INTRODUCTION

Wild Things and Chosen Children

Maurice Sendak, the renowned artist and author of children's classics such as *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Bumble-ardy*, had a problem with the idea of Jewish chosenness. "We were the 'chosen people,' chosen to be killed?" he observed to a *New York Times* reporter in September 2008.¹ Sendak, the son of Eastern European Jewish immigrants whose families perished in the Holocaust, displayed a tense relationship to Jewish identity, yet echoes of the Holocaust and Jewish immigrant experiences stalked many of his interviews.²

Chosen to be killed. This is one way to unpack chosenness, to question it in the modern world, and to link it with horrific suffering. Chosenness is a "wild thing" in its own right: once you let it out of the box, once you journey to its island of magical creatures, it's not easy to set it aside, not easy to sail back home. Yet, like the monsters that cavort with Max in *Where the Wild Things Are*, chosenness also reveals new worlds to us, crystallizing shards of our identities before we head home for supper—if we reach home for supper at all.

This book contends that Jewish Americans, African Americans, and black Jews all claim American chosenness by structuring their children's literature into redemptive, sacrificially driven narratives. These groups achieve their greatest acceptance as American citizens when their citizenship is sewn up with the commemoration of real and imagined lost children. Relating traumas religiously is a central way of identifying as a US citizen: notions of both suffering and nostalgia graft minority constituents onto ideals of liberal democracy and absorb them into communities that can be understood according to overarching white Protestant notions of properly contained religiosity and domestic respectability. Such narratives also evoke echoes of
Abraham’s binding of Isaac, the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt, Jephthah’s sacrifice of his daughter, and other unsettling biblical stories, tales that are also woven into historical conceptions of American exceptionalism. In this way, contemporary Jewish and African American children’s literature both continues and disrupts a tradition of sacrificial citizenship. Yet, in moments of fantastic literature, some authors—particularly Sendak—demonstrate subversive ways out of this trope.

We can see some of these dynamics in action by comparing the ocean voyages of Max, the young center of Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, and the Old African, the eponymous protagonist of a solemn picture book by the African American Jewish author Julius Lester and his frequent collaborator, the artist Jerry Pinkney. *Where the Wild Things Are*, first published in 1963, tells the story of how Max acts out, is sent to his room, and then voyages in his imagination (or so we think) to the island of the wild things, ultimately returning home to a supper that “was still hot.” In contrast, the Old African comes to us from a work of historical fiction mingled with magical realism. In a small African village, he and his wife are kidnapped from their home and sold to slave traders; his wife is assaulted by the ship’s crew and dies when she dives off the ship into the middle of the Atlantic. Years later, the Old African, who has magical abilities to heal and to transform, leads a group of fugitive slaves back to Africa by miraculously walking across the ocean floor. The bones of their lost relatives rise along the way, and at the book’s conclusion, they emerge, alive, enfleshed, on the shores of Africa.

The traumas and journeys of the Old African and Max speak to one another as deeply American journeys that reinforce notions of redemption through travel while simultaneously unsettling the neatness of happy endings. In both stories, time itself is plastic, almost coming undone: on his journey to the island, Max sails “in and out of weeks and almost over a year,” suggesting an unbound timelessness, yet as readers we know that this trip is also compressed into an evening, with his lovingly prepared dinner “still hot” when he returns from his imagination into his bedroom. In *The Old African*, as the slaves walk across the ocean floor, “time disappeared, as there was no morning and night in that realm.” Indeed, here, time almost runs backward, as Pinkney illustrates how long-dead bones, guarded by some morose yet friendly sharks, rise up and revive, and how these lost spouses and friends are restored to the freed slaves, including the Old African, who reunites with his wife at the story’s close. The ocean functions as a spatial and temporal vortex that ushers the slaves backward in time to the lives from which they and their ancestors had been ruptured.
On the one hand, each of these tales evinces American optimism in its tendency to unravel time and to show triumph and escape through an exodus. On the other hand, in both books, this fictional undoing is bittersweet. As contemporary readers, we know that slaves could not and did not walk back to Africa, and that those who perished during the Middle Passage were truly lost in the deep. We are touched by Max’s warm dinner, but his mother is never pictured in the text, suggesting the push and pull of family, the presence and absence of warmth, that is part of the pain of growing up. We can also wonder what the Old African and Max would say to one another if they met face to face. Would they commiserate over their long journeys? Would they share the loneliness of windy days on deck? Would the Old African mock Max’s privileged flight from home, pointing out that some voyages are not chosen? How do their respective experiences of pain connect and overlap, and where do their memories diverge?

This book asks us to fathom how these sorts of narratives speak to and with one another in contemporary children’s and young adult literature, along with classics of the postwar period that are still read today. Juvenile literature is a site at and through which we perform core cultural ideas. It cannot be reduced to a purely instrumental position; it is “an important system of its own.” As such, it is a particularly potent and complicated genre. Childhood, as experienced, recalled, and represented, is a crucial locus for thinking through the worlds of identity that are wound up with religion and literature.

Reading Multidirectionally across Jewish and African American Children’s Literature

Jews and African Americans are jointly entangled in how we, as Americans, tell tales of partnerships across difference. These two groups are overrepresented at extremes: their presence is mediated in the American imaginary by the nadirs of Holocaust, slavery, and lynching on the one hand, and by the zeniths of civil rights triumphs and ubiquitous myths of overcoming hardship to achieve American success on the other. In these margins of perceived noble privation, we can unravel the American rhetorical tendency to sacrifice children in order to save them. Suffering, in other words, is the flip side of chosenness. In these tales of slavery, the Holocaust, and wild things, American religions are written on a tenuous edge between “pedagogy” and “performance.”

This book reads back and forth across Jewish and African American texts by attending to what the literary theorist Michael Rothberg calls
“multidirectional memory.” This mode of analyzing traumatic memories is not competitive; it does not conceive of suffering as metaphorically scarce “real estate” or an attempt to gauge who—Jews? blacks? black Jews?—has suffered the most. Rather, by juxtaposing these narrative pains, we can move past the impasse of such fraught struggles, while also avoiding an overly bland and meaningless demand for sameness; we can consider the complexities of how Jewish and African Americans draw on one another’s traumas and biblical afterlives in telling their stories and claiming Americanness. Rothberg holds the image of W. E. B. Du Bois at the Warsaw Ghetto as one key example of how memories are not neatly bound within a single community. In its earliest emergence, our cultural understanding of what we now call the Holocaust was mediated not just by its victims or by Jews but by a host of Americans, who brought their own experiences to this unfathomable fathoming; the same is true for slavery, lynching, and other forms of both trauma and celebration. Rothberg argues that memory works productively, not on a logic of scarcity. In multidirectionality, we can see memories as “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative.” We will follow a similar model throughout this book.

The discussions below employ a mix of close reading and attention to biblical afterlives, with contextualization drawn from North American religious history, to show how even popular and ostensibly secular stories from religious and ethnic minorities are emplotted in white Protestant mythologies of pilgrim voyages, pioneer crossings, and pseudo-Abrahamic sacrifices of children. Although audience is not the primary focus, the book does engage in some reader-response criticism drawn from online reader reviews.

This book has a contemporary focus, considering primarily volumes that have been published since 1980. However, because the postwar context is crucial for understanding both American religious history and the emergence of popular children’s literature, it also considers classics, like All-of-a-Kind Family, that remain in print today. My selection criteria varied, and I considered far more books than those that are examined in detail here. To some extent, I relied on the top-selling lists from Amazon.com, Powell’s Books, and other book merchants in my selection process. I took into particular account volumes by well-known authors of children’s books, and I scanned recommended book lists and award winners—particularly the winners of the Coretta Scott King awards, which date back to 1969 and are now overseen by the American Library Association and focus on depictions of African Americans, and the Sydney Taylor Awards, which have been
presented by the Association of Jewish Libraries since 1968. Any honor that results in an embossed sticker on a book, such as the Newbery, Caldecott, or King award, invariably boosts the work’s sales. A full list of the books examined here can be found in the appendix.

The presence of religion in such works is sometimes quite subtle. This, in itself, is significant because the existence of religious themes even in ostensibly secular books calls into question the secular/religious binary. Secularity is not a neutral ground but, rather, is shaped by assorted cultural forces, including religious traditions—which, in America, translate most heavily as forms of Christianity. What we call the secular is far more complicated than a supposed absence of religion; it is necessary to historicize “how particular forms of Protestantism emerged as an ‘unmarked category’ in American religious history,” along with the ways that Protestantism informs and constructs secularisms. Teasing out the strands of religion and of biblical afterlives in mainstream texts further blurs the religious/secular line.

Jointly figuring African Americans and Jewish Americans takes us into territory that has been extensively covered in a variety of disciplines but that continues to confound easy definitions or histories. The terms “Jewish American” and “African American” are neither mutually exclusive, nor are they internally consistent categories, as both groups comprise a wide variety of racial, ethnic, and religious positions. In this book, I approach them from a discursive stance, as identities that are not fixed but are always in motion. The goal here is not to quibble over who belongs in each group, or to fixate on these identities in an essentialized way; rather, it is to examine precisely how notions of each group emerge in books and in the cultural stories around them.

The idea that Jewish and African Americans are natural conversation partners is itself a dyad with a history: this pairing is formed in and through national cultural conversations. The black-Jewish pairing provides utopian ideals for how we, as Americans, think about interracial and interreligious dialogue and coexistence. In the stories we tell about this history, we can point to an ebb and flow of cooperation and recrimination, with an emphasis, recently, on the high points: the valorization of Jewish-black cooperation during the civil rights movement, followed by a stop for dark interruptions like the Crown Heights riots of 1991, and then a return to triumphalism with heavy Jewish support for the election of America’s first African American president and photographs of the Obamas hosting a seder at the White House. Barack Obama and Rahm Emmanuel were, perhaps, not quite Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Joshua Heschel, but the trope in which they
were cast was the same: American minorities overcome injustice and discrimination, fight the good fight to the top, enrich each other with their differences, and share solidarity across lines of race and religion. The historical picture of African Americans, Jewish Americans, and their overlaps is deeply complicated, but it is the biblically inspired “strangers and neighbors” narrative that dominates popular conceptions, and it is these stories—the ones we learn in school, from relatives, on television, and in children’s books—that engage us where we live every day.14

Stories of both suffering and nostalgia graft these two constituencies onto American religious narratives. Ultimately, these texts are deeply cosmogonic: they make and remake worlds of Americanness and then—in moves of fantasy—begin to unbind themselves from the constraints of proving patriotism. Books for tots are thus anything but innocent. Rather, they are distilled sites of cultural transmission that make deeply fraught statements about the past and the future. In the introduction to Tikvah: Children’s Book Creators Reflect On Human Rights, Elie Wiesel writes: “Tikvah means hope and hope is represented by children. It is they who must justify our hope in education, human relations, and social justice. In other words: they represent our hope in a future which is an improvement on our past.”15 Here, Wiesel, lending the collection his own heavy symbolic and rhetorical weight as an emblem of Holocaust survival, positions the ideal of “children” at the center of a seesaw between past and future: children simultaneously inherit knowledge of an imperfect past and stand in for a vision of a utopian future. To study children’s literature is to study not only these representations, but also the ideological work that these books do.

Being chosen as a people involves looking forward in time to the notion of offspring. Historically, new generations have not been a given for either Jews or African Americans. To varying degrees, both groups have faced threats of destruction and even potential extinction, which brings us back to Sendak’s point: chosen to be killed? It is precisely this suffering that adds such emotional weight to the trope of chosenness. Children, as ideals and as a topic of discourse, provide the hopeful endpoint, the telos at the end of painful journeys, the right-hand side of the equation: we came, we suffered, we lived to tell our children. Even in cases where survival does not literally occur, as in the story of Anne Frank or the deaths during the Middle Passage, popular retellings frequently tilt toward redemptive framings.16 Young people are also central to national imaginings of what it means to be a citizen of a liberal democracy and to a realization of how very racialized such constructions have been. Attention to childhood and the symbol of children “illustrates not
only how the U.S. nation materializes out of a series of racial conflicts but, more fundamentally, how the nation is imaginatively created and sustained through the logic of racial hierarchy that the child helps to naturalize.17

Utopian ideas and attempts at consensus also emerge in the discourse emanating from children’s books, in both the ways that they tell stories of American minorities and, especially, in the rhetoric around them. The story goes something like this: we—as Americans in an increasingly fractured political and religious landscape—want to find places of meeting, agreement, and universals that trump our very real differences and disagreements. The child is presented as an apolitical answer when in fact children, real and imagined, form a deeply politicized site of discourse. Everyone can, in theory, agree that children are innocent, that children do not deserve to have horrible things happen to them, and yet such things do occur. We want to agree on children’s books, and on children, even though we can’t. The discourse around young people and their literatures is full of attempted harmony, and in our fraught public debates over abortion, poverty, and education, we can see how the lofty, idealized goal of stating that “children are the future” is a site of great debate.18

Children’s books are also a place where we learn to mourn, where we find out whose lives are “grievable.”19 We discover that Martin Luther King Jr. and Emmett Till must both be lamented, though King is in a far greater number of books; we notice that some immigrants thrived, while others were burned in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire; we are told that the victims of the Holocaust must be addressed over and over again, even in volumes that are not directly about the atrocities of World War II. We are also instructed about what we should celebrate and whose partnerships were built out of such struggles; thus, we learn that Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Joshua Heschel both experienced violence and then marched arm in arm in Selma.

Religious rhetoric is a crucial ingredient in such significations. The implicit and explicit layers of religiosity in these stories—the church preaching, the image of Moses on the mountaintop, the reclamation of Miriam by feminists and their daughters, the sacrifice of children in struggles for freedom—all of these help to construct Jewish and African American histories as religiously recognizable to other Americans. Although some Americans have moved from a postwar, additive Protestant-Catholic-Jewish understanding of pluralism to more hybridized, religiously diverse, and complex models of identity, the construction of many categories of children’s literature remains “add Jew/African American/Native American/Hindu and stir.” This book’s
readings tease out the more subtle notions of identity and overlap in such tales. Ultimately, we turn to works of fantasy in order to move beyond the goal of a utopian, multicultural democracy and toward a darker vision of what it means to perform American religion in a way that is both authentic to one's tradition and transgressive of stereotypes.

From George Washington’s Menorah to Vampires in New Orleans

The children’s books analyzed below were all published after World War II, but the story that this book tells about them follows the chronology of North American religious history. Though we have an increasingly careful and complex scholarly picture of American religious histories, popular recreations—including children’s books—still laud mythical images: pilgrims and pioneers, domestic goddesses and valiant soldiers. Thus, this book takes us from representations of old Atlantic crossings to nineteenth-century altars of domesticity, and then from the bleakness of lynching and the Holocaust in the mid-twentieth century to postwar fantasies that continue into the present day. As we traverse these representations, we see how consensus is built around the image of children. Popular notions of children as idealized innocents move us toward the horrific loss of children as the apogee of proof of a community’s Americanness. By this logic, African Americans and Jewish Americans, who have lost so many children in a biblically sacrificial manner, must be included in the body politic precisely because of such tragedies.

Chapter 1, “Remembering the Way into Membership,” demonstrates the logic underlying most of the books discussed here: it shows how American religious history, and the careful placement of Jewish and African Americans within it, is crucial for authenticating Jews and blacks as not just good citizens, but as even more American than other Americans. We thus set off on our journey with a brief introduction to the histories of Jewish and African American children’s literature, followed by readings that highlight how democratic rhetoric allowed both groups to harness juvenile materials as a central way of demonstrating patriotism and respectable religiosity.

Many children’s books describe blacks and Jews as democratically minded even before America had a democracy, and then as liberal democratic stalwarts at times when that democracy was threatened. This book’s first chapter is organized around three periods that are crucial to commemorations of Jewish and African American identities: the colonial era, World War I, and the civil rights movement. The chapter provides a capsule version
of the structures we will analyze more deeply in later sections. When appropriately directed, Judaism and African American Christianity are portrayed as channels for inculcating patriotism and American identity. Remembering is crucial for membership; mythological stories write real bodies into American inclusion.

We then move on to the two major sections of this work. In a set of paired chapters, Part I of the book, “Crossing and Dwelling: Afterlives of Moses and Miriam,” shows how exodus journeys and stories about settling down are the first two types of children’s books that make black and Jewish experiences recognizable as deeply American. Chapter 2, “The Unbearable Lightness of Exodus,” shows that crossing is a place of agreement and consensus because all Americans (except Native Americans) had to journey here in the past few centuries. Since Pilgrim’s Progress, that kind of journey has been imbued with notions of election and religiosity. This chapter shows that exodus is how minority groups engage with the ideas of crossing, strangeness, and covenant. These journeys include escapes from slavery, Thanksgiving celebrations, immigration to American ports of entry, and heroic Moses imagery. Together, all of these examples demonstrate how memory is co-constituted across groups, as well as how popular stories of coming to America and conquering the continent inscribe Jewish and African Americans into mythologies that are familiar to all American children from civic pageants and elementary school curricula. In particular, the Thanksgiving holiday provides the nationalist alchemy that transforms immigrant strangeness into more familiar American liberal citizenship.

In moving from the crossings of chapter 2 to chapter 3, “Dwelling in Chosen Nostalgia,” we see how dwelling is the next logical narrative step: in children’s books, Jews and African Americans set up homes that can be understood according to very Victorian notions of household femininity. Though these tales are written in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, they nostalgically model families in which women are angels of the house and sentiment-laden objects dominate memory. Chronologically, these notions of settling down, climbing the economic ladder, and making proper homes follow the pioneer west in our myths of American religious history. Communities cannot be sustained only in motion; therefore, memories of survival are linked with material objects, adhering to them in vivid form. Chapter 3 includes two thematic sections, one on textiles and memory and one on food-driven nostalgia, and a central interlude on readings of Sydney Taylor’s All-of-a-Kind Family and its sequels, based on readers’ responses. Here, memories of trauma are tempered by commemorations of domesticity.
Introduction

as authors create heritage. American religiosity is thus linked to nostalgic visions of material home spaces.

This cozy domesticity, however, is not a final soft landing; this is not what most powerfully thrusts blacks and Jews into American civic acceptance. Sacrifice is the notion that does this. Part II of the work, “Binding and Unbinding: Hauntings of Isaac and Jephthah’s Daughter,” brings us to stories of children whose deaths are interpreted redemptively and then seeks a way out of this symbolic bind in fantastic stories. In chapter 4, “Bound to Violence: Lynching, the Holocaust, and the Limits of Representation,” we enter the engine of sacrificial logic that drives these portrayals of citizenship. Murdered children, understood in an ethically grievous mode of sacrifice, comprise the most horrific sort of step backward, one in which political emancipation for both American blacks and European Jews led not to happy endings, but to lynching and the Shoah. These sacrifices are best understood according to a metanarrative of Abraham and Isaac that drives American culture, though the image of Jephthah’s daughter from the book of Judges complicates this picture. We will first place various treatments of Emmett Till and Anne Frank in conversation with one another; both young people became major parts of American memory during the 1950s and have been central in communal memory over the following decades. Second, we will look at two pieces of historical fiction on lynching and on the Holocaust, from Julius Lester and Jane Yolen, respectively. Here, issues of chosenness are deeply interwoven with horror and a paradoxical mix of unspeakability and loquacious repetition. This is the somber heart of this book: children’s literature shows us how both blacks and Jews achieve their greatest acceptance as American citizens when their citizenship is sewn together with the commemoration of real and imagined lost children.

Finally, in the postwar period, black and Jewish writers move into the fantastic. Like other Americans who embrace fantasy in the British imports of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien and their American imitators, African Americans and Jews write fantasy and attempt, in still dark and quite subtle ways, to free themselves from the horrific binding of sacrificed children. Chapter 5, “Unbound in Fantasy: Reading Monstrosity and the Supernatural,” shows how Maurice Sendak and Virginia Hamilton, two of the most prominent and least easily categorized Jewish and African American writers, find their way out of midcentury horrors with a turn to the fantastic and the surreal. This is not an escapist turn to either genre as a realm of happy endings, any more than Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings is a carefree romp in which the shire escapes from a scouring. Rather, in Sendak and Hamilton, we see
darkness in dialogue with light: magical adventures that reimagine pain but can never truly undo it. This chapter also considers how monstrosity plays out in children’s literature; in particular, it reads David Wisniewski’s picture book *Golem* alongside images of enchanted and monstrous women in Hamilton’s retellings of African American folk tales. Monstrosity and fantasy lead us beyond these tales of suffering pasts, as they express uncanny desires and “fantasies of witnessing” in a more explicit manner than do realist works.\(^2\)

Finally, in the conclusion, we will see how moving from sacrificial citizenship to unbinding through fantasy has opened up more pliable, less tightly bound spaces in the reading and writing of children’s literature. The Abrahamic bargain that Jewish and African Americans make in the telling of their stories is a terrifying one, but it is also not the final word on children’s books or on symbolic children. Reading across the oceans of fantastic voyages may bring us to new narratives of intercultural encounter and painful ethical grappling with the legacies of North American religious history.