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# AJL Sydney Taylor Book Award Presentations, 1992

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## AJL Sydney Taylor Book Award Presentations, 1992\*

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### Introduction

Reading and reviewing the books submitted for consideration to the Sydney Taylor Awards Committee is a most exhilarating and challenging task. Books are received by the six reviewers over a period of months, and each arrival is gently taken out of its wrapping as one would unwrap a gift, for each book is truly a gift, a gift of its author, illustrator, publisher, and all the others who labored to give it life and present it to its readers.

We, the reviewers, uncover the layers and attempt to reach the soul of each book, to evaluate it to the best of our ability, according to the criteria established for us. We frequently diverge in our opinions, and so it is most important that we have an objective system by which to measure these opinions and reach a "verdict." At times, this is not easily done, as evidenced in 1992 in the tie for the prize in the picture book category. But more about this below.

In comparison with prior years, the crop of books published in 1991 and submitted to the Sydney Taylor Awards Committee was quite small. In light of our economic conditions, one should not find this fact surprising. In particular, the number of older children's books was low: only 13 out of a total of 34. Of these 13, more than half (seven) were in some way related to the subject of the Holocaust and, of those, four were truly excellent books.

*Hide and Seek*, by Ida Vos, describes the trials and tribulations that she and her family underwent in war-torn Holland. *Waiting for Anya*, by Michael Morpurgo, is a compelling book about the people of a small French town who shelter a band of Jewish children during the war. *The Fortuneteller in 5B*, by Jane Breskin Zalben, describes the difficult period in a child's

life when she attempts to deal with the loss of her father. This part of the book is intertwined with the old but still painful sorrow of a new neighbor's loss of family during the Second World War. Finally, there is a translation of a factual book, written originally in Hebrew by the well-known author Uri Orlev, entitled *The Man From the Other Side*. In this book one gets a peek at life outside the Warsaw ghetto and learns how those inside were viewed by their neighbors living a completely different life. In the older children's category there were also two good biographies, one about Hank Greenberg and one about Marc Chagall.

In the picture book category, a large portion of the books dealt with the holidays. Nine of the 21 books were about Purim, Pesah, Shabbat, and, of course, Hanukkah. There were four Hanukkah books! This is not surprising, because holiday books in general and Hanukkah books in particular are known to be good sellers. Kar-Ben Copies published an excellent book, *Like a Maccabee*, by Raymond A. Zwerin and Audrey Friedman Marcus. Gloria Teles Pushker's *Toby Belfer Never Had a Christmas Tree* is a very different kind of Hanukkah book, which explores the "December Dilemma."

Another popular category is books of tales. There was a book of Sholom Aleichem stories, tales of the Fools of Chelm, stories of King Saul and King David, Jewish stories from around the world, and more.

And so, when one describes the winners, it is natural that again a book of stories won in the older children's category: *The Diamond Tree: Jewish Tales from Around the World*, by the masters of this genre, Howard Schwartz and Barbara Rush, and beautifully illustrated by Uri Shulevitz, was the unanimous winner.

As was mentioned above, two very different books tied for the prize in the picture book category. *Cakes and Miracles: A Purim Tale*, by Barbara Diamond Goldin,

charmingly illustrated by Erika Weihs, intertwined the story and traditions of the holiday with the story of a blind boy, Hershel, who yearns and finally manages to be of help to his poor, hard-working mother. Here one also gets a glimpse at shtetl life, which was well presented in the book *Buba Leah and Her Paper Children*, by Lillian Hammer Ross. This is a sensitively told and beautifully illustrated chapter in the immigrant experience of long separations, arduous journeys, and, finally, joyous reunions.

The other book to win in the picture book category was *Daddy's Chair*, by Sandy Lanton, and most sensitively illustrated by Shelly O. Haas. This is a first prize for Kar-Ben Copies—and well deserved, for this publisher has achieved so much in Jewish children's book publishing. The book tells most poignantly of a child's loss of his father, and through this painful story, Jewish customs in death and mourning are presented to the young child.

While the award candidates for this year did not stand out in quantity, they surely did in terms of quality writing in Judaic children's books. One can only hope that the 20 or so publishers responsible for the 34 books evaluated will continue to produce good books in the future.

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*Michlean J. Amir has been a reviewer on the Sydney Taylor Awards Committee since 1989. In 1991 and 1992, she served as chairman of the Committee. Mrs. Amir has been Librarian of the Isaac Franck Jewish Public Library of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater Washington since 1987. Prior to holding that position, she worked as a Librarian at Johns Hopkins University. Mrs. Amir is a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary and holds an M.L.S. from Simmons College in Boston. She has been active in the Capital Area Chapter of the Association of Jewish Libraries and participated in the planning of the Convention held in Washington in 1989.*

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\*Awards presented at the Banquet of the 27th Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries, Los Angeles, June 23, 1992.