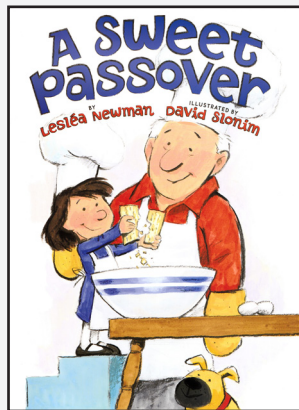


Second Reaction: *A Sweet Passover: Freedom, Family, and Food*

Newman, Lesléa. *A Sweet Passover*. Illus. David Slonim. New York: Abrams, 2012.

Maren Linett



A Sweet Passover, written by Lesléa Newman and warmly illustrated by David Slonim, provides a rich introduction to the holiday of Passover by celebrating its food. It opens with an overview of what a girl named Miriam loves about celebrating Passover with her grandparents. Then the story becomes more specific, recounting the different ways Miriam eats matzah, the unleavened bread eaten to the exclusion of leavened bread by observant Jews during Passover, on the eight days of the holiday: one day with butter, one day with jam, one day with egg salad, and so on. When Miriam wakes up on the eighth day of Passover, she is sick of eating matzah! She sits by as her family, consisting of her parents, her grandparents, and an aunt and uncle, all eat her grandfather's matzah brei, a sort of matzah omelet or, as the grandfather describes it, French toast. Miriam claims she will never eat matzah again. In response, each of her family members provides a reason why she should eat matzah: to commemorate the Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt, to celebrate freedom, and so on. Their encouragement shifts the book back into a more general explanation of Passover. Miriam is convinced and asks her grandfather to make her some matzah brei. He declines, saying he is too full to cook! But when Miriam persists, he says that they will make matzah brei together. Miriam learns how to make her grandfather's specialty and sits down to enjoy the results. The book ends with a recipe for "The Best Matzah Brei in the World," an "Author's Note" that explains the holiday of Passover, and a glossary of the non-English words used in the story.

Parents or teachers not familiar with the holiday of Passover and the smattering of Yiddish and Hebrew terms used in the story might wish to begin at the end, so they can explain the terms to curious children as they read. I would have liked the glossary to note which language each word comes from. In the “Author’s Note” we are told that Afikomen is an Aramaic word, and the glossary would be richer if it noted the origin of the remaining words.

The bold and colorful illustrations of acrylic and charcoal invite children to identify with Miriam and engage with her experience, but I was left wishing that the book had chosen a genre. The text seems caught between a desire to explain the holiday of Passover and its customs (an expository drive), and a desire to tell a story about a particular girl’s experience of enthusiastically eating matzah for seven days until she feels she never wants to see it again (a narrative drive). It is the narrative strand of the story to which my children, ages seven and four, responded. They enjoyed reading about Miriam eating matzah in myriad ways, and they could identify when she got sick of it! They were pleased to watch Miriam learn to cook matzah brei with her grandfather, but the beginning of the story, when the text lays out all the things Miriam loves about Passover, did not really excite their interest—it reads like an overview of holiday customs. When Newman shows the family’s efforts to convince Miriam to eat matzah, she returns to her explanation of Passover’s history. In both cases, the information is woven into the story about a particular little girl, but it feels like the camera has zoomed out to inform, rather than staying focused on Miriam and her experience. Both aims of the book are laudable, but they are not as well meshed as they could be, leaving the story feeling somewhat divided.

As an exploration of a Jewish holiday that centers on food, or matzah, *A Sweet Passover* succeeds. It made me remember my own grandfather’s matzah brei and prompted the urge to make some myself (I probably would have done so if matzah had been available in Lafayette, Indiana, in November!). It gave the children ideas about the multiple ways matzah can be eaten. And probably most importantly, it ties eating matzah both to the celebration of freedom and to family. When Miriam’s grandfather teaches her how to cook matzah brei, children see the ways in which food, tradition, and familial love come together at the holiday.

About the Author

Maren Linett is an associate professor of English at Purdue University. She is the author of *Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness* and is mother of Ruth, seven, and Lev, four.