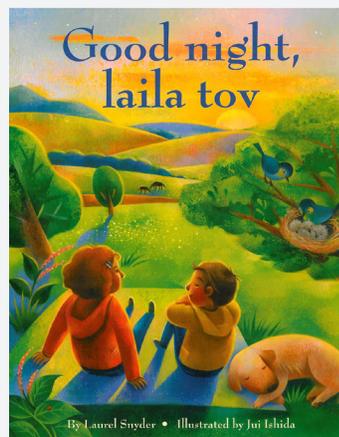
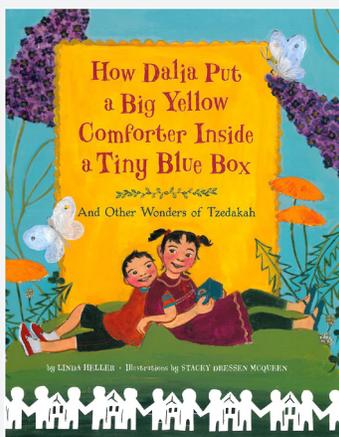


First Opinion: Portraying the Jewish Child: Comforters and Camping

Heller, Linda. *How Dalia Put a Big Yellow Comforter Inside a Tiny Blue Box and Other Wonders of Tzedakah*. Illus. Stacey Dressen McQueen. Berkeley: Tricycle Press, 2011.

Snyder, Laurel. *Good night, laila tov*. Illus. Jui Ishida. New York: Random House, 2012.

Eve Tal



What constitutes a “Jewish” picture book? Should the content be religious (holidays, religious observances, traditions), cultural/historical (folktales, immigration, the Holocaust, visiting Israel), or simply the depiction of Jewish children engaged in culturally neutral activities? In her 2001 presentation “The Jewish Child in Picture Books?” June Cummings pointed out that “there are virtually no picture books that depict contemporary Jewish children doing things other than observing a holiday” (3). The question of whether Jewishness should be defined religiously or culturally complicates matters even further. Both books under review tackle the problem from a different perspective. *How Dalia Put a Big Yellow Comforter Inside a Tiny Blue Box and Other Wonders of Tzedakah* explores a less familiar Jewish tradition, while *Good night, laila tov* depicts a Jewish family enjoying the natural world.

Of the two, *How Dalia Put a Big Yellow Comforter Inside a Tiny Blue Box and Other Wonders of Tzedakah*—hereafter *Yellow Comforter* for short—is more traditional, both in

terms of Jewish content and picture book format. (If prizes were given for the longest, most awkward picture book title, this book would surely be a contender!) At her community center, Dalia learns about tzedakah boxes and rushes home to make her own, depositing a dollar from her birthday money. When her younger brother Yossi asks what's in the box, she answers: "a big yellow comforter" (Heller). Yossi, naturally, finds this hard to believe, and the story continues with Dalia earning money to put in her tzedakah box and continuing to mystify Yossi as she "adds" a butterfly bush, a banana cream pie and kisses, and wishes and hugs to its contents.

When Dalia brings Yossi to the community center, the solution to the mystery is explained. The children pool their tzedakah money to buy the comforter, bush, and pie, bringing their gifts to an elderly woman. On the last page Dalia hugs Yossi and promises to show him how to make his own tzedakah box: "She was his big sister, his smart teacher and she loved him very much." (Heller). In case the reader missed the message, a brief afterword provides a history of tzedakah boxes and concludes that "every day becomes a special day when they give tzedakah. No child is ever too young. Even a few pennies can be a wonderful sign of love" (Heller).

In *Good night, laila tov* two children wake up early, help their parents load the car, and spend the day (or perhaps the weekend?) camping at the beach and in the country. While Dalia and Yossi are popular Israeli names, this narrator and her younger brother remain nameless. Only the Hebrew words "laila tov" in the refrain indicate a Jewish connection as the children nap at the beach, nap in a field, sleep in the tent, and nap in the car (an inordinate amount of time spent sleeping, perhaps in an attempt to inject the refrain every few pages?). The explanation that "laila tov" is Hebrew for "good night" is provided only on the front cover flap, required reading for understanding the book, although not for enjoying it. Along with the camping equipment, two boxes of tree saplings, thirty by my count, appear on the car roof, leading me to assume that the family planned to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Tu b'Shvat with its custom of planting trees. Instead, the saplings are planted in a large green field with no explanation given. Again, the reader must rely on the cover flap to learn that the "young trees are an offering of thanks" which in Jewish tradition "is called tikkun olam, or repairing the world" (Snyder). Why planting trees in a natural green area already bordered by trees constitutes "repairing the world" puzzles me, along with the question of whether planting trees on someone else's property is entirely legal.

Unlike *Yellow Comforter*, *Good night, laila tov* is never didactic or preachy. The childish voice of the happy narrator rings true to age and the rhymed text reads smoothly, although content can slip into the banal, a probable sacrifice to the constraints of the rhyme scheme:

The grasses swayed. The salty air
Was soft and still and everywhere. (Heller)

Or

We stopped for dinner, stopped to see . . .
Stopped again so I could pee (Heller).

The children covering their exhausted parents with a blanket adds a heart-warming twist to this gentle home-away-from-home tale.

Illustrating picture books showing contemporary Jewish children presents a challenge. As Cummins points out, "While there are stereotypical Jewish traits that some Jews possess, many do not have these traits and the depiction of them might seem racist. Most Jewish boys do not wear kipot (yarmulkes), and most Jewish girls do not wear Stars of David around their necks . . ." (3). Jui Ishida's lush illustrations in *Good night, laila tov* show a middle class Caucasian family accessorized with Jewish icons: the large Star of David around the girl's neck, the Star of David on a blue tzedakah box in the children's bedroom, "Shalom" on a welcome mat, and a menorah in the entranceway.

While *Good night, laila tov* is Jewish-lite, *Yellow Comforter's* explicitly Jewish content is reflected in the illustrations. The blue tzedakah box with Hebrew letters on the title page is followed by the Star of David on the tzedakah box at the community center and the Hebrew alphabet on the wall. Although none of the children wears a Star of David or a kipa, the profile of Mrs. Ross, the tzedakah recipient, implies her Semitic heritage without racist overtones, and Dalia's own profile fluctuates from page to page. Overall, I found the illustrations, especially of the children, to be unattractive. Many pages appear cluttered, as in the double-page spread depicting three different scenes (the comforter store, plant nursery and bakery) plus three sections of text. A paper cutting motif, which the book jacket flap notes was "inspired by the ancient tradition of Jewish paper cutting," appears throughout the book, but it is never integrated within the other illustrations.

Both books positively reflect different ways of being Jewish without relying on holiday celebrations and other overdone themes. *Good night, laila tov* would be enjoyed by children of any religion, but *How Dalia Put a Big Yellow Comforter Inside a Tiny Blue Box And Other Wonders of Tzedakah* strikes an unfortunately dissonant note by preaching to the reader while giving the misleading impression that Judaism holds a monopoly over helping others.

Works Cited

Cummins, June and Naomi Toder. "The Jewish Child in Picture Books?" *Proceedings of the 36th Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries*. 24–27 June 2001. La Jolla, CA. Web. 21 July 2012.

About the Author

Eve Tal's 2012 nonfiction study *A Truth to Tell: Novels About the Holocaust for Young Readers* surveys fictional representations of the Holocaust in English and Hebrew middle grade and young adult novels, with an emphasis on the historical development of the genre and literary techniques utilized to present the horrors of the Holocaust to children. A useful resource for teachers, parents and librarians, it was published by Look Again Press in major e-book formats and is also available in hard copy. Sample chapters can be viewed at: <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/38605>. In addition to publishing two award winning young adult novels, *Double Crossing* and *Cursing Columbus*, Eve has first-hand experience planting trees on the Israeli kibbutz where she lives.