JUDY BLUME
AND THE EMBARRASSMENT FACTOR

When I got to college there was no author, except Shakespeare, whom more of my peers had read. We had learned about puberty from *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (nearing the 30th anniversary of its publication) and from *Then Again, Maybe I Won't;* about sex from *Forever*; about divorce from *It's Not the End of the World.*

Sometimes, as children and adolescents, we knew about these books only through word of mouth, for feckless children's librarians often kept them out of reach, afraid of the legion of censors who for years have kept Blume's work on the American Library Association's annual list of most challenged books. (In 1989, when authors gathered at the Atlanta Fulton Public Library to support Salman Rushdie by reading aloud from *The Satanic Verses*, they also read excerpts of Judy Blume's works.)

It's quite easy to understand why teachers don't assign Blume to schoolchildren. What teacher wants to risk being the first adult to discuss masturbation with a room of 11 year olds? Worse yet, what if a teacher had to handle the subject of an obese girl (as in *Blubber*) and the cruelty to which her classmates subject her in a class that most likely includes a similar situation?

Adult or critical acclaim for Blume has been intermittent and has never resembled the adoration heaped on her by young people. Some of the disparity stems from the Puritan strain extant even in the literary precincts of our culture. (Although, as one female friend pointed out to me, for every parent trying to keep *Are You There, God?* out of her daughter's hands, another is relieved just to hand her the book and avoid the "menstruation talk." Published in the same year as *Women and Their Bodies*, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective's original version of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, Blume's *Are You There, God?* may have done more to educate more women about their reproductive systems.)

Blume's novels are—like those of J. D. Salinger, Harper Lee and S.E. Hinton—that rarest of species, realism for young people. The strength of Blume's realism is not her use of language, which could be more vivid, or her plotting, which is never surprising. Her works offer the reader catharsis, in the Greek sense, which seems to have fallen from favor as a literary motive.

What is remarkable about the catharsis offered, though, is Blume's range of subjects and the aplomb with which she handles them. Sex is the least of her concerns. In *Then Again, Maybe I Won't*, Blume draws a portrait of the arriviste, striving suburban family so incisive that it can be fully appreciated only by an adult.

In *Are You There, God?* Margaret feels left out because all her friends belong to either a church or a synagogue (Margaret is half Jewish); she tries to find a religion for herself, visiting as many houses of worship as possible in a year. No other popular book for children credits them with thinking seriously about organized religion. *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself*, which Blume has called her most autobiographical novel, traces a year in the life of a young Jewish girl in Miami Beach. The year is 1947, and the Holocaust lurks palpably, if subtly, in the plot.

Judy Blume's willingness to recognize children's serious thoughts about sex, religion and class made her a figure of controversy 25 years ago, but it looks as if the shock has worn off. In 1996, the American Library Association gave her its Margaret A. Edwards Award for Lifetime Achievement; in 1997, CBS began Broadcasting "Fudge," a Saturday morning sitcom, originally on ABC, about her most famous character.

In 1975, when the heroine of *Forever* decided to go on the pill, the book was daring. Now it is quaint. But it is precisely that quaintness that allows us to recognize Judy Blume properly. In this age of *Heather Has Two Mommies,* we clearly live after the flood. We might pause to thank the author who opened the gates.

—Mark Oppenheimer

In *Places I Never Meant To Be: Original Stories by Censored Writers* (Simon & Schuster, 1999), edited by Judy Blume, readers are encouraged to support the struggle against censorship through one of these organizations:

National Coalition Against Censorship
275 Seventh Ave.
New York, NY 10001
(212) 807-6222; fax (212) 807-6245
ncac@netcom.com; www.ncac.org

Office for Intellectual Freedom
American Library Association
50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611
(800) 545-2433 x4222
fax (312) 280-4227;
jkrug@ala.org; www.ala.org/oif.html

People for the American Way
2000 M St. NW #400
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 467-4999; fax (202) 293-2672
www.pfaw.org

Mark Oppenheimer studies American religious history at Yale. A longer version of this essay appeared in the New York Times Book Review.

CAROL MATAS
ON THE FEAR FACTOR

Why are people so fearful when dealing with children's literature? My three books, *The Primrose Path*, about a rabbi who is a charismatic leader who abuses his power, *Sworn Enemies*, about conscription of Jews in Tzarist Russia, and *Daniel's Story*, about a young Jewish boy's experience of the Holocaust, all have one thing in common. At various times and places teachers and parents were reluctant to let their children read them.

The largest, most compelling factor in adults' fear is their children's supposed innocence. Twelve thousand Ontario children voted *Daniel's Story* their favorite book and awarded it the Silver Birch Award. At the award ceremony the adults expressed how pleased they were, but more so, how shocked they were. There seemed to be a genuine chasm between what adults *thought* children would like and what they *did* like. One parent approached me and told me that she read *Daniel's Story* and found it so moving and true and yet she desperately wanted to keep it from her 11-year-old child. He was too innocent. He shouldn't know about these things. Maybe when he's older.

I mentioned this to my then 14-year-old son, Sam. His response? There's no way to "work up to" the Holocaust. I can't put it better. Not only is there no easy way to tell this story, adults should not be afraid of children hearing it. Why not?

Well, first, because children already know evil. They are not innocent. They don't live in a perfect world. They deal with bullies, violence, lies and often violence at home or in school all the time. If everyone pretends their lives don't include these things, children are left to deal with it all alone.

Secondly, ignorance is not bliss. If children don't learn what racism and hatred can produce, aren't they doomed to repeat the same mistakes?

> CHILDREN DEAL WITH BULLIES, VIOLENCE AND LIES ALL THE TIME.

What do the letters I get from children say? Thank you for telling me about what happened in the war. It made me sad. We all have to be sure it never happens again. I didn't know. Thank you for telling me.

Sworn Enemies was banned by a Jewish school trustee in Ontario because she felt it portrayed minorities in a bad light. Fortunately her decision was overturned and the same week the Association of Jewish Librarians gave the book the Sydney Taylor Award for the best book of the year. In fact, Zev is a pretty awful guy. So does that mean that it is unacceptable to portray Jews in a negative way?

The answer is "yes," according to some who respond with horror to *The Primrose Path*. My own nephew argued with me that people reading it would naturally assume that all rabbis are pedophiles. I can understand the panic. Jews have been persecuted; we are paranoid for good reason; six million killed is not a fantasy. The question is, should that silence us? It seems to me that an author's first job is to be honest. If we Jews are to be a light unto nations we must not shy away from our own darkness. If I had made the rabbi a priest, as so many people suggested, what would that have said? It would have said to every Jewish child who has been abused, "No, it didn't happen to you, Jews don't abuse their children (beat their wives, or drink, or gamble), so don't talk about it, don't *tell*."

The proponents of not upsetting children ought to consider this: Wouldn't they be far more upset if children became unwitting victims of abuse because no one had ever discussed the issues with them, because they were kept in ignorance and therefore were easy prey?

Fear about my books is not confined to their effect on children. At a Winnipeg synagogue, the Sisterhood took it upon themselves to cancel my invitation to speak to the interfaith luncheon. Apparently they had decided that *The Primrose Path* too closely paralleled a case in Winnipeg, and that if I spoke the synagogue would be sued by the person (rabbi) everyone assumes the book is about. Everyone living in Winnipeg, that is. In Montreal a woman assured me that she *knew* the book was *really* about the choirmaster in Kingston who was accused and convicted of molesting children. In Toronto it was obvious that the book was about a teacher in the Jewish school system who had been accused, then fired, but never charged. In Edmonton ... well, you get the idea. Which makes me feel I've done my job well, because everyone can see someone or some case they know in the book.

Although *The Primrose Path* received excellent reviews and children loved it when given the chance to read it, no U.S. publisher would touch it, afraid of being accused of anti-Semitism. And in Canada you would be hard pressed to find it in any Jewish day school. The good news—it is available in almost all public school libraries.

As a Jew, I would hate to see our discourse narrowed by fear. I am trying to expand the discourse. For those who want to leave children out of it, they will have to do so without me.

Carol Matas, who wrote Daniel's Story *for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, is the author of over 25 books for young people. Her latest,* In My Enemy's House *(Simon & Schuster), is the story of a Polish Jewish girl who survives the war by working for a Nazi family in Germany. An earlier version of this essay appeared in Prairie Fire.*

HARVESTING A NEW CROP OF NON-SEXIST BOOKS FOR GIRLS

MIRIAM

by Beatrice Gormley
Eerdmans, $6 paper

THE DEEPER SONG

by Patricia Curtis Pfitsch
Simon & Schuster, $16

In that awkward state between childhood and adolescence, I remember reading *The Babysitters Club*, *Fear Street* and the *Sweet Valley High* series. These books—about babysitting, murder, fashion, gossip and boys—did not give me a clue to puzzling out my identity as a Jewish female. Having now read *Miriam* and *The Deeper Song*, I wish I could give my younger self a copy of each. Both authors make a superb effort to write women back into Jewish history; they help the reader feel that she, too, can have an important role in Jewish life.

Miriam is the story of how the young Miriam saves her baby brother Moses and follows him to Pharaoh's palace. The lavish royal setting and the promise of power and prestige tempt her to abandon her gift of prophecy, her family and her religion.

Gormley fills her book with powerful, clever women aside from spirited Miriam: Jochabed, her pious mother; Shiphrah, her daring aunt; Bint-Anath, the regal daughter of the Pharoah; and wise Nebet, Bint-Anath's chief lady-in-waiting. The author fulfills the mission to which Judith, the protagonist of *The Deeper Song*, commits herself: to "give women a place in the … sacred stories of Yahweh."

In *The Deeper Song*, Judith is the daughter of a priest in the time of King Solomon. Disgusted with the patriarchal nature of Judaism—"a woman may not speak to God"—she becomes a worshipper of Asherah, the Goddess. Judith's cousin Samuel entreats her to use her gift of storytelling to write the sacred stories of the Jewish people. Judith finds no reason to comply until she witnesses soldiers destroy the temple of the Goddess and murder Her worshippers. She feels compelled to redress this terrible loss by writing down the stories, to keep women from slipping out of their place in the religion. Author Patricia Curtis Pfitsch suggests that a woman may indeed have written the Bible, and emphasizes the feminine aspects of biblical stories—"*Yahweh* … used the soil from which all life springs [to create the first man]. Isn't that part of the Goddess?"

In the end, the need to assure women a place in the religion and the fear that her loved ones will be punished for worshipping the goddess bind Judith to Judaism. However, she vows to "teach [her] daughters about [the Goddess]" and prays that "someday, for them, it will be different." These and other difficult issues such as sexuality, the abuse of women and destruction of women's spirituality make *The Deeper Song* better suited to older readers. *Miriam* is appropriate for ages 7 to 11.

—Naomi Goodman

IF YOU COULD BE MY FRIEND

Letters of Mervet Akram Sha'ban and Galit Fink
presented by Litsa Boudalika
translated from the French by Alison Landes
Orchard Books, $15.95

Few heads of state have progressed toward peace as much as Mervet Akram Sha'ban and Galit Fink. Between 1988 and 1991, these girls, corresponded on a regular basis with the aid of filmmaker Litsa Boudalika, who introduced them and acted as the messenger. Although they were only 12 years old at the beginning of their relationship, their letters show a maturity beyond their years.

Mervet's and Galit's letters are put into context by Boudalika and Ariel Cohen, who provided a chronology starting 2,000 years before the girls were born. Every last term is defined, impartially, from *chahid* ("martyr" in Arabic) to pogrom, Saddam Hussein to Betar.

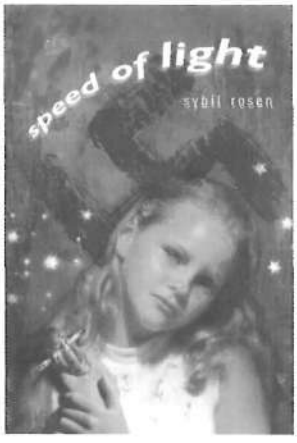
In the beginning Mervet writes, "I don't know how to speak to you." Later they start signing their letters "Your Friend." Galit's realizes during the Gulf War: "You wouldn't hurt me. You are just like me." Finally they have a much anticipated meeting in Jerusalem.

A critical moment in the relationship occurs on July 6, 1989. A Palestinian girl was killed by Israeli soldiers. Several hours later a Palestinian passenger seized the wheel of the 405

bus killing 16 and wounding 25. The girls' hurt feelings and fears are shared. Galit ceases communication for a few months, fearing the 405 bus bandit was a friend or relative of Mervet's. Mervet shows her side of life, where family members are jailed, schoolmates are shot at, and soldiers are hostile and quick to act.

Children who want to know more about the peace process will find this book an excellent tutorial. Mervet and Galit humanize the struggle.

—Susannah Jaffe



SPEED OF LIGHT

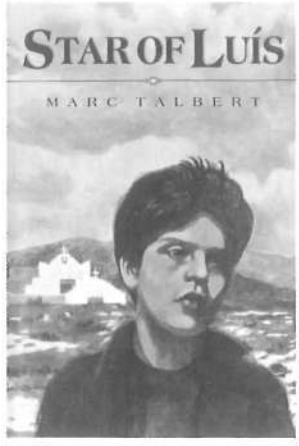
by Sybil Rosen
Atheneum Books, $16

Audrey Ina Stern and her family live in the Blue Ridge Mountains, in Virginia, immediately after World War II, one of a handful of Jewish families. Her mother's cousin, whom they affectionately call "Tante," moved to live with the Sterns after being liberated from Auschwitz. Audrey's father decides to support the night watchman at his factory, Mr. Cardwell, in his quest to become the first black police officer in Blue Gap. The town, however, is not receptive. The book revolves around the town's racism, and the anti-Semitism the Sterns encounter by supporting the Cardwells.

Rosen's novel is a valiant effort at teaching children about racism, anti-Semitism, human nature and perseverance. Where the book falls short, however, are the portrayals of Audrey and Tante. Audrey is unusually precocious for her age, using phrases no 11 year old uses, such as calling someone's mother a "prodigious worrywart." She blatantly disregards her parents' rules, is rude to the Cardwells, and mocks her survivor aunt.

The true sore point of the book, however, is the character of Tante. The Holocaust should be presented frankly but all of its atrocities don't need to be discussed. Children Audrey's—and the reader's age—won't be able to grasp the depths of the psychological aftermath, as seen in Tante's behavior. Tante is, unfortunately, likely to be seen by children as a loon with a split personality who talks to herself and hates everything. No matter how beautiful the imagery of blacks and Jews banding together to take on a small-minded town, *Speed of Light* falls flat, almost wholly because of Tante and Audrey.

— S.J.



STAR OF LUIS

by Marc Talbert
Clarion Books, $15

A boy entering his teen years discovers that he is Jewish, in a time when this is neither safe nor popular. He finds out his family's biggest secret when his mother takes him back from Los Angeles to her home in Las Manos, New Mexico, where "the ground

GROWN-UPS ANALYZE KIDS' BOOKS

Why does Frances, the female badger whose bedtime has come and gone (Russell Hoban's *Bedtime for Frances*), keep trying to get her parents' attention, while the male hero of Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen* embarks on a fantasy escape when he is banished to bed? These and other questions are explored in the endearing *Inside Picture Books,* by Ellen Handler Spitz (Yale University Press, $25). Spitz, a psychoanalyst—who incidentally writes with a Jewish sensibility—interprets the art, the words and the meanings of the culture adults transmit to children in the act of reading them picture books.

Dear Genius: The Letters of Ursula Nordstrom, edited by Leonard Marcus (HarperCollins, $22.95), contains the blunt, funny, insightful and nurturing letters of the editor who over several decades midwifed a new kind of literature for children, good-humoredly referred to as "good books for bad children." Margaret Wise Brown's *Good Night Moon,* E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy,* Mary Rodger's *Freaky Friday* and John Steptoe's *Stevie* are among the books she edited. In one letter to Sendak, Nordstrom conveys, ever so delicately and respectfully, Fran Manushkin's question of whether, when Max returns to his own bedroom from where the wild things are, his dinner might be still "warm" instead of still "hot." In another letter to Sendak she apologizes for not getting to the graveside at his father's funeral, explaining, and proud to be able to do so, that her taxi driver was a *kohen,* prohibited from proximity to dead bodies. Through this collection the reader gets an inkling of the breadth of culture, curiosity about the world, appreciation of human differences, and the empathy that enabled Nordstrom to deliver to us these much loved books.

—Naomi Danis

itself looked like a rotting carcass, with wounds where the sunset's reddish light shone."

In Los Angeles, he had gone to church and was brought up as a Christian. In New Mexico he meets his dying grandfather, his grandmother, his uncles and aunts. Although he noticed that there were no crosses in his house like there were in his friends' houses, he never suspected he could be Jewish. His uncle Solomon, his mother's brother, a minister, breaks the news to him. This was a hard bite for Luis to swallow; he did not want to be a Jew. How could a Mexican be a Jew? He used to make fun of Jews and insult them. However, as time goes on and he moves back to Los Angeles, he starts to accept his Jewish heritage. He befriends Jewish boys. He learns more about Jewish culture.

I enjoyed this book very much. Talbert's use of Spanish (with a glossary) gives the story a multicultural setting and makes the dialogue realistic. I recommend it for children in 5th or 6th grade.

—Talya Lieberman

WHEN THE BEGINNING BEGAN

Stories About God, the Creatures and Us

by Julius Lester, Harcourt Brace $17

The story of creation is depicted in this book with humor, honesty, seriousness and creativity. Lester, a scholar and prominent African-American activist who converted to Judaism as an adult, has written several books about Jewish history and culture to teach children the humanistic side of their past. He portrays God in different ways: as long red ribbons glowing in the sunlight to the angels in heaven, as a woman "as dark as wonder [with] hair as long as hope" on the earth below.

His Bible stories have a fable-like quality. When God asks Satan if he would have an animal-naming contest with Adam, Satan cannot refuse. However, after Adam wins, Satan cannot concede to him and instead starts to yell at God. God throws Satan into the bottom of the Earth in anger, but is also taught a lesson—that failure is just as much a part of life as success.

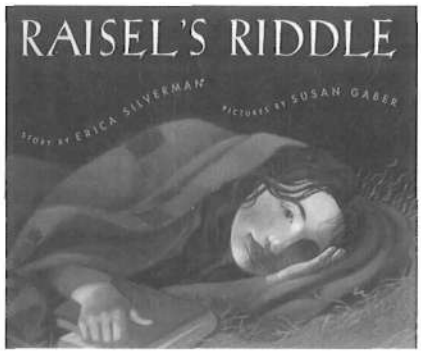
—Maren Lange

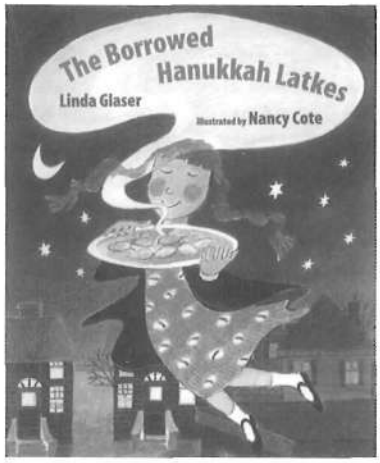
STRONG FEMALE CHARACTERS, ONE OF THEM A LAMB

This season has a number of excellent choices for children's bedtime repertoire that combine good tales with strong female and oftentimes Jewish characters.

Raisel's Riddle by Erica Silverman, illustrated by Susan Gaber (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $16), despite its quaint sounding name, is in fact a bright and exciting retelling of the traditional Cinderella story. Set in Poland in what appears to be the 18th century, the narrative tells the tale of Raisel, who goes to work for a distinguished rabbi when the grandfather who raised her dies. The story progresses in the classic Cinderella mold, with the cook playing the role of the evil stepmother, until the story's surprising conclusion, in which knowledge is as prized as beauty is, and Raisel chooses her "prince" even as she is chosen.

In *When Mama Gets Home,* written and illustrated by Marisabina Russo (Greenwillow, $15), the narrator, a strong little girl, describes her home as she and her siblings prepare for and then enjoy their mama's return from work. This story of a one-parent family is filled with love. Simply and clearly told, it is a story that can speak to any audience.





Pearl's Marigolds For Grandpa written and illustrated by Jane Breskin Zalben (Simon & Schuster, $15), is a beautiful and delicate story of loss and remembering. Pearl, a female lamb, mourns her grandfather and, with her family, finds ways to remain connected and feel his presence even after his death.

Finally, two holiday stories of note: *The Borrowed Hanukkah Latkes* by Linda Glaser, illustrations by Nancy Cote (Albert Whitman, $15.95), and *Purim Play* by Roni Schotter, illustrated by Marilyn Hafner (Little Brown $15.95). Both are stories that have strong girls as narrators and fine morals to boot. ■

—Talia Milgrom-Elcott

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