



JEWISH COMMUNITY RELATIONS COUNCIL
of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin, Sonoma, Alameda and Contra Costa Counties

September 14, 2006

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Dear Ms. Rosales and Members of the Curriculum Advisory Committee:

The Jewish Community Relations Council is the public affairs arm of the organized Jewish community. Our members represent over 80 synagogues and Jewish organizations in the Bay Area. We have a continuing long history of support for high quality public education and we remain intensively involved in educational matters including curriculum issues. We greatly appreciate the service you and all those who serve the San Rafael district render to the students and their families.

The purpose of this letter is to express our concern about a book that has been assigned 7th grade reading at Davidson school. We understand that teachers can choose from a wide variety of supplemental materials when selecting a book to assign. We believe that *The Bronze Bow* is a poor choice because it portrays Judaism as a less valid religion than Christianity as our analysis below illustrates.

We have been in communication with Donald Kairott, the Director of the Professional Development and Curriculum Support Division of the California Department of Education. Among his duties, Mr. Kairott oversees the state's "Recommended Literature Lists". He has informed us unequivocally that *The Bronze Bow* is not on any approved list, that only books on the current list are recommended by the state and books not on the current list are not recommended.

We believe that we share your goals for educating the students in the San Rafael City School District. These goals include selection of instructional materials that will best impart the knowledge and skills students need to live productive lives in our pluralistic, multicultural society. We hope you will agree that this goal will be better served if a different choice than *The Bronze Bow* is made for assigned reading.

Sincerely,

Jackie Berman
Education Specialist

cc: Laura D. Alvarenga, Superintendent
Leonard Levy

JCRC is a beneficiary of
the Jewish Community
Federation and the
Jewish Federation of
the Greater East Bay

The Bronze Bow by Elizabeth George Speare, Houghton Mifflin Co. 1961, 354 pages
ISBN 0-395-13719-5.

Summary and Analysis by Jackie Berman, Education Specialist, Jewish Community Relations Council

This is a novel written for readers of middle school to high school age. The plot concerns the life of a young Jewish man, Daniel, in first century Judea during the Roman occupation. Daniel is consumed with hatred for the Romans because they murdered his parents, an event that caused his young sister to sustain permanent psychological problems manifested by reclusive behavior. Daniel's life goal is to drive the Romans from his country, which is erroneously referred to in places as "Palestine." (The region was named Judea, not Palestine, during the historical period of this story.) Daniel states, "After my father died I...vowed I would pay them [the Romans] back with my whole life. That I would hate them and fight them and kill them. That's all I live for." (pp. 82-83) To this end, he joins a gang of depraved Jewish Zealots led by the amoral Rosh who espouses an aim of defeating the Romans, but, in fact, is nothing more than an unsavory bully who robs local farmers and travelers with no regard to the harm he inflicts on his victims.

The plot thickens when Daniel meets a brother and sister, Joel and Malthace, whose father, a respected Jewish religious authority, is a cold, authoritarian figure. Upon the death of his grandmother, Daniel leaves the mountain hideout of Rosh's gang and returns to his village to look after his sickly sister, while maintaining his relationship with the brother and sister. He convinces the siblings to join his campaign against the Romans. Joel and Malthace live in Capernaum, a large city near the Sea of Galilee. Through mutual friends the three young people learn about a man, Jesus, who has delivered inspirational sermons in synagogues and other venues where people gather to listen to him speak, partake of limitless supplies of food and receive miraculous cures for their ailments. Believing that Jesus shares his goal of evicting the Romans, Daniel joins the crowds who listen to Jesus' message. Daniel is disappointed to discover that Jesus promises the people if they follow his advice, they will be freed from Roman oppression, but he does not offer them a plan for the insurrection that Daniel believes is required. Daniel's anger, hatred and desire for retaliation against the Romans make him unable to receive Jesus' message: "Try to bear your suffering with patience, because you know that God has made a place for you in His Kingdom." (p. 103)

In spite of Jesus' popularity with the common people, the novel frequently states that the Jewish religious leaders are so opposed to his teachings that they want to kill him. For his part, Daniel stubbornly resists Jesus' message of peace until he experiences an epiphany when Jesus appears at his sister's deathbed. Jesus' very presence restores her to life, a life without fear, it would seem. Daniel finally understands that his own life can be lived only by following Jesus.

Analysis

This book is inappropriate for assigned reading in public schools. It crosses the line from material assigned to instruct students about literary analysis, cultural and historical understanding to a book that promotes the validity of one religion over another and thus is a vehicle for proselytizing. The message that the Christian belief system is superior to the Jewish belief system is carried by three basic themes.

1. Those who practice Judaism lack positive moral values. The novel contains numerous depictions of immoral and/or bad behavior by those Jews who are not followers of Jesus. From the heartless brigand, Rosh, to Daniel himself, until he accepted Jesus, Jews are shown to be individuals who slavishly follow the law, who do not care for the poor, and, perhaps most damaging, who plot to kill Jesus. An example of the negative depiction of Judaism can be seen when, without any context about the role of indentured service during that period, we are told that the *rabbis* (emphasis added) did not protest when Daniel was bound as an apprentice to a cruel ironsmith. (p.64) The novel does not clarify that Jesus' religion was Judaism and that compassion for the weak and poor are Jewish values. To the contrary, it strongly implies that these are *not* Jewish values.

Joel, who is portrayed as a learned and brilliant student of Judaism, epitomizes the book's negative view of Jewish values when he scoffs at the people who listen to Jesus, "How can he call those people children of God?... They have never heard of the Law. They are unclean from the moment they are born." (p.105)

2. The book identifies Jews as plotting to kill Jesus. This charge of deicide has been the cause of centuries of persecution of the Jewish people justified as punishment for their rejection and murder of Jesus. It is unacceptable for this accusation to be reinforced in public school classroom reading material. However, *The Bronze Bow* contains many references to Jewish leaders' intention to kill Jesus. For example: Simon tells Daniel, "they tried to kill him" (p.45) because "They said he blasphemed." (p.48). Later, Joel tells Daniel,

"Somehow, he must be warned. He has enemies everywhere...I mean the elders of the synagogue. The rabbis and the scribes. They can't understand him. They're furious at the things he says and does. He is too free with the Law. They say his is trying to destroy all the authority of the Temple" (p. 219),

Again, Simon sounds the warning,

"We are worried too. These priests from Judea—they haven't given him a moment's peace for three days. They pretend to be so respectful, and they're only trying to trap him into saying something they can prove is blasphemy." (p. 221)

Finally, Daniel himself tries to warn the unconcerned Jesus,

"Joel says you are in danger. He says they have turned against you in the synagogue. He is afraid they will try to kill you." (p.223)

3. The moral lesson taught in *The Bronze Bow* is that the only road to righteousness and God's kingdom is acceptance of Jesus. It presents Daniel with a false choice, a choice between love—Jesus' way—and hate. Jesus explains to Daniel, "Can't you see, Daniel, it is hate that is the enemy? Not men. Hate does not die with killing. It only springs up a hundredfold. The only thing stronger than hate is love." (p.224) Daniel can find peace only when he chooses to accept Jesus and thereby reject his Jewish self. The author does not offer any road to "God's Kingdom" except by acceptance of Jesus. The climax of *The Bronze Bow* is the scene in which Daniel finally understands that only by accepting Jesus can he find the true Kingdom of God. In this scene, Daniel understands that he must reject the words of King David that had always strengthened him, "*He trains my hands for war...*" Instead, he realizes the truth of Jesus' idea, "Victory was God's promise" for which men must "make ready their hearts and minds..." He glimpses a new way, "To know Jesus would be enough ...[Daniel's] terrible weight was gone. In its place a strength and sureness, and a peace he had never imagined, flowed around him and into his mind and heart." (pp. 252-53).

Daniel can find peace only by rejecting the Jewish teachings that have been the foundation of his life and following Jesus. The message of *The Bronze Bow* is clear and unmistakable—only through Jesus can Daniel leave aside his murderous anger toward the Romans and achieve true peace, strength, and love.

The author's comments illustrate that portraying this view of Jesus was her purpose in writing the book, "I was teaching a Sunday School class...I longed to have them [the class] see that the preacher who walked the hills of Galilee was not a mythical figure, but a compelling and dynamic leader, a hero to whom a boy in any age would gladly offer all his loyalty." Elizabeth George Speare, *Newbery Award Acceptance, Report of a Journey*, Newbery/Caldecott Medal Books, 1956-1965, edited by Lee Kingman.

A google search of *The Bronze Bow* reveals that it is included in the curriculum of many Christian schools where its use is appropriate in light of its clear religious message, an attribute that makes it inappropriate for public schools. (For example, the Portsmouth Abby traditional Benedictine School's site at <http://www.portsmouthabbey.org/page/494/>, or Christianbook.Com's site at http://www.christianbook.com/Christian/Books/product?item_no=62165&event=CFN) *The Bronze Bow Study Guide* published by Progeny Press asks students in its Summary section (p. 52), "...What do you think is the main *theme* or lesson of *The Bronze Bow*?" The answer given, p. 62, "Answers will vary. **Speare's main theme is that only love and knowing Jesus can bring about true freedom.**"