

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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

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When this conference was first planned, the date seemed so far away. Now this event is a reality and the conference is almost over. The Sydney Taylor Awards are truly being given in Jerusalem this evening. I don't know if Sydney Taylor or her husband Ralph ever visited this unique country, but I'm sure that they would be both proud and approving of this evening's events. Unfortunately Ralph Taylor was unable to join us as he customarily does. However, I know that he is with us in spirit, and he will receive a full report and a tape-recording of the remarks when I return home.

Before the awards are presented, I'd like to thank the hard-working members of this year's Sydney Taylor Award Committee. As chairperson, I've tried to make this committee representative of who we are and reflect our common interests, as well as our diversities. We are, therefore, from the North and the South, the East and the West, and in between, too. Some of us work in schools; others work in synagogues. Some of us are volunteers; others make our livings by serving as Judaica librarians. Some of us are professionally trained; others are self-taught. Some of us are religious Jews; others are secularists. But we all share an interest and expertise in Jewish children's books. So, to Michlean Amir, Rachel Glasser, Laurie Herman, Gerry Powers, and Annette Ratkin – *todah rabah* for your hard work and dedication during the past year.

During this year you have evaluated scores of books and have written evaluations to share with your fellow committee members and the books' publishers. You are thoughtful and wise and dedicated librarians.

*Remarks at the 25th Anniversary Banquet of the Association of Jewish Libraries, held in Jerusalem in conjunction with the First International Conference of Judaica and Israeli Librarians, July 5, 1990.

How lucky we were to have so many books, that at times we were almost overwhelmed. It has not always been so. In my hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts there were few books for Jewish children. Several hundred Jewish families lived in this city of ninety thousand. In addition, there were two-and-a-half synagogues – one operated only on weekends – but little Jewish influence in the public schools or public library. Most of us children attended Hebrew School, Sunday School, or both. I loved to read, and spent many an afternoon at the library with the Five Little Peppers, Nancy Drew, the March sisters, and famous Americans. I don't think our public library had ever heard of Sadie Rose Weilerstein or Sydney Taylor.

How I wish that it had. I was fortunate that my parents bought Jewish books, so I did grow up with *K'Tonton* and *The Littlest New Angel*, and *Good Shabbos, Everyone*, which featured illustrations by a young and very much unknown artist whose name is today familiar to almost anyone who has an interest in children's books – Maurice Sendak. But how I wish that we had had Sydney Taylor! Those warm stories, those irrepressible girls, the loving family, the ability to laugh and live were missing from my Jewish reading experience. Only later was I able to enjoy them with my own children.

This brings me to the major point of the evening. We have named our award in honor of a writer who did not sacrifice quality for ethnicity. Sydney Taylor's first book received a Charles W. Follett award in 1951. And that first title has been in print, in both hardcover and softcover, for almost forty years. The values that those books stood for in the early 1950s are still the values that we proudly honor today.

Among new books that should be noted are several from Kar-Ben Copies. Kar-Ben has bravely and successfully begun to deal with today's issues. In *Grandma's Soup*, by Nancy Karkowsky, a young girl

confronts her grandmother's growing confusion due to Alzheimer's disease and is taught that Grandma, though she may change, will always be loved.

Mommy Never Went to Hebrew School, by Mindy Portnoy, looks at the issue of Jews by choice and suggests how to explain conversion to a young child.

Richard Rosenblum's *The Old Synagogue* shows the evolution of a neighborhood through the changes in the local synagogue, as it is transformed from a beloved place of worship to a factory to a place of worship again.

Outstanding for their design and artwork are *The Story of Hanukkah* and *The Four Questions*, illustrated by Ori Sherman, and Florence Mayers' *ABC: The Alef-Bet Book*, a cooperative effort of its publisher and the Israel Museum.

The Holocaust, as usual, makes an impact with David Adler's *We Remember the Holocaust*, which looks at that cataclysmic event through the words of young people who survived its ordeal. This year's award-winning book, *Number the Stars*, by Lois Lowry, also falls into this category.

Deserving special mention is *Does God Have a Big Toe?*, a collection of modern midrashim that are perfect as catalysts for discussion.

The Holocaust is also a definite presence in books for older readers. To be noted are Mark Bernheim's *Father of the Orphans*, a biography of Janusz Korczak; *Silver Days*, an autobiographical novel and sequel to *Journey to America*, by previous Sydney Taylor Award-winner Sonia Levitin; *Lisa's War*, by Carol Matas, which, like *Number the Stars*, tells the story of the Danish Jews; and *We Were Not Like Other People*, by Ephraim Sevela, which recounts the odyssey of a 12-year-old Jewish boy in the Russia of World War II.