

## Sydney Taylor Book Award Acceptance Speeches

### *The Chanukkah Guest* Eric A. Kimmel, Author Giora Carmi, Illustrator Picture Book Award Winners

#### Introduction by Sue Barancik

One book stood out from the picture books we reviewed because of its unique text and the quality of its illustrations; a book well matched, a shidekh. *The Chanukkah Guest* tells the story of 97-year-old Bubba Brayna, hard of hearing and lacking in vision, who is busily preparing a delicious Hanukkah feast of latkes for her shtetl neighbors, including the village rabbi. When the rabbi arrives a little early, he certainly has terrible manners, gobbling up the latkes, knocking over the nuts for the dreidel game, shaking his snowy fur coat all over the clean house. But we the readers can clearly see what Brayna can't—her visitor is a bear.

Eric Kimmel is the author of this funny, appealing story—the third book he has written about Hanukkah, making him the Menorah Maven. Last year, Eric's book, *Hershel and the Hanukah Goblins*, illustrated by Trina Scharf Hyman, was a Caldecott Honor Book. In this book, he continued the droll tales begun in *Hershel of Ostropol*, published by the Jewish Publication Society.

A resident of Portland, Oregon, Mr. Kimmel is Professor of Education at Portland State University, and has received several pres-

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Treseder, Terry Walton. *Hear O Israel: A Story of The Warsaw Ghetto*. Atheneum.

A boy describes life in the Warsaw Ghetto and his family's ultimate transfer to and extermination at Treblinka.

Weissenberg, Fran. *The Streets Are Paved with Gold*. Harbinger House.

Fourteen-year-old Debbie Gold and her school and family life in Brooklyn during the 1920s are the subject of this novel, the winner of the 1988 Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award. [See *Judaica Librarianship* vol. 4 no. 2 (1989), pp. 174–175.—Ed.]

+ Honor Book

\*Winner of Sydney Taylor Award

tigious awards in his state for contributions to reading and literacy. He has published over a dozen books and is gathering increased recognition for his work. He is accompanied to our conference by his wife, Doris, his mother from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and his brother from New York, who are sharing this simḥah [happy occasion] with him.

Giora Carmi, the illustrator of *The Chanukkah Guest*, also illustrated Eric Kimmel's book, *The Chanukah Tree*, and a book on Japanese folklore, forthcoming in September. Although they have collaborated on three books, this is the first time the two men have met or even talked! Mr. Carmi grew up in Israel, attended the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem, and illustrated fifteen books in Israel. He is the author-illustrator of *And Shira Imagined*, a book about a child's trip to Israel. He, his wife, and three children moved to Briarwood, New York, in 1985, where he has continued to illustrate books as well as draw editorial cartoons.

We are proud to salute *The Chanukkah Guest*, by Eric Kimmel, illustrated by Giora Carmi, published by Holiday House, as the recipient of our Sydney Taylor Picture Book Award.

#### Remarks by Eric A. Kimmel

This is a happy occasion for me for several reasons. My mother, my brother, and my wife are able to be here tonight. It's too bad all my other relatives in Florida seem to be out of town this week, so they can't be here. That's okay. They never buy the books either.

What is also a pleasure is finally having the opportunity to meet Giora Carmi, who will have illustrated three of my books as of this fall. A large part of whatever merit they have is the result of his talent and insight. I hope this will be the first of many honors we'll share.

I was asked to prepare some brief remarks—something along the line of literary after-dinner mints: stimulating without being overly filling. This puts me in mind of an episode that occurred when I was a graduate student at the University of Illinois. The Israeli students and their families asked me—who knows why?—to lead their seder. "Now look, Arik," they said (for some reason they were always confusing me with General Sharon), "We don't want to be here all night. You don't have to read everything. Skip! Skip!"

So I did. Except that the first time I tried leaving something out, what happened? "You aren't going to do that? Why not? It's the best part!" It continued like that through the entire seder. Whatever was left out went right back in. And what was the verdict? "That was great! Why can't we do it this way every year?"

So I hope these remarks will be like that seder. Maybe not the whole megillah, but at least the Haggadah.

Why does a writer like myself write Jewish books? It's not for the money. I. L. Peretz did legal work for the Warsaw Community Council to pay his bills. Sholem Aleichem, writing day and night, was never more than a few payments away from bankruptcy, thanks to publishers who thought paying royalties to an author was a *treyf* [not Kosher] idea. Abraham Reisen had to hawk his books of poetry to the audiences at his readings to get carfare home—and he frequently didn't get it!

It isn't for honor either. We call ourselves "The People of the Book." That's because we respect books, but not necessarily those who write them.

***The Lady at the Jewish Book Fair***  
(A Dramatic Scene)

*"Oy, such a lovely book! My grandchildren would love it. How much costs this book? Oy! So much! For such a little book! Hmm. Maybe you got it in paperback? No. If I buy two, maybe you give a discount. Also no. Hmm. I have to think about it. Good luck with your career."*

I shouldn't complain. Consider the case of *Mosheh Rabenu*, the greatest Jewish author of all time. What did he find waiting for him when he came down from Mount Sinai? Twelve tribes of critics—600,000 of them—each one intent on revising, editing, improving the original manuscript!

An anecdote about the Hasidic *rebbe* Mendel of Kotzk aptly sums up the lot of the Jewish author. To his Hasidim who asked him to write a book he responded this way:

*"I should write a book! And if I did so, who would read it? The goyim? The misnagdim? Some other rebbe's Hasidim? Of course not! My Hasidim are the only ones who would read it. And what sort of people are my Hasidim? Simple, hardworking people. When do they have time to read a book? Only one day—Erev Shabbos. Now picture this—it is Friday night. My Hasid comes home from shul. He eats a fine Shabbos dinner, drinks a few glasses of wine. He takes off his shoes, lies down on the couch. Now he can read his rebbe's book. But what happens? He has worked hard all week, his stomach is full, the wine starts to go to his head. He turns one page, maybe another. His eyes close, the book drops to the floor. He snores. In another minute he is fast asleep."*

**"FOR THIS I SHOULD WRITE A BOOK?"**

So why do we write Jewish books when we know, even before we put that first word on paper, that we can expect little *koved* [honor] and less "gelt"?

I can only speak for myself, but other writers will say the same things. I do it for that long, loose-limbed, gangly ranch kid in Eastern Oregon, with the sunburned face and buck teeth, who reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a dreidel. "This is my favorite game," he told me. "My teacher taught us how to play it after

she read your book to us. Me and my brothers play it all the time when we go out after the cattle 'cause my dad don't like us to play cards. I know all these letters, too—*shin, nun, gimel, hay.*"

I do it for the Southeast Asian children in Portland who come up after my talk to share with me some of the songs, tales, and games of Cambodia and Vietnam. "You should write these down because we can't find them in any books," they tell me. To which I answer, "No, not me. You're the ones who have to write them down." To which they confidently reply, "Okay. We will."

I do it for the little boy in Battle Ground, Washington, and the little girl in Olathe, Kansas, and the brother and sister in Janesville, Wisconsin, who slipped up beside me after my talk, grasped my hand, and whispered like little Marranos, "Are you Jewish? So am I!"

However, when all is said and done, I do it most of all for a seven-year-old boy in Brooklyn, New York, many years ago—the middle fifties, to be exact—who one day discovered a wonderful book about five sisters who lived with Mama and Papa on the Lower East Side—just across the bridge—who lit Shabbos candles and spun dreidels and built sukkahs and had seders. It was a revelation. So Dick and Jane didn't rule the world after all!

The little boy was of course myself, and the book, *The All-of-a-Kind Family*, by Sydney Taylor.

I am tremendously honored to accept this award named after a writer whose books meant so much to me. I hope my books will do the same for the children of today, Jewish and non-Jewish, who will grow up to write their own stories.

Many colors. One rainbow.

Thank you.

**Remarks by Giora Carmi**

Dear friends,

When I heard about the award, I could not avoid comparing myself to Bubba Brayna in the book. Like her, I strain my eyes to see, and stretch my hearing to the limit. Yet I don't seem to be able to perceive how things turn out to be the way they are. So I don't really know why I received the award.

Nevertheless I am happy to accept it, and as a way of thanking you I would like to tell you a little about how the illustrations were done.

Reading the story, I felt that in order to illustrate it properly it was necessary to go and live in Bubba Brayna's village for a while. But since the place is imaginary I could not go there myself. I had to send an imaginary illustrator to do the job for me. He did a better job than I could have done. Being imaginary enabled him to cross boundaries and see beyond the outward appearance of things. He could feel and identify with what these things had inside of them.

I watched him while he worked. When he drew the bear he walked like one. When Bubba Brayna baked latkes, he joined the scent of the latkes and floated with it in the air. And he laughed as if he were being tickled when the melting snow tickled the roof of the house.

He respected the life in everything he saw. While drawing, he tried not to fix the figures to the paper, but only to show their shapes and let them live on the page. Between the lines of the story he found good-natured humor and tried to convey it in his work. If you were to ask me whether I know how to do all these things I'd tell you I don't, but as he seemed to know what he was doing, I trusted him to finish the job all by himself.

When I thank you now, it is on his behalf. He would like to thank the imaginary people that you have inside of you, who can look at a few brown and yellow patches on a flat page, and make a bear out of them. And he would like to thank all the people who helped make it possible for this book to materialize—the author, of course, and all the wonderful people from Holiday House who let me, and the imaginary illustrator inside of me, participate in this venture.

Thank you very much.