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**Jewish Fantasy Books: Using Folklore to Contextualize Jewish Identity**

As an English major, I believe I have earned the right to say that I have read a lot of books. As a Jewish person, one could argue that I am predisposed to love reading as one of the "people of the book." However, before the Spring of my Freshman year of college, I had never read a book with a Jewish main character that was not about the Holocaust. So reading Helene Weckers' *The Golem and the Jinni* opened my eyes to a whole new genre of literature, Jewish Historical Fantasy. I stayed up until 5 am reading before I realized I needed some sleep before my 9 am class. The main character, Chava (which means "life" in Hebrew), is a golem (a creature made of clay) lost in New York City at the turn of the 20th century who befriends Ahmad, a lost Jinni. For the first time, I saw Jewish folklore woven into history in a form of storytelling I had never encountered before. I knew I had to find more.

Jewish Fantasy and, subsequently, Jewish Historical Fantasy are genres that recently started to develop, and I have been tracking these developments like a hawk. I am particularly interested in Jewish Historical Fantasy novels set at the turn of the 20th century in the United States (particularly in New York or Chicago). I like analyzing how the fantasy elements (rooted in Jewish folklore and mysticism) use culture to contextualize the experiences of Jewish immigrants at the turn of the 20th century. This particular period of American history is rife with changes, many associated with Jewish immigrants. A few months after reading *The Golem and the Jinni*, I discovered Aden Polydoros's *The City Beautiful*. I picked up a copy from King's Books. This book was the first explicitly queer Jewish Fantasy book I read, and it looks at
queerness in history through a Jewish lens. The main character has complicated relationships with religion and queerness, which helps me understand my relationship with queerness and religion.

These books help me to understand the multifaceted nature of Jewish identity better and help me to understand and appreciate my identity as a Jewish person and my relationship with religion and community. A few weeks after finishing The Golem and the Jinni, I read an Advanced Readers Copy (ARC) of The Wolf and the Woodsman by Ava Reid. It immediately became a favorite book of mine. Not only was I seeing a Jewish character in a fantasy setting (inspired by medieval Hungarian history) for the first time, but Évike was a patrilineal Jewish woman, just like me. She struggled with the same issues of a conflicting identity and confusion. However, she also had to team up with her enemy to overthrow a corrupt ruler (unlike me). Évike studies and deepens her connection to religion and, in turn, religious mysticism, which helps her survive the final battle and overthrow the religious zealot running the country. Ultimately, the novel focused on belonging in interpersonal relationships, communities, and a nation, particularly for people like Évike (and me) who feel caught between worlds.

Last Spring, I read and reviewed an ARC of Ava Reid's second novel, Juniper and Thorn. The main character in this novel was not Jewish, but her love interest was. I fell in love with Reid's writing all over again, especially how she blends fantasy elements with the mundane and how the main character, Marlinchen, deals with and processes trauma. Reading is how I make sense of the world and reflect upon my life. Seeing characters who learn to accept themselves and appreciate their complex identities helps me to do the same. In my personalized copy, Ava Reid wrote, "To Kaya Rose, Remember - you're allowed to scream." The author
reinforces one of the novel's ideas that women can be angry, which resonated with me long after I finished the book.

Other books in my collection have come to me over time. Nathan Ausubel's *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore* was recommended to me by Zo Jacobi, who runs the "Jewitches" podcast about Jewish folklore. I found a lovingly used copy on eBay and now spend my free time reading stories from Jewish folklore in the old, thick volume with a wonderful old book smell. I picked up a copy of *The Light of Midnight Stars* by Rena Rossner during my first visit to Powell's in Portland. It became the first sapphic Jewish fantasy to join my collection. I learned about *A Far Wilder Magic* from Ava Reid's Instagram when she promoted it (the authors are friends). And so another book about a patrilineal Jewish girl joined my collection.

My grandma also loves to read, so I started sharing the books I was reading and collecting with her. She is in her 70s and had never read any books that included Jewish folklore; instead, she listened to the stories her family told her when she was growing up. She was familiar with golems, but not ones who walked the same streets her parents did. Together, we can discuss how the experiences of a golem, a figure straight out of folklore, reflect and represent the experiences of actual immigrants, including those of our family members. My grandma's friends, mostly Jewish women also in their 70s, love to read and appreciate the book recommendations I give. For the first time in 70+ years, they read books with the folklore they learned in their youth.

As I continue to read Jewish Fantasy and Jewish Historical Fantasy novels, I continue to deepen my connection with Judaism. Like Évike, I have been learning to read Hebrew and cultivating my relationship with Judaism. In fact, after many years of learning, I will become a bat mitzvah at the end of this year on my grandfather's 80th birthday, in the same Temple my dad became a bar mitzvah. Jewish tradition emphasizes passing on stories and history and continually
seeking out knowledge. I hold these values very close to my heart and know they will guide me as I seek out stories and learn to navigate my life.
The Collection on the Shelves (my collection is currently spread across two houses)

My Bookshelf of Jewish Books in Tacoma
(a mix of Jewish fantasy and other Jewish books)

My signed and personalized copy of Juniper & Thorn - and art of the main characters
My copy of *The Wolf and the Woodsman* is also signed. I read and reviewed the Advanced Readers Copies (ARCs) for both of Ava Reid’s books before they were released, and I loved them so much that I pre-ordered signed copies both times.

Collection Works Cited

   a) This book is a collection of Jewish folklore, stories, and folksongs. I purchased a used copy from eBay, hoping to learn more about Jewish folklore and the creatures (like dybbuks and golems) present in Jewish storytelling throughout the ages. In addition, it provides versions of the original stories that inspire other authors to incorporate Jewish Folklore into their stories.

   a) *The City Beautiful* is set against the backdrop of the Chicago World Fair. A Romanian Jewish boy is possessed by the dybbuk (essentially a ghost who can control the host's actions) of his murdered roommate. He must solve the murders of Jewish boys in the area to help his friend’s soul find peace and to save his own soul.

   a) A gothic horror retelling of the Grimm fairytale, “The Juniper Tree.” Set in a city inspired by Odesa, Ukraine, and in the same world but a different time as *The Wolf and the Woodsman*. Marlinchen and her sisters are the last true witches of the city who live with their overbearing xenophobic father in a crumbling house. They sneak out at night, and Marlinchen falls for a Jewish ballerina. Marlinchen must find the courage to face her father, her past, and the monster roaming the city.
   a) Évike is a half-pagan, half-Yehuli (Jewish) girl who lives in a pagan village. When the king’s army, the Woodsmen, comes to take a girl from the village, Évike is given up by her people. Monsters attack the group, and only Évike and the Woodsman, Gáspár, are spared. Gáspár is the king's first son and exiled queen, but he fears his zealous younger brother is plotting to take the throne. Gáspár and Évike agree to work together to survive and stop his brother, who plans to annihilate all pagans and Yehuli people. This was the first Jewish Fantasy book, and the first book in general, that I read with a patrilineal Jewish character. I saw my cultural and religious identity reflected in a book for the first time.

   a) Set in the Hungarian woods, descendants of King Solomon practice sacred magic. Rabbi Isaac has three daughters blessed with various talents related to fire, growing plants, and predicting the future. The family encounters tragedy, is forced to flee their village years later, and encounters the darkness spreading over Europe. The three girls must find their places in mythmaking and family history as they face the blight and the political landscape of the world around them. The poetic prose in this book took my breath away. One of the first scenes in the book is the family welcoming Shabbat together. The beautiful family dynamic blends perfectly with the Jewish magic, as the mother teaches one of the daughters to utilize fire magic (by uttering the Hebrew word for fire) to light the candles for Shabbat. Witnessing religiously observant Jewish people in a historical fantasy setting and watching their family dynamic play out felt familiar and comforting.

a) I found this book through Ava Reid as she promoted its release. I have noticed that many of the authors on my shelves are friends with each other and support each other’s work as their success opens the door for more Jewish books to be released. So, I pre-ordered a signed copy and taped up the art of the main characters on my wall. The book follows two characters, Margaret (another patrilineal Jewish girl) and Wes, strangers who team up in a mythical hunt and fall for each other. This book is more of a Gothic Fantasy as Margaret is somewhat stuck in her family manor on the outskirts of town until Wes arrives looking for her mother.


a) This book holds a special place in my heart as it was the book that opened my eyes to an entirely new genre of literature. It is also beautifully written, and the story never fails to take my breath away. Chava is a golem created by a disgraced rabbi who arrives in New York City without a master and must navigate the new city alone. She can hear the thoughts of those around her and feels compelled to help them. She meets Ahmad, a jinni, who was accidentally released by a Syrian metal worker in the same city. These two immortal creatures meet and develop a friendship as they are both incapable of sleep, so they walk together every night and form a mythical connection. I feel like I get to explore the world my ancestors lived in, from the bustling Jewish bakery Chava works in, to the dance halls, to walks through Central Park, visits to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, and the
busy, diverse streets of New York City. When I read *The Golem and the Jinni*, I felt like I had found another home for myself within a book.


a) The much-anticipated sequel to *The Golem and the Jinni* was released eight years after the original. Set in the years leading up to World War I, Chava and Ahmad struggle to find their places in the world and navigate their relationship. They encounter other creatures like themselves for the first time. The story also follows Kreindel as she helps her father (a rabbi) build a golem, Yossele, who becomes her only protector when she is sent to an orphanage. I have only read half of this book because I fear I will be severed from their world forever when it ends.
Wishlist Work Cited


This book features an angel and a demon from the same shtetl who have studied together for centuries. Pogroms and the promise of freedom in America have caused the young people in their shtetl to emigrate. When one of the emigrants goes missing, the angel and demon go out into the world to look for her. They meet other humans in need of their help and also encounter the realities and horrors of the new country. I want to add more queer books to my collection and more books that focus on the experience of Jewish immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century. I also have yet to read any books with Jewish angels.


This book is set during the 1956 Hungarian revolution in Communist Budapest. As many of the stories in my collection focus on medieval or older Hungarian history, I am interested in adding a book set closer to the modern day in the same country that deals with the aftermath of the Holocaust. The book involves a magical river running through the city, a lonely Jewish girl struggling to decide whether or not to fight for her country, a golem, the Jewish angel of death, and queer love. As I mentioned, I am curious about Jewish stories involving angels, and I want to collect and read more queer Jewish stories.


I read Older’s *Shadowshaper* for a class on Young Adult Literature and loved his writing style. He recently released a book about a diaspora community of pirates, Cuban
Santeros, and Sephardic Jews. I am always down to read about magic and murder. Still, I also want to diversify the Jewish stories in my collection and expand my collection of Jewish Fantasy to incorporate stories beyond Ashkenazi Jewish ones (note: I am Ashkenazi Jewish).


Since I have one of Rena Rossner’s fantasy books in my collection, I want to collect her other book. This book follows the bond of two Jewish sisters, one who discovers that the women in their family can shapeshift into animals and one who endangers herself by falling for an outsider. The book’s chapters alternate between the sisters; one sister’s story is expressed through prose, the other through poetry. I love poetry, and I love books that use a combination of form and content to communicate their stories.


The book's title refers to the old custom of smearing honey on the pages of books for students to eat and be taught that learning is sweet. The author looks at Yiddish stories from Eastern Europe to New York to South America and translates them into English. Many stories also delve into the historical connection between Judaism and socialism. Most of the writers in the book experienced severe conflict and persecution in their lifetimes. Still, they managed to write hopeful stories for children to teach them the joy and importance of storytelling in the Jewish tradition. I am interested in adding another primary source of stories to my collection. Many of the characters in the books I have collected speak Yiddish and would be familiar with these stories and ideas.