AJL Book Award Acceptance Speeches

Amy Schwartz:
Picture Book Award Winner
Introduction by Judy Greenblatt

When I tallied the vote for the Picture Book Award, of the five books that formed a group at the top, three were published by Kar-Ben Copies, a small, relatively new publishing house. I believe that Judyth Groner and Madeline Wikler deserve special commendation for producing books of consistently high quality. I predict a Sydney Taylor Award for Best Picture Book will go to a book published by Kar-Ben Copies very soon. The fifth book was published by the Jewish Publication Society, which also produced our winner, JPS, under the guidance of David Adler, Editor of JPS Books for Young People, has been doing an outstanding job of publishing excellent books for children.

Jewish Children's Books (continued)


Wollitzer, Hilma. Wish You Were Here. Farrar, Straus, Giroux. Bernie Segal, desperately lonely after the death of his father, has a secret plan to visit his grandfather in Florida.

Ill. For Young Adults—Grades 7-10

Bober, Natalie S. Breaking Tradition: The Story of Louise Nevelson. Atheneum. The remarkable story of one of America's foremost sculptors; includes much on the development of Nevelson's art.

Cowan, Ida and Gunter, Irene. A Spy for Freedom: The Story of Sarah Aaronsohn. Lodestar. Sarah Aaronsohn grew up in Palestine and led a spy ring against the Turks during World War I.

Isaacman, Clara. Clara's Story, as told to Joan Adess Grossman. JPS. Another dimension is added to our knowledge of the Holocaust as we read Clara's story of survival in Antwerp.


Tamar, Erika. Good-Bye Glamour Girl. Lippincott. Star-struck Liesl, a refugee from Vienna, finds out that growing up means not running away.

* Award winners

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Of the five at the top, one book stood way above the rest. Each of us found the criteria of excellence were best met by Mrs. Moskowitz and the Sabbath Candlesticks. Excellent writing, charming illustrations, and clear and positive Jewish values combine to produce a warm and delightful picture of the joys of Shabbat and of the value of observing mitzvot. Mrs. Moskowitz's problem is that she must give up the home in which she has spent the major portion of her adulthood. It is not a problem that is limited to Jewish grandmothers. Mrs. Moskowitz therefore has wide appeal beyond her Jewish community, which bespeaks the universality of the themes touched on. Thus many people outside the Jewish community will learn about our Shabbat and about Jewish values.

The author of Mrs. Moskowitz and the Sabbath Candlesticks, Amy Schwartz, is a delightful Californian, who has taught art in her native state. Her home is now New York, where she has worked in the production department of a major publishing house. Ms. Schwartz has illustrated books, including one published this year written by Amy Hest, called The Crack of Dawn Walkers. She has also done illustrations for magazines and greeting cards. Her first book, Bea and Mrs. Jones, was widely acclaimed. It was a selection of public TV's Reading Rainbow, and was listed in the New York Times and in School Library Journal as one of the best picture books of the year. Ms. Schwartz's next book will be titled Begin at the Beginning.

Mrs. Moskowitz was the first of Amy Schwartz's works to be published by the Jewish Publication Society; the next, a Chelm tale, is due out in the fall. I hope these two will be the first of many. It gives me great pleasure to present to you the winner of AJL's Sydney Taylor Award for Best Picture Book, Amy Schwartz.

Remarks by Amy Schwartz

I'd like to thank the Association of Jewish Libraries for giving me this award. It is quite an honor.

In Mrs. Moskowitz and the Sabbath Candlesticks, I wanted to express some of my feelings about the importance of a sense of home, and the idea that the holiday of Shabbat celebrates these feelings.

The book is about an older woman who moves into a new apartment. She desperately misses her old home. Mrs. Moskowitz feels so unhappy in her new apartment that she cannot even bring herself to unpack. Then her son comes by with a box that was overlooked in the move. The box contains a pair of tarnished Sabbath candlesticks. These candlesticks bring up strong feelings and memories for Mrs. Moskowitz. They serve as catalysts that lead her into unpacking, cleaning, and, most important, feeling again. Mrs. Moskowitz sets up her apartment and prepares for Shabbat. She makes her apartment into a home.

The book began with a meeting with the juvenile book editor at the Jewish Publication Society, David Adler. My agent had shown David my artwork. David phoned me and invited me to come in and talk. He told me that he was interested in doing a picture book about the Sabbath. I listened, and responded that, Oh yes, I was very interested. I'd have something to show him soon. I never tell a potential employer that I don't know how to do something.

It is an understatement to say that I was worried when I got home. I knew very little about Shabbat. And I'd never written anything from someone's suggestion. Nevertheless, I bravely put a sheet of paper in my typewriter. I typed out the word "Shabbat." Then I sat there. Then I typed two names, "Janet," and "Beth."

Janet Seckel and Beth Pearson were neighbors of mine when I moved to New York six years ago. They lived upstairs from me in a huge, impersonal, apartment building on the Upper West Side. Janet was working, Beth was a student, and they both were observant Jews.

I met them during what was a difficult time for me. I was new in New York. I had come looking for work illustrating children's books. Manhattan seemed to me to be a city of twenty-one-year-olds working in advertising, living in studio apartments, thinking only of window offices and how to dress for success. I desperately missed California. I missed my way of life there. I missed my home.

Then I met Janet and Beth. I loved visiting them. Their apartment felt different from any other apartment I'd been in in Manhattan. Something was usually cooking on the stove. We talked about feelings, friends, and family. Their apartment felt like a home.

I clearly remember the first time I visited on Shabbat. I remember finding Beth, who was in the middle of a difficult college semester, lying on her sofa, reading a novel. She explained to me that she kept the Sabbath.
No matter what was going on in the rest of her life, Beth told me, Shabbat was a day to relax and feel peaceful with herself. We talked about what Shabbat meant to her. I remember feeling deeply surprised, relieved, and happy that I'd found this peaceful retreat in the middle of Manhattan. Here, every week, Janet and Beth reaffirmed for themselves what was important. I thought perhaps this is why this apartment feels like a home.

Thinking about Janet and Beth and that first year in New York brought up more memories. I remembered one night when I couldn't sleep. I remembered getting out of bed and taking out my journal. I expected to write regretfully about friends I'd left in California, or of my worries about finding work. Instead, I found myself making a list similar to the list Mrs. Moskowitz makes when she is first left alone in her new apartment. "I miss my blue chair," I wrote. "I miss my sofa," and so on. When I was done, I felt comforted, and could fall asleep.

I also remembered my frequent trips back to California. I remembered returning to New York each time with a suitcase full of favorite things from home. Just as Mrs. Moskowitz begins to feel happy when she unpacks her candlesticks, as I unpacked each item, I felt just a little bit more at home.

The few words I'd typed out had brought up many feelings and memories, but they did not make up a picturebook. I was stuck. I needed to write, and could fall asleep.

I adjusted the picture. I swept the rug and cleaned the living room. When I was done, I felt centered and calm. And, I had a structure for my Sabbath story.

I wrote up a story proposal and sent it to David at JPS. He liked the proposal, and, with his help, I began writing Mrs. Moskowitz.

That's the story behind my story. Mrs. Moskowitz is a book about some simple

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(continued in column 3)