

Sydney Taylor Award Acceptance Speech, 2016

Lesléa Newman

Lesléa Newman is the author of seventy books for readers of all ages including the children's books, *Ketzel*, *The Cat Who Composed* (2016 Sydney Taylor Award), *My Name Is Avivia*, and *Here Is the World: A Year of Jewish Holidays*; the short story collection, *A Letter to Harvey Milk*; and the poetry collection, *I Carry My Mother*. She has received poetry fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Massachusetts Artists Foundation. From 2008 - 2010, she served as the poet laureate of Northampton, MA.

Thank you so much, members of the Association of Jewish Libraries for this tremendous honor! I am absolutely thrilled to receive the Sydney Taylor Award for *Ketzel the Cat Who Composed*.

There are so many people to thank. First of all, I thank my parents for not enrolling me in Hebrew school when I was growing up. Why? Because if I had gone to Hebrew school, I would have had a Bat Mitzvah when I was 12. Which means I would not have had a Bat Mitzvah when I was 48. Making that decision meant I needed to join a synagogue. Which led me to read the synagogue's monthly bulletin. Which led me to read Rabbi Justin David's column. Which is how I learned the true story of Ketzel Cotel. So Rabbi Justin David is someone else I would like to thank. In his column, Rabbi David mentioned a *New York Times* article about Ketzel, which I immediately read. Being a cat-lover, I was instantly intrigued.

As I read the article about Moshe Cotel, a reknowned composer, who wrote down the notes he heard the day Ketzel ran down his piano keyboard, the child in me laughed with delight. And when I feel that childlike joy inside me, I know what that means: a children's book is about to be born.

And so, I thank Ketzel, for whatever inspired her to scamper down the piano keyboard that day. I thank Moshe Cotel for being aware enough to recognize a thing of beauty when he heard it and take the time to perserve it. I thank the judges of the Paris New Music Review's One-Minute Competition for awarding "Piece for Piano: Four Paws" an honorable mention. And I thank the editor of the *New York Times* for thinking this story worthy of publication!

You see, it really does take a village to write a children's book!

Closer to home, I thank my cat, Princess Sheba Darling, who sat on my lap the whole time I was writing *Ketzel*; my spouse, Mary Vazquez who is always my first reader and biggest fan; the women in my writers group, Jane Yolen, Patricia MacLachlan, Barbara Diamond Goldin, Ellen Wittlinger, Corinne Demas, and Ann Turner who loved this story

from the start; my wise agent, Elizabeth Harding, who suggested I send the manuscript to Candlewick, and my fabulous editor Katie Cunningham, who is actually a dog person, but nevertheless, embraced the story of *Ketzel*.

Also, I need to thank Susanna Reich, an author whom I've never met, because if she had never written the children's book *Minette's Feast: The Delicious Story of Julia Child and Her Cat*, I never would come across the remarkable work of Amy June Bates and suggested to my editor that she illustrate *Ketzel*. And of course I thank Amy June Bates for the tremendous job she did in bringing *Ketzel* to life.

Last but certainly not least, I thank my grandparents who came to this country carrying nothing but bringing everything: a strong sense of Jewish heritage and pride which they passed on to me. Receiving the Sydney Taylor Award is truly the highest honor I can think of, and I am promising you, the marvelous Jewish librarians who work so hard at your job, which is putting books into the hands of children, that I will continue to work hard at my job, which is creating books worthy of taking up space on your shelves. Thank you very much.