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# Recognizing Jewish Children's Literature For Forty Years:

## *The Sydney Taylor Book Award*

KATHE PINCHUCK

### ABSTRACT

The Association of Jewish Libraries has been presenting a children's book award for forty years. The author describes some of the history and background of the Sydney Taylor Book Award, as well as its mission of "encouraging the publication of outstanding books of Jewish content for children and teens." A description of the award's namesake and her importance to Jewish children's literature is followed by a review of some of the books and authors that have been honored. These demonstrate the high standards of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, as well as the quality of Jewish children's literature. Prevalent themes and trends reflect the ever changing dynamic of contemporary Jewry.

### INTRODUCTION

The Association of Jewish Libraries has been recognizing quality Jewish literature for many years. Forty years ago, an award for Jewish children's literature was established. Since that time, the award has been renamed, expanded, augmented, and re-dated. It has also grown significantly, and as the Sydney Taylor Book Award, it is recognized and respected internationally as a mark of literary merit and achievement. At birthday celebrations, Jews often express the wish "until 120." So at one third of the way there, it is an auspicious time to look at the Award's history and mission; its evaluation criteria and uniqueness in determining books of notable content; and some themes and trends in children's literature as evidenced by the winners of the Sydney Taylor Book Award.

### HISTORY

In 1968, the Association of Jewish Libraries established an award called the Shirley Kravitz Children's Book Award. This award was renamed the "Sydney

Taylor Book Award” in 1978 after the death of Sydney Taylor, author of the *All-of-a-Kind Family* series. During this time period, a single award winner was selected from books published for older children (approximately ages eight to fourteen). In 1981, the Committee began recognizing winners for younger readers (up to age eight) as well as for older readers. The first time that an award was given in the teen reader (fourteen and up) category was 2007. During the 1980s, the award designations were expanded. In 1985, notable books were added and the committee started issuing a list of “The Best of the Bunch,” books that were not selected as prize winners but were worthy of attention. In 1988, the Committee began selecting Honor Award Winners, which receive a silver seal. Finally, in 2005 the dating system was changed to coordinate with other major children’s book awards (Newbery, Caldecott). Now the award is named for the year in which the prize is presented for a book published during the previous year (AJL, 2005). The Committee currently recognizes award winners in the younger, older, and teen reader categories, as well as honor awards and notable mention in all three areas, and has also recognized several authors—including Sydney Taylor—with a body of work award. The Committee is composed of volunteer members of the Association of Jewish Libraries, and currently receives over 120 books each year to read and review.

## SYDNEY TAYLOR

As one of the first authors to introduce Jewish characters to young readers who were not necessarily Jewish, the namesake of the award is most appropriate. Born Sarah Brenner on the Lower East Side of New York in 1904, she grew up surrounded by a large, loving family who embodied the immigrant experience, including trips to the public libraries. Sarah grew up, changed her name to Sydney, and married Ralph Taylor. Sydney would tell the stories of her childhood to her only child, daughter Jo, who loved hearing them. Sydney wrote them down and put the papers away. While she was away, her husband submitted the papers to a publishing competition. Sydney Taylor won the Follett Award, and in 1951 that company eventually published *All-of-a-Kind Family*. Sydney Taylor went on to write four more books in the series, as well as general fiction for young readers (Cummins, 2004).

## MISSION

The Sydney Taylor Book Award has a clear and ambitious purpose:

To encourage the publication of outstanding books of Jewish content for children and teens, books that exemplify the highest literary standards while authentically portraying the Jewish experience. We hope that official recognition of such books will inspire authors, encourage publishers, inform parents and teachers, and intrigue young readers. We also hope that by educating readers about the Jewish experience,

we can engender pride in Jewish readers while building bridges to readers of other backgrounds. (AJL, 2005.)

This mandate is what makes the Award unique.

While the American Library Association continually expands its awards and recognizes books in more specialized categories every year—including works by authors of specific ethnicities, authors of fewer than three published works, books originally published in a foreign language, beginning reader books, books about the artistic expression of the disability experience, and informational books (ALA, 2008a)—the School, Synagogue, and Center Division (SSC) of the Association of Jewish Libraries continues to recognize outstanding books of Jewish content, regardless of author, subject, or genre. (Similarly, AJL's RAS [Research Libraries, Archives, and Special Collections] division offers annual awards for reference works and bibliographies.) *Vive Le Paris*, a 2007 Honor Award Winner for Older Readers by Esme Raji Codell is a prime example. Paris McCray is an African American girl living in Chicago who takes piano lessons from Mrs. Rosen, a Holocaust survivor. When Mrs. Rosen gives Paris the yellow star she had to wear during World War II, Paris's ignorance of the Holocaust and what the star means results in a faux pas of major proportion. As she learns about the Holocaust, she becomes aware of her error and gains even more respect for Mrs. Rosen. From her studies, she sees that ignorance and violence must be faced and stopped, and she intercedes with the bully who is tormenting her brother. Ms. Codell was as proud to receive this award as the Committee was to give it:

Most of all, I was proud of AJL. I've said it before and I'll say it again and again, my own great honor notwithstanding, the Sydney Taylor Award is a Hyperion of what a book award should be, and sets an example for other book awards that establish criteria based on the author instead of what's in the binding. Meticulous debate, transparency, and a love of literature were clearly the order of the day, and every day that went into the work of AJL this past year. It was the first time this award was given for a book featuring an African American protagonist, and I must say it was one of my proudest professional achievements. (Codell, 2007.)

The Committee has also recognized *Stones in Water*, a work of historical fiction about World War II Italy by Donna Jo Napoli (1998 Award Winner for Older Readers); and Jean Marzollo's adaptations of Bible stories (2004 and 2005 Honor Awards for Younger Readers).

## EVALUATION CRITERIA

The criteria used to evaluate books submitted for consideration facilitate the selection process. A book must have literary merit. It must also have positive, or

at least authentic, Jewish religious or cultural content. It has to be appropriate for the intended grade level in style, vocabulary, format, and illustration. It must be solidly rooted in authentic and accurate detail, through scholarship and research by the author (Kamin). The literary merit, age appropriateness, authenticity, and accuracy are relatively easy to judge. Jewish content is often a gray area, where some may think a book is “Jewish” because of certain values or themes presented in the book, and others may not. Sometimes quality will outweigh quantity, where a character or subplot is presented well enough to impress the committee members. *The Book Thief*, by Marcus Zusak, the 2007 Award Winner for Teen Readers, is narrated by Death and centers on Liesel, a Lutheran girl. But the depictions of Nazi Germany and Liesel’s relationship with Max, a Jew who is hidden in the basement, make this “an engaging story that resonates with the full spectrum of human emotions and experiences.” *The Book Thief* was also a 2007 Michael L. Printz Honor Book (an award for excellence in young adult literature, sponsored by ALA’s Young Adult Library Services Association).

Many books recognized by the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee have garnered other prestigious awards for their literary merits. For example: Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars*, about the Danish Resistance during World War II, was the 1989 Sydney Taylor Book Award Winner for Older Readers as well as the winner of the 1990 Newbery Award. *Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins*, written by Eric Kimmel and illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman, received a 1989 Honor Award for Younger Readers as well as a Caldecott Honor Award. *Noah’s Ark*, by Jerry Pinkney received a 2002 Honor Award for Younger Readers, as well as a 2003 Caldecott Honor. *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat*, by Simms Taback, received the 2000 Caldecott Medal as well as a Sydney Taylor Honor Award for Younger Readers.

## THEMES AND TRENDS

Obviously, Jewish themes pervade. Sydney Taylor Book award winners have included books about the Sabbath and holidays; the Holocaust; Israel; Bible Stories; Jewish folktales and legends; biographies of notable Jews; historical fiction about the immigrant experience, the Spanish Inquisition, and medieval France; and Jewish customs and rituals.

While books about the shtetl and immigrants on the Lower East Side have dominated the awards in the past, other themes have become prevalent in recent years, particularly how Jews relate to non-Jews and define themselves. This can mean acquaintances, neighbors or relatives, as evidenced by recent submissions for consideration: *Stealing Home* by Ellen Schwartz; *Notes from the Midnight Driver*, by Jordan Sonnenblick; *Across the Alley* by Richard Michelson; *Willy and Max: A Holocaust Story* by Amy Littlesugar; *Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist* by Rachel Cohn and David Levithan; *Wide Awake* by David Levithan.

In *The Entertainer and the Dybbuk* by Sid Fleischman, the 2008 Sydney Taylor Book Award Winner for Older Readers, the spirit of a young boy killed in

the Holocaust inhabits the body of a non-Jewish former American soldier so that the boy can avenge his sister's death—and his own—at the hands of the Nazis. "The Entertainer" learns about Jewish life and the Holocaust from the dybbuk, and helps him exact justice.

In *Hanukkah at Valley Forge*, the 2007 Sydney Taylor Book Award Winner for Younger Readers, by Stephen Krensky and illustrated by Greg Harlin, a Polish-born Jewish soldier tells General George Washington about Hanukkah, who draws a parallel between the Macabbees' war against their foes and that of the Colonists against their British oppressors.

A 2007 Honor Award Winner, *A Brief Chapter in My Impossible Life*, by Dana Reinhardt, is the poignant story of Simone Turner, who meets her biological mother, and learns about the circumstances of her adoption—how Rivka, a Hasidic Jew, became pregnant at sixteen and was shunned by her family. She gave her baby to Simone's mother, an ACLU lawyer helping the community defend their rights to pray. Rivka, who moved to Cape Cod and became a photographer, suffers from terminal cancer. While Simone did not immediately embrace her Jewish heritage, it clearly made an impression on her and propelled her to the *mitzvot* of making a Seder, honoring Rivka, and some of the greatest *mitzvot* involved with death and mourning. This book for teen readers captured the teenage voice without explicit language or explicit sex.

*Confession of a Closet Catholic*, by Sarah Darer Littman, the 2006 Sydney Taylor Award Winner for Older Readers, highlights the dilemma of many contemporary teenagers, who are told to be Jewish, but not "too Jewish." The beauty of this book is that both the Jewish and Catholic religions are presented positively and accurately, and that Justine is able to find a place where she is comfortable with her religion and herself.

*The Silver Cup*, by Constance Leeds, a 2008 Notable Book for Older Readers, is mainly about Anna and her family, Christians living in Germany during the Crusades. When Anna and Gunther go to Worms on a trading trip, they find the Jewish quarter decimated and its inhabitants brutally murdered. They find Leah, the daughter of the spice merchant, hiding in the rubble, and they bring her home with them. Leah must explain her ways and customs, and Anna learns that Jews are not the sorcerers and evil people that most of her townsfolk believe them to be.

Family is also a recurring theme, and the award winners reflect the changing dynamics and diversity of Jewish families. One of the first of these is *Our Eddie*, by Shulamith Ish-Kishor, the 1969 winner. The sad story of a dysfunctional family ruled by an unstable father is an example of stark reality that was not previously prevalent in children's books, and was criticized for depicting a Jewish father as cold and selfish. This book also received a Newbery Honor in 1970.

Brynn Olenberg Sugarman's 2007 Honor Award Winner for Younger Readers, *Rebecca's Journey Home* (illustrated by Michelle Shapiro), asserts that a Vietnamese girl adopted by a Jewish-American family can be many things: "a famous poet, Olympic skier and mathematician all rolled into one." This book is useful for families in the same situation, but it is also a good story on its own and embraces the trend of adopting Asian babies.

*Papa Jethro*, by Deborah Bodin Cohen with illustrations by Jane Dippold, a 2008 Notable Book for Younger Readers, explores how a Jewish girl and her non-Jewish grandfather can enjoy each other's company and embrace what they have in common.

Elsa Okon Rael's 2001 Sydney Taylor Award Winner for Younger Readers, *Rivka's First Thanksgiving* (illustrated by Maryann Kowalski), depicts the culture clash between the Old Country and America, when the rabbi decides that Polish Jewish immigrants should celebrate a traditional American holiday. More modern cultural differences are the subject of *Strange Relations*, the 2008 Sydney Taylor Award Winner for Teen Readers. Marne, who has been brought up in a non-religious home, spends the summer in Hawaii with her aunt Carol, who is now Chaya and has become Lubavitch, living by Hasidic principles. Marne expects a relaxing summer at the beach, but learns about the importance of family, her Jewish heritage, and how to accept people for who they are and make the best of a situation.

## **SYDNEY TAYLOR BOOK AWARDS SHARED WITH DIFFERENT ORGANIZATIONS:**

### **(a) American Library Association**

Newbery-award winning authors and Caldecott-winning illustrators frequently receive Sydney Taylor Honors as well. Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose *Zlateh the Goat and Other Stories* (1967), *The Fearsome Inn* (1968), and *When Shlemiel Went to Warsaw and Other Stories* (1969) all received Newbery Honor Awards, received the Sydney Taylor Body of Work Award in 1971.

Karen Hesse, who won the 1998 Newbery medal for *Out of the Dust*, received the 1992 Sydney Taylor Award for Older Readers for *Letters from Rifka*, as well as a Sydney Taylor Honor Award for Older Readers for *The Cats in Krasinski Square* (2004). Gary D. Schmidt, who has garnered two Newbery honors, was recognized by the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee for *Mara's Stories*, a 2001 Notable Book for Older Readers. Kathryn Lasky, who won a Newbery Honor for *Sugaring Time* (1984), received the Sydney Taylor Book Award for Older Readers in 1981 for *The Night Journey*.

Mordicai Gerstein, a 2004 Caldecott Winner for *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers*, has been recognized by the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee many times: *Noah and the Great Flood* was a 1999 Honor winner for Younger Readers; *Jonah and the Two Great Fish* was a 1997 Notable Book for Younger Readers; and *The White Ram* was a 2007 Honor winner for Younger Readers. He illustrated *The Jar of Fools: Eight Stories from Chelm*, by Eric Kimmel, which was a Notable Book for Older Readers in 2000; and *Sholom's Treasure: How Sholom Aleichem Became a Writer*, by Erica Silverman, the 2005–2006 Award Winner for Younger Readers. Marjorie Priceman, the illustrator of *When Zaydeh Danced on Eldridge Street* (by Elsa Okon Rael), the 1997 Sydney Taylor Award Winner for Younger Readers, won the Caldecott Honor Medal for her

illustrations of *Zin! Zin! Zin! a Violin* (by Lloyd Moss) the previous year. Notable Caldecott illustrators Uri Shulevitz and Brian Pinkney have illustrated some of "The Best of the Bunch."

The Mildred L. Batchelder Award, recognizes children's books originally published in a foreign language in a foreign country, and subsequently translated into English and published in the United States. *When I Was a Soldier*, written by Valérie Zenatti and translated from the French by Adriana Hunter, received a 2006 Batchelder Honor as well as an AJL Notable Award for Older Readers. *Daniel Half Human and the Good Nazi*, by David Chotjewitz and translated from the German by Doris Orgel, received a 2005 Batchelder Award as well as a 2004 Sydney Taylor Honor Award for Older Readers. Uri Orlev received the Batchelder Award for *Run, Boy, Run*, translated from the Hebrew by Hillel Halkin in 1994. He also received the Batchelder Award in 1985 for *The Island on Bird Street*, also translated by Hillel Halkin, which received the 1984 Sydney Taylor Book Award for Older Readers. *The Lady with the Hat*, a Sydney Taylor Notable Book for Older Readers, was the 1996 Batchelder Award winner. *Samir and Yonatan* by Daniella Carmi, translated from the Hebrew by Yael Lotan, won the 2001 Batchelder Award and a 2000 Notable for Older Readers. *Thanks to My Mother* by Schoschana Rabinovici and translated from the German by James Skofield, received the 1999 Batchelder Award and a 1998 Notable for Older Readers. *Anne Frank Beyond the Diary: A Photographic Remembrance*, by Ruud van der Rol and Rian Verhoeven, received a 1994 Batchelder Honor Award and was a Sydney Taylor Notable Book for Older Readers.

### (b) Canadian Honors

*Hana's Suitcase*, a 2002 Sydney Taylor Award Winner for Older Readers by Karen Levine, also received the 2003 Silver Birch Award, given in Canada to a non-fiction book for fourth, fifth or sixth grade students, as well as the 2004 Rocky Mountain Book Award, the 2005 Red Cedar Book Award, the Canadian Library Association Book Of The Year For Children Award, and the 2003 Golden Oak Award. *Something from Nothing*, by Phoebe Gilman, a 1992 Sydney Taylor Award Winner for Younger Readers, won the Ruth and Sylvia Schwartz Children's Book Award in 1993. This prize recognizes authors and illustrators who demonstrate artistic excellence in Canadian children's literature.

## CONCLUSION

The first forty years of The Sydney Taylor Book Award have chronicled the growth of Jewish Children's Literature, its refinement to literature that wins Newbery Awards, as well as one that delights readers of all ages. Beloved classics brought to life, innovative fiction, and well-documented non-fiction will continue to be recognized for excellence as the genre grows and the Committee endeavors to fulfill its mission.

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