

## Sydney Taylor Award Acceptance Speech

*Donna Jo Napoli*

People love disaster stories. Those stories can pluck at every string that vibrates within us: fear of great loss, horror at death and destruction, gratitude for the love we have (and might be losing), shock at the immensity of the powers around us, and on and on. But my guess is that what resonates inside us the most – the very most – is hope. When we see a character that dares to hope in the most overwhelming of calamities, we want to identify; we want to be that strong. Would we pick ourselves up, delve into our reserves of energy and resourcefulness, and plow ahead – perhaps even helping others to do the same – and ultimately prevail? Or would we perish without a struggle – simply yield to what seemed inevitable?

Sebah, the main character of *STORM*, is an ordinary girl. Uneducated, inexperienced, untested with respect to life's major hurdles. And the rains come.

Imagine those rains. At first any rain can be welcome. After all, there are plants to water and underground aquifers that need replenishing so that our wells don't run dry, and, really, rain just plain refreshes the world.

But then it keeps raining. You can light a candle and play cards. You can make a hearty stew and nestle in. You can catch up on your mending and polishing and whatever else. You can gather together by a fire and tell stories.

But it keeps raining. The water rises. And you realize this is not the ordinary. This is the extraordinary. This is the beginning of the end. A wail sounds in your head, and it will not stop.

In *STORM* many got washed away, down the hills, swept out to sea. Drowned. Sebah climbs, though. Up a cliff, a hill, trees. As high as she can get. She stows away with animals foreign to her. She befriends a giant whose intentions are unfathomable. She braces herself against the elements. And she's pregnant as she does it all.

Sebah is like a nest; she herself is a safe refuge for others – certainly for her child and her giant, but also for the animals in the ark. She is like a blanket when you come home soaked to the bone from falling through the ice, like a drink of spring water on a sweltering day, like a piece of hot toast with butter when you learn your best friend is moving away. She comforts.

This rock of a woman comforts.

Wouldn't we all wish we could have the strength of Sebah when disaster strikes?

I've asked myself many times, so very many times, why *STORM* is considered a Jewish book. You consider it a Jewish book. I consider it a Jewish book. But it takes place in Noah's

times... before Abraham came on the scene. No one in this book is Jewish. And yet you can rip off a corner of a page of this book and chew on it and know it is as Jewish as matzoh balls made with chicken fat. The importance of schmaltz can't be overestimated.

The rain is like a knock on the door. In the middle of the night. The thing you fear that could not just kill you, but wipe out your family, your friends, the community you love. Whether or not you have ever heard that sound, you are aware of its presence in a visceral way. What Jewish child of twelve has not thought about what she would do in such a downpour?

And what twelve-year-old Armenian, native American, Cambodian, Tutsi, Bosnian, Darfurian has not thought about such a downpour? How many twelve-year old Syrians are finding out right now what they are capable of, what strengths they have or don't have?

So why is *STORM* Jewish? I'm going to go out on a limb here. I believe there are at least two reasons. One lies in Noah – in the tenor of his faith. Faith is not an easy thing to hold on to; it is tested repeatedly. The way Noah approaches his faith, as presented in *STORM*, feels decidedly Jewish to me. He trusts in the Almighty, not blindly and not without a stiff amount of suffering – his wife lets us in on that fact. But, no matter how much it may be challenged, this faith – this approach to what's good and right – allows Noah to get from day to day.

The other reason lies in Sebah. She hardly ever thinks about any power other than her own and those of the people and animals around her. She isn't plagued with conceptual challenges. She defines morality and decency in concrete terms. And those terms allow her to get from day to day:

*...all at once I realize something: It's stupid to be sad. That's the sum of it. I have to find something good to do. Something that brings me hope. That's the secret now – the secret to surviving on the ark. Maybe it's the secret to surviving anywhere. I don't believe in Noah's god, but I do believe what Noah said. We must all do what we can. (p. 139)*

Noah and Sebah seem like bookends of something – a Jewish spirit, if you will. Whether you come at life through a more cerebral or more concrete path – both paths being common among people who self-identify as Jewish – what matters is finding a way to get from day to day.

But this is a book for young people – so survival isn't enough. Being good and right isn't enough. Hope is necessary. Hope teaches us not to be sad, as Sebah says.

So I'm back where I started. This is a Jewish book because it's full of hope. And this is a children's book because it's full of hope.

Thank you for recognizing that. Thank you for your vote of confidence in my work. I like to believe I don't need external confirmation of the value of spending so many hours at my computer. But, in fact, it is lovely to receive it. Thank you, thank you.