

A Grandfather's Gift: A Tale of Generations

The Always Prayer Shawl. Sheldon Oberman. Illus. Ted Lewin. Pennsylvania: Boyds Mills Press, 1994. Unpag. \$19.99 cloth. ISBN 1-878093-22-3.

The Always Prayer Shawl makes precious the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. Framing ideas about continuity, this story was not only conceived for this volume, but was also produced professionally in a play version by the Winnipeg Jewish Theatre in 1995. The history of the prayer shawl in Oberman's book is also the history of its central character, Adam. We accompany him on a journey from revolutionary Russia to modern day North America, and from young boy to grandfather. A skilled storyteller, Oberman allows for different kinds of readers to enter his story, and at many levels — so that as Adam matures we are able to find our experience as child, parent or elder reflected in the narrative.

At each stage in his life, Adam is confronted by challenges: moving to a new land, a new home and school, or taking on new responsibilities; and in each instance, we discover something about how to cope with change. In their wisdom, the grandfathers distinguish between what's really important in life and what is not — teaching us that “some things change and some things don't.” For, amidst all the uncertainties and challenges, there are two constants: the presence of the prayer shawl — symbolizing commitment to Jewish life — and the love of family, mirrored in the experience of the story's three generations. It is these constants that provide Adam with a foundation from which to embrace change, to value his culture and identity; to proclaim loudly “I am always Adam and this is my Always Prayer Shawl.”

The thresholds in Adam's life, both as grandson and grandfather, are translated into paintings which capture the immediacy of events and emotions. We want to linger over these brief glimpses into the poignant and intimate moments between the boy and the old man, and are compelled to look for evidence of such moments in our own lives. One such encounter is found at the end of the book when Adam and his grandson sit talking together in the synagogue. The little boy is wrapped in his grandfather Adam's Always Prayer Shawl while “they shut their eyes and feel the warm sun shining on their faces.” As such, even the prayer shawl presents an invitation to reflect on our own special objects of importance — that which carries with it family history and memory.

Visually, it is the prayer shawl which first greets us — a fabulous representation that lines the inside of the book as you open its covers. Ted Lewin paints with such delicate and sensitive use of light and shadow, that the soft background allows the audience to focus on the detail in the faces themselves, almost imperceptibly drawing us to the characters. It is truly as if we experience the passing of a lifetime with each turn of the page of this beautifully-illustrated picture book.

If I have any reservation about *The Always Prayer Shawl*, it lies in its absolute focus on boys and their grandfathers. While I know that it was written in celebration of the author's own son's bar mitzvah, it need not omit young women from its circle, given that in much of contemporary Judaism, girls are

invited to wear a “tallit” or prayer shawl, as well. However, I make reference to the issue of inclusion since Oberman’s touchstone for writing was his participation in the creation of a ceremony in which *both* mother and father of the bar mitzvah might share in the event. They solved the dilemma of whose prayer shawl their son would wear by agreeing to use *his* grandfather’s tallit, but with the fringes of *her* new tallit sewn on! The real-life backdrop to the tale reminds us that we can extend the fictional context by discussing ideas about the cultural recognition of gender difference, and by asking kids to explore their own legacy — the background of their name, family memories, the discovery of their own special objects or treasured relationships. All the more reason why *The Always Prayer Shawl* stands as a book to be shared at home and in the classroom. Ultimately, as the best stories do, this one impels you to tell other stories, allowing children an opportunity to bring their personal histories to their learning and writing.

A Wilderness Passover. Kathleen Cook Waldron. Illus. Leslie Gould. Red Deer / Northern Lights Books for Children, 1994. Unpag. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88995-112-8.

Cook Waldron’s book, *A Wilderness Passover*, opens dramatically on the evening before Passover to what seems to be a traditional beginning to the holiday. But as the morning sun rises, preparations are abruptly halted by Mama’s vehement response that there will be “no seder,” since they have “no matzah, no parsley, no horseradish, no haroset, no special wine, Nothing!” and besides, “how can we have a seder with just four people?” Suddenly, we find ourselves inside a story that asks us to consider how it is possible to maintain Jewish practice and identity in the face of isolation from family, friends and resources. We follow the children, Susan and Louie, and their Papa as they try to help Mama find ways to celebrate Passover, by searching for alternative forms for making a Seder.

By truly encouraging kids to help with preparations for the Passover holiday, young readers of *A Wilderness Passover* will immediately relate to Susan and Louie. Indeed, this story succeeds in honouring kids’ ingenuity and resourcefulness, and their ability to become real partners in family life. It is their point of view and scale that we discover in Leslie Gould’s charming paintings of the wilderness they now call home. Her watercolour sketches suggest a wonderful sense of place and colour, providing us with a real feel for this landscape, almost evoking its smells and textures. Ultimately, this book builds to one moment of real sentiment, which I admit to reluctantly. The children’s “plan” leads us to a deep sense of community and highlights the power of creating and sharing Passover — wherever and with whomever it may occur.

However, I was a reluctant participant, because it is a story not fully told. Cook Waldron’s book has too many loose ends — both in terms of its narrative and in its account of Jewish life. In order to begin to fill in those missing pieces, parents or teachers might pose questions like: why do they only begin to prepare for Passover the night before? If Passover is so important to them, as the story suggests throughout, had they never before considered the implications of making a Seder in a such a remote location? Why did they bring nothing

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

