

Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Speech
A Pickpocket's Tale

Karen Schwabach

Karen Schwabach is from Gilbertsville, New York originally, graduated from Antioch College in English and SUNY-Albany in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). For the past several years she ran an English as a Second Language program for a school system in the remote Alaskan Bush, serving 24 roadless Yup'ik Eskimo villages. Then she moved to Anchorage and took this year off to write. Not married, no kids; dogs.

Thank you. Thank you very much.

When Rachel Glasser called me back in February and told me the committee had chosen my manuscript, that was really a great moment in my life—as I'm sure those of you who are writers can imagine. But life isn't mostly made up of great moments; life is mostly made up of small, petty irritations and annoyances. And, as the late Stephen Jay Gould recently wrote, of thousands of unnoticed acts of kindness.

And history is the same way. History isn't about great men or great events. History is about millions of lives that were mostly filled with small annoyances and small, unnoticed acts of unkindness.

I chose to set *A Pickpocket's Tale* in New York City in the year 1730 because nothing important happened then. So I could just concentrate on the story.

In England, this was the time of the Bloody Codes, when there were over 200 crimes punishable by death. As far as I've been able to find out there was no downward age limit to the death penalty. They would literally hang boys and girls. To mitigate this system somewhat they came up with the sentence of Transportation, where convicts who would otherwise be sentenced to death were sent to the American colonies and sold as indentured servants or in some cases slaves. Quite a few of these convicts were Jewish.

It was the custom in the Jewish community to see that all the Jewish convicts were bought by Jews, so that these convicts wouldn't be forced to break the Sabbath, the dietary laws and so forth.

In my story Molly, a London, I don't know what's the word, street hoodlum I guess, of Jewish descent is bought by a Jewish family who attempt through stability and caring to turn her life around. And to some degree they succeed. Molly learns about the importance

of belonging and of caring for other people, but she remains something of a street hoodlum too.

One problem I had writing this story was, I'm not Jewish. So for background knowledge I read *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Judaism*. Twice. But I guess it was written for idiots less complete than me, because after reading it I still didn't understand the dietary laws, so I had to ask some Jewish friends to explain that. And I also had to ask them to read my manuscript, partly to look for mistakes but also because I wanted to know if I'd managed to portray Jewish characters and Jewish family life in a manner that Jewish readers could relate to.

By the way, a couple of people here have asked me if there *are* Jews in Alaska. And a few folks have mentioned they have relatives in Alaska. Oh, you have relatives in Alaska? [*Audience member: We have a member in Alaska.*] You have a member in Alaska? [*Audience member: At Temple Beth Sholom on Northern Lights Boulevard.*] Temple Beth Sholom? You know what their website address is? I guarantee you're not going to forget this. It's www.frozenchosen.org.

Actually I went there last Friday for the Shabbat service. I had never been to a synagogue before, so I have no basis for comparison, but it surprised me that the place was so crowded—completely packed. There were a lot of people there. And that surprised me particularly because last Friday was June 21, the summer solstice, which is *the* big party night in Anchorage. We're all a bit pagan up there.

Actually I found out the answer to a question I'd been wondering about, which is if the sun never sets, what time does the Sabbath begin? And the answer is 7:30 p.m. And the reason is, because. Thank you very much.