

Sydney Taylor Award Winner *Julia's Kitchen*
By Brenda Ferber

My dear friend Esther Hershenhorn, who won the Sydney Taylor Book Award for her picture book, *Chicken Soup by Heart*, often talks about “Kodak moments” in our lives. And 3 years ago, winning the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award and being able to announce to everyone at the banquet in Brooklyn that I had found a publisher for *Julia's Kitchen* was certainly one such moment for me.

Since then, I've had a run of Kodak moments, and I'd like to share a few of them with you now.

First of all, getting good reviews was huge, but my favorite was getting a starred review from *Kirkus*, whom I had heard was the “Simon Cowell” of reviewers.

Selling the German translation rights was a Kodak moment I never even thought to dream about. But wow, how powerful can you get? Here was a book that would have been burned in the Holocaust and which will now be available to German children.

And one of my favorite Kodak moments continues to happen sporadically. I'm talking about fan mail. Letters from children I don't even know, from all parts of the country. I'm amazed that these kids take the time to write and send actual letters (not even e-mail!) through my publisher and finally on to me.

One letter that I want to share with you was actually from a mom. She had read *Julia's Kitchen*, loved it, and shared it with her daughter. She said, “My daughter Karly started reading it this week too, and she commented that she thought Jewish people didn't believe in God - maybe in someone else - some Jewish god, I guess. (We're Catholic - so it's really nice that you clarified that for her. Never thought to mention it before and it never came up in conversation.)”

Which brings me to this Kodak Moment. Today at my presentation, I read an entry from my diary from the day I learned I won the STBA. It started off like this: I won the Sydney Taylor Book Award. I believe I may need to repeat that. I won the Sydney Taylor Book Award!

My utter astonishment was due in part to the amazing Jewish books that were published this year. I was blown away by so many of them, and often I wondered privately why *Julia's Kitchen* had to come out in a year with such stiff competition! But honestly, I think and I hope this a trend. I've heard it said that religion is the last taboo in children's literature. And it looks to me like the walls are coming down.

Sydney Taylor's books touch the hearts of Jews and non-Jews alike. And that is why this award is so meaningful to me. I never set out to write a Jewish book. *Julia's Kitchen* is a book about resiliency, about finding hope and faith when tragedy strikes. You don't have to be Jewish to understand that. But my main character, Cara, is Jewish. She's Jewish because I'm Jewish. She's Jewish because in my reading, I didn't see enough Jewish

characters, and I didn't think that was fair. But Cara's story is a universal one. And because of that, people of many faiths are reading this book. And people like Karly are learning about Judaism. And with learning comes understanding. And with understanding comes tolerance. And with tolerance, comes peace.

So thank you to Sydney Taylor for leading the way. Thank you to Rachel Kamin, the Sydney Taylor Award Committee, and the whole AJL for honoring *Julia's Kitchen* this year. Thank you to my son Sammy, who is here tonight and to my children, Jacob and Faith, who are already at summer camp, for understanding when I got too wrapped up in writing to make dinner. And thank you to my wonderful husband, Alan, who makes it all possible.