

Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee I  
*by Sylvie Frank*

**Description:** Award winning author and illustrator Jim Aylesworth and Barbara McClintock, Sydney Taylor Book Award Winners for Young Readers, will discuss their book **My Grandfather's Coat**. Editor Sylvie Frank will discuss **Storm**, by Donna Jo Napoli, Sydney Taylor Book Award Winner for Teen Readers. Diane Rauchwerger will discuss *Hidden: A Child's Story of the Holocaust*, by Loic Dauvillier, illustrated by Marc Lizano and Greg Salsedo, winner of the Sydney Taylor Book Award for Older Readers.

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**Hello!**

**I'm pleased and honored to be here today on behalf the wonderful and brilliant Donna Jo Napoli, whose novel STORM I had the great pleasure of editing.**

Sixteen-year-old Sebah takes shelter in a tree, eating pine cones and the raw meat of animals that float by. The rain started suddenly and didn't let up, washing away her family and her home—everything she knew. When Sebah fears starvation is imminent, she builds a raft as a last resort, not knowing where it might take her. What she finds is beyond imagining: a gigantic ark. For days she hides in an enclosure she shares with two bonobos, two aardvarks, and two gazelles. She's careful to conceal herself from the people onboard, Noah and his family. But it's from them that she learns God's plan: the same creatures that board the ark must leave it—none must die, and none must be born; they will repopulate the earth once the floodwaters recede. As Sebah grows stronger, she explores her new home, discovering the hundreds or pairs of animals that live on the ark. While Noah and his family care for the animals' basic needs, they are so caught up in their personal miseries that they are blind to the animals' depression. And so Sebah learns her purpose: she will tend to the animals' happiness and give them the will to live. It is as she cares for them that she discovers another stowaway, Bash. Rejuvenated by her new friendship, Sebah is determined to survive the rain and fulfill her destiny.

**I thought I'd read a passage from STORM so you can get a feel for the writing and tone. This passage is toward the end of the book. At this point it's been 355 since the rain began and Sebah is living on the roof of the ark. Mother Emzara, Noah's wife, is talking to her from inside the ark.**

**I'm much less interesting than Donna Jo, so I thought the most effective use of my time here would be to conduct an interview with myself, where I play both myself and Donna Jo.**

**I'll start with a classic author question: Where did the idea for this book come from?**

Brenda Bowen asked me if I was interested in Noah's story. I have always been interested in Noah's story. I love Old Testament stories. They are wildly harsh sometimes. And the flood terrified me as a child. I liked being terrified by stories, because it took my mind off the real terrors in my life -- which were right there in my daily routine (my family was distinctly

impoverished and my father had a zillion problems that spelled themselves out in destructive ways) So I said yes.

**The movie *Noah* starring Russell Crowe came out right around the same time as *Storm*. Was that intentional?**

Brenda's idea was to bring the book out as the movie came out. But, of course, as you know, my book focused on very different things from the movie, and the movie didn't stay in the theaters very long. So the timing, rather than being a touch of marketing genius, turned out to be irrelevant.

That's fine with me -- since I write what I need to write when I need to write it. But you might have a different perspective on that. :-)

**I often hear writers say that the first chapter of a new project ends up in a drawer. What was it like to begin to write *STORM*?**

Brenda and I batted around the first few chapters a bit before she sent them to you. I had originally started out telling the story in third person. But Brenda felt we'd get inside the character more quickly if I used first person. I trust her instincts, so I did that immediately. I can't really remember anything else that we talked about -- but maybe she remembers.

Later, when I had finished the first draft, Brenda warned me not to get so much into animal details that we lost sight of the humans. I adore animals. In college I had the opportunity one summer to work at a zoo or to work at NASA in a computer lab. I took the NASA job because I was a math major and I figured it made sense. But I always wondered what direction I would have gone if I'd taken the zoo job. (The person who was offered that job after me became a veterinarian.) Anyway, again, I took Brenda's advice. I know that I can go on and on about what I love and make my readers' eyes glaze over. That's not what I wanted to do.

**What was the editing process like? Long? Short? A total rewrite?**

It felt very minimal to me in terms of the direction of the story. Rather, it focused on intelligibility. Mostly you pointed out places where I had eclipsed something -- I needed to let the reader see the whole scene. I needed to be more explicit and/or to linger on some details. But, again, maybe you remember things I don't remember.

One thing about it was that it went very fast. From our first discussing the idea to a full draft being in your hands was probably only 3 or 4 months, no? Then we took another 3 or 4 months to edit. Or was it more? And then out it came.

**Is there a reason, do you think, that this writing and editing process went quickly?**

I think the quickness was because the Bible had set up a kind of calendar, really. It wasn't easy to find it -- there aren't many details about the flood in Genesis -- but I used every detail I found and plotted out that calendar (first day of rain, when rain stopped, when they sent out birds to

search for dry land, etc.). Then my job was to get from one important calendar point to the next in a way that showed the lives and spirits of the inhabitants of the ark. I like that kind of challenge. It's like a puzzle. So for me, the work absorbed me night and day... which meant it went fast.

**Can you talk a little bit more about the research you did to write this book? How did the Bible dictate how you told the story?**

Actually, I think the Bible just gave me reference points and some (but very little) insight into Noah's family. Really, it was the Midrash about the stowaway giant Og, the king of Bashan, that lit my fire. If there could be one stowaway, why couldn't there be two?

Much of my research, though, had nothing to do with people, but just with animals. They were the major inhabitants of the ark. And they were kept in conditions that must have caused many of them to deteriorate physically and/or mentally.

**STORM has some very adult moments. There's a lot of sex and sexuality in this book, and animal sex and sexuality in particular. Part of what we worked on during the editing process was making sure that these grownup moments were both necessary to the plot and expanded upon the themes. So my question is, when you write, who are you writing for? How do you balance telling the story you want to tell and ensuring that the themes and content resonate with your readers?**

Oh, this is such a difficult question to answer, because I worry that people will get angry with me. And it is also a very personal question in a way. But I will answer it because you asked it with the hopes of helping to give people an inside view of what went on in making the book. So please understand my answer in that spirit.

I have to say that on my first drafts I try hard to write just the best story I can write... without thinking about who it is for. Since the book has animals in close quarters, it has to involve sex at least for some of those animals. Bonobos were important to the plot because I needed animals with their particular intelligence and dexterity... and it just happens that bonobos are highly active sexually. I could have used chimps -- for comparable intelligence and dexterity -- but they are far more aggressive and violent, and Sebah had enough to worry about without falling into the hands of chimps.

And since the book has people in close quarters under life and death circumstances facing really difficult spiritual questions, it has to involve sex (at least from what I know about people who have not specifically made vows of chastity). That is, in my understanding of people, sex is an intrinsic part of identity and the situation of being on that ark certainly posed issues for identity. But sex can take many forms. Rather than decide on what sexual events should occur, I tried to listen to my characters and let them inform me of their behavior. I didn't censor them.

The result was an adult draft, much more than a child's draft. And, yes, now I remember that you posed me some questions here. On later drafts I cut back on the sex across the board. And I looked for opportunities to use sex among the animals to reflect upon the human situations, so that I could cut back even further on the human sexuality.

The main character of STORM is sixteen, and a sixteen year old could certainly have read the first draft (the adult draft) with no problems. But many times I get letters from readers who are twelve or even ten -- letters about a book that I thought was for teenagers. So I tried to think about the sensibilities of that potential younger reader. Still, I think taking the sex out of STORM entirely would have simply made an unrealistic book -- a lie. And I try hard not to lie to children.

I have a lot of faith in children's abilities to figure out what's right for them, though. I hope the child who isn't ready to consider sexuality seriously will simply close the book for now.

**Is there anything else you want say?**

Yes. Thank you for asking.

Many times when I finish a book, I'm glad to let it fly away. But when STORM ended, I missed it. I missed Sebah/ Shebah. And I missed Og/ Bash. I wanted them to have a beautiful life together. I wanted the satisfaction of seeing their triumphs. But I had to let it go... because, in fact, there were a zillion challenges ahead. And that's another book, on a long list of books I want to write someday. Life isn't long enough to tell all our stories.