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Becoming an “All-of-a-Kind” American: Sydney Taylor and Strategies of Assimilation

June Cummins

During the second half of the twentieth century, Sydney Taylor’s series, the All-of-a-Kind Family books, were the most widely known books about American Jewish children. Read by Jews and non-Jews alike, the books were beloved from the time they were first published and continue to be beloved today.¹ Set in early-twentieth-century New York City, the five books in the series detail the daily lives of five Jewish sisters and their one brother. The books include All-of-a-Kind Family (1951), More All-of-a-Kind Family (1954), All-of-a-Kind Family Uptown (1958), All-of-a-Kind Family Downtown (1962), and Ella of All-of-a-Kind Family (1978). Throughout the series, Taylor lovingly describes Jewish rituals and holidays, simultaneously educating those readers unfamiliar with these traditions and affirming the experiences of children who know them already. Taylor’s books obviously validate Jewish observance and identity. Her efforts in this direction are on the surface of her narrative. Not only are Jewish customs explained honestly and frankly, but Taylor makes them attractive and positive, drawing in her readers, both Jewish and non-Jewish (figure 1).

What is not as apparent is Taylor’s simultaneous depiction of an assimilative process that works, ultimately, to pull her characters slowly away from their traditional roots. For while the books are about being Jewish, they are also about becoming American. As with any other immigrant group, the relationship between two identities, one associated with another country or culture and the other with America, produces a tension not easily, if ever, resolved. Accurately reflecting the experience of the majority of second-generation immigrant Jews, Taylor widens the world of her characters, expanding their horizons, but at the same time turning their attention toward American values and away from Jewish values.
Sydney Taylor’s Strategies of Assimilation

Taylor saw herself as explicitly filling a need by writing books that featured Jewish characters. She always claimed that she wrote the *All-of-a-Kind Family* stories for her daughter Jo, who asked, “Mommy, why is it every time I read a book about children, it is always a Christian child? Why isn’t there a book about a Jewish child?” (*Contemporary Authors* 552).² By the time Taylor and her husband were raising Jo, they were quite assimilated. Taylor’s own experience as the daughter of immigrant Jews was one of intense Americanization, just like that of hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants and their children who went through enormous cultural changes at the end of the nineteenth century and during the first two decades of the twentieth. Taylor’s books, the first ones to depict Jewish children to a wide audience, offer us insight into the construction of American Jewish identity in the twentieth century.

From the moment Jewish immigrants stepped off boats when they reached the United States, they began to assimilate—some more haltingly and with more resistance than others, but within one generation, they and their children, as a group, had shed most of the habits and customs that defined a religious identity and had taken on an American identity. Taylor’s family, the Brenners, was no exception. At the time Taylor wrote the *All-of-a-Kind Family* books, which she calls “autobio-
graphical,” she herself no longer kept kosher or observed the Jewish Sabbath or most of the other holidays and rituals discussed in detail in the book series, and neither did the vast majority of American Jews.\(^3\)

With her books, Taylor attempted to capture the past and present it to her daughter and other readers as personal and ethnic history. She clearly desired to depict and explain Jewishness, but she could not help but display how early-twentieth-century Judaism is filtered through an American acculturation process.

In some of the books in the series the assimilation process is readily identifiable. For instance, in the second book, *More All-of-a-Kind Family*, published in 1954 and set in 1915, an example of conscious assimilation occurs when the family attends a different synagogue (because they have temporarily left the city to escape an epidemic). Papa is unhappy because the rabbi is so different from the one he is accustomed to. "‘Praying in English!’ Papa sniffed. ‘Some rabbi! He hasn’t even got a beard!’” (*More* 122). Mama placates Papa with "‘Well, Papa, I guess the world has to move on. New times—new ways!’” (122). Papa quickly agrees: ‘‘I suppose it’s all right. . . . They have good hearts, our children. God will hear their prayers in English, too, I’m sure’” (122–23). However, no such moments occur in *All-of-a-Kind Family*—the first, best known, and most widely distributed book in the series.\(^4\) Characters do not discuss changes to their lifestyles or values, and no incidents occur that point to the acculturation process. Indeed, what’s fascinating about the first, and still the best-selling, book in Taylor’s series, is that assimilation is repressed. Not dealt with frankly, as a topic of conversation among characters or through encounters consciously understood as Americanizing, assimilation occurs at subtextual levels and even extranarratively, through influences readers cannot see. *Being* an American is an experience recounted on the most obvious and readable levels of the stories. *Becoming* an American is a matter conveyed in more subtle ways, through Taylor’s narrative strategies and editorial choices. Narrative strategies are intrinsic to the text, but editorial changes are extrinsic. In this article, I will demonstrate the pressures both within *All-of-a-Kind Family*, as evidenced through narrative tensions, and upon the novel, as revealed in correspondence between Taylor and her editor at W. W. Follett, Esther Meeks. Seeking the ways that assimilation occurs in *All-of-a-Kind Family* reveals not just the assimilative processes themselves, but traces of suppressed ethnicity that suggest anxiety about Jewish identity. Pursuing the reasons for the suppression and the sources of the anxiety reveals, in turn, the ways Taylor not only reflected but shaped twentieth-century American Jewish identity.
Narrative theorist Mieke Bal explains why close analysis of narrative operations in a text is helpful, asserting that with a narratological perspective “cultural artifacts, events, or domains can be analysed closely” and that narrative analysis “reorients . . . close reading into . . . cultural analysis” (222). From this perspective, Taylor’s narrative decisions are revealing. In telling her stories Taylor engages two different types of narration and cannily finds a way to capture the power inherent in each type of narrator. The books are written in the third person, but Taylor makes very clear from the beginning that this is her story and that she, as author-narrator, has a place in it. On the first page of All-of-a-Kind Family, Taylor begins her novel with: “That slowpoke Sarah!” Henny cried. “She’s making us late!” Mama’s girls were going to the library, and Henny was impatient (12). Taylor’s familiar use of “Mama”—with no article or pronoun designation (such as “the” or “their”)—leads a reader to believe that the narrator personally knows this woman. It leaves open the possibility that the missing pronoun could be “our” and the book might proceed in the first person. Taylor intensifies this effect on the second page of the book when she writes, “Almost no East Side child owned a book when Mama’s children were little girls.” Who is this narrator who can speak of Mama as familiarly as one of the five daughters might? Is this merely a tactic to draw in child readers who might speak of their own parents with this universal tone, or does it set up the narrator as someone who knows this historical fact and this family because she lived in this place and time—could she be one of the sisters grown up? The answer is not supplied, but the question is raised.

Taylor asserts a narrator’s presence in other, less subtle, ways as well. One specific strategy is the use of translation. One of the ways Taylor provides cultural specificity is through her use of Yiddish words and expressions. At times, Taylor weaves in translation smoothly and naturally, as in this example describing a local shopkeeper: “‘Hello,’ he said in Yiddish. Mr. Basch spoke no English. ‘What does Mama want today?’ . . . He walked over to the back of the store where he kept slabs of smoked salmon (he called it lox) and cut off two pieces of moist, salty skin” (54–55). In these instances, Taylor signals translation by contextualizing it through the narrator’s voice. Other times, somewhat clumsily, Taylor provides a more intrusive translation, as in this example: “But Mama was not getting any live fish this time, only pieces of several different kinds of fish, whitefish, yellow pike and winter carp—that meant gefullte fish (stuffed fish) for the Sabbath, yum, yum!” (73). This sentence asserts a narrative presence in two ways. First, the words “yum yum” designate her preference for and excitement about eating gefullte
fish, as they are not incorporated into the speech of any particular character. Present as free direct discourse, they indicate a personality and a presence. Second, the insertion of the translated words “stuffed fish” in the discourse of the narration reinforces the narrative presence as a personality—who else but she is doing this translation of her own text?

Thus Taylor makes a narrative presence known but keeps its identity hidden. It is easy enough to assume that the narrator is herself, the author, but we in fact have no evidence for that identification. Instead, readers discern only that this narrator knows this family very well and can describe it and its cultural milieu seemingly with firsthand knowledge, which increases the validity and reliability of the text. But by maintaining some distance through not disclosing a specific identity, this narrator can also retain the distance necessary for a narrator to achieve a third-person, unrestricted, omniscient narrative stance and power.

A focalizer is a character or narrator from whose perspective the narrative is presented. By manipulating the text so that her presence as focalizer is maintained, Taylor subtly pulls a reader to her view of the world represented. What this world is is very clear: the Lower East Side of New York City at the turn of the twentieth century. Taylor’s views of this world, however, are less evident. By examining another narrative mechanism, the way in which a narrator unfolds a plot, we can begin to see them more clearly.

The majority of plots progress in a traditional form that is very familiar to readers. This is the standard structure of setting up a story by describing the characters and place, introducing a conflict that impedes the characters in some way, and then depicting movement toward the resolution of this conflict, usually via a climactic episode and then a winding-down (or denouement). This pattern is so persistent and reliable we notice departures from it quite readily. Some children’s literature follows a different structure, one called “episodic.” In an episodic narrative, events do not necessarily proceed in a logical, consequential order; that is, one event does not necessarily lead to the next. Chapters or sections of the story may seem to be in somewhat of a random order; characters do not demonstrate growth and development but remain fairly static. For the most part, the chapters in All-of-a-Kind Family seem to flow in this loose, episodic way. Markers of time progression, such as changing seasons, are not highlighted (unless one knows the Jewish calendar very well—the three Jewish holidays Taylor discusses occur in the order they would appear chronologically). The girls have small adventures, like going to a candy store or dusting the parlor; small crises, like losing a library book or getting lost oneself at Coney Island; and
small triumphs, like recovering from scarlet fever or becoming sisters to a new baby brother. But rarely do the girls refer to events that have already occurred in the time covered by the novel. Taylor does not link events pertaining to the girls’ lives through flashbacks (also called retroversions), flash-forwards (also called anticipations), or reference.

But one narrative thread does run through the novel in a way that ties the generally episodic plot together, linking the past, present, and future. It does not involve the girls except as little more than bystanders; its central focus is two non-Jewish characters, Charlie and Kathy, and their romantic story of loss and reunion. Fascinated by these lovers, the sisters, as well as the readers, are entranced by their unfolding drama, the climax of which provides the climax of the novel as a whole. Charlie is a family friend who works as a peddler for the girls’ father, who runs a rag shop. He is mysteriously sad and out of place in the rag shop, and the girls wonder why. They learn that Charlie turned his back on his patrician family when his father would not allow him to marry a woman he loved. The girls have another friend, a lovely young woman who is their local librarian. Both characters are introduced at the beginning of the book (in fact, the first chapter of the book is “The Library Lady”). While the library lady is less mysterious, she is described as “wistful.” When the girls invite both these dear friends to celebrate a Jewish holiday with them, it is revealed that they are the long-parted lovers, and they are happily reunited, to the delight of the girls and the reader.

These two characters are intriguing and fascinating, especially Charlie, with whom Ella, the oldest daughter, becomes infatuated. From his first appearance, Charlie is described as interesting because he is different, but his difference is actually the ways in which he is deeply, conformingly all-American. For example, Charlie is introduced in a chapter entitled “Rainy Day Surprise.” One rainy day, the girls visit their papa in his junk shop. This chapter is unusual in its extended attention to characters outside of the girls’ family and immediate experience. Several peddlers are introduced who are not mentioned again in the course of the book. Each of them is obviously an immigrant, as the girls’ parents presumably are (although the immigrant status of the parents is not mentioned). Each peddler is described in full detail for at least one paragraph. First, “There was Polack who had the heavy body and broad, stolid face of a Polish peasant” (38). Next, “Close by sat Joe, a swarthy Italian. . . . Joe always talked in lively fashion, waving his hands expressively. ‘Much rain! Bah! No gooda for business!’” (39). Then, there is “Poor old Picklenose! His face would have been most ordinary had he not been blessed with such an enormous object in the middle of it” (39). While Picklenose’s specific
ethnicity is not described, he is very much like the other two. All are big, solid, poor, comic immigrant men who are dependent on Papa for their livelihood as peddlers. Set in opposition to these men is Charlie. Tall and lanky, “Charlie was different. He was handsome, blond, and blue-eyed, and a good deal younger than most of the peddlers. It was rumored he had come from a wealthy family and had a fine education. But something had happened in Charlie’s life that changed everything. No one really knew what . . .” (41). Taylor spells out why Charlie is not like others but does not label the differences. In addition to youth and breeding, however, Charlie is clearly different because he is American. “Blond and blue-eyed” are physical markers of this status; “wealthy family” and “educated” hint that he is not an immigrant. When he speaks, lack of an accent or dialect also asserts Charlie’s native blood.

Charlie is described as Papa’s best friend, a necessary solace for him when his large, female family makes Papa feel “lonesome” (42). The girls adore Charlie and he them; he is the only one of the peddlers who comes to Papa’s home and plays with the girls. Ella fancies Charlie from the beginning of the book. At first, it is her interest in him that provides the linking mechanism. She grows fonder and fonder of him and more and more curious as to why he is sad and displaced. Even a slightly experienced reader develops this interest and curiosity along with Ella and anticipates the resolution to the tension the questions raise. Readers know that as an author pays more and more attention to certain events or characters, those entities become increasingly important.

But most child readers probably do not guess that the other linking character, Kathy the Library Lady, will eventually be joined with Charlie. When I reread this book as an adult, I was unprepared for the surprise reunion and experienced real pleasure and satisfaction as it occurred. The surprise reunion indubitably presents the narrative and emotional climax of the book. Both narrative and cultural analysis help us see why Taylor leads readers in this direction, maneuvering their attention to this particular event.

Taking place in the family’s sukkah, the temporary home Jews erect during the autumn festival of Sukkot, Charlie and Kathy’s reunion literally and geographically occupies a Jewish space, perhaps to the point of displacing it. Charlie, the star of this climax, already figured importantly in a slightly earlier chapter. In “Fourth of July,” he is the central focus and source of narrative progression. At the outset of the chapter, youngest daughter Gertie does not know the significance of the holiday. Taylor often employs the device of explaining unfamiliar Jewish customs to her readers by having characters describe them to this young child. But
this is the only American holiday that merits explanation, underscoring its importance to the narrative. Charlie arrives and delights the girls with a gift of fireworks. He then takes them into the street to set them off.

“...”

The streets were full of excitement. Everybody was expressing their joy in freedom today. From tenement house windows and from store fronts flew American flags of all sizes. The air was filled with the clang of cowbells and the blasts of horns” (135). Shooting off Roman candles, Charlie draws a spellbound crowd, initiating the tenement-house residents into a custom specifically identified with this most American of holidays. An accompanying illustration depicts Charlie surrounded by the Jewish neighbors who all gaze at him (figure 2). Standing in the center of the crowd and holding the flaming Roman candle, Charlie is the focus of a visual attention that parallels the narrative attention Taylor pays to him. The scene takes place among the tenements and Jews populate it, but all attention is riveted on Charlie, the all-American boy:

Soon around the family there gathered an ever-increasing audience. Here was a display they could watch for nothing. From all sides the neighbors and their children came running. From tenement houses, a multitude of heads stretched forth over the sills to gape at the rare treat. Mama’s children felt proud because it was their Charlie who was giving everybody such a good time. ... “What a day!” cried Henny as the family started up the stairs. “Yes,” said Mama. “Thanks to Charlie we’ve had enough excitement to last a year.” (143)

Mama’s gratitude for Charlie extends to the whole family and is marked in a serious way. At the end of the book, the All-of-a-Kind Family welcomes a new baby, a son whom Papa names Chaim, after the boy’s grandfather. According to European Jewish custom, a child is named after a relative who died in the hope that the child will acquire the characteristics and traits this relative had. Thus the name choice not only honors the dead relative but bestows upon the child certain personality features. American Jews often give their children two names: a Hebrew one and an American one. The American name Papa chooses for his son is Charlie. While none of the characters explicitly connects this name to their friend, Mama acknowledges this importance. “‘Why, that’s a wonderful thought, Papa! That’s a name we all love’” (188).

Clearly, there’s nothing “wrong” with naming this child after a beloved, Christian, family friend at the same time he is named after a grandfather. Yet this is an unlikely practice for a Jewish parent to make; even today most Ashkenazi Jews do not name their children after living nonrelatives, and this practice would have been extremely rare in a first-generation immigrant family. The surface story of the name choice is that
the family is honoring someone close to them. The subtext, not at all explored but still tacitly present, is that the father breaks from Jewish custom to honor someone who represents America and bestows these American traits on his son. While a reader may have no awareness that Papa’s decision is unusual, the tension is noticeable as Papa seems to have named his son after two different people and may even be honoring the unrelated man more than his wife’s father, as “Charlie” is the name by which the child will be known.
This incident illustrates the way in which Papa’s daughters are shifting their attention and even their values in the direction of American priorities. The baby is explicitly linked to Charlie, who is implicitly linked to the acculturation process. Taylor tacitly approves this assimilation process by presenting it as unproblematic and inevitable. Because she has built confidence in her readers by speaking to them with both familiarity and authority, her manipulations of the changes in characters are not likely to be questioned. Thus her function as a narrator is part of the assimilation process the books softly advocate.

As discussed above, Taylor does assert a personality and presence through her narrator. While literary critics warn us repeatedly that authors and narrators are not the same entities, most child readers do not develop this sophisticated understanding on their own. Most will assume that Taylor, the author, is the narrator. Fan letters written to Taylor reveal that this blurring between author and narrator occurs all the time, as fans repeatedly ask Taylor which of the five sisters is her, with many of them assuming that she is Sarah, the middle daughter, which in fact is correct. Taylor responds to her fans with comments such as, “Yes, I am Sarah” ([S]ager letter). In fact, her name, Sydney, is an “Americanization” of the name Sarah, which was given to her at birth. So Taylor sees herself as constructing her own narrative, as telling her own tale. Yet Taylor did not act alone in this process. If perusal of Taylor’s fan letters—which she kept, along with carbon copies of the return letters she sent her fans—reveals Taylor’s understanding of herself as a narrator, then perusal of the correspondence between herself and her editors reveals the other forces at work in shaping her stories, those which I am terming extrinsic.

Taylor did not send the manuscript of All-of-a-Kind Family to a publisher; her husband did, without her knowledge, while she was away for the summer, working at a camp. Ralph Taylor took the typewritten manuscript out of a drawer and submitted it to a contest sponsored by the publishers W. W. Follett. Considering herself a novice who was dealing with an editor almost accidentally, when the editing process of her manuscript began, Taylor was fairly open to the suggestions of editor Esther Meeks, who politely but firmly insisted on several significant changes. Many of Meeks’s changes benefited All-of-a-Kind Family. It was she who suggested developing the characters of Charlie and Kathy and introducing a plot line (through him) that would tie the chapters together. Certainly, shaping and focusing the plot are primary concerns of a good editor. But Meeks was not only advocating aesthetic improvements; she also inserted an ideological perspective—perhaps influenced by assumed marketing demands—that Taylor, in this case, eventually accepted. For example, on November 21, 1950, Meeks writes to Taylor:
The family seems to live in a world of its own—the Lower East Side, not America. I have the feeling that these episodes were lived and wonder if this isolation really existed. Did the family have no contacts with any but Jewish people? Did they have no holidays except the orthodox Jewish ones? If they did celebrate the Fourth of July, for example, it would certainly make them seem more like Americans (also) to celebrate it with a picnic.

Just over a month later, Meeks repeats the suggestion, wondering why Taylor has not responded to it. In a letter written on December 28, 1950, she writes:

You didn’t comment on my query as to whether this family ever celebrated any holidays other than the orthodox Jewish ones. I still think it would be a good touch if they had a picnic on the Fourth of July. This could be an opportunity to bring Charlie in again. He could shoot off fireworks for the girls and it would remind him of his own family, inevitably. I do think it important, too, particularly today, that this family show some signs of being American as well as Jewish.

Meeks’s comment, “particularly today,” bears consideration. While one could assume that Meeks means “today” in a general, postwar way, it is far more likely that she was referring to the arrest of Julius and Esther Rosenberg, which occurred on July 17, 1950. Their trial would take place in March of the following year. The seven months between the arrest and the trial, for what J. Edgar Hoover called “the crime of the century,” was the time period during which Taylor had her first book accepted for publication, revised it extensively, and finally published it. Many Jews at that time were very concerned with public perception about them and worried that the Rosenberg trial would exacerbate latent anti-Semitism, or that anti-Semitism itself led to the Rosenberg arrest and eventual execution. Historian Edward Shapiro explains: “Arnold Forster, then general counsel of the Anti-Defamation League, remembered the fears of the Jews during the Great Red Scare of the early 1950s that they would be victimized by McCarthyism. ‘Jews in that period were automatically suspect,’ he said. ‘Our evaluation of the general mood was that the people felt if you scratch a Jew, you can find a Communist’” (35). The Rosenberg case exacerbated Jewish fears, and many Jews thought the way to handle the ethnic association with the Rosenbergs was to assert their Americanism. “Whatever the actual extent of their contributions to Soviet knowledge, the Rosenbergs’ trial gave the Jewish community the opportunity to prove its patriotism. . . . An unmistakable message was conveyed: the Jewish community was not to be identified with the Rosenbergs” (Hertzberg 307). Given this context, Meeks’s exhortations to Taylor to make her characters seem more American, “particularly today,” resonate.
Taylor, an American Jew living in New York City, could not have been unaware of the swirl of politics and emotions surrounding the Rosenberg case. But she had to respond to Meeks in a way that made sense to herself as a writer, and apparently Taylor continued to resist Meeks’s suggestions about the Fourth of July. In a letter written on January 11, 1951, Meeks responds to a revision Taylor had recently submitted. She remarks on the development of Kathy’s character and the addition of certain incidents. Beginning her letter with high praise—“This is fine! It has interest, pathos, and reality”—Meeks goes on to explain why the manuscript is much improved. “Now I get the impression that you believe in what you are doing. I am glad, because it seems hardly possible to write convincingly unless you are yourself convinced.” In the very next paragraph, however, Meeks asks, “Don’t you think you could slip in an incident that wouldn’t be a few more pages long about the Fourth of July and Charlie, etc.?”. Meeks does not seem to realize that she has answered her own question in the previous paragraph when she explained that good writing comes from conviction. Her continued insistence eventually has a result.

A preliminary typewritten manuscript of All-of-a-Kind Family is available at the Kerlan Collection at the University of Minnesota. This rich document, complete with pencilled-in changes and deletions, is fascinating for what it reveals about the editorial process. Apparently, the manuscript is not the one that Ralph Taylor sent to Follett while his wife was working at the camp, for it contains a long section about the Fourth of July—which was later cut. The section begins when Gertie asks what the Fourth of July is. The manuscript reveals that Taylor wrote a long sequence in which both oldest sister Ella and Papa explain in detail the history of the holiday. Ella focuses on the tensions between England and America, explaining that the King was unjust and that people left England and refused to follow his rules. She ends her explanation with a description of the Revolutionary War and the conclusion, “Ever since . . . we celebrate the Fourth of July to remind us that we are free” (103). Papa concurs that what Ella has said is “a wonderful story,” and adds, “but you left out a very important part. You forgot to say that when America became free, she set an example for the whole world. Everyone said—‘Look at America. There all kinds of people live side by side in peace”’ (103).

Papa goes on to say something quite interesting, worth quoting here in full: “[In America], a man can pray to his God in his own way. He can speak his mind and not be afraid. And he has a chance to better himself regardless of whether he is a Jew or a Gentile—not like in the old
country, eh, Mama? So, children, that’s why Mama and I left the land of our birth and came here so you could be raised as free men.” (103). Sarah exclaims “free men!” and Papa smilingly adds, “and women.” He continues to praise America and tells his daughters that they must all be “on guard to keep this freedom.” Taylor explains, “The children had never heard Papa speak like this before” (103).

As it turns out, neither would any of the readers of the All-of-a-Kind Family books. Both Ella’s and Papa’s explanations of the Fourth of July holiday were entirely cut. This section was truncated, in the published version, to Ella’s statement in answer to Gertie’s question about what holiday it was that day: “‘Independence Day,’ Ella answered. ‘It’s a holiday all over the country’” (133). Interestingly, in both the published and the longer, unpublished versions of the “Fourth of July” chapter, Taylor does not include a picnic, revealing she will resist Meeks’s suggestions at the point where they do not seem natural to her.

The letters in the Kerlan collection do not indicate who decided to make this cut. Whether it was Taylor or Meeks, a simple reason could be length—eliminating the patriotic speeches would reduce several pages of text (other correspondence indicates that Meeks made several cuts to save space). However, in perusing Taylor’s manuscript, one notices a pattern of the sorts of cuts she consistently makes and can then see how the large excision made in the chapter “Fourth of July” fits into her overall editorial process.

Throughout All-of-a-Kind Family, Taylor suppresses indicators of the family members’ ethnicity, most notably by altering their language. Although this book is closest in time to the parents’ immigrant experience, the published version never once mentions that Mama and Papa are not native-born Americans. In her emendations, Taylor reveals an anxiety about calling attention to this fact, one that subsided a few years later when she has Papa openly declare that he was born in another country. Her removal of Papa’s statement that he and Mama left another country is the tip of an iceberg of tacit but not entirely silent changes she made throughout the book.

Although other characters have Yiddish accents, including Mr. Basch, the owner of a store below the family’s apartment, and Mrs. Blumberg, the woman who operates the candy store, Mama and Papa are not depicted as having these accents. Their speech has the cadences, inflections, and pronunciation of the daughters’ English. Most child readers of the book would not notice the discrepancy between the way Mr. Basch and Mrs. Blumberg talk and the way Mama and Papa talk, but those with even a little knowledge of immigrant history, particularly if one’s own
grandparents or great-grandparents were immigrants, might wonder at Mama’s and Papa’s lack of accents. What would not be apparent to any reader is that Taylor carefully removed traces of Yiddish from Mama’s and Papa’s mouths. Although once in a while the parents will say a Hebrew or Yiddish word, these words are always directly related to culturally specific items, such as food or holidays: for example, the gefüllte fish discussed above. But the typewritten manuscript reveals that in many cases, Taylor changed Yiddish words to their English equivalents or left them out altogether. “Challe” becomes “white bread” (51), “Shabbos” becomes “The Sabbath” (41), and Mama’s act of “benching licht” (saying a prayer over the Sabbath candles), is translated into English. A Purim song originally written in Yiddish is also translated. The one occasion where the girls say something in Yiddish in the manuscript (they answer their father’s “Gut Shabbos,” by saying the same) is eliminated (54). Papa’s “kittel” (a ritual garment) is removed from the text, and discussion of “schmaltz” disappears. While sometimes Yiddish words are replaced with English equivalents, certain expressions are dropped altogether. For example, Charlie is more than once described by Mama as a “shagetz” (a somewhat pejorative term for a Gentile man), and Taylor completely removes that expression, as if realizing belatedly that it could be interpreted as having a negative connotation.

In the manuscript, Taylor refers to Papa’s ability to speak Polish but then removes this acknowledgement of foreign origin (22). Since other characters are clearly depicted as non-native speakers of English, we can assume that Taylor was suppressing something with this excision. I believe what she suppresses is an abundance of ethnicity, particularly negative ethnicity. Secondary characters can be stereotypically, even comically Jewish, but Mama and Papa, important main characters, must seem refined and Jewish in only positive ways.

Perhaps the most apparent effort Taylor makes to refine the family occurs when she compares Mama to other Jewish women. When Mama and the girls go shopping on Rivington Street to buy food for the Sabbath, they first make a stop at the library to introduce Mama to the Library Lady. The girls are “very proud” because “most of the other women in the neighborhood had such bumpy shapes. Their bodies looked like mattresses tied about in the middle. But not Mama. She was tall and slim and held herself proudly. Her face was proud too” (65). Miss Allen (the Library Lady) confirms the girls’ view of their mother by saying, “My, you couldn’t possibly be the mother of five—you look young enough to be their eldest sister” (66). Silently emended is the following sentence: “[Mama] had a short, straight nose, and thin lips. Her clothes
were always so neat and tidy” (42). Taylor seems to be delicately balancing her attempt to make Mama different from other immigrants and at the same time not to make those others seem ugly, or, by implication, too Jewish. These women could be overweight because this was not an especially Jewish trait. But if Mama’s difference is expressed as having a non-Jewish nose and lips, then stereotypical Jewish traits are being implied for the others. None of the Jews in *All-of-a-Kind Family* should be open to this attack. Mama can be better than other Jews, but other Jews should not be made to look worse than non-Jews.

“Pride” and good breeding, however, are seen as characteristics that Jews might not have. In a related comparison, Taylor explains that even the living arrangements of the All-of-a-Kind Family are more refined and “proud” than those of other people: “Like many other families, Mama and Papa and their children lived in the crowded tenement house section of the Lower East Side of New York City. But unlike most of these families, their home was a four-room apartment which occupied an entire floor in a two-storied private house” (35). While this distinction between housing arrangements might seem to indicate economic class superiority, it is more likely that Taylor makes it to indicate superiority in terms of breeding and not finances. For the family is quite poor and is described as similar to other East Side families in this way. Miss Allen, for example, feels bad that Sarah must pay for a lost library book because she knows that “the people on the East Side had to count their pennies carefully” (20). And Mama shops on Rivington Street because the prices there are lower (63). Outside of the home, the family does not display their difference as one manifested through wealth. The girls all dress alike in practical clothing. Instead, unlike their mother, the sisters’ difference is expressed at home, not in public.

Inside the home, the four-room apartment allows the family to have a front room that the girls are required to dust every week. The importance of this front room is underscored early as it is the subject of the second chapter of the book, “Dusting Is Fun.” As Sarah dusts the room, she touches and examines the many cultural artifacts that bestow refinement, such as a piano, decorative sea shells, lace curtains, and the china shepherd and shepherdess, “so dainty in her pink-and-blue dress with tiny rosebuds on it!” (30). Like Laura Ingalls Wilder’s family’s china shepherdess, which Ma Ingalls places on a table or mantle whenever a new home is built in order to indicate the civilization the family brings to the wild territories, Mama’s shepherdess marks this Jewish family’s refinement and civility. Thus, while the streets and shops on the Lower East Side teem with loud noise, strong smells, and coarse people, Mama
and her family are elegant, delicate, and graceful, in public and in private. These attributes counter Jewish stereotypes of the period, of which the following, printed in the *New York Times* in 1893, is an example:

This neighborhood, populated by the people who claim to have been driven from Poland and Russia, is the eyesore of New York and possibly the filthiest place on the western continent. It is impossible for a Christian to live there because he will be driven out, either by blows or the dirt and stench. Cleanliness is an unknown quantity to these people. They cannot be lifted up to a higher plane because they do not want to be. (Qtd. in Brodkin 29)

In *All-of-a-Kind Family*, the river and streets may be dirty, but the people never are, certainly not the girls in the titular family. Jews may be lumpy or loud, but they are clean and presentable. They are nothing like the Jews described in the *New York Times* in 1893. Taylor clearly writes against that stereotype, and it is not farfetched to argue that she almost singlehandedly shaped American understanding of the Lower East Side as something wholly opposite to what the *New York Times* reported above. In her book *Lower East Side Memories*, historian Hasia Diner develops the argument that this small geographical area became a source of cultural identity and pride for American Jews after World War II. Diner contends that the Lower East Side has become a sacred space for American Jews, a space that gives them a sense of belonging and ethnic self-acceptance. Diner credits Taylor as the first writer to view the Lower East Side nostalgically, effectively recreating it for postwar American Jews and non-Jews. “In 1951 the Lower East Side broke into the mainstream of American culture,” writes Diner. “That year Follett Publishing Company . . . published Sydney Taylor’s *All-of-a-Kind Family*, the first commercially published, widely distributed book with a Jewish subject. The book also had the distinction of providing the first postwar mass-market depiction of the Lower East Side” (59). As the book is almost ubiquitous in American school and public libraries, it may well be that the vast majority of contemporary knowledge of the Lower East Side—certainly among non-Jews—is filtered through Taylor’s construction of it.

If Taylor recreated the Lower East Side, and if the nostalgia for the Lower East Side shaped Jewish identity in postwar America, then Taylor herself deeply affected American Jewish identity—and still does. It’s important to note not just that Taylor romanticized the Lower East Side and established it as a Jewish place for both her Jewish and non-Jewish readers, but that she also presented Jews in subtly complex ways that reflected more than pride in heritage and religious identity. Under
extrinsic pressure not to make her characters too Jewish or seemingly un-American and reflecting her own experiences as an assimilated Jew, Taylor intrinsically wove through her representation of her characters’ feelings of pride and affiliation the narrative threads of the turn from ethnic identity to a more generic American identity. In later novels in the *All-of-a-Kind Family* series, Taylor would take on the assimilation issue more openly, but in this, her first, best-known, and most widely-read book about the five sisters, she pushes the themes of cultural tension and ethnic loss to the margins, not addressing them directly. These themes express themselves not in the surface of the story but in its subtexts, hardly visible to readers. Narrative analysis helps us recognize imbedded ideology in fiction: it can reveal, as Mieke Bal explains, “the difference between the text’s overt ideology . . . and its more hidden or naturalized ideology, as embodied in the narrative representations” (31). This subterranean tension in Taylor’s fiction is covert but in its own way genuine, and it may be what saves *All-of-a-Kind Family* from being too sugar-coated, too unrealistically idealized. The complicated presentation of American Jewish selfhood may be what makes the book a favorite even today. As non-Jewish readers learn about Judaism and as Jewish readers feel a sense of ethnic pride and belonging when they fall in love with *All-of-a-Kind Family*, they all also experience the subtle narrative strategies Taylor employs. The pleasure of reading about the five sisters derives in part from the presentation of the close, loving family, and certainly from the opportunity to see one’s ethnic self reflected in literature if one is Jewish, but it also derives from the complexity of the issues raised, the suggestions made of change and loss as the characters become American. For even child readers—or perhaps we should say especially child readers—recognize that literary value is found not in simplistic stories but in those that capture the inherent intricacies of actual lived experience.

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Notes

I am grateful to San Diego State University for awarding me a Faculty Development Grant that paid for travel to the Kerlan Collection at the University of Minnesota.

1 To get a sense of reader responses to All-of-a-Kind Family, read the reviews on Amazon.com. The word “love” comes up repeatedly in the overwhelmingly positive reviews.

2 This comment was reprinted in several places. It seems Taylor originally quoted it in a letter to a Mr. Smith, written on March 28, 1952.

3 Over the course of several conversations I’ve had with Jo Taylor Marshall, Sydney Taylor’s only daughter, I’ve learned much about Jewish religious observance in the household, which was generally minimal.

4 For over twenty years, it was the only one available in paperback, and since the others came out in paperback in 2001, it continues to be the best-selling, currently enjoying an Amazon sales rank of 5,168, while the rest are ranked lower, from 13,373 for More All-of-a-Kind Family to 35,942 for Ella of All-of-a-Kind Family. To get a sense of how successfully the first book sells, compare its rank to those of the books Are You There, God? It’s Me, Margaret (5,199) or Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (6,188). I chose these books because they are known as classics, twentieth-century American children’s books that have stood the test of time and continue to be popular; the similar numbers for All-of-a-Kind Family demonstrate its comparable status.

5 In More All-of-a-Kind Family, Papa says frankly that he and Mama came to America from Europe (157).

6 In actuality, Sydney Taylor’s mother, Cilly Brenner, spoke German, although she was born in Russia. Taylor’s father, Morris Brenner, was born in Poland and spoke Polish. The tongue spoken in the Brenner home when Sydney was growing up was German; all the siblings spoke both German and English, and the parents both had heavy accents. During an interview with Jerry Brenner, the only living Brenner sibling, I asked if he and his sisters were aware of his parents’ accents. He laughed heartily and explained they most definitely were and shared a touching anecdote about the first time his mother heard her voice on a tape recorder: she was startled to hear she had an accent. “But we always knew,” Jerry explained.

7 Pianos were very common in the Lower East Side, despite the fact that space was extremely limited. “Amid the seemingly incongruous conditions of tenement life, immigrant Jews avidly sought to own a piano, that avowed instrument
of gentility. . . . [I]mmigrant Jews were acutely sensitive to the cultural implications of owning and playing a piano. For them, as for upwardly mobile and middle-class people everywhere, the sweet tones of the piano had much to do with creating a proper, suitably domesticated home environment” (Braunstein and Joselit 35–36). Jews were so identified with pianos that sheet music “frequently depicted a young woman seated at the piano with her family—the older menfolk respectfully clad in yarmulkes—gathered attentively around her” (36).

Works Cited


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Sydney Taylor’s Strategies of Assimilation 343

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