

## **Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Acceptance Speech**

**Brenda A. Ferber**

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Thank you Rachel and the AJL. And a huge thanks to my husband Alan. I couldn't have written CARA'S KITCHEN without his love and support, and I'm so glad he's here with me tonight.

In seventh grade I had a language arts teacher named Mr. Temby. He was the grumpiest, most stone-faced teacher I had ever come across, and I had this crazy idea that it was my job to make him smile. All year, I tried my best making wisecracks, telling jokes, being silly, anything I could think of to lighten his mood. Unfortunately, Mr. Temby didn't seem to appreciate my behavior, as well-intentioned as it was. My name had a permanent spot on the chalkboard, with misconduct tally marks next to it. For every five tally marks, my grade went down. So even though I was getting A's on all my papers, on each report card, I was lucky to get a B. By the last reporting period, this gruff old teacher had started to grow on me, and I think I grew on him, too. He not only smiled two times, but once he actually laughed. However, my name continued to go on the board, and I knew to expect a B- on my last report card.

Well, that's not what happened. Mr. Temby gave me an A+. And in the comment area, he wrote, "Brenda is an extremely talented writer. I hope she'll continue to write the rest of her life."

I have to tell you, that vote of confidence from Mr. Temby was all I needed to make me believe my dream of becoming an author was not so far-fetched. And today, as I accept this

award, I feel a lot like that same 13-year-old girl. When Rachel called me with the news that my manuscript had won, I was standing in the kitchen, holding my daughter's hand, and we were both smiling ear to ear and shaking. After working so hard on this novel, feeling at times like it was nothing but sentimental junk and at other times like maybe I was creating something real and powerful, the AJL validated me, my story, and my effort. That kind of recognition and validation is hard to come by as a beginning author, and it's awesome!

You can't imagine how much fun it was to mention this award when I sent my novel out to Farrar Straus and Giroux, my first choice publisher. And you really can't imagine how high I jumped when I got an e-mail from FSG a couple weeks ago, offering to publish my novel! Yes, it's true, I've already found a publisher, and I'm meeting with my editor tomorrow. This never would have happened so quickly if it hadn't been for the AJL and the Sydney Taylor manuscript award. So thank you all so much.

By now, you're all probably wondering just what is this book about and how can I get a copy? Well, CARA'S KITCHEN (which is going to have a different, yet-to-be-determined title when it comes out) is about an 11-year-old Jewish girl, Cara Segal, who is trying to get back to a normal life after her mother and sister die in a tragic house fire. With the help of a secret cookie business, her best friend Marlee, and her own inner strength, Cara forges a path through her grief. She redefines her thoughts of God, rebuilds her relationship with her dad, and renews her hopeful outlook on life.

They always tell you to write what you know, and I believe that. But I've never been involved with a house fire, and I've never lost a member of my nuclear family. So how did I come to write this story?

First of all, I was one of those kids who constantly worried about death. I loved books about grief, and I was a bit obsessed with the thought of how fragile life was. Then, when my husband and I were trying to start our family, I experienced infertility. Although infertility is not your traditional “grief,” it felt that way to me. During this time, a rabbi said to me, “Every day you’re mourning the loss of the child you never had.” How right he was. It was a horrible two years, but it was an experience that changed my outlook on life in an incredibly positive way. At first, I felt abandoned by God. Why wouldn’t he let me have children? How could he do this to me? But eventually I came to see that God didn’t “do” this to me. God wasn’t out to get me. In fact, He was crying right alongside me. This change in perspective helped me get through the infertility, and it stuck with me. I would never face another difficult situation without knowing God was somehow on my side.

Then, in 2001, when I was living in Austin Texas, there was a tragic house fire in our neighborhood. A father and son died in the fire. Every day as I ran my errands, I would drive past the burned out house, and I would think about the surviving family members. I wondered if they felt abandoned by God, or if maybe they knew that God was still with them, mourning and crying right alongside them.

I knew I wanted to write a story about a girl in that situation. I knew she would be Jewish. And I knew the story would be for a general audience, not just Jewish kids. Because I knew I wasn’t the only kid who recognized how fragile life was. Especially after 9/11. Every child worries. Every child has these fears. And sadly, for some children, these fears become reality. I wrote this book for children everywhere to say to them, I know this world can be a scary place. But don’t lose faith. God is on your side. And somehow or other, we get through it. We all survive.

As to how you can get a copy of my book, I hope you'll scour the FSG catalog in about two years and look for my name. Then order away! I'd be thrilled to come to your school, library, or synagogue to do a book talk and book signing.

Thanks again!