

## SYDNEY TAYLOR MANUSCRIPT AWARD 2018 ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY JUDITH PRANSKY

Thank you, Aileen, for your lovely introduction, and thank you to all the members of the committee who chose to honor *The Seventh Handmaiden* with this year's Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award. Aileen can attest to the fact that I was in total shock when she called to tell me I won. (She kept trying to get me to say something intelligent that she could document, but all I could say was something inane, like, "I'm blown away!")

I've been writing all my life, and gave up on the dream of having my fiction recognized more times than I can count. Yes, I've had newspaper articles published, and I edited guidebooks to Philadelphia, where I live, but my fiction was never acknowledged. Then Aileen called, and as my sister said—I became an overnight success after 50 years! I even have a children's book on the market now—*Mister Lister*—about a third-grade boy with social issues.

So what is this manuscript award that I received for *The Seventh Handmaiden*? And what makes it so special? To me, this award is hope—it's possibility—it's promise. If the multiple members of the Awards committee chose this book, it rekindles the hope that, after six years of writing the novel, and more years of trying to market it, there is a publisher out there who will also choose it.

I hope that's not a false hope, because this manuscript tells a story, but it also has a purpose. It grew out of my teaching—the job I chose to do for more than 20 years because I love it, but also because it gave me the gift of summers, when I could focus on my writing. I teach English and History to sixth graders at Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy, in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. Probably the most important part of my job is to get my students to actually WAKE UP—to get them interested—to make them care about what they're learning. And one of the very best ways I have found to do this is through fiction. For my classes, it's historical fiction—ancient historical fiction, to be exact. I teach ancient history as a major foundation of American culture, and of course, Jewish history is a significant part of ancient history. So *The Seventh Handmaiden* was born, a story about a girl named Darya that brings ancient Persia to life. But ancient Persia is where the Jewish history story of Purim takes place, so *The Seventh Handmaiden* brings Jewish history to life, as well, because we see the events of Purim through Darya's eyes.

That is the purpose of this novel—to entertain, first and foremost, but also to make history real—to make Jewish history real—to make young people care about it, to make them see it and feel it and remember it, and not think about history, especially Jewish history, as something dull and dusty and, worst of all, BORING.

So thank you to the Sydney Taylor Awards for opening up possibilities. Thank you to my husband Bob for always giving me the space and time and support that writing needs. Thank you to my children and grandchildren for being enthusiastic readers and critics. (They are

represented here by my son Doni, who flew in from Atlanta to be here for me for a few hours.) Thank you to my sisters, my friends, and my colleagues for their critiques and advice—especially to Wendie Sittenfield, the excellent and tireless librarian at Barrack Hebrew Academy, who is the reason I am here today. She is the one who told me about the Sydney Taylor Awards, and kept encouraging me to send in my manuscript.

Thank you all for giving me hope, and giving hope to Darya, the young girl who lived in ancient Persia, and who was fortunate enough to become Queen Esther's Seventh Handmaiden.