

AJL Book Award Acceptance Speeches

Florence B. Freedman, Author Robert Andrew Parker, Artist Picture Book Award Winners

Introduction by
Judy Greenblatt

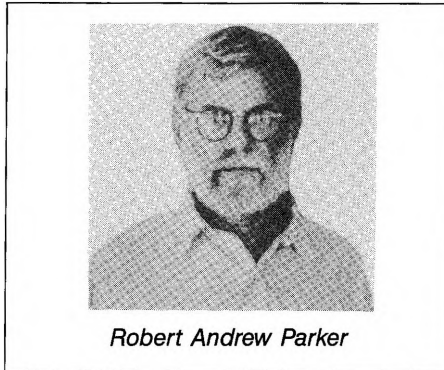
Our picture book award winner, *Brothers*, is a story based on a legend which expresses and explains a Jewish value, making available to our children a wonderful part of our heritage. The message of *Brothers* does not apply to Jews alone. In simple but graceful language, the joy of a loving sibling relationship is made clear as each brother tries to help the other from his own limited reserve. It is a message all people can understand and heed.

Robert Andrew Parker's lovely illustrations—soft clear washes—reflect the same loving and caring feeling. Mr. Parker, born in Norfolk, Virginia, received his Bachelor of Arts in Education from the Art Institute of Chicago, and now lives in Cornwall, Connecticut. He has illustrated many children's books, and has had many one-man art shows. In addition to *Brothers*, he has award-winning illustrations in *Pop Corn* and *Ma Goodness*, by Mitchell Preston, which was a Caldecott Honor Book and a National Book Award finalist in 1970, and *Flight; A Panorama of Aviation*, by Melvin Zisfein, which was a New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Book of the Year in 1981.

Florence Freedman, the author of *Brothers*, is a native New Yorker who lives in Manhattan. She is a graduate of Adelphi University, received her M.A. from New York University, a Ph.D. from Columbia University, and holds a Bachelor of Jewish Pedagogy from the Jewish Theological Seminary. One of the first teachers of Hebrew in the public high schools, and a Professor Emeritus of Hunter College in New York, she is a member of two honorary societies in education. Ms. Freedman is a member of the Board of Directors of the Women's Division of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and serves as its honorary president. Florence Freedman is a poet, writer, and scholar.

Brothers, which has also won the 1986 National Jewish Book Award for Illustrated Children's Book, is based on a story Ms. Freedman first encountered when she was a child in Hebrew class. She is also the author of another children's book: *Two Tickets to Freedom: The True Story of Ellen and William Craft, Fugitive Slaves*; two adult books; and numerous articles about Walt Whitman and

his circle. We hope that she will remember many more legends from her Hebrew class, and produce many more books of the same high quality. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you the winner of the Sydney Taylor Best Picture Book Award, Florence Freedman.



Remarks by Florence B. Freedman

A writer's rewards come in many styles—from the light in the eyes of a young reader, the tears of an older reader, a good review to—rarest of all, an award.

In acknowledging this award for *Brothers*, I want to express my gratitude to Harper and Row for accepting *Brothers* and for selecting Robert Andrew Parker to illustrate it. I am especially grateful to Ralph Taylor for establishing so appropriate a memorial to his talented wife, Sydney Taylor, thereby encouraging others to follow her example in children's literature with Jewish themes, and to the committee of the Association of Jewish Libraries for honoring *Brothers*.

Before *Brothers*, the only prize I received for my writing was a still-treasured medal that was given to me in 1920 upon my graduation from elementary school for an essay I had written. And now, 66 years later, this award! I think you will agree that I am a "late bloomer."

If I had an award to present, I would give it to librarians. As with many New Yorkers, the 42nd Street Library was my home away from home throughout my high school and college years. Since then, librarians in many university libraries, public libraries and special collections throughout the United States have enabled me to pursue my research. In lieu of an award to librarians, I'd like to tell you three true stories of children in libraries.

The first is about my husband. When he was a child in Cincinnati, he discovered the children's room in the public library, but thought he had to read the books in order—the first book on the first shelf, then the second, and so on until he had gone all around the room. He had read through most of the books on the first two shelves with varying degrees of interest; some were too easy and childish, some not to his liking for other reasons, but enough were fascinating to keep him going—until he found a space on the shelf where a book should have been. He approached the librarian and told her that the book he wanted was not there. She asked him the name of the book.

"I don't know," he replied, "because it isn't on the shelf."

The librarian, instead of dismissing this as a foolish answer, went to the shelf with him. He was delighted to learn that he could read any book he wanted—and remembered that librarian with gratitude for the rest of his life.

The other two stories were told by writers participating in a series called "Tea and Talk" at the Hunter College Education Library. (With their permission, these talks were later assembled in a volume called "Creating Books for Children" by Donna Hill and me, not yet published.)

Isaac Asimov's first experience with a library did not take place in the public library, which later meant so much to him, but in a private house. Isaac's father, who had a store where he sold candy, magazines and newspapers, often took his young son with him when he made deliveries to customers. On one occasion, they were ushered into the library of a large house. Isaac was as astonished to see shelves of books there as he would have been to find Prospect Park in the living room. He quietly went over to look at the books and took down a volume of *The Book of Knowledge*. Seeing his interest in the book, the owner of the house told him that he could take it home to read, and when he returned it, take out another. Dr. Asimov told his audience at Hunter College that if anyone had told that little boy that someday he would write for that book, he wouldn't have believed it!

Ezra Jack Keats, in his talk, told how he had come upon the library by chance. In Junior High School, he had a "crush" on a beautiful girl in his class named Harriet. Too shy to approach her in school for fear of blushing and stammering, he decided to walk

past her house casually after school (as if on an errand), on the chance that she might be sitting on the porch. One day she was there, and waved to him. He waved in answer, and with thoughts and emotions soaring, he walked on and on. After about an hour, he saw an imposing building with "Brooklyn Public Library, Arlington Branch" on the door. He climbed the stairs to the Reference Room and found the Art section. He took out the first book on the shelf—an oversized beautiful tome on ancient Egyptian art. It was the first time he had seen a book on art. Since he could not take the book out, he spent many afternoons in that room, and read every book in the collection. He would tell his friends in school what he had learned. The collection ended with the Impressionists, and he thought that was the most recent school of art. Thus Ezra owed his earliest knowledge of art history and his first acquaintance with many works of art, albeit in reproduction, to the books in that library. Children who visit the children's room in the Arlington Branch nowadays find that it has been named the Ezra Jack Keats Room. As for Harriet, the motivating force for his visit to the library, she and Ezra went through high school together, and several years later she married a different classmate, who evidently had not been too shy to speak to her.

I join the people whom I have written of in thinking that I would like to give an award to librarians.

To return to my book which received *your* award: I have been asked where the idea came from and why I wrote the book at this time.

I wonder whether other writers would agree that ideas for books are buzzing around waiting to catch the future author at a time when writing them down is not only possible, but inescapable. I am reminded of a concept in Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, a satire on utopias written in 1872. In the country named Erewhon (*nowhere* spelled backwards) no child can answer a parent's criticism by saying, "I didn't ask to be born." Indeed, in *Erewhon* children do not only ask to be born; each unborn soul selects a pair of people whom it would like as parents and pesters them without mercy until they reluctantly agree to have the child. So it was with me and *Brothers*, a story which I first read in Hebrew when I was about eight years old. It stayed with me. In time, it was one of the stories I told to my three sons, and later at the camp they attended.

Throughout the years, I wrote books connected with my Whitman studies and with teaching, and a children's book which grew out of my research—*Two Tickets to Freedom: The True Story of Ellen and William*

Craft, Fugitive Slaves, which was published by Simon and Schuster in 1972. *Brothers* was giving me a faint buzz from time to time.

Then the time for it to be written arrived. Ezra Jack Keats, my high school student and dear friend, accepted my invitation to dedicate the library at my grandsons' Hebrew Day School in Syracuse. On the way back to New York City, he said that he would like to do a book in the Jewish field.



Florence B. Freedman

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"I have a story I want to write," I said. He liked the story, planned some sketches for it, and we presented it to Harper and Row. The editors liked it. I was about to go on a trip to Israel, where Keats had never been. He thought that this would be a good time to go—to get background material for his illustrations. There he photographed and sketched a model of the Old City of Jerusalem, old houses in Hebron, boys riding on donkeys, and other scenes of fields and hills. He loved Jerusalem and took trips away from the city only if he could return each day by sunset to go to the Western Wall. He hoped to return to Jerusalem some day.

That dream was never to be realized, nor were the sketches completed. Ezra died in May, 1983. Harper and Row searched a long time for an illustrator, and finally selected Robert Andrew Parker. That is how *Brothers* grew from idea to book.

What idea is pestering me now, asking to be made into a book? With a friend of Ezra's, Dean Louise Engel, I am planning to write a biography of Ezra Jack Keats for young readers. The buzzing is very insistent.

**Carol Snyder:
Children's Book Award Winner**
Introduction by
Judy Greenblatt

I categorized Ike and Mama and the Seven Surprises in the coming-of-age group, and as a book dealing with Bar-Mitzvah. At first, I wasn't going to count it as an immigrant story, because I knew Mama would no longer consider herself an immigrant, but then I remembered Uncle Jake. It is also a book concerned with Jewish values, and more than that, it has a universality of appeal that is a quality of all of our winners. Jewish values, such as the importance of saving a life, visiting the sick, helping others, family support, and the real meaning of Bar-Mitzvah are all part of this fifth in the Ike and Mama series. As it opens, Ike is preparing for his Bar-Mitzvah, and his father is hospitalized with tuberculosis. While Mama remains a powerful force in this book, as in previous ones, Ike matures, becoming more independent and more of a mensch.

Carol Snyder, the author of the Ike-and-Mama series, was born and raised in Brooklyn. She now lives in New Jersey with her husband and two daughters. She was graduated from Brooklyn College with a B.A. in education. In addition to writing, she teaches in a writers' workshop, and lectures for New Jersey young authors' conferences and elsewhere. Carol and her husband Michael Snyder shared the 1973 Hanna G. Solomon Award for Service to Children, given by the National Council of Jewish Women.

In addition to the earlier Ike and Mama books, one of which, Ike and Mama and the Block Wedding, won our book award in 1979, Ms. Snyder is also the author of Memo: To Myself When I Have a Teenage Kid; The Great Condominium Rebellion; and the forthcoming The Left-Over Kid. It gives me great pleasure to present the winner of the 1985 Sydney Taylor Best Book Award, Carol Snyder.

Remarks by Carol Snyder

Sydney Taylor was an inspiration. I loved her books and I'm so pleased to meet her husband Ralph today. I never got to speak to her. I wish I had.

It's a great pleasure for me to be here in Montreal with all of you. I feel as if I'm amongst good friends in this group—catching up on the news of the years since I last saw you.

A lot has happened to me and my family since that banquet in Philadelphia in June 1980 when my second book, *Ike and Mama and the Block Wedding* won the 1979 AJL award. That will always be a special memory in my life. My whole family was there—