

# CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

## Association of Jewish Libraries Book Award for Children's Literature\*

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"And the winner is . . ." Whether it's the Academy Awards or the Tony, Newbery or National Book Awards, there's always an air of excitement when those deemed to have achieved most in a creative art are awarded accolades for their accomplishments. The Association of Jewish Libraries Book Award, although it may not have the clout of a Caldecott, the golden glow of the Oscar, or generate the increased sales of a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, does bring honor and happiness to authors, editors and publishers.

There we were on the evening of June 21, 1983, in the Grand Ballroom of the Queen Mary. Dinner was over, welcoming speeches given, and the awards ceremony began. Although the two honored writers had known of their awards for several months, eliminating the element of suspense, they still sat there on the edge of their seats waiting for their names to be called. One of the prize winners, Marilyn Sachs, had a lengthy history of writing, speaking, and award accepting; the other, Linda Heller, with fewer years of experience at her craft, was worried about making her first public speech.

As I made my presentations to these two women, my mind could not help but wander back to the year's activities leading to this evening. First of all, I needed a committee of AJL members interested in children's literature and willing to take on the responsibilities of such a position. Committee members had to be able to read books with a critical, evaluative eye; and most importantly, to put these opinions down cogently, concisely and clearly. To read well is one aspect; to write well is something else. To be able to hand in reviews on time is yet another qualification!

It's ideal, and really essential, to have a committee representing a cross section of Judaic librarians with differing

religious perspectives, geographic settings, and library facilities. The group that had declared Sachs and Heller their favorites consisted of synagogue librarians from Rochester, New York, Toledo, Ohio, and Evansville, Indiana; a day school librarian from Kansas City; and a professional book reviewer and children's literature expert from New York.

Just what kind of books are eligible for AJL awards? Let me explain. Plainly and simply, they must have Judaic content. But what does that mean? If the twelve-year-old heroine's name is Jill Levinson and her distraught mom walks around, eyes to the ceiling, saying "Oi vey," does "this a Jewish book make?" On the other hand, are we only looking for books that are strictly about Jewish holidays, customs, and commandments? No to both questions. Speaking to the first example, if a Jewish name or Yiddish expression constitutes the entire Jewish content, then we won't consider the book — no matter how well written and absorbing the tale. "Jill Levinson" has to be involved in Jewish activities so that the reader can identify with her and learn more about his or her own Judaism. And books about Jewish customs and concerns are definitely considered — and are indeed sought after — but there must be quality to the work. A list of rabbinical injunctions or a poorly contrived artificial attempt at writing a Jewish story won't win favor. We need carefully crafted works with fully developed, believable characters.

The criteria sent to publishers that might have eligible books are as follows:

1. The book has general literary merit.
2. The book has a definite, positive Jewish focus.
3. The book is suitable in style, vocabulary, format and illustrations for the designated age level of the reader.

4. Whether fiction or non-fiction, the book is solidly rooted in thorough and accurate scholarship and research, and features authentic detail.

It doesn't matter whether the action takes place in the tenements of turn-of-the-century New York, the Warsaw Ghetto in the early 1940's, or Long Island in the 1980's, as long as the characters are enthusiastic or questioning or even negative about their Judaism — if a positive resolution is made during the course of the story.

The chairman sends publishers requests for their books; the committee reads and reviews them; the chairman collects the reviews and redistributes them among the members for comparison; and the decision(s) is/are reached. From one award we have evolved to three possible annual awards.

From the first AJL award in 1968 to Esther Hautzig for *The Endless Steppe* until the 1977 award to Anita Heyman for *Exit from Home*, one book per year was selected as the most distinguished contribution to Jewish children's literature. In 1978, under the chairmanship of Rita Frischer, the Sydney Taylor Body-of-Work award was established to honor authors who had contributed considerably to our literature with a large volume of books for Jewish children. Sydney Taylor, who won the hearts of children with her All-of-a-Kind-Family series, was the appropriate choice to receive the first award given in her name. Mr. Taylor accepted the award for his deceased wife. Other winners of the Body-of-Work award have been Marilyn Hirsh, Sadie Rose Weilerstein, and Barbara Cohen.

When Hazel Karp was chairman of the Book Award Committee in 1981, it was decided to add a third award. Because the quantity and quality of Jewish children's books had so marvelously

increased, it was considered desirable to give separate recognition to picture books. Barbara Cohen received the first picture book award for her charming Yom Kippur folktale, *Yussel's Prayer*.

Our five committee members, having evaluated the forty-two entries for the 1982 citations, had to come to some decisions. It was soon obvious that Marilyn Sachs and Linda Heller were garnering the most points with their stories of immigration to America, *Call Me Ruth* and *Castle on Hester Street*, albeit by different approaches and formats. There was also strong support for Barbara Cohen's *King of the Seventh Grade*, Cohen's *Gooseberries to Oranges*, Lois Ruby's short story collection, *Two Truths in My Pocket*, and Johanna Hurwitz's *The Rabbi's Girls*.

After serious consideration of several authors, the committee could not reach a decision as to who should be the recipient of the AJL Body-of-Work Award, and it was decided that the prize would not be awarded this year.

Why do we bother to give these awards? Does it really matter to the librarian or teacher, the author or publisher? Could an award by such a small group as ours really count in the enormous publishing world? I say yes! Presenting these awards indicates that we, as Judaic librarians, are concerned about the quality of children's books, and that we require and desire better books to help us with our work as synagogue or school librarians. It prompts the small religious press to work constantly on improving the quality of its offerings. As for general, secular publishers, notice of our awards indicates that there is a concerned body of people imploring them to seek out authors and books with a Jewish story to tell. If we buy these books for our libraries, gift shops, or ourselves, we indicate the value of publishing books on Jewish subjects. The shiny gold seal on winning books is not only a professional recognition to the publisher but an economic one too.

As my new committee and I tackle the new crop of books in anticipation of next June's award banquet, we'll be looking for those books that speak to us as librarians and educators, as caring Jews, and as People of the Book. See y'all in Atlanta next year.

*\*Reflecting upon the Book Awards Banquet of the 18th Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries held in Long Beach, California, June 21, 1983, where awards were granted for the best children's picture book and best book for older children.*

## Jewish Children's Books Too Good to Miss: Selected List of 1982 Contenders

### ASSOCIATION OF JEWISH LIBRARIES BOOK AWARD COMMITTEE

#### Pre-school through Grade Three

Adler, David. *Picture Book of Hanukkah; Picture Book of Passover*. Holiday House. The books present historical information in a readable, enjoyable format with colorful illustrations by Linda Heller.

Gogot, Howard. *Books Are Treasures; I Learn About God; I'm Growing; Yoni*. Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC). A preschool series which is gentle, informative, and positive in its approach to Judaism.

Cohen, Barbara. *Gooseberries to Oranges*. Lothrop, Lee & Shepard. Tell's the story of early immigration to America in a finely crafted picture book illustrated by Beverly Brodsky.

Garfield, Leon. *King Nimrod's Tower*. Lothrop, Lee & Shepard. A fine retelling of the Tower of Babel story for primary grades.

Heller, Linda. *Castle on Hester Street*. Jewish Publication Society (JPS). Our winner for the best book for younger children, it tells the story of early years in America from two different perspectives—charming story.

Meir, Mira. *Alina in Israel: Story of a Russian Immigrant*. JPS. Photo-essay depicts Israeli life for a newly arrived Russian family.

Miller, Deborah. *Only Nina Chairs; Poppy Seeds Too*. Kar-Ben Copies. Two absolutely delightful and zany picture books to enhance any young child's holiday celebrations—the first for Passover, the other for Shabbat.

#### Grades Four through Eight

Chaikin, Miriam. *Getting Even*. Harper and Row. Third in a series of the daily happenings, good and bad, of a young observant girl growing up in the late 1930s, early 1940s.

Chaikin, Miriam. *Joshua in the Promised Land*. Clarion. Vivid novelization of the story of Joshua and his quest for Jericho.

Cohen, Barbara. *King of the Seventh Grade*. Lothrop. The story of the coming of age of a confused young boy who finds out that his attempts to quit Hebrew school turn out differently than anticipated—excellent contemporary novel of alienation.

Drucker, Malka. *Sukkot: A Time to Rejoice*. Holiday House. Another in Drucker's excellent holiday series combining factual info, religious observance, crafts, and cooking.

Hest, Amy. *Maybe Next Year*. Clarion. Contemporary novel of a girl's desire to dance—warm story.

Hurwitz, Johanna. *The Rabbi's Girls*. William Morrow. The adventures of a Rabbi's family, set in Lorain, Ohio, in the 1920s. Good reading for girls.

Lyttle, Richard. *Nazi-Hunting*. Franklin Watts. High interest—low vocabulary book which, despite its simple controlled vocabulary, provides fascinating reading.

Roseman, Kenneth. *The Cardinal's Snuffbox*. UAHC. The reader has to make choices as the story of Jewish persecution in Spain in the 1400s unfolds.

Sachs, Marilyn. *Call Me Ruth*. Doubleday. Our award winner, this novel tells the story of immigrants at the turn of the century and their assimilation into a new culture.

Singer, Isaac B. *The Golem*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Singer turns his talents to retelling the Golem tale in his own unique style, providing an excellent reading experience.

#### Grades Nine and up

Aaron, Chester. *Gideon*. Lippincott. Novelization of the uprising of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Friedman, Ina. *Escape or Die*. Addison-Wesley. True stories of young people who survived the Holocaust.

Lehrman, Robert. *Juggling*. Harper and Row. Soccer player tries to find himself as an individual and as a member of a group. Fine novel integrating many elements—sexual content.

Leviton, Sonia. *Year of Sweet Senior Insanity*. Atheneum. Funny, touching novel of a California girl's coming of age—sexual content.

Meltzer, Milton. *The Jewish Americans: 1650-1950*. Crowell. Brings history alive through the use of diaries, letters, and other primary sources.

Ruby, Lois. *Two Truths in my Pocket*. Viking. Short stories depicting the Jewish adolescent as outsider—each story is an excellent discussion starter.

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