informative. Comparing one book to another or a new character with a familiar one is another useful technique for an effective book report.

Margot Berman is the Librarian of Temple Beth Am and the author of How to Organize a Jewish Library (New York: Jewish Book Council, 1982).