

## BAGELS FROM BENNY

Aubrey Davis

**Aubrey Davis** is a Toronto children's author and storyteller. While traveling in Europe and North Africa in the 1970s, he discovered traditional folktales and the art of storytelling. He began telling the stories that had traveled farthest in time and space. These tales resonated across cultures and generations. They appeared in more story collections than any others. They were intriguing, puzzling and often very funny. They contained hidden depths that provoked thought and a better understanding of our world and our selves. They were relevant and useful. They were the tales that had endured. Later, as a teacher of special needs children, he developed an oral language program that incorporated this ancient art. With their roots in centuries-old stories, his books "Bone Button Borscht", "Sody Salleratus", "The Enormous Potato" and "Bagels from Benny", now delight contemporary audiences and readers.

*This submission is cobbled together from outlines for my "What's Hot/What's Not" presentation and Sydney Taylor Award acceptance speech at this year's AJL conference. Time has passed. I hope you'll forgive any unworthy additions, deletions and changes in emphasis.*

*I want to thank the Sydney Taylor committee for giving this award to Dusan Petricic and me for Bagels from Benny. It is a great honor.*

An ornithologist raised a songbird in isolation from its species. He discovered that the bird could sing much of its song, but it was not "species perfect". It lacked some notes. When placed with other songbirds of different species, the bird successfully picked out the missing notes and completed its song.<sup>1</sup>

Several years ago I was invited by Montreal's Jewish Public Library to tell a story to children and their families. Because I'd visited them several times before, I needed something new. I'd heard the late Alec Gelcer, a marvellous Toronto storyteller, tell the "Challas in the Ark". (Syd Lieberman's version is closest to Alec's.)<sup>2,3</sup> Since it was traditional and in public domain, Alec felt he could neither grant nor deny permission to retell this legend. This was the tale that eventually became Bagels from Benny.

As a boy, the stories of the Torah intrigued, puzzled and provoked me. They challenged my concepts of justice and reality. They made me think. As an adult I retained this appetite for meaningful tales. I gravitated towards folk tales from other traditions that stimulated me to think broadly, deeply and flexibly; to reflect

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<sup>1</sup> P.K. Page, Hologram (London ON: Brick Books, 1994), p.12

<sup>2</sup> Steven J. Zeitlin, Because God Loves Stories : An Anthology Of Jewish Storytelling. (New York: Touchstone,1997)

<sup>3</sup> Howard Schwartz, Next Year in Jerusalem: 3,000 Years of Jewish Stories. (New York: Viking, 1996)

on the world and myself.<sup>4</sup> For some reason, I felt compelled to tell these stories. With help from my wife Sandra, who had extensive dramatic experience, I began telling them to adults. Then for seventeen years I told folk tale classics to developmentally handicapped and primary children. I learned to select stories that appealed to these young mixed audiences. These children challenged me to squeeze big ideas into small, delightful packages. They taught me how to speak clearly, economically and dramatically. They taught me how to write.

To help the Montreal children better relate to the tale, I replaced the naïve Marrano of the original with a young boy. This forced a number of logical changes in the story. At the same time I wanted to honor its original sense and pattern. This was difficult because there were several variants, each with different emphasis. Furthermore, my friend, Susan Josephs, asked a question that forced me to look at the tale differently and to think about it more deeply. Dusan Petricic brilliantly hints at this in his beautiful illustrations.

Perhaps all children inhabit many different worlds. Mine included the secular suburban lifestyle of my parents, an ultra-conservative cheder and shul, my Yiddisher Nana's old world home, my dad's Hot Rod Shop; a non-Jewish summer camp and cub scout pack. As a boy trying to negotiate and reconcile these conflicting worlds, I did a lot of hard thinking. Like Benny, I asked some difficult questions.

All this experience, thought, tradition, insight, questioning, children, friends, family, Alec Gelcer, Debbie Rogosin (editor) and more, created the text for Bagels from Benny. These were the missing musical notes that a Jewish songbird found to complete an ancient niggun.

And the bird continues to search for notes to another song far from complete. Maybe we all are.

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<sup>4</sup> "Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it." Mishna Avot 5:22. Each person who stood at Sinai saw a different face of the Torah. I think it is essential to extend this attitude and approach to other literature. Many folk tales have bottomless depths of meaning. They offer priceless opportunities to exercise thinking skills, breadth of vision and flexibility. Applied to life itself, they can help us view problems from different angles and consider new solutions and possibilities. They can help us see ourselves and our situation more clearly. See psychologist Robert Ornstein's recent Library of Congress lecture, "Teaching-Stories and the Brain. [www.hoopoekids.com/REOatLOC.html](http://www.hoopoekids.com/REOatLOC.html)