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# Sydney Taylor Book Award Acceptance Speeches (1993)

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Sydney Taylor Book Award Acceptance Speeches

Picture Book Award Winner

Introduction by

**Michlean J. Amir**

We had no difficulty coming up with clear winners this year. In the picture-book category, the winner is *Something From Nothing*, by Phoebe Gilman, who wrote and illustrated this beautiful North Winds Press book. The book is a magnificently adapted old Yiddish folktale in which a tailor continues to find ways to use an old coat even as it becomes worn and tattered. As Ms. Gilman very sensitively puts it, "when the last shred of the coat is gone, he still finds enough material to turn it into a story."

Ms. Gilman is a native New Yorker who was born and raised in the Bronx. She graduated from the High School of Art and Design and attended the Art Students' League and Hunter College. She lived in Europe and Israel before settling in 1973 in Canada, where she lives with her husband, Brian Bender, and their three children.

She has published numerous books and has exhibited in Europe, Israel, and Canada. I have had the pleasure of talking on the phone with Ms. Gilman and am delighted to present her with the Sydney Taylor Award for the best Judaic picture book published in 1992—*Something From Nothing*.

**Remarks by Phoebe Gilman**

Thank you for honoring me with this award. I can't tell you how many times I have secretly rehearsed these words in my fantasies over the years. When I was growing up, getting Bat Mitzvah[ed] wasn't popular yet ... at least not in our neighborhood. I feel like I'm finally getting to write my own Bar Mitzvah speech. Today I am a "mensch."

When Michlean Amir contacted me with the news, the first thought that flew into my head was, "I wish my Mother could be here today. My beloved Mother, who always believed in me, how I wish she could be sharing this with me." Through the two long years I struggled to create this book, my mother was fighting a much harder battle—with cancer. She saw the rough dummy book and kept a color xerox of the first painting framed on her wall, but she never lived to see the book completed. She never lived to see this day.



**Phoebe Gilman**

Our families are our first audience. All artists need an audience. We do not speak to the wind. We speak to you. Thank you for listening. Thank you for hearing, understanding, and appreciating what I did.

The old Yiddish folktale from which I adapted *Something from Nothing* tells of a tailor who keeps finding new uses for his old coat as it wears thin. When the last shred of it is gone, he still finds enough material to turn it into a story.

This happens to me all the time. Anything can become grist for the story mill. When my daughter's balloon popped on a tree branch, that tree eventually turned into my first book, *The Balloon Tree* (1984). I never know what will be the catalyst for a new story. My children's first venture into business became *The Wonderful Pigs of Jillian Jiggs*. Their grandmother's chocolate chicken wrapper-present eventually turned into *Grandma and the Pirates*.

I've come to accept that stories develop a life and a will of their own. Even a story like *Something from Nothing*, which is adapted from an old folktale, changed as the characters created themselves in my hands. I meant to parallel the original tale, but as soon as I decided to turn the tailor into a grandpa, he wanted to make all these things for his grandson instead of himself. He wanted to give his grandson the moon and the stars. And he did. He made him a blanket, a wonderful blanket, upon which he lovingly sewed the moon and the stars.

Of course, as the blanket grew older, Joseph grew older too. Now it so happens that when I was growing up, my younger brother, Mark, had a blanket that he loved and refused to part with, no matter how much our Mother begged and pleaded. It was known as his *shmate* [rag]. This bit of family history found its way into the story too. When Joseph's blanket became "frazzled and worn, unsightly and torn," his mother insisted that he throw it out. Of course, Joseph didn't want to throw it out. What did he do? He took it to Grandpa and asked him to fix it.

The internal logic of the story necessitated further elaboration. Joseph was growing up as my story progressed and, since Joseph was older by the end of my story, he decided to be the one to turn it into a story. Grandpa had taught him well. Or, as our Father would say, "The eggs are getting smarter than the chickens!"

Illustrating a story is a bit like solving a mystery. Where do the characters live? When do they live? What do they look like? I thought to myself: It's a traditional Jewish folktale, it should be set where it originated ... in the shtetl. One does not enter this world that my grandparents came from lightly. As I worked on the drawings and researched the book, I was filled with sadness at the memory of this world that was destroyed in the Holocaust of World War II. The people in the photographs called out to me to act as a witness to their vanished world.

The book took on another dimension. It became a way of remembering and recording the lives of my people. The house, the street, the people in *Something from Nothing* once lived and laughed and cried. The bagel vendor, the organ grinder, the knife sharpener, the chair mender, the woman bringing water from the well, the people in the marketplace are all portraits of actual people which I painted from these old photographs.

I decided to mirror the repetition in the text by repeating the image of the interior of the house and the exterior of the street like a stage setting. This solved the illustrator's problem of how to portray a repeti-

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AJL Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Competition, 1993\*

Introduction by

**Lillian Schwartz**

*Just as I was deeply thrilled to expect Ralph Taylor to be here with us to participate in this evening's awards, I am deeply disappointed and saddened that he is not here. He established this program as a pathway to encourage unpublished fiction writers in the field of children's literature. He knew they were out there ... struggling, disappointed, creative people aching to know that their talents ... what they have to say ... could be appreciated. [As noted in JL vol. 7, p. 87, Ralph Taylor died on June 24, 1993.—Ed.]*

*The Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition has found its own special niche in this maze of publishing. This year I received 258 letters requesting the rules; 21 manuscripts were accepted. At least that number were returned as ineligible. The criteria are clearly outlined, but the writers send along their work regardless...desperate to find a sympathetic heart. The award winner this year is Lillian Fox Ducharme, who presents an adventure from a rarely mined locale...the Galveston Project.*

*Ms. Ducharme is known by the nickname Dede. She lives in The Woodlands, Texas, and has devoted her professional life to teaching. She is currently in the Language Arts For the Gifted Program for grades 3 to 5. Her special interest is, of course, writing, and she has won several awards: a Rice University Workshop Scholarship, Honorable Mention by the Golden Triangle Writers Guild Writers Conference, and the Southwest Writers Conference Golden Pen Award.*

*In a letter to me she wrote, "The Treasure in the Tiny Blue Tin' is not my family's story, but creating this story gave me an opportunity to express my love for my family and my pride in being a Jewish Texan. I tried to tell this story in a way that all children could understand and appreciate."*

*Lillian Schwartz, Librarian of Temple Emanu-El in Providence, Rhode Island, for the past 20 years, is a past president of the New England Jewish Library Association, and has been Coordinator of the AJL Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition since its inception in 1985.*

*Dede, you have succeeded. I am delighted to present to you the Association of Jewish Libraries' Eighth Annual Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition Award.*

**Acceptance Remarks by Lillian "Dede" Fox Ducharme**

One day when my great-uncle was fishing on Pelican Island near Galveston, his friend turned to him and said, "Did you know this island used to be a detention center for immigrants?" My uncle just baited his hook and said, "You don't say!" What my uncle didn't say was that in 1914 he had spent his very first night in America on that very island.

From 1900 until 1917, the Jewish population of Texas more than doubled, from 15,000 to over 31,000. Many who immigrated through the Port of Galveston had an opportunity to bypass the difficult tene-ment experiences of the East, but a new life in the American West offered its own challenges.

My story, "The Treasure in the Tiny Blue Tin," is about a fictional character, Max Miller, a recent Texas immigrant whose family lives above his uncle's store. When Max's father, a peddler, fails to return home in time for their first American Passover, Max takes a bike and runs away from Houston to find him.

Max is not your typical Texas hero. He'd rather go to school than fish. He doesn't know how to swim, and he's afraid of horses. He's completely different from his enemy Joe, the blacksmith's son, who follows him out of town and joins him on his journey.

Together the boys face Texas at its worst. They encounter thieves, storms, floods, snakes, and even death. Along the route north, however, Max finds more than his father. He finds himself, new friends, and a lot about what it means to be an American Jew.

"The Treasure in the Tiny Blue Tin" is not my family's story, but creating it gave me an opportunity to express my love for my grandparents—my grandma, who grew up in an All-of-a-Kind New York family, and my grandpa, who as part of the Galveston Plan became a Jewish Texan at age 22.

Thank you so much for this award. As one of only a handful of Jews in my community, it means a lot to me that this award comes from the Association of Jewish Libraries and that the award honors one of my favorite children's authors, Sydney Taylor.

A special thank you to Lillian Schwartz, contest coordinator, who is consistently kind and helpful, and to my husband Chuck, who always reads what I write even when he'd rather be reading a computer manual.

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*\*Remarks at the Banquet of the Association of Jewish Libraries' 28th Annual Convention, New York Hilton, June 22, 1993.*

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**GILMAN**

*(Continued from p. 113)*

ive action in a visually interesting way. It allowed me to move the people around, creating mini-picture stories while remaining consistent with the form of the text. By doing this I was also able to create a panorama of shtetl life.

At this point, two questions began to concern me: (1) Was my story becoming too somber and adult for its intended audience, and (2) Where was the wonderful button? I guess the child in me was not completely satisfied with the story's solution of turning it all into a wonderful story. I wanted to know where the button went!

The solution to that mystery was the creation of a family of mice under the floorboards of the house. They became the ones to find the button, which their father then turned into the cushion of a little mouse chair. The last page shows Joseph reading to his family. Down at the bottom, a little mouse is sitting on the button chair reading his story to his family. If you want to hear and see the story they wrote, you must turn back to the beginning of the book and begin again.

A good story can be reused and recycled by generations of readers as long as there are generations of good listeners. Thank you for honoring me with this award.