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Sydney Taylor Book Award Acceptance Speeches

Picture Book Award Winners

Introduction by Michlean Amir

Cakes and Miracles: A Purim Tale was written by **Barbara Diamond Goldin**, who is a preschool teacher and a storyteller. She lives with her husband and two children in Northampton, MA. Her first book was the acclaimed *Just Enough Is Plenty: A Hanukkah Tale*, and she is currently working on a Passover tale. Her books have allowed her to research the "old country" whence three of her four grandparents came.

Letter of Acceptance by Barbara Diamond Goldin

June 22, 1992

I regret that I cannot be here in person tonight to deliver this speech. This award means a great deal to me, especially because it is named after Sydney Taylor, who inspired me as a writer with her book *Danny Loves A Holiday*.

About 12 years ago, when I began writing, I came upon her book. I had been disappointed by the fact that though there were many beautiful and inspiring children's books available, there were very few specifically for Jewish children with the same appeal.

Danny Loves A Holiday stood out. The stories about the Jewish holidays were well written, entertaining, yet filled with information and midrash [legend] about the holidays. The family was loving and true to life, as was Danny, the amusing main character. The illustrations by Gail Owens were delightful.

I liked this book so much that one of my early writing projects was a book of my own with a story about each holiday that revolved around characters I named Iris and Benji. I learned it wasn't so easy to write a story about a Jewish holiday that wasn't preachy, didactic, and bogged down with explanation. After all, how do you talk about graggers and hamen-tashen, Rabbis and Purim without explanation?

I worked hard on these stories, reading them to my weekly writing group, none of whose members were Jewish except for me. One writer friend thought I should try nonfiction, that perhaps it was too difficult to do a fictional story about a holiday.

I didn't give up on the idea. However, I did start writing nonfiction articles about how to celebrate the Jewish holidays with children. I sold these to Jewish newspapers across the United States and Canada, and even to London over the next few years. Doing the research and writing these articles made me feel all the more like working on the fictional stories.

There were so many wonderful holiday customs I was learning about, such as delivering *shalach manot* on Purim, gifts back and forth. The Purim images in Bella Chagall's book *Burning Lights* burned in my mind. She described children dazzled by little horse, sheep, bird, and doll figures that covered tables in the marketplace of her shtetl on Purim. Little Mordecais and Ahashveroshes on horseback bringing the Purim story to life. Of how she and her brothers spread their Purim gifts on plates wrapped in handkerchiefs so that Pinye, the messenger boy, could deliver them to their friends.

I worked hard; my stories improved. But I was still getting letters from editors like Kent Brown, at *Highlights for Children*, saying the stories bogged down. Then I had a breakthrough winter, or so it appears to me now, seven or eight years later, looking back. It was during a time of babies for me, a time of writing very early in the morning and then when they napped.

I immersed myself in the books of I. B. Singer, Bella Chagall, Sholem Aleichem, and Hasidic Rebbes. I was fascinated not just with the holidays, but with Eastern Europe, with my grandparents' past, with a place that no longer existed anywhere but in books and pictures and memories.

I felt a sadness about this past, my family's past, that was eased by reading and writing about it. The sadness was eased by recreating it in stories, on paper.

Idea for these stories came to me in dreams, daytime dreams and nighttime dreams, dreams drawn out from my reading and my imagination and my longing. Sometimes these ideas began with a visual image, clear and brief. There was the image of a caring yet poor girl in a shtetl hat who found her apron pockets filled with coins left by the Prophet Elijah. This idea later became the book *Just Enough Is Plenty: A Hanukkah Tale*, but

with books replacing the coins, and a sack replacing the pockets.

I dreamed of a blind boy shaping Purim cookies—of angels and miracles. I tried to imagine what this blind boy's life would be like in a shtetl. How would he feel? What would his frustrations be? What joy could he find? In my mind, this character Hershel and the holiday of Purim went together. The story evolved from there—Hershel, blindness, the shtetl, Purim, angels, and miracles. I revised the story many times until it finally became one of the award winners tonight—*Cakes and Miracles: A Purim Tale*.

Three of the stories I began that winter eight years ago would later become published picture books. But I never did sell that first effort about Iris and Benji. I now think of that collection of stories as part of an apprenticeship, a process. And Sydney Taylor was a part of that process too. So it is especially exciting to receive an award that honors her, her wonderful stories, her characters, and her joy in her religion and heritage.

Erika Weihs, who illustrated *Cakes and Miracles*, was born, raised, and educated in Vienna. She has illustrated 40 children's books and her paintings have been widely shown throughout the United States. She lives in Greenwich Village with her husband.

Letter of Acceptance by Erika Weihs

June 15, 1992

Dear Ms. Amir,

I would like to thank you; the Association of Jewish Libraries; Mr. Ralph Taylor, the donor of the award; and your Committee of six librarians for selecting *Cakes and Miracles* to be given the much-coveted Sydney Taylor Picture Book Award. I feel honored.

I want to thank my editor, Deborah Brodie, for her constant support and encouragement. Ms. Brodie really likes my work, and all of us artists need to be loved and frequently told so.

I want to thank my initial art director, Barbara Hennessey, for her imagination in submitting my portfolio with this story in

mind. And I want to thank Cecilia Yung, the present art director at Viking, for finishing the project with me. It is a very well designed book.

And last, but not least, I want to thank the author, Barbara Diamond Goldin, for writing a meaningful and inspiring story I personally can identify with. This is a rare treat indeed.

As an illustrator, I have to add visually to the words the author uses. And that is only possible if I can truly understand and feel with the characters, if I can put myself in their place. Experiencing the characters allows me to add visually to the life of the story. *Cakes and Miracles* is such a story for me.

I have illustrated more than 40 children's books. *Cakes and Miracles* was the first book I did in oils. Since I am a painter, working primarily in oils, I always avoided using the same technique for my illustrations. However, using oils worked out well and reproduced well.

As for costumes and environment of the period, whatever research was needed I did at the Picture Collection of the New York Public Library. My thanks and appreciation go to them.

About myself: I was born, raised, and educated in Vienna, Austria. I left after the Anschluss and have lived in Manhattan since 1940. I have been married for 50 years to the same man; we have two sons. My husband, Kurt Weihs, is an artist, and we live in Greenwich Village. As a painter, I have had 12 one-person shows and am represented in a number of museum collections.

I wish I could be in Los Angeles in person to thank you, to smile at all of the 150 [AJL] members present at the banquet, and to sign as many copies of *Cakes and Miracles* as you desire. I also wish your convention would take place within a maximum radius of a three-hour train ride from New York City, but, alas, Los Angeles is just too far away.

I hope that at some point in the future I shall have the opportunity to thank you in person.

Daddy's Chair's author, **Sandy Lanton**, holds a B.S. in Psychology and an M.S. in Early Childhood from Queens College. She also studied writing, and that has been her occupation ever since she stopped teaching. She has written extensively for Junior Scholastic, Young American, and Hopscotch magazines. Daddy's

Chair is her first picture book. It is based on a real family tragedy, and so she said, "The text truly, wrote itself." Sandy lives with her husband Sy in Woodbury, NY. Her children, David and Ruth, are grown.

Remarks by Sandy Lanton

I'm very pleased and honored to be here this evening to accept the Sydney Taylor award for *Daddy's Chair*. I am especially pleased because this was voted by librarians, who had an early and meaningful impact on my life.

When I was seven, we moved from Manhattan to Queens. Getting my own room was wonderful. Opening up my window and climbing out onto the sweet-smelling grass was fantastic. But, the best part of all was the location—around the corner from the public library. No longer did I have to hold my mother's hand as we crossed busy streets; I could walk to the library all by myself. What a sense of freedom and independence!! Now, we are not talking about an imposing edifice with statues of lions; this was a small, dark storefront. But to me, the place was the Garden of Eden. I don't remember the Library Lady's name, but I am forever in her debt. She always had suggestions when I came in looking for something new to read. She was never too busy and she always made me feel that I was important to her. She knew when to encourage me to take on greater challenges, yet she never gave me a book I wasn't quite ready for. Most of my classmates went to ballet class or piano lessons after school. My parents didn't have the money for any of those, but I never felt deprived. I had my library. If my mother couldn't find me when it was time to come home for dinner, she always knew where to look.

I had two major goals in that room. One was to read every book in the Children's Section, which sadly, I did not achieve. The other goal was to write a book of my own—hopefully one that would reach children the way the books of my childhood reached me. Writing teachers and therapists tell us that in order to write for children (and probably for adults too) it is necessary to reach the child inside us.

Daddy's Chair was written to fill the needs of a real child. Three years ago, my cousin Joe died of cancer, leaving behind a wife and three children, ages 15, 12, and 6. Being the book person in the family, I took it upon myself to find books to help them cope with this devastating loss. I found some excellent ones for the two older kids, notably Eda Le Shan's *Learning to Say Goodbye: When a Parent Dies*

and *How It Feels When a Parent Dies*, by Jill Krementz.

There was little for the youngest, Jonathan. There were some excellent and well-written books dealing with death: *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*, by Judith Viorst; *Dead Bird*, by Margaret Wise Brown; *About Dying*, by Sara Bonnett Stein; and Norma Simon's *The Saddest Time*. However, these didn't begin to answer Jonathan's basic questions: Why did my Daddy die? Was it my Fault? and Who's Going to Take Care of Me?

I went home and wrote something for him that explained about cancer, hospitals, and death but was very dull and matter-of-fact. I read it to him and then brought the manuscript to the class I was taking with Pam Conrad. After listening to a classmate's wonderful anecdotal account about the questions a young child asked an elderly relative at a funeral, I realized how awful a piece of writing I had created. I had neglected Lois Lowry's advice to always tell a good story.

I then went home and wrote the first draft of *Daddy's Chair*. Between the first and final drafts of the story (because now it was a story) two things happened. I met Shelly Haas at a conference. She told me that Kar-Ben was looking for a book about parental death, and encouraged me to submit it to them. The other, and more important: my father died. My classmates were stunned when I showed up in class, manuscript in hand, only a few days after I finished sitting *shiva*. What they soon understood was that I needed to be there. That book was therapy for me, for the grieving six-year-old inside me who was asking the same questions Jonathan had asked only a few months before. This book was helpful to me in the writing. I hope it is helpful to others in the reading. I hope that this book answers the questions of the six-year-old inside each of us. For I believe that when we are grieving, we are *all* six years old.

This book has been a dream come true. I have achieved a goal I set for myself over 40 years ago. But I obviously didn't do it alone. I have to thank Shelly Haas for her wonderful illustrations. And without her, I might never have thought of submitting to Kar-Ben. I must thank my editors, Madeline Wikler and Judy Groner, for helping to shape the manuscript into its final form, and for having the courage to go with an unknown writer on such an important subject. I have to thank my teachers—Connie Epstein, Johanna Hurwitz, Pam Conrad—and the staff at the Highlights Foundation, especially Christine San Jose.

I have to thank the members of my Long Island writing group for their support and encouragement; my husband Sy, who let me follow my dream all those years and didn't insist that I bring in a steady paycheck; and finally, Jonathan and the rest of the Eisenstein family, who helped me cope with my grief more than I ever helped them.

Thank you all. I will cherish this forever.

Shelly O. Haas, who illustrated *Daddy's Chair*, has been drawing and painting all her life. She graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design and now lives with her artist husband and her son Dillon in Berkeley, MI. *Daddy's Chair* is the fourth book that Ms. Haas has illustrated for Kar-Ben.

Shelly's approach to book illustration combines her background in theater arts with her education and training in fine arts and illustration. Meditation, visualization, and classical music are an important part of her daily life and inspiration.

Remarks by Shelly O. Haas

I thank you from my heart for the opportunity to stand before you tonight and accept this award. I thank Kar-Ben Copies for recognizing the book's importance and asking me to be involved. Sandy Lanton wrote a truly special manuscript which was a blessing to work with. I have illustrated stories related to psychological and personal crises before. There is an assimilation process that takes place through countless readings of a manuscript, exposure to the issue in related articles and art, and contact with special friends regarding customs that pertain to the story. That is followed by meditation and sketching.

It is my way of contacting the child within and placing myself in the character's situation, to make it true for readers.

I was about to start painting the finished illustrations for *Daddy's Chair* when I received word that an author whose work I had just illustrated lost her husband to cancer and had two small children. She was living the situation in this story and I was only simulating it. I sat down to write to her. The words were not there. I had doubts about the ability to reach the children who needed this book.

It was time to put the project in God's hands. I could not find the words for the lady and her children. I could pray for them and paint for them. I did both. The experience for me was intense and joyful.

News of this award brought everything back to me, and I am grateful for the honor and the experience.

(*Sydney Taylor Book Award Acceptance Speeches continue on the next page.*)

Jewish Children's Books Too Good To Miss

(Continued from p. 105)

soul..."—and indeed his text accomplishes the same.

**Schwartz, Howard; Rush, Barbara. *The Diamond Tree: Jewish Tales from Around the World*. Illustrated by Uri Shulevitz. Harper Collins.

A fine collection of stories from the diverse cultures that fashion the Jewish people. Shulevitz's fresh, soft watercolors are delightful, and fit well with the underlying messages of love and kindness. The list of sources and commentary for each of the stories are helpful and informative.

Sholom Aleichem. *Around the Table: Family Stories of Sholom Aleichem*. Selected and translated by Aliza Shevrin. Charles Scribner and Sons.

These familiar stories, recalling a long-gone era and describing holidays in the bosom of families in an Eastern European shtetl, are masterpieces of charm and wisdom, as well as a faithful mirror of Jewish life, tradition, and values. The translator managed to convey the flavor of Jewish life and to preserve many of the Yiddish idioms; it hardly seems a translation at all.

Vos, Ida. *Hide and Seek*. Houghton Mifflin.

Based on the author's life as a child, this documentary fiction takes place during the German occupation of Holland during World War II. Through a child's eyes we experience the terror of the German invasion of the Netherlands, the sadness of relinquishing a favorite bicycle, and the constant fear of discovery while hiding in the home of Christian friends. The book is the author's tribute to those courageous friends who helped her and others survive.

Zalben, Jane Breskin. *The Fortuneteller in 5B*. Henry Holt.

Eleven-year-old Alexandria Pilaf is grieving over the recent death of her father, when a mysterious new neighbor arrives. While pursuing the mystery, she experiences a painful revelation that leads to personal growth and the acceptance of her unique neighbor.

Older Children's Book Award Winners

Howard Schwartz is probably the foremost Jewish folklorist in the United States. He has been writing collections of Jewish folktales both alone and with Barbara Rush.

Four major collections were published by him: *Elijah's Violin and Other Jewish Fairy Tales*, *Miriam's Tambourine: Jewish Folktales from Around the World*, *Lilith's Cave: Jewish Tales of the Supernatural*, and, most recently, *Gabriel's Place*. He teaches at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, where he lives with his wife and three children.

Barbara Rush, who holds an M.L.S. and an M.A. in Jewish studies, is a storyteller and children's librarian from Commack, NY. She now lives in Durham, NC and Jerusalem, where she is on the staff of the Hebrew University. She has written several collections of Jewish folktales alone and with Howard Schwartz. Their latest joint venture is *The Sabbath Lion*. She wrote a book of tales of the Jews from Kurdistan with Baruch Rand, and is currently putting the finishing touches on a book of 75 Jewish women's tales, which will include analyses of each story.

Ms. Rush was an ALA (American Library Association) Book Fellow in Israel in 1992, working on the establishment and development of children's libraries there.

Remarks by Howard Schwartz

On behalf of Barbara Rush and Uri Shulevitz, who could not be here today, I would like to thank you for honoring our book, *The Diamond Tree: Jewish Tales from Around the World*, with the Sydney Taylor Book Award. We would also like to thank our publisher, HarperCollins, and our editors Toni Markiet and Judith Levin, for their support of the book. I would also like to thank my wife, Tsila, who is here with me tonight, and my children, Shira, Nathan, and Miriam, who have truly made *The Diamond Tree* a family project. As a St. Louisan, I would also like to thank our local Jewish librarian, Barbara Raznick, who has been wonderfully supportive in every respect.

Perhaps you would be interested in a little of the history behind *The Diamond Tree*. I trace its genesis to the CAJE conference held at Stanford University in 1984. My book *Elijah's Violin & Other Jewish Fairy Tales* had been recently sent to all CAJE members, along with a teaching book about it put together by Peninnah Schram, and everyone there knew it. And literally dozens of people came up to me and said: "You must do a book of stories like that for children!" I had met Barbara Rush in Israel and we became friends; I made the wise decision of asking her to work with me on such a children's book. And work we did. As Rita Frischer will attest, I dragged a not-so-portable computer with me everywhere I went working on those stories, which Barbara and I sent back and forth for ages.

In editing *The Diamond Tree*, we drew generously on the stories collected in the Israel Folktale Archives (IFA). This is an archive located in Haifa, founded by Professor Dov Noy of the Hebrew University, that has so far collected over 18,000 oral tales from every Jewish ethnic group in Israel. Almost half of the stories in *The Diamond Tree* were drawn from this archive, and from our perspective the IFA is something of a diamond tree itself. We are grateful to Professor Noy and to the other directors of the IFA, Professor Aliza Shenhar and Edna Hechal, for permitting us access to their archives, which I have also drawn upon generously in my other collections of Jewish folklore: *Elijah's Violin*, *Miriam's Tambourine*, and *Lilith's Cave*.

I would like to leave you with a little good news. Later this summer, HarperCollins will publish a picture book by the team of Schwartz and Rush: *The Sabbath Lion*, also based on a story we found in the IFA. And, if you can keep a secret, I thought you might like to know that before too long we will also be bringing out a sequel to *The Diamond Tree*, called *The Wonder Child*.

Thank you again from all of us for the wonderful award. We are deeply grateful for the honor you have brought to our book.

Uri Shulevitz is an internationally renowned award-winning author-illustrator of over 25 books. He has received the Caldecott Medal for illustration as well as the Christopher Award. He won the Bronze Medal at the Leipzig International Book Exhibition in 1970, and in 1980 his book *The Treasure* was chosen as a Caldecott Honor Book. Mr. Shulevitz's work has also been honored by the Society of Illustrators and the American Institute of Graphic Arts.

Letter of Acceptance by Uri Shulevitz

June 15, 1992

To love a book is to become part of its creation. I am delighted and honored that the Association of Jewish Libraries has expressed its feelings about *The Diamond Tree* by giving it the 1991 Sydney Taylor Book Award, and has thus joined Howard Schwartz, Barbara Rush, and myself in becoming a part of this book.

Based on my experience of working with Howard Schwartz on *Lilith's Cave: Jewish Tales of the Supernatural*, I anticipated quality material. I wasn't disappointed. The lively retelling of stories from different parts of the world and from different Jewish traditions offered a richness of subject matter hard to find in more homogeneous collections. It made illustrating *The Diamond Tree* an enjoyable experience. Thank you.