with them? Are they too poor even to send away for a box of matzah? How might they cope and still celebrate Jewish life? Why do you think the family is separated from their loved ones? More difficult is the portrait of this mother. How do we account for her behaviour? It is not that I am unsympathetic to the mother's sadness. On the contrary, the reader feels her grief keenly; indeed, it is her story I want to know more about. Has she experienced so great a loss? Has she come here against her will? What is wrong with this sensitive woman, a mother who will not or cannot participate with her children, despite their eagerness in repeatedly reaching out to her, both in text and drawings? It is her wilderness of spirit that is disturbing and cannot be wiped away, even when finally, at a beautiful and full Seder table, created around and for her, she is able to find pleasure, and we see that "Mama's eyes shone like the festival candles."

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Christmas and Hanukkah: Festivals for Understanding

The Gift. Joseph Kertes. Illus. Peter Perko. Toronto/Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre/Groundwood Books, 1995. 40 pp. $12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-235-1.

This book seems written for the nine- to eleven-year-old, though both younger and older readers will enjoy it, and even quite young listeners will love the rhythm of its telling and the freshness of its illustrations. Joseph Kertes, a Leacock Medal winner and director of the Humber School for Writers, begins

his story very attractively. Jacob Beck, the youngest child of a Jewish refugee family from post-1956 revolutionary Hungary, recollects from a mature perspective what had been a seminal experience in his new life as a Canadian. He poignantly recounts the pressures of acculturation on a nine- or ten-year-old living in the Bathurst and Bloor Street area of Toronto, a mixed neighbourhood of established families from Britain and newcomers from Eastern Europe. At the time of the story, the Becks have been in Canada for only a few years (this is their fourth Canadian Christmas) and Joseph, together with his older brother, Noah, find their "grey" Jewish home surrounded by a "bright" very intensely Christian culture, one that appears to exclude them, though their Christian immigrant neighbours seem to fit in more readily.

Surprisingly, Peter Perko, a graphic designer who teaches at Humber College, has never undertaken book illustration before. His numerous full-page illustrations are clear and rich in detail, and serve the narrative extremely well by underscoring and drawing forth various elements and emotional content in the story. The text evokes in the non-British Canadian reader familiar memories of school and home, and echoes the recorded experience of many other Jewish new or first generation Canadians, such as the childhood stories of Fredelle Bruser Maynard from the Prairies, or Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice*, set in Montreal, and even the American writer Philip Roth's luminous story, "The conversion of the Jews." Unlike those narratives, however, there is something incomplete and not quite right about Kertes' story, evocative, poignant and realistic though it is.

Kertes is careful to show us that Jacob is from a warm and loving family, one that does observe aspects of their Jewish culture. He also shows how successfully Jacob and Noah have absorbed various elements of Canadian secular culture, such as ice hockey and watching television. As with other new Canadian children, they want their parents "to sound like" they were "British-Canadian." However, the impact of a North American Christmas on the sensibilities of a non-Christian child make for a special sense of "otherness" that pervades Jacob's life, as the strength of the new culture dominates the older one. The classroom echoes with Christmas icons, from a desk-top crèche and the ubiquitous English composition topic — "Our Christmas Holidays" — to a picture of Jesus at the Last Supper. The latter is described as hanging on the classroom wall, "beside the portrait of the radiant Queen." (Could that be so? This reviewer, born and raised in downtown Toronto by immigrant parents, attended several public schools in the 1940s and 50s, but the only picture ever hung next to the Queen was that of the Duke of Edinburgh.)

Jacob is given the opportunity to experience the majority culture at the home of his friend, Larry Wilson, when he is invited for lunch on Christmas Day, the central event leading to the climax of Kertes' story. Jacob becomes absorbed in the quest to find a suitable present for Larry, and despite his knowledge of what kinds of presents his Canadian classmates get for Christmas — in the past after the holidays he would even tell them lies about the presents he had been given — he rejects the secular and buys a gift reflecting the same Christian iconography hanging on his classroom wall. This anomaly is acceptable to the

reader, in as much as Jacob's parents have always explained Christmas in terms parallel to their own "important holiday[s] like Yom Kippur and Passover, and a family time," and because it is clear that Jacob has not yet learned the difference between the secular commercial manifestations of Christmas and its religious aspects. The famous animated windows of Simpson's and Eaton's department stores are effectively evoked by Kertes to play a role in Jacob's confusion.

What is difficult for this reviewer to accept, is the total absence of any positive impact from Jacob's religious upbringing on his sensibilities through most of the book. Despite Jacob's close family and evidence that he has received some formal education in Judaism as well as participated in its practices, Kertes holds Jacob back from positively reflecting his Jewish culture until the very end of the narrative, when he "learns" to appreciate his own heritage as a result of Larry's response to his gift. Although this likely was done in order to heighten the climax and sharpen the denouement, it creates stress in the plot and significantly counters the verisimilitude of the story line. For example, Jacob and Noah must know about the rather strict Jewish dietary laws, yet there is no concern at all allowing Jacob to eat meat at the Wilsons' table. The Becks surely gave their sons presents in the first days of Hanukkah and certainly the boys would have learned the significance of the holiday in terms of the Maccabees having rejected the competing culture of their Greek-Seleucid conquerors, including the abrogation of Jewish religious values. Even at the end, Jacob is portrayed as an observer of the celebratory lighting of the Hanukkah candles, rather than as a participant. Further, Kertes at no time has the older Jacob, his narrator, reflect on what he now understands about the events of that bygone childhood time. So the reader is presented with some puzzles. Why doesn't Jacob evince any recollection of his life in Hungary, a very Catholic country with many strong Christmas traditions? Why would the older Jacob not comment on the significance of Hanukkah, which he would certainly understand, even if his younger persona did not, as the successful continuation of Jewish life in the face of severe intolerance and violent pressure to assimilate?

Apart from these not insignificant concerns and caveats, Kertes' story is well written and the book truly benefits from Perko's marvellous illustrations. Their combined skills are especially well presented in the passage where Jacob returns from the Wilsons in the growing darkness, following the near debacle of having his gift rejected by Larry, but recouped by the reality of their firm friendship. Jacob witnesses an unknown young female figure skater in the park near his home "spin and bound, spin and bound as if she were stirring the sprinkling snow." The skater is drawing "sideways figure-eights ... between the straight painted lines of our hockey rink." This evocation of the Greek letter alpha, symbol of infinity, in opposition to the boundaries of the neighbourhood hockey rink, is wonderful and resonates deeply within Jacob. Though he clearly does not understand it on the cognitive level, he responds to the metaphoric image and goes home "straightened up as tall as I could" to the warmth and bright colour of his family's Hanukkah celebration. The same is likely to be true for most young readers of the book, with Jewish children possibly being

concerned about the author's lapses, while non-Jews likely will acquire insight into culture clash and the impact of one value system on another in everyday situations with new and first generation Canadians.

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Seasonal Highs and Lows

Jenny and the Hanukkah Queen. Jean Little. Illus. Suzanne Mogensen. Penguin Books Canada Limited, 1995. 32 pp. $17.99 cloth. ISBN 0-670-85268-6. ***Mouse in the Manger.*** Tim Wynne-Jones. Illus. Elaine Blier. Penguin Books Canada Limited, 1995. 32 pp. $6.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-054971-4. ***Merlin's Castle.*** László Gál. Stoddart Publishing, 1995. 32 pp. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-2852-X. ***Woodland Christmas.*** Frances Tyrrell. North Winds Press, 1995. 32 pp. $16.99 cloth. ISBN 0-590-24430-2. ***Follow That Star.*** Kenneth Oppel. Illus. Kim LaFave. Kids Can Press Ltd, 1994. Unpag. $11.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-134-9.

Seasonal books can, obviously, celebrate an event. They can also illuminate our traditions, give them some perspective, and create new aspects to those traditions. Such, then, is the challenge for the author and illustrator: to create something new, yet reflect the timeless quality of the celebration; perhaps even to create something that explains the celebration to not only those in the community but also to those in other communities, something that may draw us together in our newfound understanding of each other.

In *Jenny and the Hanukkah Queen,* Jenny's Jewish family responds to the overwhelming presence of Santa Claus during the holiday season by inventing the Hanukkah Queen. This charming book began its life as Michele Landsberg's true family story (as told to Jean Little). The question the book raises is when does a good family story become a good story for everyone? At what point does the weight of the storyteller's voice influence our beliefs? Will Jewish children believe they've missed something if they don't know about the Hanukkah Queen? And will children of other faiths grow up believing that the Hanukkah Queen is, and always has been, a part of the celebration of Hanukkah?

In attempting to provide Jenny with some "new" element to inform her struggle with the concept of Santa Claus, the story comes perilously close to diminishing Jenny's family's own holiday. There are aspects of Hanukkah that are as equally wonderful as anything Christmas can offer, including Santa Claus. Appropriating an image from Christmas leads to a homogenization of cultures, of beliefs, of celebrations. Rather than celebrating our diversity, it just serves to make us all the same.

In *Mouse in the Manger,* elements in both the text and the illustrations work to undermine the tension in Mouse's story. The illustrations are reminiscent of old Christmas cards, slightly garish in their use of red, green, and other