

**SYDNEY TAYLOR AWARD FOR YOUNGER READERS:
ACCEPTANCE SPEECH**

Elsa Okon Rael

This morning, I attended the Sydney Taylor Award Panel, and let me tell you, I am in a state of astonishment! I wonder if you are aware of the incredible amount of work and caring—the dedication, intelligence and love—that go into every book they examine. This is a remarkably generous group, giving over much of their lives to this effort. Bless them.

Obviously, I went off into a dream state when Linda Silver, the past chair, called with the joyous news about RIVKA'S FIRST THANKSGIVING. How is it possible, to get touched-again-for-a-second-time, by the magic of Sydney Taylor? I must be dreaming—and in that dream I got to meet the wonderfully patient and dear Libby White, the new Chair and her committee. And to see Ellen Cole again, who was my first fairy godmother. Uh-oh, wait—do Jews have fairy godmothers? Well, we must—how else did I get here, along with my enormously creative illustrator Maryann Kovalski? Yet, get here we did, accompanied by Sarah Nielsen of Margaret K. McElderry at Simon and Schuster and for this, I thank you, all of you on the committee who read RIVKA'S FIRST THANKSGIVING. Truly, thank you.

Last week, rummaging through the 3½ tons of the paper that make up my life, I found the notes I'd made of my last speech in 1998. What amazed me was how little had changed in that time: I'm still being asked, as I was several times today, if I'm Zeesie, and now Rifka. The answer still is: no. I'd never shown the courage of my two spunky heroines. Imagine, just imagine, the chutzpah, the unadulterated gall of writing a letter to an esteemed rabbi, telling him he's not as intelligent as the world believes him to be! I'd never have dared. But I'm glad Rifka did, because her pluckiness brought me here today.

As you know from my stories, I love the Lower East Side of New York City which, for me, is redolent with memories. The streets vividly bring my tenement childhood to mind, despite the vast changes. I studiously ignore the gentrification of Orchard Street and mitigate my disappointment by getting myself a snappy pickle from Gus' ancient barrels, or a hot bialy from Grand Street, or honey cake from Ratner's on Delancey.

Oh, so many memories—the Zborovah Society package parties; my Zaydeh, with the Torah in his arms, holding it tenderly like a baby, dancing into the street on Simchat Torah; the pushcarts on Orchard and Essex streets; a wild walk across the Williamsburg Bridge on a torrid August Sunday anticipating the lemon ice pop on the Brooklyn side; the endless waits on frigid Saturday mornings on lines that wound around the block outside the Seward Park Library ... we would wait for the doors to open, so we could hear librarians read stories that opened the hearts and minds of the children of immigrant parents. It was on that line I first encountered ... ANNE OF

GREEN GABLES, IVANHOE, JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS and absorbed stories from the OLD TESTAMENT.

It should come as no surprise that I found Sydney Taylor, although I was somewhat older, in the Donnell Branch Library ... in what appeared to be an accident. I hadn't gone looking for her, but there she was ... with a picture on the cover of many children—ALL OF A KIND FAMILY. I knew I was meant to read this book and I did, right there ... it was “bashert.” Please know, as both child and adult, I have always considered my library card as my passport to heaven. Where in the world has it not taken me?

The work you do as librarians, as keepers and givers of literary mind magic is truly a treasure. You are not here by chance. You chose this work. You are a blessing. Indeed, I feel blessed by you, and I thank you.

Libby White: Maryann Kovalski, illustrator of RIVKA'S FIRST THANKSGIVING is recipient of the 2001 award in the Younger readers' Category. She brought Rivka and her long-vanished community to life. Maryann resides in Toronto, but it wasn't always so. She is a former New Yorker who remembers her father's stories about growing up on the Lower East Side. Maryann attended New York City's School of Visual Arts, majoring in animation and illustration. After moving to Canada, she worked in editorial illustration, but her interest in children's literature never faltered. She has written and/or illustrated more than thirty children's titles.