

JEWISH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: WHAT'S HOT AND WHAT'S NOT? THE SYDNEY TAYLOR BOOK AWARDS

Libby White

Description: Who's invited? Everyone of course, but especially day school librarians, Hebrew school and synagogue librarians, community and education center librarians, children's and young adult public librarians, authors, illustrators, booksellers, and publishers! Convention time means the return of the "FEW HOLDS-BARRED PANEL." As usual, the panel—consisting of Kathleen Clotfelter, Donna Klein Academy, Boca Raton, Florida; Etta Gold, Temple Beth Am, Miami, Florida; Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, California; Naomi Morse, Charles E. Smith Day School, Lower School, Rockville, Maryland; Linda Silver, Jewish Education Center of Cleveland, Cleveland, Ohio and Libby White, Beth Israel Congregation, Owings Mills, Maryland. The fast-paced program will consist of two parts, separated by a break to allow all involved to catch their breath and unscramble their senses. Expect a program of pluses! Meet Sydney Taylor Book Award winners Maryann Kovalski, Elsa Okon Rael, and Catherine Reef—plus—Hear Emma Dryden, Editorial Director of Margaret K. McElderry speak on "Raising Jewish Voices in Contemporary Children's Fiction"—plus—celebrate the achievements of retiring audience feedback to energize, and who knows, to elevate our presentation!

Libby K. White is the librarian at the Beth Israel Congregation Hebrew School in Owings Mills, Maryland, and directs the Jewish Vocational Service Library in Baltimore. Formerly, she was—at different times—a reference, ethnic culture, young adult, and children's librarian in a large public library system in Upstate New York. Libby reviews for the *AJL Newsletter*, *School Library Journal*, and the *Baltimore Jewish Times*. Currently, she is a doctoral candidate in Jewish History at Baltimore Hebrew University. Libby has been a member of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee since 1998; this is her first year as chairperson. Libby will chair the STBA program on Tuesday morning and will present awards to the 2001 winners at the banquet. Libby can be contacted at <mailto:Libbylib@aol.com>.

Good morning and welcome. I am Libby White, chair of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee. Although we look forward to the glitter and glamour of this evening's banquet, at which the winners will receive their awards, many of us believe that the annual

"What's Hot and What's Not?" session, featuring the "Few-Holds-Barred Panel" and recently, a presentation by an award winner, are the heart and soul of Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee life. I do not intend to deliver a state of the committee address, but I shall touch upon a few matters that are included in my annual report.

It is about fifty years since Sydney Taylor's ALL OF A KIND FAMILY was published. Today Taylor's series is finding new audiences as a result of marketing based on its family values appeal! Administratively, our committee consists of two overlapping committees, resulting from a change in 2000 in the Sydney Taylor calendar year, which now runs from January to December. The change was made in order that our award announcements coincide with other major children's literature awards, such as the Caldecott and Newbery. The committee which will fight it out this morning actually finished its work at the end of 2001. Since January 2001, a newly seated committee has been reviewing books. You will see and hear them in action in Toronto in June 2003.

In terms of our continuing work, the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee has been making a concerted effort to call attention to new books that are inaccurate and biased. Such titles are reviewed promptly in the *AJL Newsletter* and noted on HaSafran. We are not in the business of censorship. However, librarians need to know the content of books that they purchase. Library budgets are small enough, given our vast needs. Most of you know that the committee occasionally makes a “Body-of-Work Award” to a distinguished author. We presented such an award to Barbara Diamond Goldin in 1997. We plan to present a “Body-of-Work Award” in 2003. We will be asking all members of the Association of Jewish Libraries for suggestions. Please look for instructions in the *AJL Newsletter* and on HaSafran. In order that this not become an unwieldy exercise, we shall request that you abide by the rule, “One AJL member, one suggestion.”

This morning we have with us quite a number of important people. I invite them to stand as they are introduced; if you wish to applaud, do wait until the end. Elsa Okon Rael is the author of *RIVKA’S FIRST THANKSGIVING*, published by Margaret McElderry Books/Simon and Schuster, winner of the 2001 Sydney Taylor Book Award in the Younger Readers’ category. Elsa’s *WHEN ZAYDE DANCED ON ELDRIDGE STREET* was the 1997 winner. Maryann Kovalski will receive the 2001 Sydney Taylor Book Award for her illustration of *RIVKA’S FIRST THANKSGIVING*. Catherine Reef is the author of *SIGMUND FREUD: PIONEER OF THE MIND*, published by Clarion/Houghton Mifflin, the 2001 Older Readers’ winner. We are delighted that the winning publishers are represented. Sarah Nielsen, Assistant Editor at Margaret K. McElderry and Jennifer Greene, editor at Clarion are with us. Also important are the new members of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee. I am pleased to introduce Susan Berman of the Myerberg Library, Baltimore Hebrew Congregation Day School, Baltimore, MD; Andrea Davidson of the Lee and Dolores Hartmark Library, The Temple-Tifereth Israel, Beachwood, OH; Heidi Estrin, the Feldman Children’s Library, Congregation B’nai Israel, Boca Raton, FL.

I hope that the tradition of having award winners address us informally during our daytime convention session will continue. Today, Catherine Reef is our speaker. As a teenager Catherine was already attracted to a career in the arts, and in college she focused on writing. Her books, which are mainly works of biography and American history, reflect a particular interest in creative people as subjects. For a long time Catherine expected that she would become a teacher, like many others in her family. She likes to think that she has indirectly realized that goal through her writing. Catherine Reef will speak on **AFTER SEPTEMBER 11: LESSONS FROM HISTORY AND ART**

Catherine Reef :

Our children are growing up in a surreal time. Last year we experienced unthinkable terrorism in two of our major cities, and the government tells us to expect more. Meanwhile, news reports repeatedly describe terrorist violence overseas. More than ever, therefore, children need ways to cope with life’s difficulties.

In April, together with a fourth-grade class in Wilton, Connecticut, I explored ways to find comfort in literature and art. Wilton is a community deeply affected by the attack on the World Trade Center; in fact, five children attending this school lost parents in that horrific event. I learned a great deal while preparing and leading this program, and I have thought that others who work with children and books might find it useful to carry out some of the activities in which the class and I took part.

We began by talking about biographies. The children had completed a unit on biography, and as we discussed the books that had been read it became clear that every biographical subject had faced obstacles and setbacks, and that tough times are part of life for famous and ordinary people alike. We then read from Russell Freedman's *FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT* about Roosevelt's ordeal with polio and explored how Roosevelt's response to the disease revealed much about his character. We agreed that he showed determination and that through this misfortune he grew intellectually and emotionally. The class understood that it is possible to learn from Roosevelt's experience and to emerge stronger from our own difficulties.

I asked, "Does it matter if the person we read about in a book is a real man or woman or a fictional character?" We decided that one can just as easily learn from the experiences described in novels, because fiction and nonfiction are based on the same set of truths.

Taking a different approach, I then suggested that life's events often inspire writers and artists to create. Walt Whitman, for example, composed several of his finest poems following the death of Abraham Lincoln, a man he greatly admired. Lincoln died when spring flowers were starting to open and Venus shone brightly in the evening sky. As Whitman expressed so beautifully in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," those images—the spring lilacs and the evening star—would be forever linked with his grief. After defining some vocabulary, the class and I read the opening lines of this poem. We discussed the fact that with the passing of time, people no longer feel deep sorrow over Lincoln's death; the thoughts and emotions that Whitman felt are universal, however, and can be meaningful to us in times of personal loss.

Social conditions have inspired visual artists, including the photographer Gordon Parks. Parks once wrote, "Photography was my choice of weapons. I picked up a camera because of what I hated most in the universe ... racism, hatred, and intolerance..." As a final exercise, we looked at photographs by Parks that offered powerful visual condemnation of racism. As a parting thought, I suggested that it is possible for us to create our own works of literature and visual art in response to events occurring in our lives and in the larger world.

I used a particular set of books and pictures in my program, but librarians, teachers, and parents could easily complete the same exercises with different materials, including books and images of Jewish content. These activities give children a way to find solace in a troubled world, and they encourage young people to think critically while they read and view art.

Libby White:

Thank you, Catherine, for your thoughtful and thought-provoking words. It is now time for the return of the “Few-Holds-Barred Panel.” In addition to many other kindnesses and courtesies, the Convention Co-Chairs and their associates performed a special mitzvah for the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee. Susan Berson and Bernice Tarlie arranged to gather the books of 2001 which we shall be evaluating from Denver area libraries. The panel will be introduced and the discussion of “What’s Hot and What’s Not” will be moderated by Fred Isaac of Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA. Fred is himself a panel member.

Fred Isaac:

The panelists this year are Kathleen Clotfelter, Donna Klein Jewish Academy, Boca Raton, FL; Etta Gold, Temple Beth Am, Miami, FL; Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai Library, Oakland, CA; Naomi Morse, Linda Silver, Ratner Media-Technology Center, Jewish Education Center of Cleveland, Cleveland, OH; Libby White, Beth Israel Congregation Library, Owings Mills, MD. According to established procedure, after the opposing “HOT” and “Not” views are presented, audience members are invited to raise their hands and make comments. If time permits, Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee members will give brief summaries of Notable Books that are not scheduled to be discussed by the panel. This is a double session. During the break, which will begin about 10:00am, we encourage you to pick up bookmarks and the list of Notable Books for 2001 (formerly Best of the Bunch), and to purchase the committee’s Compilation of Reviews volume.

The Books

Round 1 –Holidays

1. FRIDAY NIGHTS OF NANA by Amy Hest, Illus by Claire A. Nivola. (Candlewick)
Hot (Gold) “A stunning reflection of all that Shabbat can be ... the comfort of family relationships, the reassurance of ritual ... pictures sustain the mood of satisfaction and delight.”
Not (Silver) “Pleasant but pallid additional purchase.”
2. CHANUKAH LIGHTS EVERYWHERE by Michael Rosen, Illus. by Melissa Iwai(Harcourt/ Gulliver)
Hot (Gold) “The text is gentle and loving, inclusive and happy..Chanukah lights and Chanukah lights shine forth...Illustrations are exquisite.”
Not (Isaac) “Regrettably, no one tells the story of the Maccabees; the historical and midrashic importance of the holiday is missing.”
3. THE LITTLEST FROG by Sylvia Rouss, Illus. by Holly Hannon. (Pitspopany)
Hot (Clotfelter) “The littlest frog scared Pharaoh so much (that) Pharaoh comes to the conclusion that perhaps he should set the Jews free.”

Not (Silver) “Pesach lite.” “An additional purchase.”

4. THE MAGIC MENORAH by Jane Zalben, Illus. by Donna Diamond (Simon)
Hot (Morse) “A Jewish suburban boy releases a Yiddish genie...funny, witty, and satisfying.”

Not (Isaac) “A Jewish version of A Christmas Carol.” “ While the message is important, the method is too derivative.”

5. A MOUNTAIN OF BLINTZES by Barbara Diamond Goldin, Illus. by Anik McGrory (Harcourt)

Hot (Isaac) “Based on a Chelm story and re-set in the Catskills, (it) should charm both old and young ... More about food than about Shavuot.”

Not (White) “Characters are unlikable ... the ending obliterates the traditional message ... the children take responsibility in contrast to their feckless elders.”

6. SOLOMON AND THE TREES by Matt Biers-Ariel. Illus. by Esti Silverberg-Kiss(UAHC)

Hot (White) “Draws together legends of King Solomon and Jewish traditions of God’s charge to humankind to care for nature.” “An engaging, instructive story for Tu B’Shevat.”

Not (Silver) “serious, high-minded, and not very lively... gloomy illustrations” an additional purchase.”

7. SOPHIE AND THE SHOFAR by Fran Manushkin, Illus. by Rosalind Charney Kay.(UAHC)

Hot (Clotfelter) “The shofar disappears ... Sophie lays the blame on Sasha (her Russian immigrant cousin) ... Some real good lessons are presented.”

Not (Silver) “Contrived story that isn’t up to the author’s usual standards.”

8. ZIKAZAK: A MAGICAL CHANUKAH NIGHT Eric A. Kimmel. Illus. by Jon Goodell (Random House)

Hot (Gold) “ The townspeople of Brisk are beset with the misdeeds of two terrible devils that intend to ruin Hanukkah However, they are no match for the wise rabbi.” “An absolute delight.”

Not (Morse) “Telling children, as the rabbi does, that there is good in evil is a lie, no matter how well-intentioned. No positive Jewish or human value.”

ROUND 2—FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN

1. BEHOLD THE TREES by Sue Alexander, Illus. by Leonid Gore (Arthur Levine/Scholastic)

Hot (Morse) “visually gorgeous ... for older readers...Illustrations tell the story of the land of Israel’s trees through the ages.” “A Tu B’Shevat book, an ecology lesson, (for) an art or writing class.”

Not (Gold) “A lovely gift for an adult ... as a celebration of re-forestation and our affection for Israel it simply doesn’t work.”

2. BLESS YOUR HEART by Holly Bea, Illus by Kim Howard. (H.J.Kramer/Starseed)
 Hot (Gold) “Two young children are at the beach from dawn to dusk and every action, every sight, every emotion throughout the day is blessed in rhyme.” “A happy and reassuring read-aloud.”
 Not (White) “Gosh and golly, this is so cute that I could hardly bear it—and spiritual too, whatever that means. This blessing business, as presented here, is too much of a very good thing.”

3. CAIN AND ABEL:FINDING THE FRUITS OF PEACE by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, Illus. by Joani Keller Rothenberg (Jewish Lights)
 Hot (Clotfelter) “Just about everyone can relate to this book (and) enjoy the lessons ... We go from love to hate in a short span of time.”
 Not (White) “Sasso’s universalistic concerns are again expressed in a didactic, insistent manner ... Bright color illustrations burst forth to lend appeal.”

4. THE HARDEST WORD: A YOM KIPPUR STORY by Jacqueline Jules, Illus. by Katherine Janus Kahn (Kar-Ben)
 Hot (Isaac) “In addition to the moral tale, the illustrations lend an air of fun; sweet and powerful”
 Not (Silver) “Ridiculous story ... confusing format, dreadful illustrations that confuse.” “The mighty Ziz of Jewish legend is reduced to a ... charmless Big Bird.”

5. LEMUEL THE FOOL by Myron Uhlberg, Illus. by Sonja Lamut. (Peachtree)
 Hot (Clotfelter) “Around and around he goes—ending up in the same place.” “A humorous book... The illustrations work well.”
 Not (Isaac) “A misguided attempt to recast one of the great Chelm tales.”

6. A LITTLE GIRL NAMED MIRIAM by Dina Rosenfeld, Illus. by Ilene Winn-Lederer. (HaChai)
 Hot (Isaac) “Can be used to teach young children about the role of women in Jewish history ... emphasizes “the values of kindness and a pure spirit.”
 Not (Silver) “A narrative point of view that idealizes its subject beyond current standards of literary taste in children’s books.” “illustrations ... exaggerate human faces and use flat bright colors that give them an unattractive, commercial quality.”

7. SNOW IN JERUSALEM by Deborah da Costa, Illus. By Cornelius van Wright and Ying Hwa-Hu. (Albert Whitman)
 Hot (Clotfelter) “Two young boys living in Jerusalem (one Jewish and the other an Arab) who bond as friends.”
 Not (Morse) “The well-intentioned and innocent American author has planted a white cat in the Old City of Jerusalem to bring an Arab and a Jewish child together peacefully. This reviewer has little patience with the presumption that a book written and published for children in the American market can make a difference.”

ROUND THREE— FOR READERS IN THE MIDDLE

1. DAUGHTER OF LIGHT by Martha Attema (Orca)

Hot (Clotfelter) “Nine-and-a-half-year-old Ria could not understand why people were mean ... Her definite goal (was) to make sure her mother and the new baby would be safe and warm. What bravery ... she showed... A great story.”

Not (Silver) “Set in Holland during the Holocaust ... an improbable plot; no Jewish content.”

2. RIVKA’S WAY by Teri Kanefield (Front Street/ Cricket)

Hot (Morse) “Well-researched historical novel ... that keeps the reader turning pages.” “A believable re-creation of eighteenth century Prague.”

Not (White) “Rivka leads a privileged comfortable life in the ghetto, but is attracted by the larger world. Poorly developed characters ... Unbelievable plot. Little groundwork laid for what would have been a major act of rebellion with possibly serious consequences for the Jewish community.”

3. STOLEN WORDS by Amy G. Koss. (Pleasant Company)

Hot (Gold) “The awful strain of facing loss, especially the effect it has on all those we love, is expressed so well in the words of the young narrator.” “A voice that’s very real-funny, and honest.”

Not (White) “Story lines are quickly dropped. One of these is a reference to the Austrian refugee past of the young narrator’s mother. Who decided to take this depressed woman on an Austrian vacation as a healing measure?? Plot development does not prepare the reader for the surprise ending, which seems an add-on.”

4. PRISONER IN TIME: A CHILD OF THE HOLOCAUST by Pamela Melnikoff. (JPS)

Hot (Isaac) “Combines the Shoah and Terezin with a Golem story set in the time of the Maharal of Prague” “Jan (the hero) is both complex and lively.”

Not (Silver) “By giving the main character the ability to evade the Final Solution by traveling back to the time of the Golem, (the author) critically distorts readers’ understanding of the existential nature of the Holocaust and its inexorability upon its victims.” “Marginal.”

ROUND FOUR—FOR OLDER READERS

1 DAUGHTERS OF FIRE: HEROINES OF THE BIBLE by Fran Manushkin, Illus. by Uri Shulevitz. (Silver Whistle/Harcourt)

Hot (Gold) “A celebration of women, their determination, courage, and strength ... poetic and sophisticated.” “A beautiful Bat Mitzvah gift.”

Not (Clotfelter) “Wordy and detracts from the story.”

2. DEATH ON SACRED GROUND by Harriet K. Feder (Lerner).

Hot (Isaac) “Sixteen-year-old Vivi gets involved in a mystery. Both shrewd and friendly, (she) is able to assist ... in capturing the killer. The author is extremely skillful in merging Jewish practice into the book.”

Not (White) “Vivi solves the case while completing a daunting social studies assignment, encouraging her divorced father’s romance, and reenergizing an almost defunct Jewish community.” “Characters are wooden and stereotypes. The Orthodox take a major hit.”

3. **DISPLACED PERSONS** by Ted Gottfried, Illus. by Stephen Alcorn. (Twenty-First Century/ Millbrook)

Hot (Isaac) “Because the post-war era has not been widely-discussed in children’s books, this volume is of value.”

Not (White) “Unwieldy, deeply flawed.” “In the last section Gottfried expands on his belief that the Palestinians were also victims of the Holocaust. He pushes the Nazi-Israeli analogy so beloved by the enlightened elites, quoting from a poem by W.H. Auden, ‘I and the public know, What all schoolchildren learn, Those to whom evil is done, Do evil in return.’”

5. **EMMANUEL RINGELBLUM: HISTORIAN OF THE WARSAW GHETTO** by Mark Beyer (Rosen)

Hot (White) “ A tribute to a basic aspect of Jewish tradition, historic memory. A well-written account of a Polish-Jewish social historian who documented Nazi crimes. Parts of his archive were retrieved after the war. This noble, gifted man refused rescue, choosing to remain with his family and people.”

Not (Isaac) “Less valuable than others in Rosen’s Holocaust Biography Series.” No Background info on the Warsaw Ghetto, historic anti-Semitism in Poland, history of the ghettos throughout Europe.”

5. **MARA’S STORIES: GLIMMERS IN THE DARKNESS** by Gary Schmidt (Henry Holt)

Hot (Silver) “Retellings of stories about the Holocaust by Mara, a rabbi’s daughter and camp prisoner. The stories are adapted from Wiesel, Buber, Eliach, and Zeitlin.” They “provide a glimmer of Jewish light into a hopeless situation.”

Not (Morse) “A dark book ... not a book for children.”

A SELECTION OF NOTABLE BOOKS--BRIEF REVIEWS

1. **FRIEND OR FOE** by Eva Vogiel (Judaica)

In a post-war setting in England Nechy Horowitz’s reunion with her concentration camp survivor mother brings sorrow. Nechy is forced to play the role of caretaker. The boarding school that Nechy attends appears threatened by a new neighbor. Young people will enjoy this as they adventure through the school year with a group of darling young Jewish girls, and their teachers. (Clotfelter)

2. **MENDEL ROSENBUSCH: TALES FOR JEWISH CHILDREN** by Ilse Weber (Herodias)

These are moral fables about a Elijah-like character who helps the good and punishes the bad in his town. The book can be profitably read by adults as well as by older children. The author was a young Czech writer who died in the Shoah. (Isaac).

3. SECRETS IN THE HOUSE OF DELGADO by Gloria D. Miklowitz. (Eerdmans)
The story is set at the time of the Expulsion from Spain, 1492. The narrator, a young Roman Catholic servant maid has been kindly treated by the New Christian Delgados. Circumstances place the family's fate in her hands. The author captures the terror of the Inquisition and the ambiguity that surrounds its victims. She presents believably the varying degrees of attachment to Judaism that survive. Characterization is thin, and loose ends are tied up too conveniently. Yet, this is a slice of history in accessible form. (White)

4. SHOES FOR AMELIE by Connie C. Steiner, Illus. by Denis Rodier. (Lobster)
Children have been introduced to the Righteous Gentiles of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in several prior books. This touching story is centered on one family and the little Jewish girl it shelters. It is told by the youngest boy in the family. Rodier's full-page color illustrations are as affecting as the narration. (Silver)

5. UNDERSTANDING BUDDY by Marc Kornblatt (McElderry/Simon)
Sam is a fifth-grade Jewish boy ... an unusual boy who is trying to understand the odd behavior of his schoolmate Buddy, whose mother has recently died. To make matters more complicated, Buddy's mother used to clean the house for Sam's family, which presents an awkward social situation. However, Sam is persistent, and not easily discouraged. Happily, there is a satisfying ending. The book is refreshingly long on Jewish families but short on action. (Morse).

6. THE WAR WITHIN: A NOVEL OF THE CIVIL WAR by Carol Matas. (Simon)
Thirteen-year-old Hannah Green is forced to endure the hardships of the Civil War in 1862 in Holly Springs, MS. Hannah is fiercely on the side of the South. Life for Hannah, however, is changed forever when General Grant issues general order #11, commanding all Jews to evacuate the area. (Gold).

The book review portion of the Sydney Taylor Book Award program's second session came to an end at 11:45 am. Libby White, Chair of the committee, then thanked retiring committee members and presented them with certificates of service. Etta Gold and Naomi Morse completed their terms. Linda Silver completed terms as a Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee member and as Chair.