

Review of *The Birds' Bakery* by Tammy Brown Elkeles

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Classic children's literature often depicts children going through class and economic crises. Sara Crewe, the heroine of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905), turns overnight from princess to servant following her father's death. Her life as a servant living in the attic does not detract from her exceptional character, as she essentially remains a wise and kindhearted princess. She later regains her original status thanks to her father's friend. Poverty is presented in the novel as a source of difficulty and shame, but it is nevertheless attenuated by the miraculous solution that lifts Sara out of it, making it a temporary experience caused by the headmistress's cruelty. *Oliver Twist*, the eponymous hero of Charles Dickens's novel (1838), is kidnapped from his home and has to deal with the underworld, an emotionless world rife with misery and ignorance, where people survive through crime and violence. Like Sara Crewe, Oliver's poverty is temporary, and he ends up back with his wealthy family. The March sisters, the protagonists of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), also have to live on very little. Their financial situation prevents them from resembling their neighbors and friends and forces Meg and Jo to help support their family. They often ponder the relation between money and love, and Jo decides to marry Professor Bhaer, who is her intellectual equal, but, like her, lacks a solid financial base.

As Western countries embraced extreme capitalistic values, poverty was left outside the literary text, and financial well-being became an obvious, integral part of the shaping of most works written for children and young adults. Even when child characters have various problems, financial difficulties are usually ignored, and the spotlight is focused on psychological and social problems experienced by the main character. The denial in texts for children of such a central aspect of children's lives – the family's financial situation – produces a false consciousness whereby wealth and prosperity are considered the default. This signals to children that their parents' financial capability is limitless, and that therefore the financial aspect of their lives is of no importance and need not be acknowledged. The contrast between the poor and the rich, which had been a prominent feature of fairy tales, was replaced by the portrayal of children living in prosperity, with neither them nor their parents having any financial problems; they are concerned only about finding a new friend, 'otherness,' parent-child relations, or other similar issues.

Tammy Brown Elkeles's new book, *The Birds' Bakery*, tackles head-on the sensitive issue of a child's financial situation in a sensible and exceptional manner. The story

follows Yoav, the son of Simha the baker and his wife Fanny, who run a bakery and a café. Yoav is involved in the bakery's life cycle; every day when he comes home from kindergarten, he goes to the bakery to help with different tasks. He even brings his friend Naama a heart jam cookie every morning. Rather than take us back to the days of *Oliver Twist*, the depiction of a child at his parents' workplace, lending them a hand, establishes the child in the parents' occupational environment, suggesting he may follow in their footsteps.

The turning point comes when the bakery is abandoned by most of its customers for an unknown reason. The tables and chairs stay empty. Yoav overhears snippets of conversation between his parents: 'What are we going to do? We'll soon run out of money and won't be able to buy groceries.' He sees their worry without understanding the situation. He even tries in vain to make them laugh. As the bakery is abandoned by its human visitors, it begins to attract different kinds of spectacular birds. Yoav feeds the birds, and the illustration, revealing layers not found in the text, shows the worried father looking at job ads. Using the last remaining bag of sugar, pack of butter, and bag of flour, Yoav and Naama make cookies and serve them to the birds. Just when the parents put up a 'For Sale' sign, and the illustration shows the sad mother preparing to break the bad news to her son, birds and tourists begin to flock to the bakery, filling the empty tables. Instead of a 'For Sale' sign, a new sign is put up: 'The Birds' Bakery,' and the place is bustling once again.

While Yoav's parents are anxious about the future, the solution to their predicament comes from Yoav, whose love and care for the birds save the family from bankruptcy. The text refers both to the financial crisis and to the parents' difficulty in explaining and conveying the situation to their son. Where words are not available, the illustrations reveal the pain experienced by the parents as they see their life's work go down in flames, as well as Yoav's lack of understanding, which leads to a feeling of uncertainty and even an escape to the world of the birds, whose magic and colorfulness contrast with the parents' distress.

The happy ending shows that imagination and creativity sometimes lead to financial success, as thanks to the new 'customers' Yoav has found, the bakery gains notoriety and is saved from being sold. Unlike capitalistic fables such as 'The Ant and the Grasshopper' that teach a harsh attitude toward the needy, here it is generosity that brings prosperity and success.