

Sydney Taylor Book Award Acceptance Speeches

Berchick
Esther Blanc, Author
Tennessee Dixon, Illustrator
Picture Book Award Winners

Introduction by Aileen D. Grossberg

While many of our parents and grandparents were grappling with the problems of sweatshops, Els, and city noises, Esther Silverstein Blanc's family faced the unknown of wild animals and the open prairie. She grew up not as a city girl, but a homesteader in Wyoming, a Jewish Laura Ingalls Wilder. Mrs. Blanc, born in 1913 and raised in a Wyoming town of 2,000, was out of necessity bilingual (in English and Yiddish) by the age of five. Her father was a custom tailor who had tried his hand at homesteading. When times grew hard, he moved his family to town, where he lived for 65 years.

Although there were few Jews in the area, the Silverstein family enjoyed and retained its Jewishness. Her father donned tallit and tefillin daily, the holidays were celebrated, and her father prayed for peace and enough to eat. Her mother, about whom we shall hear later, was also a strong influence on Esther Silverstein Blanc and became the inspiration for Berchick.

Mrs. Blanc later moved to California, served in the Army Air Corps, completed a Ph.D. in the History of Medicine, and is still writing and learning.

It's been said that everyone has at least one book in her. Esther Silverstein Blanc, with Berchick, epitomizes that saying. Berchick is the story of a homesteading family, Mrs. Blanc's family – and especially of her mother, who had a way with animals. Berchick, a wild horse, becomes Mrs. Silverstein's special pet until the family, as mentioned above, moves to town.

This beautifully crafted story is enhanced by Tennessee Dixon's illustrations. Ms. Dixon based her drawings on old photographs, and achieved a soft, almost daguerreotype feeling.

Tennessee Dixon is a freelance illustrator who lives in New York City. She has done editorial work for newspapers and magazines, in addition to creating portrait and book covers. While Berchick is her first book, she has others in progress. In addition, Ms. Dixon makes one-of-a-kind books and related objects.

Neither Esther Blanc nor Tennessee Dixon is able to join us tonight; however, they have both graciously sent remarks that they wish to share with you. I shall read Tennessee Dixon's. John Thorne, Mrs. Blanc's great nephew will accept the award on behalf of his aunt.

Remarks prefaced by John Thorne

Esther Blanc is actually my great aunt, not just my aunt. She's also a wonderful woman and a great lover and collector of books. She couldn't be here tonight, so she sent me this speech. So imagine that I'm my sweet little great aunt.

Remarks by Esther Blanc

It is in a state of humble gratitude that I say "thank you" to the persons who are responsible for this award being given to me.

I would like to say a most special "thank you" to Ruth Gottstein, the publisher of Volcano Press, and to everyone involved in producing such an elegant setting for Berchick.

What can one say in gratitude to Tennessee Dixon, whose charming and thoughtful illustrations bring the story to life? I thank you, Tennessee, from the depths of my heart.

I have been asked to tell you whatever I choose about my life, and I have chosen to tell you about my parents and my mother's mother, who came to America from Rumania to find a better life for their children.

They lived in Philadelphia for awhile, and in Pittsburgh for a short period, and [then] my father decided that he would homestead "out West." He did become a homesteader in Goshen County, Wyoming, brought my mother and my grandmother from Pittsburgh, and began to have built a fine sod house, chicken coops, a barn, [and] an outside toilet. A well was dug. The water was cold in summer and it did not freeze in winter. It had a most delicious taste. He kept a tailor shop in town, eleven miles away in Nebraska. I was the second child to be born there in 1913. We had neighbors, all Jews.



Esther Silverstein Blanc

For the first years of my life, everyone around us were Jews. I was bilingual at age five. Every day, Mother read to us from the *Jewish Daily Forward*, which was delivered by the Rural Free Delivery Service of the United States Post Office.

School was conducted in a one-room schoolhouse with all eight grades. All the students were Jewish, and during the High Holidays the schoolhouse became the *shul*.

As the years went by the Jewish families went away so that the children could go to high school, to *heder*, and have violin lessons.

We moved to Mitchell, Nebraska, into a nice house with indoor plumbing. I missed our sod house. It was cool in the summer and warm in the winter. My dear grandmother died, and we were the only Jewish family in our town of 2,000 persons. At home, there were many changes. We bought milk and cream and butter at the local creamery, but Mama still lighted the Sabbath candles and made chicken soup on Friday, we kept all the Jewish holidays, and Papa dressed in his great tallis and tefillin, and said his morning prayers in front of the dining room window.

Years went by. Eventually I graduated from high school. My older sisters had gone to San Francisco and I joined them, and became a graduate nurse in 1934.

I have had a varied and checkered career. Richard, my husband of 45 years, died in 1986. Now I keep myself occupied by reading and writing and small domestic duties.

Berchick was written in 1972 for a change of pace, while I was writing a dissertation for my Ph.D. in the History of Medicine. Eventually it was published. My mother had an almost magical way with animals, and *Berchick* really lived almost as described in the book.

For the last four years I have been busy reading about the history of 19th-century biology. My concentration is on Charles Darwin and his contemporaries. I have also completed a play about a nurse and wars, largely drawn from my own experiences in the Spanish Civil War and the United States Army Nurse Corps during the Second World War.

Again, may I say that being given this award has a special meaning for me, because being Jewish has been an important part of my life.

Remarks by Tennessee Dixon

Thank you all for recognizing *Berchick*. It's an honor to receive this award, unexpected and encouraging.

I'd like to say a little about how I got into this book project and about some of the

research that went into it. This project started for me when David Charleson, the designer, introduced me to Ruth Gottstein, the publisher, who had a story by Esther Blanc waiting to be illustrated.

I'd never done a children's trade book before. I'd been doing mainly editorial work and children's educational illustration, along with a steady stream of tiny drawings of furniture and toys for one local business. So it was a surprise to get this job. And it was my delight to get this story, because I love that region of the country and that period of American history, and horses have been a big part of my life since I was six.

It was a perfect match.

I soon met Esther. We sat together one afternoon and I asked a lot of questions about the farm, her family, the horses, and details of their daily life. She told me stories but she showed me no photographs, because she wanted the drawings to come from my imagination.

Because *Berchick* is a historical story, elaborate research is essential. I want the pictures to be believable, to feel right, and to pass on accurate information. There were many details for me to investigate. I like information as firsthand as it comes, so that fall I took a trip to Wyoming and Nebraska to collect more ideas to work with.

I really liked doing the research. I got immersed in it, and it was only the print-

ing schedules that put limits on the time for researching. Soon books got piled high, as did lots of photos and magazines. I wrote down descriptions and made little sketches of ideas. In turn, the initial drawings got taped all over my walls – all over my brain. During this time, the story started to grow up beyond the words and details got filled in.

The farm in *Berchick*, for example, I've looked at from all different perspectives: from the north, from the east looking west, from above, in the rain, at night, from inside the house looking out the windows – how many windows are there?

The characters come in and I follow them around while they eat, walk in and out of doors, milk the cows, collect cow chips for the stove – always aware what direction town is in, where *Berchick* is, and what day it is. Eventually it is so familiar that the story starts to tell itself back to me and the finished pictures come out.

It's a memory now that has been fed by all the conversations, readings, photos, and by all the interactions I happened to stumble upon in the making of these pictures. In the end I don't consider them my illustrations. I think of them as *the* illustrations, helped along the way by everyone involved: Esther, the author; Ruth, the editor and publisher; Kathy Krull and Dahlia Hartman, who helped begin; my models; and many others. And helped by all of you and your appreciation of the book and, of course, by *Berchick* and Mama and Me. Thank you.



Tennessee Dixon
Self-portrait

Number the Stars

Lois Lowry, Children's Book Award Winner

Introduction by Aileen D. Grossberg

Stars are not unknown to Lois Lowry. Her numerous books have received many starred reviews from respected journals, such as Booklist and School Library Journal. Since her first book in 1977, A Summer to Die, loosely based upon her sister's death from cancer as a young woman, Lois Lowry's books have appeared on numerous best-book lists and have been honored with awards from the International Reading Association, Boston Globe – Horn Book, International Books for Young People (whose Soviet representative joined us earlier this week), The American Booksellers Association, and most recently, the Jewish Book Council, with its National Jewish Book Award, and the American Library Association, with the John Newbery Medal. In fact, when I phoned Ms. Lowry to tell her of the Sydney Taylor Award, she was recording her Newbery acceptance speech. Lois Lowry is unable to be with us tonight, as she is in Alaska talking about what else but. . . books.

Lois Lowry grew up with books and taught herself to read by age 4. As a child, she lived with her family all over the world, from the Far East to Hawaii to Pennsylvania. She attended Brown University but left to marry, and by the age of 25 was the mother of four. Eventually that marriage broke up and Ms. Lowry received a degree from the University of Maine.

Before she began writing fiction for children, she worked with children as a professional photographer and textbook writer. Since the success of her first novel, A Summer to Die, she has continued to create memorable characters. Lois Lowry has the ability to create unique characters like Anastasia Krupnik and her precocious brother Sam. She can enter her characters' minds and depict realistic relationships, and through her fiction helps teenagers answer their questions about life, identity, and human relations.

Number the Stars, the book that we honor tonight, is a fine piece of historical fiction set in Nazi-occupied Denmark of 1943. While the Occupation provides the impetus for the action, the story's focus is the relationship, the trust, and the friendship of Annemarie Johansen and her Jewish best friend, Ellen Rosen. Through the Johansens' friendship with the Rosens, lives are saved.

This is really a simple story with a simple plot. Indeed, it is that very simplicity that makes this book memorable. The characters come alive. As Lois Lowry herself has said about writing, "Your story – your plot – your theme – is only a portion of the lives of the characters you have created. Their lives, if you have made them real to the reader, are going to continue in the reader's mind."

We honor Number the Stars and its author Lois Lowry for her ability to make Ellen and Annemarie continue in our minds and to make us care about them and their future.

Remarks by Lois Lowry

How small the world seems. How amazing it seems, for an American author – who is actually in Alaska this July – to receive, in Jerusalem, an award for a book about Denmark.

But how fitting, as well – because the world has grown smaller than it was in 1943, the year that was the setting for *Number the Stars*. That long-ago fall, the fall that the Danish Jews were saved, the longest distance in the universe seemed that little strip of water they had to cross in order to escape.

Today, a tourist can cross that same strip of water by ferry. No one even asks to see your passport. When I was in Copenhagen doing research for the book, I sat in an outdoor café briefly, and began talking to the people at the next table. I assumed, of course, that they were Danish. But they were Swedes – just over for an afternoon's outing. They would be home by dinner-time.



Lois Lowry
Photo by Amanda Smith

Number the Stars was partially completed by then, and I couldn't help reflecting, as I sat there sipping coffee on a sunny afternoon, on the chapter I had just written: the chapter where the Rosen family, in the perilous darkness of an October night, climbs into the hiding place below the deck of a fishing boat, in order to be taken to freedom.

It was difficult, relaxing there among happy people of all nationalities, to believe that it had actually happened.

Yet that night, in another part of Copenhagen, I sat in a small apartment with a Danish woman in her seventies and listened to her tell of the events in 1943. Her memories were vivid. They were angry. And they were very filled with pride.

Many accounts have been written about that time and that place: first-person accounts from those who were saved, and those who risked their lives to save them. But when I sought them out in Boston, I found them not on the well-used shelves of my library, but in the basement of that building, in a corner of a back room.

What's wrong here? I thought, as I looked at the card in the back of each book and observed that they hadn't been checked out for decades. Why are the Danielle Steel novels upstairs peppered with check-out dates – and yet here are accounts of heroism, honor, and history, unread?



I don't have an answer for that. But I did try to find a remedy, and it was with the publication of *Number the Stars*. I can tell you that now schoolchildren all over the United States and Great Britain – because it has recently been published there – are reading my fictionalized account of the way the Danish people saved their Jewish population. Soon it will be published in Sweden, as well.

And they are responding – I know this from the letters I receive almost daily – with admiration for the integrity of Denmark, something they hadn't known of before, and with questions. What happened afterward? What happened to Ellen Rosen and her family?

The Ellen Rosens of the world are grandmothers now, as I am. One of them, smuggled out of Denmark in a fishing boat when she was ten, is the wife of a Chicago lawyer. Her family has written me. Others are in Israel, in Sweden, in Denmark.

They may live next door to you, I write back to the children who ask. They may be in the house down the street.

Because the world now is, indeed, that small and that changed. It is not yet, unfortunately, permeated with the kind of understanding and courage that the Danes showed the world in 1943.

But it is populated by the children who will shape the future. It is for those children that I wrote this book.

It is on behalf of them, and the future, that I am very honored to accept this award.

*The Association of Jewish Libraries accepts, with gratitude,
the endowment of the Sydney Taylor Book and Manuscript Awards
by Sydney Taylor's husband, Ralph Taylor.*

AJL Sydney Taylor Body-of-Work Award

Yaffa Ganz, Body-of-Work Award Winner

Introduction by Aileen D. Grossberg

This is a special year for the Association of Jewish Libraries, for not only are we meeting in Jerusalem, one of whose sights is the Shrine of the Book, but we are also presenting the first body-of-work award in several years. The recipient is an author born and educated in the United States, living in Israel, and writing in English. How small the world seems at times.

Yaffa Ganz is the recipient of the Sydney Taylor Award for the totality of her writing – both fiction and non-fiction. She writes for a traditional audience, but her books appeal to a cross-section of Jewish readers with their humor, honesty, and imagination. Yaffa Ganz was born in Chicago and attended the University of Chicago. In 1964 she moved to Jerusalem with her husband, Rabbi Avraham Ganz.

From 1980 to 1989, Mrs. Ganz was the founding editor of the Young Readers Division at Feldheim Publishers in Jerusalem and New York. During her tenure with Feldheim, she was responsible for the publication of more than sixty books. She has also written close to 200 articles and stories for both children and adults. She has, in addition, done a series of experimental programs for Israeli Educational Television, and published a Jerusalem series for young children with Behrman House. She has recently begun to publish books with Art Scroll Mesorah.

Yaffa Ganz is best known, however, for her juvenile books. Twenty-five have been published in English, five have been translated into Hebrew, three into French, and two into German. Five more books are in production.

Mrs. Ganz, a traditional Jew whose books reflect her background, has created vivid characters who have broad appeal to Jewish readers of all backgrounds. Savta Simcha – called the Jewish Mary Poppins – is a favorite.

Yaffa Ganz's young characters, like Mimmy and Simmy and Heidi and Jeremy Levy, are similar to children everywhere, and her moral tales are marked with humor and understanding. Her works of non-fiction explain Jewish concepts such as the lunar year, the Jewish view of the human body, and respect for the world and nature.

This enthusiastic writer wants to get children to read Jewish material, and she has succeeded. Let me give you an example: Some years ago, a father and his young daughter came into the public library where I worked. They were new in the community and knew little about it or the library's book collection. We began to talk, and the father soon mentioned that his little girl's favorite book was Savta Simcha and the Incredible Shabbos Bag. Now, that public library did not own this book, but the local synagogue where I was librarian did. And thus began a fond relationship between a family, a synagogue, and its library. That little girl was just an ordinary child from a not particularly observant Jewish family, but Savta Simcha had captured her.

To quote Yaffa Ganz:

The world of the Jew and his Torah is the unending story of Man, the Divine, and the wondrous world we live in. Bringing even a tiny bit of this vast wealth, wisdom, or beauty to light, especially to a Jewish child . . . This is my task; from this do I derive my pleasure; in this do I delight. And may I add, I work very hard at getting it all down on paper.

Yaffa Ganz, your hard work has borne fruit. You have brought that wealth, wisdom, and beauty to light, and for this we honor you with the Sydney Taylor Body-of-Work Award.

Remarks by Yaffa Ganz

Books

We Jews have a special affinity to books and the printed word. It stems, of course, from our special relationship with the Book of Books, our Torah, and from the Word of G-d, which we, as the Chosen people, were privileged to hear at the foot of Mt. Sinai long ago, and which was then handed down to us carved on tablets of stone.

In the very beginning of the book of Joshua, first chapter, seventh verse, just as the Jews were about to enter the Land of Israel and begin a more normal existence as a nation in their own land, G-d tells them:



Yaffa Ganz
Photo by Karen Benzian

This Book of the Torah shall not leave your lips; you shall ponder it day and night in order to observe and do all that is written in it, for then you shall succeed in all your endeavors, and you shall be wise.

Since then, Jews and their books have been an inseparable team.

One of my fondest and most vivid memories of grammar school was the time our class went on a trip to the neighborhood public library. It was the first time I had ever been in a public library, and the sight of so many books, neatly stacked on low shelves, just waiting to be read, left me trembling with anticipation. The yellow, hand-stamped library card I received that day became one of my most precious childhood possessions.

For me, it was the beginning of a long-standing love affair with libraries and books, particularly with juvenile books. Even now, the sight of stacks in a library leaves me feeling a bit intoxicated; a new book in hand is always a delight to be savored; and a new *juvenile* book is always the beginning of a fresh, eager journey into Never-Never Land.

Jewish Books

When, on various occasions, it was suggested to me that I write for the general market instead of limiting myself to Jewish children, I admit that, once or twice, I was tempted to try my luck. But then that *pin-*

tele yid, that tiny spark which resides in every Jewish soul, started piping up, "But why? Why not write for your own?"

Why indeed? It was a good question. I thought of the tens of thousands of authors writing for the general market and of the thousands of general juvenile books published every year. And I asked myself: How many Jewish writers are there producing Jewish material for our kids? The answer was: Very few.

So I remained in my own backyard, and I discovered that it was so enormous, it would take me years of hard work to cultivate yesterday's and today's ideas, let alone the ones which might sprout tomorrow.

And I came to the conclusion that if I succeed in bringing even a small measure of the wonder, wealth and wisdom, the beauty, joy, and truth of the Torah to a Jewish child through one of my books, the fruits of my harvest will be bountiful indeed.

Thank You

But no one produces a book alone. Therefore, I feel that I am accepting the Sydney Taylor Award this evening for an entire group of people, all of whom were involved in the publication of my books: for the illustrators and graphic artists I have been privileged to work with; for the editors and proofreaders and platemakers and printers, each of whom

leaves his or her imprint on the finished product; and of course for my two publishers, Feldheim and ArtScroll Mesorah, both of which do their utmost to ensure a good, a beautiful, a quality book.

A very special and loving thank you to my long-suffering children and sister, who are often required to hear a story in fifteen different versions or drafts until the "baby" is finally born. Yet, somehow, their excitement and enthusiasm at the appearance of each new book is spring-fresh and dewy.

They say that behind every great man there stands a woman, but in my case, behind every book there stands a great man – my husband. His is to edit, encourage, suggest, support, and serve as an instant source of information – my own personal encyclopedia. The rabbis tell us not to enumerate all of a person's good qualities in his presence. Since my husband is here this evening, suffice it to say that I am enormously indebted, deeply grateful, and very fortunate.

Ve-aḥaron aḥaron ḥaviv – last, but most certainly not least – my heartfelt thanks to Ralph Taylor, Marcia Posner, Aileen Grossberg, and all of the other wonderful people in the AJL. The Sydney Taylor Award they have so graciously awarded me will undoubtedly put a wider pair of wings on my books, helping them to fly a bit further, reach a few more Jewish readers, and touch a few more Jewish hearts. Thank you very much.



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