



Writing the Books I Wish I Grew Up With

BY LAUREL SNYDER

When I was a kid, “Jewish books” meant *Zlateh the Goat* and *All of a Kind Family*, and how I adored them! In general, I loved books, and in particular I loved books about the past. I longed to live in a simpler time. I remember how I’d tie a towel around my head, pretend it was a bonnet, and that I was a happy village girl, fetching water from the well.

But the truth was that while those books were “Jewish books” to me, they didn’t resemble my life very much. I didn’t have Yiddish-speaking grandparents, with memories of the old country, or the Lower East Side. I had a grandma with a Mercedes the color of a tomato. I had a diverse elementary school, a non-Jewish neighborhood, and a Catholic mother. Never mind that I went to Hebrew school and shul, that I fasted on Yom Kippur and meant it. There were no books about my Jewish life.

The sad thing is that my way of reconciling this fact was to assume that my own Jewish experience was somehow wrong. I felt like real Jewish kids had grandmas who baked challah and kept carp in the bathtub. All the books told me so! And for sure, real Jewish kids didn’t have moms who went to church and kept Irish fairy tales on their shelves. I was a fake and I knew it.

Years passed. I grew up, and became a writer. I also became a mom. One day, I found myself reading Jewish picture books to my own son. Only, as much as the world had changed in the intervening years, it felt like the stories hadn’t. Most of them were still set in the shtetl or the Lower East Side. Of course, these books were wonderful, but they weren’t enough. They weren’t the whole story. I knew that now, and I didn’t want my son to feel like a fake.

This was how my first Jewish picture book, *Baxter, the Pig Who Wanted to Be Kosher*, came to be. This was how, as a mom and writer, I found myself working with PJ Library. Trying to craft stories that would resonate for my own kids, and also resemble them. What an amazing opportunity this has been—a chance to create the literature my own family needs. A chance to write the books I’d have wanted when I was a kid.

And I really do see the effect. I see the change. I travel around the country, speaking to JCCs, synagogues, and day schools, and kids and parents approach me, and thank me. “I feel like Baxter sometimes,” people say. And then, suddenly, we’re a community. It’s an amazing thing.

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