

KID TESTED. COMMITTEE APPROVED.

CHOOSING BOOKS FOR OLDER READERS

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BY CATRIELLA FREEDMAN
DIRECTOR, PJ OUR WAY

I RECENTLY QUIPPED TO A GROUP OF AUTHORS that if we just wanted to provide Jewish content to older kids, we would send each one a Torah and call it a day. The fact is that older kids are independent readers with a growing sense of self that includes a large dose of strong opinions. Authors, publishers, and agents agree that for a middle grade book to be a success it needs to engage the reader within the first 10 pages.

I've been directing PJ Our Way from the beginning, when it was a concept without a name. While so much of the program has developed to be a wonderful companion chapter to PJ Library for kids ages 9-11, one aspect of the program continues to be the greatest challenge: Finding quality Jewish middle-grade books that kids will want to read.

That is why in our quest to provide the best middle-grade Jewish content, the PJ Our Way book selection process includes three key elements:

1. KID-TESTED

Once the PJ Our Way Book Selection Committee decides that a book or manuscript is a good fit for the lineup, it is sent out to kid readers. These readers are a continually rotating group of PJ Our Way subscribers from varied locations, ages, and Jewish backgrounds. Our kid manuscript reviewers are asked details about the reading experience, and their comments are shared directly with the author and publisher who then work with the committee to integrate this vital feedback.

2. AUTHOR INCENTIVE AND SUPPORT

In September 2017, the Harold Grinspoon Foundation began awarding \$5,000 incentives to new, unpublished manuscripts that are accepted into the PJ Our Way lineup. In addition, we have introduced a number of initiatives to support and communicate with authors, such as author lunches and meetups, a quarterly author newsletter, and a middle-grade track to the PJ Library sponsored Tent: Children's Literature workshop.

3. SUBSCRIBER REVIEWS

PJ Our Way has a built-in, user-friendly platform to promote this important feedback. Kids are encouraged through the website to post reviews and comments about the books and share their opinions and perspectives with each other. These reviews serve a triple purpose: They allow kids to see that their opinions matter and engage them further in the conversation; they help future PJ Our Way members decide which books are right for them (serving the same function as Amazon or Goodreads); and they are a crucial way for us to know which books are worth offering again in the future.

Early on, when we were developing the idea of a PJ Library for older children, it became obvious that the first step would be to rely on our customers: the kids! That was the inspiration for basing PJ Our Way on choice — each month kids can choose the book that most appeals to them.

It's not always easy. It's not uncommon for a "popular" book, like *Queen of Likes*, to receive kid reviews from both extremes:

"This book was fantastic! I couldn't stop reading it and I brought it to school every day. I can really relate to this book. You should totally read it!"

"Awful. 0 stars."

For me and the book selection committee, this is actually part of the fun. Learning more about kids' tastes and enjoying how differently they can each look at the same book and the same content is part of our own professional development. Each interaction and review brings us closer to our goal of providing the best and most inspiring Jewish content to older kids.

PJ OUR WAY offers the gift of exceptional books with Jewish themes to kids ages 9-11 — books that they choose themselves! With more than 25,000 subscribers, the program is available throughout the United States and launching in Canada in 2018. Visit **PJOURWAY.ORG** for more information.
