

2. In honor of the month of November being Jewish Heritage Month, attached you will find reviews of two books, one of which recasts a famous Jewish legend in modern terms, and one of which recasts a famous non-Jewish fairy tale in Jewish terms. The two books together provide a new perspective on the uses of myth and legend

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in literature and in life, and I recommend them. [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
MT 3D-441 908-957-5619
...mtgzfs3!leeper

There's no trick to being a humorist when you have the whole government working for you.

-- Will Rogers

HE, SHE, AND IT by Marge Piercy
Knopf, 1991, ISBN 0-679-40408-2, \$22.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
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_ H_ e, _ S_ h_ e, _ a_ n_ d_ I_ t is about so many different things I don't know where to start. It's about determinism and free will, about ecology and electronic networks, about Jewish mysticism and advanced genetics, about freedom and slavery, and (ultimately) about what it means to be human.

That's a lot to pack into one book. Piercy does it by concentrating on what is important to her plot and her goal. Not for her the long descriptive passages so characteristic of a lot of "cyberpunk" writing (though Piercy acknowledges her debt to cyberpunk). Her characters don't luxuriate in the Net--they get in, do their task, and get out.

_ H_ e, _ S_ h_ e, _ a_ n_ d_ I_ t is really two parallel stories. One is the story of Shira Shipman, living in a future world almost destroyed by

pollution and other ecological abuse, controlled by multi-national corporations, and almost universally connected by the Net. After losing custody of her son in her divorce, she leaves the multi that she worked for/lived in and returns to Tikva, the independent Jewish community where she was raised. But it is not the safe haven she expected; a scientist has built a cyborg to defend the community, a cyborg so advanced that its existence precipitates the very attack by the multi it was built to defend against, who wants the technology.

The other story is that of the 16th Century Golem of Prague, told by Shira's grandmother Malkah to Yod (the cyborg) as a parallel to the reasons for Yod's creation and the results of that creation. The two stories are inter-leaved--one or two chapters in Shira's world, then a chapter of Riva's story-telling, then back to Shira's world, and so on. At first, this is a bit jarring, but the reader rapidly comes to realize how effectively this highlights the relevance of this 16th Century legend, even--or perhaps especially--in the world of today and tomorrow.

In spite of her lack of science fiction credentials (or maybe because of it), Piercy has written an extremely competent and readable science fiction novel. Avoiding many of the snares that often catch mainstream writers on their first forays into science fiction, Piercy gives us a work that engages our interest, involves us in its characters, and at the same time illuminates the fact that the "foolish" myths and superstitions of the past may not be so foolish after all, and may teach us a lot about the human condition. Readers familiar with the golem legend will find it treated here with as much accuracy as one can expect for a legend, but readers unfamiliar with it will not be lost either, because Piercy does not assume prior knowledge of the legend in her telling. Highly recommended!

BRIAR ROSE by Jane Yolen
Tor, 1992, ISBN 0-312-85135-9, \$17.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
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Thank you, Jane Yolen.

I thanked you last year for T_h_e_D_e_v_i_l'_s_A_r_i_t_h_m_e_t_i_c,
a young

adult novel in which a young girl travels back through time to the Holocaust and comes to a better understanding of her heritage and her family. And now I thank you for B_r_i_a_r_R_o_s_e, in which a woman tries to find out the secret of her grandmother's past, and why her grandmother was so obsessed with the fairy tale Briar Rose (a.k.a. Sleeping Beauty).

For as long as Rebecca can remember, her grandmother Gemma has told Rebecca and her sisters the tale of Briar Rose (which we know as Sleeping Beauty). But more than that, she has told them that s_h_e is Briar Rose. Now that Gemma has died, Rebecca is driven to find out who her grandmother really was and why she told this story. Even from the beginning, Rebecca discovers that much of what she believed about her family history isn't true. Eventually her search takes her to Poland and the truth about the dark time of the Holocaust.

Yolen has done a very good job in describing a Jewish family and its history, but what is worth noting is that she has not ignored the other aspects of the Nazi regime during that period. One of the primary sources of information for Rebecca when she travels to Poland is a man who was imprisoned for his homosexuality. And the history involves other groups persecuted as well. Yolen manages this without minimizing anyone's suffering--it is not a contest of what group suffered more, but a look at the people who suffered and how they often worked together against the horror.

In my review of Marge Piercy's H_e,_S_h_e,_a_n_d_I_t, I talked about how Piercy told a 16th Century legend, both in its own time and then as a re-telling in a near-future time, so that we could see that what seemed like just an old story was still very relevant to the issues that face us today. In B_r_i_a_r_R_o_s_e, Yolen takes a fairy tale rather than a legend, but then does the same thing: shows us that it would be a mistake to write it off as just another story--shows us that even a fairy tale may have much underlying truth in what it says. I have not read the other stories in the "Fairy Tale" series (of which this is one), so I don't know if that is the usual approach, but I highly recommend this book.