

SYDNEY TAYLOR BOOK AWARD
FOR OLDER READERS:
WHO WAS THE WOMAN WHO WORE THE HAT?

Acceptance by
Nancy Patz

Thank you so much, Susan ---

And my warmest thanks, too, to the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee of the Association of Jewish Libraries. I am most appreciative of this very special honor.

In planning to talk to you tonight I discovered a surprising kinship between Sydney Taylor 's ALL OF A KIND FAMILY books and WHO WAS THE WOMAN WHO WORE THE HAT? Sydney Taylor wrote about a Jewish family in a bygone time, and through her stories she answered some very basic questions: What was this family like? (The hard-working father? the sensible, caring mother?) What were the 5 sisters like, and how were they different from each other? How did these people live their daily lives?

These are the same kinds of questions I asked in my book:

“Who was the woman
who wore the hat
I saw in the Jewish museum?
What was she like? ...
Did she put cream in her coffee?
Did she put raisins in her apple cake?”

Of course, there's one striking *difference* between our books: Each of the people represented in WHO WAS THE WOMAN? was real, not imagined. I drew portraits from 1930s and '40s photographs in Holocaust books, from the Yad Vashem Memorial in Israel, and from Holocaust museums in Washington and Amsterdam. And after each portrait was finished, I taped it up on my studio wall. As I wrote and re-wrote the poems that became the text, I continued to draw – and draw upon -- these faces, (mostly women, but children, men, families, too) -- one after another. In time they formed a wall of faces across the studio. I grew to know them well-- and I began to feel very close to them.

Some of them reminded me of people I've known and loved. And in the 3 years it took to do this book, my memories of those I had cherished in my *own* life – and my thoughts about the portraits on the wall – began to get all mixed up.

For instance, there was a drawing of an older woman looking into a mirror and tipping the brim of her hat as she put it on. She looks nothing at all like my mother. But the text that prompted that drawing is this:

“When the woman put on her hat,
did she tip the brim just slightly?
Did she like the way she looked
with her hat down over one eye?”

Years and years ago my father often reached out and tipped down the brim of my mother’s hat. I can see him. There’s no question in my mind that that part of the text came straight out of that memory.

As I kept drawing portraits and wondering about the lives of the people I was drawing, I continued to feel very connected to them. Without my realizing it these people I never knew had begun to feel like family. One morning in the studio it was suddenly clear that I needed to include some pictures of *my* family in with those from Amsterdam and Stuttgart and Warsaw and Paris.

Months later I realized that this feeling seemed to echo the page that is perhaps the heart of the book. There are no pictures here, just these words:

“It might have been my mother’s hat.
It could have been my hat.

Or yours.”

In that first year 3 publishers considered the book. Everybody liked it and rejected it. Nobody knew -- quote -- “what to do with it!” (They couldn’t figure out how to market it!)

Finally, for advice and direction I called up Stephanie Owens Lurie, President and Publisher of Dutton Children’s Books, (whom we heard on the program this afternoon, and whom I’ve known since she was my editor when I illustrated THE FAMILY TREASURY OF JEWISH HOLIDAYS.) We met at a restaurant in Washington, and between the lamb chops and the apple tart, with the table strewn with dozens of drawings from my studio wall, WHO WAS THE WOMAN WHO WORE THE HAT? found a publisher who loved it and was eager to publish it!

So tonight I say a fervent “Thank you!” again to Steph Lurie, and to those at Dutton who were so caring about every detail of the book’s production.

There are a few other people who helped beyond measure to bring WHO WAS THE WOMAN? to life:

Susan L. Roth, my cherished friend and colleague, from the beginning and all the way through.

My good friend Gail Green, who on the computer transformed many of the drawings to small printed images, which I then drew on again -- and tore and collaged into the final art.

My children-- Jeannie, Peter, Susan and Alan.

My grandchildren-- Sophie, Livia and Maia.

And my source of strength and encouragement, my husband Patrick. You all helped me in different ways at different times, just as you always have. A big hug to each of you!

When I first saw the hat, that day in the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam, I certainly didn't have in mind to do a book about it. I didn't even have my sketchbook with me, because the guards had made me check it with my camera and pocketbook and jacket.

But somehow I wanted to draw that hat in my sketchbook! I went and asked the guard if I could get out my sketchbook and a pencil. He said NO.

So what to do? I went back to the case, and I stood in front of the hat and memorized it -- just memorized it. I walked back along the canal to the hotel, and I sat on the bed and drew the hat in my sketchbook.

(This is that page from my sketchbook.)

And Patrick and I went on with our trip.

But my life had been changed -- by that moment of extraordinary connection with the hat, and by my later, moving thoughts and experiences in making the book.

It means so much to me that adults and older young readers alike are reading it and wondering about one woman and the millions like her who never lived out their lives.

It pleases me also that younger readers -- like, for instance, Sophie and Livia and Maia -- in time will read this little book and think in a special way, perhaps, of a moment in our history that was profoundly life-changing for us all....

Again, my deepest thanks to the members of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee of the Association of Jewish Libraries.

I am honored by your recognition.

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