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# The 2008 Sydney Taylor Book Awards: An Overview

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# The 2008 Sydney Taylor Book Awards:

## *An Overview*

RACHEL KAMIN

Sarah Gershman and Kristina Swarner, author and illustrator of *The Bedtime Sh'ma: A Good Night Book*, Sid Fleischman; author of *The Entertainer and the Dybbuk*; and Sonia Levitin, author of *Strange Relations*, were the 2008 winners of the prestigious Sydney Taylor Book Award. The Sydney Taylor Book Award, presented by the Association of Jewish Libraries, honors new books for children and teens that exemplify the highest literary standards while authentically portraying the Jewish experience. The award memorializes Sydney Taylor, author of the classic *All-of-a-Kind Family* series. The winners received their awards at the association's annual convention in Cleveland, Ohio, this past June along with a special celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the award.

Gershman and Swarner received the 2008 gold medal in the Younger Readers Category for *The Bedtime Sh'ma: A Good Night Book*, published by EKS Publishing. With accessible language, this book helps young children understand the meaning and concepts of the Sh'ma prayers. The stunning artwork matches the mood of the text, and the words of the prayer (in Hebrew, English, and transliteration) are beautifully integrated into double-spread illustrations. "The soothing and soulful voice of Rabbi Julia Adelman on the included CD will lull the listener to sleep with sweet dreams," adds Kathy Bloomfield, member of the award committee. Recommended for children up to grade 2, *The Bedtime Sh'ma* is Sarah Gershman's first book. Kristina Swarner is also the illustrator of *Before You Were Born* by Howard Schwartz, which was recognized by the Association of Jewish Libraries as a Notable Book in 2006.

The 2008 gold medal in the Older Readers Category was bestowed upon Sid Fleischman for *The Entertainer and the Dybbuk*, published by HarperCollins Children's Books. When the spirit of a twelve-year old Jewish boy, murdered by the Nazis, possesses the body of an American GI traveling through Europe as a second-rate ventriloquist, the pair is able to unmask the Nazi responsible. "Fleischman's knowledge of ventriloquism and senses of humor and humanity craft an imaginative and haunting story, and although all the action takes place

after the war, the sense of loss and tragedy echo through the book,” comments Kathe Pinchuck, incoming chair of the committee. “Wry humor adds dimension to the characters and suspense accelerates the pace.” The book is recommended for grades 6–8. Fleischman is the author of over sixty books and received the Newbery Medal in 1987 for *The Whipping Boy*. *Escape! The Story of the Great Houdini* was recognized as a ALA Notable Book in 2007.

Sonia Levitin was granted the 2008 gold medal in the Teen Readers Category for *Strange Relations*, published by Knopf, an imprint of Random House Children's Books. Fifteen-year-old Marne decides to spend the summer with her Aunt Carole in Hawaii. But Aunt Carole is now Aunt Chaya, married to a Chabad Rabbi with seven children. What Marne anticipates will be a relaxing summer of jogging on the beach, surfing, sun tanning, and shopping turns out to be a summer of exploration, spirituality, and growth. Levitin skillfully writes from the perspective of a contemporary teenager and realistically deals with issues such as drinking, drugs, sexuality, and peer pressure. A prolific author of over forty books, Levitin also won the 1987 Sydney Taylor Book Award for *The Return* and honor awards for *The Singing Mountain* (1998) and *Silver Days* (1989).

Three Honor Awards were presented for Younger Readers. *The Castle on Hester Street*, by Linda Heller, won the Sydney Taylor Book Award when it was first published in 1982 by the Jewish Publication Society. The new twenty-fifth anniversary edition, published by Simon & Schuster, received a 2008 Honor Award due to Boris Kulikov's new illustrations. “It's difficult to be objective about this book because the original edition is one of my all-time favorite children's books,” admits Susan Berson, member of the award committee. “However, Kulikov's new illustrations have revitalized the text. The bright colors, the attention to detail, and the expressive faces of everyone in the book, including Moishe the goat, make this a fun read-a-loud as well as a book young readers will want to peruse on their own.”

Another Honor Award winner for Younger Readers was *Letter on the Wind* by Sarah Lamstein, with illustrations by Neil Waldman (Boyd's Mills Press). When his village suffers a drought and there will be no olive oil for the Chanukah menorahs, Hayim, a poor and humble man, writes a letter to the Almighty to request enough oil for the entire village. Lamstein's magical retelling of this Jewish folktale is enhanced by Waldman's expansive ink and watercolor illustrations, making this a wonderful addition to the Chanukah bookshelf. Waldman was honored by the Committee in 2000 for his illustrations in *The Wisdom Bird: A Tale of Solomon and Sheba*, by Sheldon Oberman.

The concepts of *tikkun olam* and making the world a better place are explained simply yet lyrically in *Light* written and illustrated by Jane Breskin Zalben (Dutton Children's Books, an imprint of Penguin Young Readers Group), also a 2008 Honor Award winner for Younger Readers. “It is rare to find a book whose sub-

ject is so intrinsic to Judaism and that has universal appeal,” notes Kathe Pinchuck. Another prolific writer in the field, Zalben has also received multiple recognitions from the Committee: *Pearl’s Passover: A Family Celebration Through Stories, Recipes, Crafts, and Songs* and *Beni’s First Chanukah* both received honor awards.

Both of the Honor Awards for Older Readers in 2008 were presented to nonfiction books. *Holocaust: The Events and Their Impact on Real People* by Angela Gluck Wood with consulting by Dan Stone (DK Publishing) is a comprehensive, readable, and impressively visual history. The content spans across the years from the origins of Jews, life in Europe, and the history of anti-Semitism to the post-war period, including the survivors, Nazi trials, stolen property, and concentration camps and present-day memorials. The book is supplemented by a DVD of personal testimonies from the archive of the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, in Los Angeles.

The amazing story of how a group of thirty-eight Jews managed to survive during World War II for nearly a year in the underground caves of Western Ukraine is told with captivating narratives and descriptions, sharp full-color photographs, and an attractive layout and design in *The Secret of Priest’s Grotto* by Peter Lane Taylor and Christos Nicola (Kar-Ben), also receiving a 2008 Honor Award for Older Readers. An extensive teaching guide, integrating language arts, math, science, and social studies, is included at [www.karben.com](http://www.karben.com), along with a podcast with the author and a photo slideshow of the caves.

For Teen Readers, the Honor Book was *Let Sleeping Dogs Lie*, by Mirjam Pressler, translated from the German by Erik J. Macki (Front Street/Boyds Mills Press). Seventeen year-old Johanna Riemenschneider’s idyllic, privileged childhood comes to an abrupt end when she travels to Israel with her German classmates to meet Jewish alumni of their high school who fled the town during World War II. Originally published in German, this well-written, complex novel for mature teens (due to explicit sex scenes) raises important questions about the possible responsibility, shame, and guilt of young people today in Germany.

In addition to the medal-winners, the Committee designated twenty-three Notable Books of Jewish Content for 2008: eleven in the Younger Readers Category, eight in the Older Readers Category, and four for Teens. Notable titles, and more information about the Sydney Taylor Book Award, including how to order the CD-ROM compilation of all of the Committee’s reviews, brochures, bookmarks, and gold and silver seals, may be found online at [www.SydneyTaylor-BookAward.org](http://www.SydneyTaylor-BookAward.org). A special video announcement of the awards can also be accessed at [www.youtube.com/SydneyTaylorAward](http://www.youtube.com/SydneyTaylorAward), a blog about the awards can be found at [www.sydneytaylorbookaward.blogspot.com](http://www.sydneytaylorbookaward.blogspot.com), and an interview was included on the January episode of “The Book of Life: A Podcast about Jewish People and the Books We Read” at [www.jewishbooks.blogspot.com](http://www.jewishbooks.blogspot.com).

Over 130 books published in 2007 were read and reviewed by the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee. Members of the Committee were: Nancy Austein, Susan Berson, Marci Lavine Bloch, Kathy Bloomfield, and Kathe Pinchuck. The Committee is also aided by Heidi Estrin, Past Chair, and Etta Gold, Compiler.

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Rachel Kamin served as Chair of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee until 2008, preceding Kathe Pinchuck in that position.