

Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Introduction

Aileen Grossberg, Chair

Good evening, everybody.

It's so nice to be addressing you while you are still all awake after our long day of sessions. Usually the Manuscript Award is the last one of the evening. But tonight we have the privilege of being the lead in to the Sydney Taylor Book Awards- sort of a before and after.

It's been an exciting year for the Manuscript Committee after last year's disappointment when the potentially winning manuscript had to be disqualified.

But this year we had a great group of manuscripts. Almost everyone had a champion among the judges. I applaud our judges for their hard work to reach a timely consensus.

Thank you to Debbie Feder, Toby Harris, Mildred Bernstein, Jill Ratzan and and a special thanks to Helene Tuchman who stepped in at the last minute when Heidi Rabinowitz had to withdraw from the committee.

Mildred and Helene will be leaving the committee. Heidi will be rejoining us.

Now on to this year's award. Historical fiction in a Jewish context dominated this year's entries with many stories inspired by the experiences of the authors' families as you can see from the following brief summaries:

- Russian boy soldiers try to maintain their Jewish identity and escape the Czar's army in 1831. (*Fragile Ice*)
- The invented game of skyros- a cross between soccer and quidditch- is central to this story of assimilation and survival set in the time of the Maccabees. (*Gilgul*)
- Escaping from Russia in 1919, Beba tries to be as brave as Queen Esther as she and her family face a harrowing journey. (*Beba's Passage*)

- Told in alternating perspectives, two 12 year old boys, one German and one Jewish, deal with the changes and challenges in Hannover, Germany in the summer of 1938. (*Crushing the Red Flowers*)
- An ultra Orthodox boy finds his route to understanding his father, his bar mitzvah parasha and friendship through baseball in a story that flashes between the past and present. (*Go to Yourself*)
- This contemporary novel in verse focuses on the inner life and turmoil of a 10-year-old dancer (*Reeni's Turn*)
- In this funny- and at times- sad- story of family dynamics focusing on her yearning for a special dog.- a Canaan, a breed native to Israel, Libby learns patience and responsibility in this novel that has some laugh out loud scenes. (*Raising Canaans.*)

The final and winning entry is a story of maturation set in ancient Persia where a young girl grows up to become one of Queen Esther's handmaidens.

With its focus on the story of Esther from the perspective of another orphan, *The Seventh Handmaiden* by Judith Pransky has been selected the recipient of the 2018 Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award .

The Seventh Handmaiden tells the story of Darya who, at the story's start, is a twelve-year-old slave in ancient Persia. By the end of the novel, she has matured into a strong, brave young woman who serves Queen Esther and is finally aware of her true identity.

With its exotic location and themes of uncertain parentage, hidden identity, young love, palace intrigue, jealousy, secrecy - as well as universal themes of friendship, loyalty, prejudice and persecution, slavery and freedom, perseverance and survival-the judges felt that the story would appeal to many ages and interest groups. They also saw parallels between the politics of ancient Persia and the United States today.

In addition, the judges applauded the story's strong narrative, command of language and midrashic-like quality. The judges liked the way the Purim story was woven into Darya's story without overwhelming it and the importance of complex issues of self-identity, Jewish

theology, conversion, prayer, politics, slavery and human trafficking. The judges also commented on the descriptive details that helped the reader visualize the scenes. And we librarians should be pleased that the author had Darya spend her free day in the library.

Judith Pransky is a middle school teacher at Jack M. Barrack Academy near Philadelphia whose sixth graders concentrate on ancient history. Judith uses “historical fiction extensively to bring history to life.” And, indeed, she has brought Darya and the other characters -as well as the time -period to life.

Judith has taught English in Israel, run a kosher bakery business from her home, taught writing and is the advisor to the school’s newspaper. Along the way , she raised five children.

She is certainly an experienced and accomplished individual. Just as every pot has its lid, let’s hope that every author- including Judith- finds its publisher.

I am sure that in the next few moments Judith will tell us more about herself and her inspiration.

So, now I am very pleased to present the 2018 Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award to Judith Pransky author of The Seventh Handmaiden.