

# What is a Jewish book?

**By Dena Abramowitz**  
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The following is part of a series of columns in which local community members write about their favorite Jewish books. This week's column is by Dena Abramowitz, a teacher of English-as-a-Second-Language at MATC.

In the spring of 1925, Fanny Goldstein, a librarian at the West End Branch of the Boston Public Library, created an exhibit promoting Jewish books. It was held during the springtime scholars' festival of Lag Ba'Omer, and Fanny named it "Jewish Book Week." Two years later, with the help of a Chicago rabbi, it went national.

The promotion later moved to November to encourage the purchase of Jewish books for Chanukah presents. It now operates as Jewish Book Month, running from 25 Cheshvan to 25 Kislev, the big shopping month before Chanukah. According to its sponsor, the Jewish Book Council, its goal is "to promote the reading, writing and publishing of quality English language books of Jewish content in North America."

That goal raises some questions. What exactly is "Jewish content?"

Should we have the same requirements for reading books as we do for writing and publishing? Would a strictly political book about Israel qualify? What about the life story of a Jew like Madeline Albright, who didn't know until adulthood that she was born Jewish, or Gustav Mahler, who converted from Judaism to get a job?

How about some of Karen Armstrong's books, which are about religion but not specifically about Judaism? Is it reasonable to include any book by a Jewish author, regardless of the subject? (And what is a Jew, anyway? Okay, we won't go there.)

As a member of a Jewish book group, I give this matter some consideration every time we choose a new book to read. I'd like to look at three books that we've discussed recently to see whether they qualify under the Jewish Book Council's criteria, and why they interested us as readers of Jewish themed books.

"Strangers in the House: Coming of Age in Occupied Palestine" is a memoir by Raja Shehadeh, a Palestinian lawyer whose family fled Jaffa during the War of Independence. The book has no Jewish content and our group almost didn't choose it for that reason.

It is the story of the author's changing relationship with his father as he grows up in Ramallah under Jordanian rule and struggles with young adulthood under Israeli occupation. It's a book about Israel, but there is really nothing Jewish about it.

Yet it was a valuable reading experience for a Jewish book group, as it gave us an educated Palestinian's view of Israel that we don't normally see. It was disturbing, yet it deepened our understanding of the conflicts that Israel faces.

"Crossing California," on the other hand, is ostensibly a book with Jewish content. It is a fictional account of the denizens of Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood on both sides of California Street in the 1970s. The author, Adam Langer, is Jewish, as are his characters.

Yet we know that the characters are Jewish only because they tell us so. One of the teenagers attends a Jewish day school and gives his band a Hebrew name. The kids go to dances at the synagogue and frequently mention Hebrew school.

But the content of their lives is essentially post-war suburban American. It almost didn't matter that these people were Jewish. The discussion that this book generated in our group was mainly nostalgia about the Chicago suburbs in the 1970s, and we quickly ran out of things to say about the Jewish aspects of the story or the characters.

"Depths of Glory: A Biographical Novel of Camille Pissarro" is written by a Jew, Irving Stone, about an artist whose Jewishness was insignificant to his life.

Camille Pissarro didn't consider himself a Jewish artist. He was the only Jew in the small group of early Impressionist painters that included Monet, Cezanne and Degas. He married his family's Christian housemaid, and his only hesitation about the marriage involved the difference in their social standings — in fact, they had several children before they officially tied the knot.

Yet there was a lot to discuss. While being Jewish didn't affect what Pissarro painted, perhaps it affected how he painted. Maybe Pissarro's intense support of Capt. Alfred Dreyfus, a wealthy French Jew accused of treason, and his consequent falling out with some of his fellow Impressionists suggest that Jewish identity can appear in different forms, even late in one's life.

Also, several of his sons — who were raised Christian — married Jews, and their descendents are Jewish today. This is another provocative topic — why Pissarro's Jewish roots survived despite his personal lack of interest in them.

Each of these books allowed us to confront and explore Jewish issues in a different way. Perhaps it's the Jewish prism through which we read that allows us to broaden our Jewish experience, and this may be more meaningful than the literal Jewish content.

Our book group has never formulated a policy about what to read, and I'm sure we never will. I think we enjoy revisiting this question each time we choose a new book.