

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

AJL's Sydney Taylor Awards for Children's Literature*

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We are here tonight to honor books, especially Jewish children's books. During the past months, the members of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee have carefully read almost 50 books; that represents thousands of pages and probably millions of words. We began to dread the arrival of the mail and the UPS truck, for just when we thought that we had read our last book, another would arrive. We truly sought to leave no page unturned in our search for literary excellence, positive Jewish focus, authenticity, and accuracy.

I'd like to thank Rachel Glasser, Geraldine Powers, Annette Ratkin, Maureen Reister, and Sherri Rice for the timeliness, thoughtfulness, and quality of their reviews. They have done a superb job.

While a children's book award has been given for twenty years, it is only since 1979 that it has been awarded in the name of Sydney Taylor. Sydney Taylor was an accomplished woman—an actress, a dancer, a mother, a wife, a counselor, and a writer—but almost by accident. Her first stories were based on her own childhood, and were written to give her daughter a sense of family history. Her husband submitted them for publication, unbeknownst to her, and thus began almost thirty years of wonderful Jewish family stories.

*Remarks at the banquet of the 24th annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries, held in Washington, DC, June 20, 1989.

Like Sydney Taylor's books, many of the books the committee read this year dealt with the traditional values of family, love, and perseverance. Among the outstanding books for younger readers are Yaffa Ganz's *From Head to Toe: A Book About You*. It is a book about the body, which explains each system in clear and simple terms, and discusses each within the framework of Jewish values, observances, and relationship to God.

The Ark, by Arthur Geisert, is a meticulously illustrated retelling of the familiar Bible story. Simply told and beautifully illustrated with architectural-like drawings, this book will invite close scrutiny and will bring a smile to many a face.

If Little Bear and mice and rabbits can celebrate Christmas, why can't Beni the bear celebrate Hanukkah? *Beni's First Chanukah*, by Jane Breskin Zalben, takes Beni, a young bear, through holiday preparations and celebration with words and softly colored, detailed pictures.

For older readers, the committee has highlighted Jacqueline Dembar Greene's *Out of Many Waters*, which uses the genre of historical fiction to relate the seldom-told story of how the first Jews came to New Amsterdam.

Barry Cytron's *Fire! the Library is Burning* brings to life the story of the disastrous fire and rescue of thousands of books burned at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1966.

The Holocaust colors much of Jewish literature, as we can see from other outstanding books. In *David and Max*, Gary and Gail Provost have written a sensitive story of teenage David and Max, his grandfather, and the secret that Max, a Holocaust survivor, has kept for many years.

Milton Meltzer's *Rescue* chronicles how non-Jews risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. The use of first-hand sources makes this history come alive.

Comprehensive and passionate, Barbara Rogasky's *Smoke and Ashes* is a well organized, methodical, and comprehensive study of the Holocaust, enhanced by numerous thoughtfully chosen pictures.

Finally *Touch Wood*, Renee Roth-Hano's autobiographical novel, tells of the Roth family's three daughters, refugees from Alsace in occupied France, who found a haven in a Catholic women's residence in Normandy.

These and other books chosen from those submitted for consideration appear on the AJL list of "Jewish Children's Books Too Good To Miss."

Before I turn to our first honoree, I'd like to introduce two very special people. We are indeed fortunate to have with us tonight Ralph Taylor, Sydney Taylor's husband, and Henny Davis, one of the sisters so vividly portrayed in the Sydney Taylor books.

Aileen D. Grossberg, Librarian of Congregation Shomrei Emunah in Montclair, New Jersey serves as chairman of the AJL Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee for Children's Literature. She is also the Children's Librarian and Assistant Director of Elmwood Park Public Library in Elmwood Park, New Jersey.