

On the Writing of *Shayna's Shadows*

Paul Philip Brown

Description: *Shayna's Shadows* introduces a Jewish youngster with a learning disability who arrives at Pierre Elliott Trudeau Junior High School and encounters bullying, bigotry, prejudice and antisemitism. Shayna overcomes her problems through reliance on her own inner resources, as well as on the help of a number of significant others in her school, religious, and community environments. A comprehensive teacher's guide is currently in preparation and is expected to be available at the conference.

Paul Brown has been teaching in Toronto, Canada, for over 30 years, with 21 of those years spent at the junior high school level. Born and raised in Toronto, Canada, he attended what was then called the Toronto Hebrew Day School, a private Jewish elementary school providing both regular school subjects as well as an in depth exposure to Jewish Bible, history, culture, prayer and Hebrew language. Having spent most of his adult life working with junior high and high school students, Brown wanted to create a vehicle for addressing some of the most challenging issues young people constantly face - bullying, bigotry, racism and anti-Semitism. The compelling novel *Shayna's Shadows* is the thought-provoking result.

How do we change attitudes of intolerance? How can we make people see the unfairness and inhumanity of discrimination? How do we rid society of the scourge of racism?

A couple of weeks ago, a Jewish acquaintance of mine told me this

joke. A married Jewish Orthodox man one day decides to convert to Christianity. The next morning, he arises early, following his usual daily practice, and begins putting on his prayer shawl and phylacteries. Upon seeing this, his wife says to him, "What ARE you doing? Yesterday you converted to Christianity. Have you forgotten already?" The man slaps his forehead and says, "Oy, a goyishe kop!"

Literally this means a Gentile head. The idea, a very derogatory one to non-Jews, implies that they are forgetful at best, rather dense at worst. It is a negative stereotype which reinforces the view held by too many Jews that they are inherently more clever, intelligent, and sensible than Gentiles.

My acquaintance is university educated and is, or so I thought, an open-minded, tolerant individual, so I was surprised at the joke. And when I asked, "Do you think this is a good thing to say?" after a few moments of silence, the answer was: "I guess not."

Perhaps part of the answer to my question of how we change intolerant attitudes is that we all, each one of us, must fight the good fight on an individual and personal level whenever we hear a comment or a joke which reinforces stereotypes. We must deal with the comment or joke tactfully but firmly. We must teach ourselves to discourage this misuse of language which only perpetuates putdowns. This is easier to do in a one-on-one, so I was able to handle it, but it's much harder to do in a group setting.

But this is only a stop-gap approach. What can we do long-term to stem the tide of racism, prejudice and bigotry?

The only hope I can see is to reach our youth before their personalities have been fully formed, when they are still malleable.

As a junior high school teacher about 15 years into my teaching career in the mid-80's, I saw cruelty in and out of the classroom on a daily basis – cruelty inflicted on kids who were different in some way – whether they had a learning disability and were in what some kids called the “dummy” class, whether they were new to Canada and couldn't speak English, or whether they differed in race, religion, gender or outward appearance in some way. Seeing this really hurt me. I felt for the victims every time it happened, and I worried about its effect on their self-esteem.

So I searched for a remedy. I tried telling kids to be nice to one another - it didn't work. I asked them how they'd feel to be the butt of jibes – that also didn't work. What *would* work, I wondered?

As an English teacher, I had to teach novels to junior high students, and I saw firsthand the power that a story can have over even the most hardened kid. A really good story could capture their interest and if it had a worthwhile message, it sometimes did make an impression.

One example that comes to mind is the novel *The Outsiders* by Susan Hinton. If I read Chapter One aloud to any junior high class, the students were hooked, the non-readers included. So I realized that a good plot, with believable characters with whom the students could identify, had a real impact.

So I had my answer. Craft a well-written novel dealing with the trials and tribulations of a learning disabled student, a story that hopefully would move its readers to an improved understanding and empathy.

[However, due to a board initiative at that time in establishing an anti-racist education department, and my own interest in Holocaust education, the book seemingly transformed itself into a story of prejudice and intolerance.]

But this raised a new question. Could I write such a novel? It took me several years to muster up the courage to try, and the result was the novel *Shayna's Shadows*. I'll let you be the judge as to how successful I was. Here are two excerpts. Let me set the scene of the first excerpt for you.

Shayna Rosen, a grade 8 student at a Hebrew Day School in Toronto, the Louis B. Solomon Education Centre, is experiencing reading problems and is unable to handle the double program of both Hebrew and English studies. She is transferred to a local junior high school named Pierre Elliott Trudeau Jr. High, and we join her on her first day at the school. She has just met her home room teacher, Mrs. Fraser, and been introduced to her student buddy, Jessica, who is escorting her to her first class in the Family Studies room.

Excerpt #1: pages 19 – 20

The family studies room was double size, with the kitchen arranged at one end of the room and the sewing machines at the other end. Shayna sat down next to Jessica at a table in the cooking section of the room.

Several girls came over to see who the new kid was. Jessica introduced them to Shayna.

The teacher, Mrs. Simpson, had not yet arrived. A tall girl with an athletic build named Darla Williams asked Shayna, "What school are you from?"

Self-conscious about telling them that she was there because of her reading problems, and unsure of how these kids felt toward Jews, Shayna hesitated, her eyes cast downward. Should she tell them that she'd come from a Jewish day school? Maybe they'd dislike her just for being Jewish. Maybe they thought Jews were all rich snobs. Lots of people had that mistaken idea. She'd learned that in class discussions at Solomon.

They'd called it a stereotype -- a common picture that people have about a particular group, a picture that was based on ignorance or gossip, or sometimes an unpleasant experience with one member of that group. Jews were often stereotyped as money hungry and clannish, they'd learned. She remembered thinking how she wished her own family would have fit the mould, at least the part about being wealthy, but her dad's income as an office manager did not qualify them to entertain the mayor at dinner, that was for sure.

"I'm from another school in the area," said Shayna. "What difference does it make where I'm from, anyway?"

Shayna hadn't meant it to come out so harshly. She was trying to keep her head above water. Why did she have the feeling she was drowning? This was supposed to be a new start.

Darla sneered. "You must be a rich Jew from Solomon who's afraid we'll find out, but your nose gives you away. I would be too if I were you. Why don't you go back to Jewschool where you came from? While you're at it, you can take all your fellow Jew bums with you."

Shayna's forehead began to glisten. She could feel the moisture under her arms. Soon there would be large stains forming on her top.

Shayna felt trapped. Her first period at Trudeau hadn't even begun, and the roof seemed to be caving in.

Without thinking, Shayna closed her hand into a fist and, swinging up and over in a lightning-swift motion, returned Darla Williams' greeting with one of her own, right between the eyes.

You'll notice that two of the elements I mentioned are included here – a typical chapter-ending cliff hanger which provides motivation to read on, and a mini-lecture about Jewish stereotypes and their possible origins.

The second excerpt is two chapters later, when Shayna is tricked into thinking the lunch period is over. Jessica is away that day, so Shayna moves toward her locker alone.

Excerpt #2: pages 30 – 32

Shayna grabbed her lunch bag and dashed out of the cafeteria towards her locker. Walking around the corner from her homeroom, she realized that there was not a single person in sight. The

halls were deserted. Where was everybody? Why weren't people at their lockers getting their books for afternoon classes?

Out from behind a recessed doorway, Darla and Gilbert appeared. Shayna stopped abruptly, wheeled around and started running in the opposite direction, only to smack right into Monica.

Darla's menacing sneer caused Shayna's heart to race. "Well, well, if it isn't the little Jewess. You're about to get a new name. From now on we're all going to call you Juice, just so you don't ever forget what you are. We're not ever going to forget our new name, are we? I wish all you Jews would go back to Jewland where you came from."

Darla's eyes narrowed as she spotted the Magen David, the star of David, suspended on a necklace hanging around Shayna's neck. "If there's anything I can't stand it's Jew crosses. Get that disgusting thing off your neck. Better yet, let me." With one swift motion, Darla's extended hand grabbed the Magen David and yanked, snapping the chain.

Shayna was in turmoil. Her brain sent a hundred words to her mouth, but no sound came out. There was no point anyway, she realized. Alone, she was powerless to stop them.

Darla flung the necklace under a nearby storeroom door. Gilbert gloated, "Nice shot, Darla. Ah, what I really mean is, gee, isn't that a shame, Juice, the necklace got loost." Gilbert dragged out the last word for emphasis. "I sure hope you had insurance 'cause you ain't never gonna see that thing again. I can guarantee it." With that, he held up a ring of keys in front of her face and looked meaningfully toward the door under which her necklace had disappeared.

On the verge of tears, Shayna tried desperately to control herself. She would not give these ignorant clods the satisfaction of knowing they'd gotten to her. She hoped they didn't notice the sweat building up on her forehead, or the stain starting to spread from her underarms.

It was Monica's turn now. "Look what we brought for you, Juice. It's our little present from us to you." She held up a shiny, red apple. "To get to keep it, all you have to do is roll it along the floor from here to the corner over there. Look, I'll even put it on the floor for you. Now, that doesn't sound too hard, does it?"

"Of course it doesn't," chimed in Darla. "The only hard part is that you have to do it with your overgrown, uglified Jewish nose." Darla grabbed Shayna's top and yanked her down to the floor. Shayna suddenly found herself on all fours, with Gilbert and Darla pushing down on her head until her nose was jammed hard against the apple.

"Now push, Jewgirl! Push!" Gilbert's face reddened. His calm demeanour was suddenly transformed into irrational, almost hysterical anger. Gilbert started kicking Shayna in the ribs. "I said push, you Kike!" he screamed.

Her eyes smarting, chest sore, Shayna found herself crawling along the floor, pushing the apple more or less forward with her nose as best she could, to the accompaniment of taunts, catcalls and laughter.

Then, a strange thing happened. The hurt Shayna felt began to change. Something else stirred inside her. It wasn't only anger; it was indignation, accompanied by a firm resolve, and its heat turned her cheeks beet red.

Without warning, Shayna heard the drumbeat of feet running along the floor. She looked up to see Darla, Gilbert and Monica tearing away down the hall. A teacher was approaching from behind.

Relief overwhelmed her, instantly dissolving her hard-won composure. She burst into wrenching sobs just as Mr. Lee bent over to help her to her feet.

By now we can see that things have escalated from name-calling to physical aggression. We also see the beginning of Shayna's growth as an individual. This experience affects her something like a piece of metal in a forge, the heat of the forge beginning to mould her personality into a new shape.

That incident of pushing the apple along the floor apparently did happen, so I was told by a cousin of mine, whose son reported at the time the incident occurred in his high school.

This brings me to a related theme of the novel that I'd like to touch on: **bullying**. It's a concern increasingly shared by students, parents and educators as we've come to realize the true extent of the problem and the ill effects it has on both the victims and the perpetrators.

The source of my information on bullying is Dr. Glenn D'Pasquale, former Chief Psychologist for the York Region Board of Education.

Dr. D'Pasquale believes that bullying is **not** a regular part of growing up. It is a serious behaviour we should pay a lot of attention to. It is a societal problem that happens everywhere, not just in the inner city. And we have good reason to be concerned.

Dan Olweus, Professor at the University of Bergen in Norway, has been doing research on bullying for over 30 years. He says that bullying is a gateway behaviour leading to criminality. He looked at 260 boys identified as bullies at the age of 10 to 14, then did a follow-up study 10 years later and found that 60% had at least one criminal conviction and 40% had 3 or more criminal convictions.

As far as the effects on the victims of bullying is concerned, for 10 to 15% of them, the effects may be more enduring, requiring in some cases long-term intervention.

We can see the importance of addressing this issue as early as possible. And I believe that Junior high is the last real chance we have of effecting change to intolerant attitudes. By the time students reach the secondary level, it's too ingrained.

We see this illustrated in the final chapter, when the antagonist, Gilbert Garrett, is required to attend a performance of the play "The Diary of Anne Frank" in an attempt to have him experience the feelings of someone who is treated the way Gilbert has treated students from minority groups.

This brings me to my final excerpt from the novel.

Excerpt #3: pp. 162 – 164

The lights dimmed. Mr. Frank, Anne's father, entered from backstage. He explained that he had returned to the secret hiding place soon after the war's end, in 1945, for one last look before leaving Amsterdam forever. He had to leave in order to escape the many painful memories that staying there would bring back. His entire family had been put to death during the war.

Then the action of the play itself began. Everything that happened in the Secret Annex, from the time that the Frank family moved in, was portrayed. The Annex was actually the upper rear of the warehouse that Mr. Frank had once owned before the law was passed disallowing Jewish ownership. It was entered through a secret door hidden behind a hinged bookcase on the second floor of the building.

Gilbert had come to see the play because he was forced to do so. He had no interest at all in the subject. His plan was to sit through it and get it over with, maybe picking up a few points he could use in the essay he'd been assigned by Mr. McTavish.

Nevertheless, in spite of himself, Gilbert became involved in the story. The daily restrictions of their movements in the Secret Annex were bad enough, imposed so the warehouse employees working downstairs during the day couldn't hear them: stay put all day long from 8:00 until 6:00; if you have to get something, walk quietly in stocking feet; don't speak above a whisper; don't run any water.

Gilbert found himself identifying with Peter Van Daan, the boy he was required to write about. The Van Daan family had been invited by the Franks to share their hiding place. Peter was three years older than Anne, but very shy and uncomfortable with girls. His father criticized him; his mother made fun of him. He had no self-confidence; his sole companion was his cat, Mushi. But during the course of their stay together, Anne became first his friend and eventually his confidante. Gilbert understood how Peter must have felt.

During the intermission, Gilbert asked Mr. McTavish, "Is this really a true story or was it just made up, like one of those TV shows?"

Mr. McTavish said, "I assure you, Gilbert, that the play is based on the actual diary written by Anne Frank, the same one that Mr. Frank finds in the first scene of the play when he returns to the hiding place. It's the same one that has become a best-selling book, published in many languages in over twenty countries. Oh yes, it's true, all right, Gilbert. It actually happened."

The intermission over, the play resumed. When Anne and Peter slammed their doors on Mr. Dussel, the cranky and annoying eighth person who'd come to live with the Franks and Van Daans, Gilbert laughed aloud and cheered along with the rest of the audience. When Anne found out from Miep, the Franks' friend and former employee, who acted as their lifeline to the outside world, that Anne's best friend had been taken away to a concentration camp, he too was affected, although he would not have admitted it.

And at the end of the play, when the hiding place was finally broken into by the Nazis, and the Franks, the Van Daans and Mr. Dussel were about to be taken away, Gilbert actually became

upset. He tried to reason with himself that this was only a stage play, that these were just actors pretending to be real people. But he knew it had really happened, just the way it was shown in the play. Guys like Peter, not much different from himself, had been dragged off to die.

So we do have a glimmer of hope for the Gilberts of the world.

But it's not an easy transformation, and by the time the Gilberts are in high school, it's hard for them to change.

Excerpt #4: page 164

Still, Gilbert couldn't see any link between what he and his gang had done to Shayna and what Hitler had done to the Jews of Europe. Maybe, just maybe, he would be willing to admit that his treatment of Shayna wasn't so nice, although Gilbert had never learned how to apologize, and certainly didn't plan to in this case either, but nobody was going to convince him that the murder of masses of people and some harmless name-calling, or even a little rough stuff, were even remotely connected.

Though Gilbert has difficulty expressing his feelings openly, I can tell you that, as an English teacher, I have been privileged on a number of occasions to witness that special glimmer on the face of a student when a realization dawned for the first time. My hope is that *Shayna's Shadows* will cause many young readers to experience that same glimmer, making the world a little bit brighter for all of us.

**A comprehensive Teacher's Guide
is now available
directly from the publisher
for classroom use
with the young adult novel
*Shayna's Shadows***

**10% discount
on class sets
of *Shayna's Shadows*
available directly from the publisher**

**For more information
Contact Educan Publishing
Toll Free Tel. 877-633-7124
Email: paulbro@pathcom.com
Website: www.pathcom.com/~paulbro**