

## Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Acceptance Remarks

*Susan Krawitz*

We all have a sort of inner memory house where childhood experiences live, and some of us have an outer one as well. My great-aunt Hannah's house in Bensonhurst Brooklyn was such a place for me. It had a big yard, with concord grapes growing on the garage, and lots of steep stairs. It also had an interesting history—Moe, Shemp, and Curly Howard, aka, the Three Stooges, grew up there. Perhaps some of their impish energy inhabited it, because even though we were told not to, my cousins and sisters and I loved prowling around the mysterious third floor where elderly relatives lived. During one snoop, I spotted a curious item draped over a chair in my great-aunt Edie's room—a colorful Mexican serape.

My uncle Sheldon told us stories of my grandfather's redheaded first cousin Rose Solomon who, with her brother Abraham, used to visit from their home in San Antonio Texas. Rose had a lovely singing voice, and Abe was quite a character. He always wore full cowboy regalia so he could look like a rube and pool-shark the locals at the billiards hall. He played chess on horseback; balancing a board? Play-acting a knight? I never learned which. But the wildest tale of all was that he'd ridden with Pancho Villa's gang during the Mexican Revolution.

Were these stories true, or was crazy Uncle Sheldon just entertaining the kids? The tale of our Jewish cowboy relative was fun to think about, and that serape made me curious. 30 years ago I gave my sister, a historian, a T-shirt with a picture of Pancho Villa's gang on it, and we joked about which bandito might be our cousin. And then she came back from a trip to San Antonio with a copy of an article she'd found in the library about Abe himself. Amazingly, it confirmed our family legends and created some new ones as well.

Abe's story was the very first one that told me to write it as a novel, but life gets in the way, and so do shorter, easier to write stories. I've been a single parent since my daughter was a year and a half, carving a career as a freelance writer and editor. But mostly, I was writing and editing other people's stories, not mine. Someone once said, "If you don't build your dream, someone will hire you to build theirs," and about 14 years ago, I realized I was going to have to hire myself to write this. I was not a good boss. Late nights, weekends, very few vacation days, and pay in satisfaction only. My first choice of protagonist was Abe, but the story really began to roll when I realized it actually belonged to Rose.

The research, which, by the way, included *Zayda Was a Cowboy*, a Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award winner, was fun. As I researched the Villa gang, I discovered facts that were so much stranger than fiction. Silent movie cowboy Tom Mix joined them, and so did journalist John Reed, (perhaps the first embedded journalist), and the Sundance Kid taught them to blow up trains. And when the US got involved in the Mexican War for Independence, it was over the discovery of oil in the Tampico desert.

The material was fantastic, but the story came together slowly. When it finally felt ready, I queried agents and got one. But unfortunately, that relationship didn't work out. The book was never submitted to publishers, and for the last three years, it has gathered dust. 2014 was a very challenging year, and somehow in the middle of chaos, Abe's story rose up again for me, like a life raft of self. I revised it once more and entered the Sydney Taylor manuscript contest at about the last minute possible. And I'm really glad I did.

This award makes me feel like I've been given permission to follow my heart around on the page as well as my head, and that's exciting, because Rose had another interesting brother. His name was Elliot and he changed his last name from Solomon to Sullivan and became an actor on the Broadway stage, and then in film. Uncle Sheldon said he was blacklisted as a communist in the fifties, but he has a page on the Internet Movie Database with a lengthy filmography, which is where I learned he played mostly thug roles. He started acting again in the late sixties, and one of his last roles was as Wilson's friend in *The Great Gatsby*. And now I have a whole new batch of what-ifs. What was Broadway theatre like in the early 1900s? What if Rose came east to visit Elliot? What happened when she met my grandfather and his sisters?

And then there's Rose herself. Someone made an oral history of her life and it's in a San Antonio library. Did she really, as my uncle said, introduce the song *La Cucaracha* to the US public? I'm going to find out.

We all have a memory house and sometimes we don't really care about what's in it until we climb some stairs and peer into rooms we've been warned against. There can be treasure in there, and I'm so thrilled and grateful to the Sydney Taylor manuscript award committee for allowing me to share mine. My enormous thanks to Aileen Grossberg and the manuscript committee, and the family of Sydney Taylor. This is a wonderfully supportive award for writers. I also want to thank my friend Audrey Coulombis, who jumped into my writer's group and mentored us with her own amazing writing path. Thank you to my incredibly supportive partner Bruce Davenport, who unwaveringly has my back, and my daughter Hannah—another family redhead—who inspired me to follow my dreams and is thrilling me immeasurably by following her own.