

Oy Feh So by Cary Fagan

A good children's book or series can provide a fun learning experience and shape a core childhood memory for the reader. These books are often lighthearted and appear very surface-level but can carry deeper more intricate overarching tones. Often a children's book intends to develop a meaningful theme or to help children learn about certain aspects of a culture or society. Jewish children's literature effectively accomplishes both. The short picture book *Oy Feh So* by Cary Fagan is a strong example of this. The story is silly and lighthearted but displays aspects of Jewish culture while also delivering strong overarching themes about family bonding, appreciation, and togetherness.

Oy Feh So is a short children's book narrated by a young boy that lives with his mom, his dad, his brother and his sister in a loving Jewish home. However, the first characters the readers are introduced to are his aunts and his uncle, who visit every Sunday. The entirety of the plot is centered around the absurd demeanor and dialogue of these relatives, who are grumpy, cynical, and only ever say one thing: *oy*, *feh*, or *so*. His Aunt Essy responds to everything with "oy," his Aunt Chanah with "feh," and his Uncle Sam with "so?" This phenomenon is used as a blueprint for the development of the story, which is actually quite comedic and satirical. The scene starts out with members of the family doing and saying simple and normal things, to which the aunts and uncles respond "oy, feh, and so." But the scenes get more and more ridiculous and extreme as each page is turned, with surreally dangerous events happening before the eyes of the aunts and uncle. But each time they still give the same, scoffing, nonchalant remarks, spearheaded by "oy, feh, and so." For example, towards the end of the story there is a scene in which the narrator is being eaten by a dragon. The relatives employ the following responses: "Oy," said Aunt Essy. "Such a commotion." "Feh," said Aunt Chanah. "I never liked pets." "So?" said Uncle Sam. "Is it worse than my bad stomach?" (Fagan 2013). The story develops based on this repetitive structure, until the end when the kids start making fun of the way their aunts and uncles talk. Then the parents point out the similarities between the kids and the relatives, and they all laugh and joke around with each other and have heartwarming family time. The story ends with the aunts and uncles holding the children's hands, walking out of the house to leave for the day. The story teaches children about family bonding and togetherness, and that at the end of the day members of a family love each other for who they are.

The book illustrates a multitude of Jewish cultural aspects. Primarily, the appearance of the members of the family in the story. The members of the family all either have curly hair, glasses, or red hair, sometimes all of the above. These are all common physical features of ethnically Ashkenazi Jewish people, so the reader can

infer that this is the family's ethnicity. Further, the names of the aunts and uncles, Essy, Chanah, and Samuel, are all very traditionally Jewish names. In addition, illustrations of aspects of Jewish culture can be seen throughout the story. For example, a framed photo of Elijah's cup can be seen hung on the wall on page 3. It is never explicitly stated that the family is Jewish, nor is there any dialogue in which Judaism is mentioned. However, the reader can easily infer that this family is Jewish based on visual and contextual cues. And lastly, the author of this book pokes fun and delves into Jewish stereotypes as a source of satirical comedy. The portraying of the aunts and uncle as whiny, cynical, and judgmental plays on the old adage about the cynicism and comedic sarcasm of Jewish people, especially older Jewish people. The demeanor of the aunts and uncle is something a Jewish reader is probably familiar with and can relate to it.

From a literary standpoint, this book obviously relies on repetition to develop its plot and themes. According to one children's book editor, "If you're not repeating something in your children's book, it's not going to be a great children's book" (Fox). The repetitive structure of having the aunts and uncles respond with the same three words on each page after every scene makes the plot easy to follow and emphasizes the comedic intentions. Hyperbole is also something the author implements with a similar goal. The illustrated scenes are all intentionally over-the-top and ridiculous in order to exaggerate the indifferent and cynical demeanor of the relatives and the subsequent exasperated frustration of the family. For example, one scene describes and illustrates alien space invaders trying to kidnap the narrator, and the aunts and uncles still scoff and remark "oy, feh, and so?" This illustrates how the book is definitively dual-appealing to both children and adults. The jarring, colorful and imaginative illustrative scenes, the small number of words used, and the simplicity of the plot appeals to children. Additionally, the satirical tones of the relatives' stubborn and cynical demeanor is something that only an adult can fully understand and appreciate. Ultimately the book conveys its overarching theme that no matter their attitude or outward actions, family loves and appreciates each other. This is shown at the end of the story, when the kids make fun of the aunts and uncles, causing them to finally break their nonchalant demeanors, laugh wholeheartedly and begin to tell the children stories from when they were kids.

While delivering this heartwarming message, this story also displays evidence of historical migration and language shifts through various levels of language contact. Two out of three words most central to the story, "oy" and "feh," are both Yiddish loanwords. A loanword is a word or phrase that is "loaned" or borrowed from another language and inserted syntactically into the base language (Matras 2009). "Oy" is a Yiddish exclamation of surprise, and "feh" is a Yiddish exclamation of disgust (Jewish Lexicon). The usage of Yiddish loanwords is an aspect of Jewish English, which is a variety of

English spoken by Jews in the United States (Harry and Benor 2018). It incorporates features from Yiddish, Hebrew, Aramaic, and other Jewish languages, and also employs certain ethnolinguistic features such as distinctive prosody borrowed from Yiddish, with fast speech rate, quasi-chanting intonation, and rise-fall intonation contours (Benor 2016). The latter can only be seldomly expressed in a written story with no audio, but a lot can be inferred based on all the other aspects of Yiddish influence and Jewish English in the dialogue. For example, one sentence in the book reads, “Oy, look at that! He looks just like you Sam. He *sounds* just like you!” (Fagan 2013). It can be inferred that the sentence is said with a Yiddish influenced rise-fall intonation, with “*sounds*” italicized meaning Aunt Essy put emphasis on the word and used a higher pitched voice. With all the evidence of Yiddish linguistic infusion in the English interactions between members of the family, it can be inferred that the family is of Ashkenazi Jewish descent and that their ancestors immigrated to the United States several generations ago. Their ancestors were likely part of the large community of Eastern European Jews that migrated to America in order to escape Jewish persecution in the early 20th century or later on during World War 2 and the Holocaust (Harry and Benor 2018).

The family in *Oy Feh So* is an example of a family of a different ethnolinguistic descent whose mother tongue now only survives in a post-vernacular sense. When it comes to linguistics, post-vernacularity refers to a language that has become separated or has spread beyond its vernacular roots but survives in communities in which it is not spoken with complete fluency through symbolic means or through language infusion (Shandler 2005). Not once did the family communicate or construct fully Yiddish sentences to each other, but their use of Yiddish loanwords implies that the language is used among their community in a post-vernacular context.

All in all, *Oy Feh So* by Cary Fagan serves as an example of how Jewish children's literature can blend humor, cultural heritage, and pedagogical themes to engage both young and adult readers. The book's playful, repetitive narrative structure is not only entertaining for children but also reflects deeper satirical commentary that adults can appreciate. Beyond its comedic surface, the book introduces elements of Jewish identity and Ashkenazi culture through visual cues, names, and Yiddish loanwords. These inclusions reflect the linguistic heritage of Jewish immigrants and the post-vernacular use of Yiddish in modern American Jewish families. *Oy Feh So* ultimately conveys a heartwarming message about family love and togetherness, reminding readers that cultural identity and humor can shape childhood memories and familial bonds in profound ways.

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