

Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award

Presentation by
Lillian Schwartz

The winning author of the Second Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition is E.M. Solowey of Kibbutz Ketura, Israel. Her manuscript, entitled Cubs of the Lion of Judah, was the unanimous and enthusiastic choice of our judges. It is the story of two Ethiopian children and their struggle in the desert, about love and caring and Jewish values during Operation Moses. I sent E.M. (not knowing if it was a male or female) an International Special Delivery letter informing her of the award. Two weeks later, I received a response. Elaine's letter conveys her feelings on winning the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition.

Letters from Elaine M. Solowey Kibbutz Ketura, Israel

Dear Ms. Schwartz,

Your letter of April 17th has made me very happy. Incidentally, it took only five days to reach me; this is very good considering the isolation of my settlement.

To answer your questions, I do not see how it will be possible for me to attend the banquet, though I would love to. I have never been fortunate enough to either win a prize of this sort or attend a banquet, and I am always glad of a new experience . . . but recently my husband and I adopted a baby girl. To be frank, she needs us very much at this point, and I do not feel that I can travel.

I shall find someone to attend for me, another member of my kibbutz, or a relative.

As to who and what I am . . . I was born in California in 1953 and came to Israel at the age of eighteen. Here I attended various agricultural seminars and became what we call a "matanikit," an orcharder. I also studied horticulture in California; it is a life-long interest with me.

I spent the troubled and frightening years before the Yom Kippur War on a border kibbutz in the Golan Heights. My kibbutz was shelled, rocketed, and generally harassed by the Syrians long before the attack. This experience hardened my Zionism.

I joined Kibbutz Ketura just four months after the kibbutz was founded. By this time, I was determined to go out and make the desert bloom—or something of the sort! I found the right place . . . Ketura had only thirteen scrawny trees in the perimeter of the kibbutz. Over the years, I have planted over twelve thousand more.

I met my husband Michael here and we were married in 1975. We have five sons and

one adopted daughter. My husband is currently a cook, but his main interests are the Mishnah and Jewish education. He teaches almost all the bar-mitzvah boys in the area, and often arranges their bar mitzvahs. These bear little resemblance to the sort of celebrations that take place in the United States, but are kibbutz-oriented and often involve the boy's entire class.

I am currently running an experimental orchard for Ben-Gurion University. It is without a doubt the most interesting work I have done.

I have written and published poetry in Israel and in the United States. Since 1980, I have been writing fiction.

When the first Ethiopian Jews came to Eilat, I had the good luck to meet with them and to speak with them. After hearing many of their stories, I was vibrating with wonder and pride in this branch of the Jewish people. It is unbelievable.

Miri's story is a composite of several experiences. The character of Shaul also has his basis in reality . . . though he does not resemble one specific person.

Well. That is the who, what, why in a nutshell.

Thank you very much, Mrs. Schwartz. I will write again.

Dear Ms. Schwartz,

It is good to hear from you. I am quite sure that I will have a representative. Her name is Sara Cohen, she is a young member of a settlement group to my kibbutz.

Even if my book is never published, I still have the satisfaction of knowing that it was read and appreciated. I suspect that most of my previous works and a good deal of poetry is regularly deposited in the circular files of many publishers—unread. This is very hard to bear as they could at least read it before they throw it away!

However, I do not give up easily. I couldn't and live where I do. The prize has encouraged me greatly and proved to me that I can compete with those who work with modern technology and modern resources. I will keep on writing and keep on trying, no matter what happens with my manuscript, so don't feel too badly if the "dream" doesn't come true. I know that you liked my work. That is the greatest prize of all.

You will surely agree that this award is going to an exceptional person.

Elaine Solowey's delegate, Sara Cohen, is almost family, the daughter of one of our favorite prize-winning authors, Barbara Cohen.

Remarks by Sara Cohen Kibbutz Ketura, Israel

When Elaine heard that she had won the prize, she was very excited, and all of us at Ketura shared her excitement. I wish that she could be here tonight, because I know she would have loved meeting you, as I'm sure you would have enjoyed meeting her. As you have heard, she is an amazing woman.

Elaine's book tells the story of an Ethiopian girl and her brother—how they arrive in Israel, and the problems they face once they're there. Because Elaine's novel discusses such an important subject, it is my profound hope that this book will be published.

If the manuscript needs editorial work, I am sure that Elaine will be willing to do that work. A woman who has planted 23,000 trees in Israel is no stranger to hard work.

The work I ask you to do is to see that an appropriate publisher is found for this manuscript. And now, Elaine's letter.

(Continued on next page)

Thank you very much for choosing my manuscript. Israel is a land full of amazing people and all of them have stories to tell. For many years I have been listening and making notes. I have heard folktales from all over the world, personal accounts of aliya that made me glow or made me shiver, and stories of incredible heroism.

I have always thought that someone should write these things down. However, I was never sure that I was the right someone.

The prize has encouraged me greatly. Not only is the money a compensation to the kibbutz which puts up with my scribbling, your interest in my manuscript has made me determined to keep listening and keep trying to put down what I have heard and experienced in novel form.

I believe that children are more impressed by a book they love and reread than by textbooks, lectures, or even television.

I know that was the case with me. This is the reason that I choose to write for children. . . . I want to convey a sense of time, place, adventure. But I do not want to lose the human and Jewish values that I believe in.

This is all that I want to say, except thank you again. I would very much have liked to attend the awards ceremony. But since I am not able to travel right now, for family reasons, I am lucky enough to have chaverim who can stand in my place. That is one of the advantages of living on a kibbutz.

Shalom, and thank you again,
from all of Kibbutz Ketura.



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