gles to come to terms with her new powers, she asks her Baba, "how can you believe in God after the Holocaust?" and Baba responds, "that is the biggest question of our day for Jews. But I say that God didn't make the Holocaust. Hitler and those that collaborated with him made it happen. They made those choices."

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Reverse Discrimination

Fitting In. Sharon Kirsh. Second Story, 1995. 191 pp. ISBN 0-929005-74-0.

How to make young readers aware of the suffering brought on by racial and religious discrimination is the heavy challenge tackled by Sharon Kirsh in her novel for young adults. *Fitting In* is a bittersweet title, for the story concerns young people, who though snug in the familiarity of their orthodox lifestyle, do not fit the norm of the community in which they live. The narrative, which unfolds through the length of a school-year, is a rite-of-passage story, not in the usual sexual-awakening mode but rather through a newfound awareness of the power of prejudice.

The story is told by Mollie, a girl not yet fully adolescent, who belongs to a group of some thousand Jews living in the much larger Christian community of a seaside town just "large enough to be called a city." In a series of rich vignettes, Kirsh shows us at once what it feels like to enter adolescence and to grow up Jewish in an alien world. Kirsh is at her best in her portrayal of adolescence. Like young people everywhere, her protagonists are addicted to the telephone and talk to their friends on the line "till their throats are sore." They haunt the local shopping-plaza, mainly because, as Mollie explains, "there it's so dark and understated, so adult, that it feels like we're discovering a lost planet." Like most children brought up in religious households, they display a pretend offhandedness towards the practices of their religion. Mollie and her friends refer to their Hebrew school as "Hebe," while "Junior Congregation," the religious service for the young on the Sabbath, is to them "Junior Cong." They nickname their teachers: Mrs. Evans, the dreaded homeroom teacher at their public school, is known as "Mrs. EE, otherwise known as The Evil Eye," while their harsh Hebrew teacher, the Reverend Bloom, is "Bloomers" to them all.

Adolescence is also a time when we discover the meaning of friendship, and Kirsh displays a sure hand in depicting the intensity of feelings which mark the early ways of friendship. "Naomi is my best friend," Mollie

declares, two pages into the story, "I call her Nao ... because that extra syllable seems to jam itself in the way of the closeness between us." Mollie and Naomi prepare themselves to seal in blood their "oath of eternal sisterhood." Kirsh's sense of humour shines in her depiction of their failed attempt as it does also when she shows us her protagonists engaged in the rowdiness typical of their age-group. In one such scene, Mollie and Naomi buy pistachio nuts, in spite of the "huge financial sacrifice," position themselves in the plaza's mezzanine and proceed to aim the shells at the bald-headed men below, hooting with laughter when they "bean" one of them. At the pyjama party given by Christian neighbours, Mollie and her friends behave as typical young do on such occasions: they dance in "sweaty frenzy," dine on "chips and pop," exchange beauty tips in the bathroom and listen in awe as one of them tells of "fooling around" on a date. Throughout these passages Kirsh displays a sure ear for the language of teens.

In spite of similar behavioural patterns, Kirsh's protagonists are aware of the many ways in which they differ from their non-Jewish peers. For one thing they do not look like most other children. "You're so lucky ... because you don't look very Jewish" declares Phyllis to Naomi, as she vows to have her "big and ugly nose" fixed and her "black and frizzy hair" straightened out so that she will "look more like the kids at public school." Furthermore, Jewish children must go to religion classes after school, "every day but Friday," so that they cannot participate in after-school activities and thus are considered "oddballs."

Mostly though, Mollie tells us, they know they are "strange ... because everyone around us let us know in one way or another." "Is it necessary for you to be away again?" asks Miss Evans as Jewish holy days approach, "Don't your people's holidays every end?" The gym teacher, Miss Clark, only remembers the names of the girls with "blond hair, blue eyes, and bulging calf muscles, the ones who look like walking milk commercials." "Now, you ... what's your name again?" shouts Miss Clark as Naomi scores against her own team. Even in a neighbour's friendly household, the mother always speaks of Mollie as "Elizabeth Ann's little Jewish friend." Kirsh's evocation of what it feels like to be a Jewish child at Christmastime is one of the finest spots in the narrative. The non-Christian child has an advantage, Mollie tells us, for when Santa Claus comes to town "Christian kids have to worry about whether they've been naughty or nice," but "Jewish kids are off the hook." Yet, Christmastime is mostly a troubling time to Jewish children who, enjoined to sing Christmas-carols "with feeling," are aware that "guilt and awkwardness" are "their main sentiments." "The confusion can be counted on each hand," confides Mollie: on the one hand it is "exciting" to prepare a performance for parents and "if you refused ...you'd stick out, you'd be different." On the other hand, "pretending even for one evening that you're Christian ... feels strange, like being a traitor to your religion, plus what if our Hebe teachers found out, plus what if God found out."

Yet, in the midst of such fine work, other incidents are depicted that strain the writer's credibility. For instance, at Naomi's birthday-party, given shortly after her mother's death, Mollie and Phyllis go upstairs in search of the mother's ghost and, when a door squeaks, closet themselves in the bathroom in fits of laughter, and in effect ruin their friend's party. Occurring at the close of a narrative in which Naomi has constantly been described as Mollie's "best friend," such unfeeling behaviour contradicts Kirsh's portrayal of her young narrator as a sensitive and loyal girl. More deplorably still, the incident concerning the Holocaust seems itself marked by discrepancies. In that scene a film is shown at the Hebrew school which relates the role of nuns in hiding Jewish children from the Nazis. Neither Naomi nor any of her friends seem to have any idea why Jewish children had to be hidden away during the war. "I cannot believe this story," she says, "the plot is impossible ..." and repeats: "I can't believe this story." We are tempted to echo Naomi, though for different reasons than hers. Kirsh situates her story in 1963, almost twenty years after the discovery of the concentration-camps an their countless depictions in words and pictures, and over *ten* years after the publication in English of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, of which thousands of copies had been sold by then. How could it be that, even in a smallish city, twelve-year-old Jewish children would *never* have heard of the Holocaust by 1963?

Such discrepancies would probably not be apparent to most young readers so that they may well take as factual the horrifying instances of racial and religious discrimination which Kirsh describes in the subsequent chapters of the narrative. Though Mollie's childhood neighbours attend a nearby Catholic school, they have been her playmates ever since she can remember. Yet, one day for no apparent reason, the following exchange takes place between them: "What did you get for Christmas, Mollie?" asks Bettie. "I didn't get anything ... we don't believe in Jesus. Don't you remember?" answers Mollie. "Oh yeah, I forgot," says Bettie as she casually adds: "You're Christ-killers ... we learned it at school. You people killed Jesus...." "Our priest said the same thing," confirms Chris, and for good measure she adds: "My parents told me that Jews are rich but cheap." Even kind Kelley confirms that she too "learned the same things at school." This reviewer spent thirteen years in European convent-schools, between 1935 and 1948, and such an exchange utterly contradicts the spirit and form of religious instruction given in Catholic schools. Not only was it never taught that modern-day Jews, like the Sadducces of old, were responsible for the death of Christ, but the core of all teachings rested on the fundamental necessity to pursue the virtue of Charity. Yet Kirsh deepens her portrayal of hateful bigotry as those same Catholic "neighbourhood friends" proceed to smear swastikas all over Mollie's house, shouting at the top of their voices "Dirty Jews! Kikes! Kikes!"

After reading of such heinous incidents I find it disturbing to have Mollie inexplicably compare those children's ugly behaviour to her own

when she ruined Naomi's birthday party. "I'll never trust Chris and Betty again," she remarks," so why should Naomi ever relax her guard with me?" Such seeming confusion between unfeeling behaviour and downright hatemongering is one of the reasons why Kirsh's novel can be deemed questionable at times. More questionable still are the means by which she has chosen to denounce the virulent anti-semitism of her fictional city. Since no particular reasons are given and no incidents occur that would at least explain how childhood playmates suddenly become vicious antagonists, her young readers will most surely conclude that those children's Catholic upbringing is solely responsible for their behaviour. Though Kirsh exposes the evils of racial and religious prejudice, by portraying hateful children, she just as surely fosters another kind of discrimination.

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The Children's War

The Old Brown Suitcase: A Teenager's Story of War and Peace. Lillian Boraks-Nemetz. Ben-Simon, 1994. 148 pp. $9.50 paper. ISBN 0-914539-10-8. *A Time to Choose.* Martha Attema. Orca, 1995. 165 pp. $7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-045-2.

In *The Old Brown Suitcase,* Lillian Boraks-Nemetz finds subtle ways of dealing with the challenges that arise when one writes about the Holocaust for younger readers. A coming-of-age story, *The Old Brown Suitcase* introduces us to Slava Lenska as she arrives in Montreal with her family in 1947, and then depicts her struggle to adapt to Canadian life, alongside flashbacks of her family's treatment by the Nazis in occupied Poland. Slava — or, as she is called in Canada, Elizabeth — comes to terms with her own burdensome history as part of a larger effort to discover who she is and how she will contend with adult life.

The novel's portrait of the Lenskas' wartime experience is spare and evocative. Each short chapter depicting the war focuses on a different stage of the transformation of Polish Jews from citizens into hunted enemies of the German state. Without slowing down her narrative with too much historical detail, Boraks-Nemetz succeeds at accurately depicting what historian Raul Hilberg has called "the machinery of destruction"; the reader gains a clear sense of the movement from exclusive laws, to random arrests, to life entrapped in a ghetto, to the experience of hiding, escape, and finally liberation by less-than-heroic, drunken Russian soldiers. These scenes are carefully inserted into the narrative of Slava/Elizabeth's first two years in Canada,