

JEWISH CHILDREN'S BOOKS IN THE NEW CENTURY: WHAT'S HOT? WHAT'S NOT?

*Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee
of the Association of Jewish Libraries - Synagogue, School, and Center Division*

Description: What will Jewish children be reading in the new century? What are the trends? The hot-ticket items? The sleepers? The duds? The Sydney Taylor Book Award committee will review and discuss Jewish children's books published in 2000. We will scoop the varying opinions behind our reviews (compiled, printed and for sale for program follow-along). We will dissect the good, the so-so, and the awful. Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee Chair Linda Silver will offer a brief history of the award and outline the selection process. Committee members Kathleen Clotfelter, Etta Gold, Fred Isaac, Naomi Morse, and Libby White will connect review criteria to specific books, expressing their agreements and disagreements. We will distribute bookmarks, award and honor book seals, and copies of the current AJL Notable Children's Books. We will recommend books for library shelves and family reading. And we will invite the audience to participate with their feedback. It will be lively and stimulating with plenty to take back home!

Committee Chair:

Linda R. Silver, Jewish Education Center Library, Cleveland, Ohio

Committee Members:

Kathleen Clotfelter, Donna Klein Jewish Academy Library, Boca Raton, Florida

Etta Gold, Temple Beth Am, Miami, Florida

Fred Isaac, Sinai Temple Library, Oakland, California

Naomi Morse, Charles Smith Day School, Lower School Campus, Rockville, Maryland

Libby White, Beth Israel Congregation Library, Owings Mills, Maryland

INTRODUCTION

Linda R. Silver

Linda Silver is librarian of the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland and is completing her last year as chair of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee. Along with the previous chair, Ellen Cole, she is co-editor of the AJL Newsletter's new children's book review section. She is also editing a new AJL publication, *Creating a Judaic Children's Collection: A Basic List of Books and Videos*, which will be available later this year.

Welcome to this afternoon's program, brought to you by the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee. I think we could say that this program has become an AJL convention tradition and it's a pleasure to see both old faces and new!

I'm Linda Silver, the chair of the committee. The stars of this afternoon are the members of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee: Kathleen Clotfelter, Etta Gold, Fred Isaac, Naomi Morse, and Libby White. Etta, Naomi, and I

will finish our terms on the committee at the end of this year so next year, in Denver, look for us in the audience!

First, a few announcements. All of you should have a list of the books to be discussed this afternoon. Be sure you have one, because they'll be used at the end of the program to award doorprizes- audio cassettes of Sydney Taylor's first book: *The All-of-a-Kind Family* story, generously donated by Listen and Live Audio, which produces this cassette and the others that are to follow. You are also welcome to take bookmarks, kindly compiled as in previous years by a former member of the committee, Cheryl Banks; copies of the *AJL Notable Books for Children*, aka *Best of the Bunch* lists; and winning and honor book seals- all available on the tables in the back of the room.

Even if you don't win a door prize, you can still buy the *All-of-a-Kind Family* books, which are being sold in the back of the room by Mr. and Mrs. Gordon, representing GRM Associates, the Taylor Family Estate agent. They have copies of all of the books and order forms if you want to get them later.

You can also buy a compilation of the committee's reviews of all the books submitted in 2000. This is another Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee convention tradition; the compilation allows you to follow along with the panel at this afternoon's program and it's a very good book selection tool when you go back home and try to decide which of last year's books to buy for your library. Last year's books were unusually good ones, by the way! If you decide later that you want a compilation, you can get one from AJL Publications.

Speaking of AJL Publications, I want to announce the publication of the first new collection development tool for Jewish children's librarians to come along in many years. It is entitled *Developing a Judaic Children's Collection: Recommended Books and Videos* and it consists of 16 extensive subject bibliographies subdivided by age level. Every title is annotated and publication information is included! This was a labor of love on the part of members of AJL's Greater Cleveland chapter- Andi Davidson and Julie Moss, two of the contributing editors, are in this room- and we think it will be a great help to librarians and a great boost to Jewish libraries serving children from preschool through middle school. Flyers announcing the forthcoming publication are at the AJL table in the exhibits and there are some on the back table.

Speaking of the exhibits, buy your copies of this year's award winners and honor books at The White Rabbit Children's Book Shop (a San Diego book store exhibiting here at convention), which is selling them for the Committee this year.

As many of you know, the Sydney Taylor Awards were established by her husband in memory of Sydney Taylor, the author of the *All-of-a-Kind Family* books, a series of 5 warm-hearted books about a Jewish immigrant family living on the Lower East Side of New York in the early years of the last century. Awards have been given since 1968, when Esther Hautzig's now classic memoir, *The Endless Steppe*, was the winner.

There are 6 members of the committee. Publishers, not authors, submit books for consideration and the committee judges them using the following criteria- the same, probably, that you use to decide which books you will buy for your library collection. The criteria are: *Literary and artistic merit*,

positive Jewish content and focus, age-appropriateness in terms of style, vocabulary, content, format, and illustration; and accuracy, based on solid research and reputable scholarship. Many mediocre and downright poor books get rejected by the committee, based on these criteria, every year but so, too, do a few good books- because they are lacking in Jewish content. You will find reviews of them in the compilation and hear a few of them discussed this afternoon but you won't find them among the winners or honors or even, notables. You can see that the committee takes the Jewish content of books very seriously- as seriously as literary merit- because, like you, we are professionally committed to encouraging the publication and visibility of good Jewish books and of getting them into the hands and hearts of Jewish children!

We'll begin today's discussion, which will be moderated by the next chair of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, Libby White, with some remarks by Fred Isaac. We'll try to move along briskly, so we can finish by 3:45, in time to award those door prizes and get to the next program- there's a good one called "The Jewish Child In Picture Books" by June Cummins at 4PM. Please feel free to chime in with questions and comments: the audience at these programs is always invited to participate!

TEN YEARS OF SYDNEY TAYLOR AWARD BOOKS

Fred Isaac

Fred Isaac is currently Librarian at Temple Sinai in Oakland California and a Judaica Library consultant and writer in the San Francisco Bay Area. He is a past President of the AJL's SSC Division, and a current member of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee.

Fred has also presented papers and published in the field of detective fiction and is a long-time member of the Popular Culture Association.

This past April I delivered a paper on the past ten years of the Sydney Taylor Book awards at the Popular Culture Association's annual Conference in Philadelphia. The PCA is an academic group with a long history of broad-mindedness; I have been presenting at their meetings since 1981. This paper was given under the Association's Jewish Studies Area, led by Professor Daniel Walden of Penn State University. Approximately a dozen people attended (which I consider a success for this type of session.) The title I chose was "Who Cares About Harry Potter?: the Best Jewish Books for Children, 1990-2000."

I began by reminding the audience that, while there is a long and wonderful history of literature for adults, until the current century children did not have the same advantages. I cited Bialik's poem "Ha-Matmid" and the boys of Anatevka in "Fiddler on the Roof" as examples of how children were treated in earlier generations.

I continued by introducing the audience to the history of children's judaica, ending with the awards themselves. The remainder of the time I dealt with a number of topical issues (rather than review the books individually). The books I reviewed were the Award winners since 1990. I provided the audience with chronological lists of the winners. I also had lists of the Honor Books, and a breakdown of the categories I discussed.

The subjects I covered included

- What topics have been covered by the winners?
- Is the Shoah presented, and in what light?
- How broad (or narrow) has the range of subjects been?
- What level of sophistication do the books have?
- What might their effect be on the young people and families who read them?

I made a point, when possible, of separating the older children's books from the picture books, but I also wished to emphasize that the breadth of the field is very wide.

I concluded with a short statement on the question "How Jewish are they?" to remind the audience that while ideas are universal, their presentation in a Jewish context can have dramatic impact.

I closed with the following paragraph: "So, with such an abundance of excellent literature for children of all ages- not to mention the value it has for their parents, Jews by Choice, and others interested in discovering and exploring the Jewish experience and Jewish thought in a non-threatening environment- the world of Judaica for young people is a thriving segment of the publishing world. While I deeply appreciate the enormous boost Harry Potter has given to the juvenile publishing world in the past few years, and admire J.K. Rowling's creativity, it is not too much to say in response, "Who cares about Harry Potter? Jewish children's books are doing just fine."

The audience included several professors of Judaica from around the nation, and at least one Professor in the Education program at Bennington College in Vermont. I have been asked to expand the presentation and submit it to Professor Walden for inclusion in his Jewish Studies Annual.

PANEL DISCUSSION: SELECTION OF PANELISTS' REMARKS

Moderated by Libby White

Libby White is the librarian of the Beth Israel Congregation Hebrew School in Owings Mills, MD. She also directs the Jewish Vocational Service Library in Baltimore, MD. Libby has been a Reference Librarian at a large public library system in upstate New York and was coordinator of the Summer Sessions on Judaic Studies at Skidmore College in Saratoga Spring, New York. Libby reviews for the AJL Newsletter, School Library Journal, and the Baltimore Jewish Times. She has been consultant to *Funk and Wagnalls Encyclopedia* and to *Magazines for Libraries*. She contributed an essay on Balkan Jewry to the *Reader's Guide to Judaism*. Since 1999, Libby has been a member of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee. At the 2001 AJL Conference, she will participate in the Sydney Taylor Award Panel session. Libby is a PhD. Candidate in Jewish History at Baltimore Hebrew University.

I wish to thank Linda Silver and Ellen Cole, the present and former chairpersons of the Sydney Taylor Book award committee, under whom I have served. Both have been excellent teachers and guides, and they remain my constant friends. This afternoon Linda has given me an opportunity to present a different face to you. Over the years on these panels, I've earned a reputation as "take-no-prisoners" reviewer. In other words, I was rarely "hot"---more often "not!" This afternoon I shall appear before you in the role of a wise, temperate, and conciliatory mediator, except, of course, when I present my own reviews!

Kathleen Clotfelter has been part of the Media/Library department at Donna Klein Jewish Academy for the last four years. Prior to this she was librarian at Hillel Community Day School in North Miami Beach for ten years. She is completing her second year on The Sydney Taylor Committee. Mrs. Clotfelter has been a member of AJL for fifteen years and served on the South Florida board as Co-president and secretary. She also served on the planning committee for the last two AJL conventions that were held in South Florida. Besides being involved in the educational world since 1956, Mrs. Clotfelter has been active in local civic affairs and community projects.

Etta D. Gold has been the head librarian at Temple Beth Am Library in Miami since 1996. Previously, she was Manager of the Children's Department at the Coral Gables Branch of the Miami-Dade Public Library System, having earned her MLS in 1991. She has worked for many years in Jewish education as teacher and administrator, holding a RJE. Currently she serves on several national committees, including Accreditation and the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee.

Naomi Morse is the Head Librarian at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, Maryland. She has worked as a children's librarian for many years. She is most interested in art, poetry, children's literature and the literature and art of the Holocaust. She is always looking for a good story.

Biographies

Pressler, Mirjam. *Anne Frank: A Hidden Life.* Translated by **Anthea Bell.** New York: Dutton Children's Books, 2000. \$15.99. 176p. ISBN: 0525463305.

HOT: Pressler is an expert on Anne Frank and the editor of the definitive edition of the diary. This book is a remarkable piece of biographical and historical reconstruction, describing the Frank's family's life before they went into hiding, giving short but precise portraits of the eight people who lived in the secret annex, speculating about their relationships using evidence from the various editions of the diary, and filling in many of the details that surrounded the development of Anne as a young woman and a writer. Linda Silver.

NOT: Cynthia Ozick wrote a 1997 New Yorker essay entitled, "Who Owns Anne Frank?" I was reminded of Ozick's objections to elements of the "Anne Frank industry" in reading this title. ... I have three objections. The author's too close identification with Anne causes her to uncritically accept Anne's often cruel and immature assessments of others. Pressler's practice of psychobiography is also troubling. Finally, the author describes the romantic relationship between Anne and Peter as if she herself had been present---quite a reach. As Hazel Rochman stated at an earlier session, our children need to be exposed to many views of the Holocaust. This work is hardly a definitive companion to the diary. Libby White.

Boerst, William J. *Isaac Asimov: Writer of the Future.* Greensboro, NC: Morgan Reynolds, 1999. 112P. \$18.95. ISBN: 1883846323.

HOT: Asimov was a brilliant man with an unusual personality. Throughout the text of this biography, his personality and devotion to writing remains the author's focus. Etta Gold.

NOT: Asimov is portrayed as a brilliant but unpleasant individual who entertained vendettas against others at every stage of his life. The author attempts to rationalize Asimov's behavior. A very annoying aspect of this work is its excessive and irrelevant detail. Does the reader really need to know about Asimov's extensive use of diuretics? Libby White.

Winter, Jonah. *Once Upon a Time in Chicago: the Story of Benny Goodman.* Illus. by **Jeanette Winter.** NY: Hyperion, 2000. \$14.99. (30p.) ISBN: 078680462-9.

HOT: True life biographies are rare for very young readers and this one outshines them all. The crisp, vivid pictures and undulating color-framed pages give the feel of jazz rhythm to the simple, poignant text- a perfect combination. Etta Gold.

NOT: This is a handsome, charming, beautifully made biography for children in the primary grades. Its Jewish content is minimal, however. Naomi Morse.

Holidays

Kimmel, Eric A. *The Jar of Fools: Eight Hanukkah Stories from Chelm*. Illus. by Mordicai Gerstein. NY: Holiday House, 2000. \$18.95. 56p. ISBN: 0823414639.

HOT: Too delicious to be confined to reading only at Hanukkah, these stories are an eclectic combination of traditional lore and original tale spinning. Gerstein's droll illustrations are among his best! Linda Silver.

NOT: I am uneasy about the obvious names given to the Chelmitic characters and about the physically grotesque illustrations. I have no doubt that children will find these features "funny," but is this the essence of humor? The gentleness and subtlety of Chelm is lost: the tradition is coarsened. Libby White.

Melmed, Laura Kraus. *Moishe's Miracle*. Illus. by David Slonim. NY: HarperCollins, 2000. \$15.95. (31p.) ISBN: 0688146821.

HOT: Melmed ... blends fairy tale elements with characteristic Jewish humor to create a true Hanukkah masterpiece ... Slonim's painting are miracles in themselves. Their weighty darkness reflects the old world setting, the wintry cold, the poverty and yet, they cleverly depict the personalities and funny mood of the story. This book is a winner! Etta Gold.

NOT: In an impoverished shtetl, generous Moishe and his shrewish, selfish wife, Baila, face the prospect of a latke-less Hanukkah. Then, Moishe receives the gift of a magic frying pan which generates its own latkes. Baila's attempt to seize the pan ends in disaster. Chastened, she becomes an obedient helpmate I have been surprised by the enthusiastic acceptance of the stereotypical portrayal of a Jewish woman. I had assumed that the days of the "yenta" were long gone. Libby White.

Kimmelman, Leslie. *The Runaway Latkes*. Illus. by Paul Yalowitz. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman, 2000. \$13.95. (30p.) ISBN: 0-8075-7176-8.

HOT: *Runaway Latkes* is a delightful story for Hanukkah ... a Jewish version of the Gingerbread Man. Rebecca Bloom fries her pan cakes in preparation for the Hanukkah party. Much to her surprise, the pancakes jump from her frying pan and begin to sing "Big and round, crisp and brown, off we run to see the town. And YOU can't catch us!" Yalowitz uses soft colors in his illustrations. The roundness of the people match the roundness of the latkes. A great picture book for the younger set. Kathleen Clotfelter.

NOT: ... a cute but ultimately silly book about how latkes can bring a whole community together. Fred Isaac.

Stories for Younger Readers

Kushner, Lawrence and Kushner, Karen. *Because Nothing Looks Like God*. Illus. by Dawn W. Majewski. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2000. \$16.95. (31p.) ISBN: 158023092X.

HOT: This is a sweet and effective way to introduce God to young children. Each double-page spread includes a way to comprehend holiness, from birth and death to nature and *tikkun olam*. The effect is to recognize that every good thing (and some not-so-good) reflect the presence of holiness in our everyday lives. Fred Isaac.

NOT: This is basically a book of conversations between children and adults. Three main questions are asked: “Where is God?”, “What does God look like?”, and “How does God make things happen?” Many answers are given. Some make sense, others don’t. God being in a red tomato is a bit far fetched ... The saving grace in this book are the illustrations. They are cheerful and bright. Kathleen Clotfelter.

Prose, Francine. *The Demons' Mistake, a Story from Chelm*. Illus. by Mark Podwal. New York: Greenwillow Books, 2000. (30p.) \$15.95. ISBN: 0-688-17565-1.

HOT: In the past few years, Prose and Podwal have given children a small treasury of picture stories based on Jewish themes. Although it begins in Chelm, this story is the least tied to traditional lore, being informed, instead, by a subtly sophisticated urban outlook ... Throughout this witty tale, Podwal’s smudgy pictures charm and entertain. For third grade up, maybe second. Linda Silver.

NOT: When the demons of Chelm decide they can make more mischief in the New World than they can in the Old, they move to America ... When at last they arrive in contemporary New York, they are confused and scared. But they find a way to survive ... just look into your computer screen. This is a new tale based on the strange life of Chelm. Regrettably, though, young children will not understand the issues it addresses. Fred Isaac.

Deedy, Carmen Agra. *The Yellow Star: the Legend of King Christian X of Denmark*. Illus. by Henry Sorensen. Atlanta: Peachtree, 2000. \$16.95. (30p.) ISBN: 1561452084.

HOT: Handsome, concise, and dignified, this picture book tells the legend of King Christian of Denmark, who challenged the Nazis by wearing the yellow star himself. The layout, graphics, typeface, and illustrations are outstanding in their clarity and placement. It begs to be viewed and read slowly and carefully. Highly recommended for book collections in both secular and Judaic settings, this is that elusive item - a children’s Holocaust story with positive content. Naomi Morse.

NOT: The text expresses a “what if” perspective: what if King Christian X and his people had all worn the yellow star by which the Germans sought to isolate the Jews and prepare the way for their eventual deportation? ... Yes, there is a subtitle calling the story a legend ... and there is solid research that documents the valor of the Danes. Why should children be taught a sentimental and discredited rumor? Libby White.

Stories for Older Readers

Rosen, Michael. *The Blessing of the Animals*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000. \$15.00. 87p. ISBN: 0-374-30838-1.

HOT: Twelve year old Jared hears that the Catholic Church across the street is going to have its annual Blessing of the Animals, and wants to take his dog Shayna. When his mother says no, Jared argues further. They agree to ask four people each and get their opinions, talking about it later. What follows is a valuable exploration of what it means to be Jewish ... We hear from several

generations, clergy, and family members, all with different experiences and understandings of ... Judaism. Jared's decision is not surprising but the discussion is both accessible and deep. Fred Isaac.

NOT: It's commendable that this book was written because too few books for children attempt to show ordinary kids seeking Jewish answers to life's problems. That said, the plot is single-focused and the pace is slow. I doubt if many children will find it readable. Linda Silver.

My Secret Camera: Life in the Lodz Ghetto. Photographs by Mendel Grossman. Text by Frank Dabba Smith. San Diego, CA: Gulliver/Harcourt, 2000. \$16.00. (37p.) ISBN: 0152023062.

HOT: This book of photographs taken secretly in the Lodz ghetto gives the reader a chilling look at those Jews who were trapped there. These are some of the photographs of Mendel Grossman, who took great risks to leave us this photographic record of his and his fellow Jews' situation. The text by Smith is artfully understated, letting the photos speak for themselves. The book is restrained ... the bookmaking is handsome. This is one of the better Holocaust titles I've seen. Naomi Morse.

NOT: This is a spectacular book of photographs of life in the Lodz Ghetto. Grossman, like Vishniac, hid his camera and took candid pictures as he traveled, recording the world the Nazis created. The short narrative reinforces the tragedy of that life. Grossman himself died in the final days of the War. But despite its large format, the work is not meant for children, and especially not young children. Fred Isaac.

Lester, Julius. *Pharaoh's Daughter.* San Diego: SilverWhistle/Harcourt, 2000. \$17.00. 182p. ISBN: 0152018265.

HOT: Lester has written an involved midrash on Moses in the form of a novel. Making many leaps, and incorporating much Egyptian lore, [he] has created a suspenseful, accessible window into what life in Egypt might have felt like to one Hebrew family. Strong character development, psychologically plausible situations, and effective writing make this a fascinating journey in mind and thought. Lester is frank in telling a truth about parent/child relationships: children may find their parental match in a mentor outside the family, and many parents find that their authentic children are not their biological offspring. Naomi Morse.

NOT: This work is yet another attempt to transfer modern understandings of tolerance and modern trends toward the blurring of the margins between religious communities to ancient civilizations. The game is fixed from the beginning; monotheism is portrayed as a more demanding, less attractive option. Perhaps young adults will be titillated by the promise of assorted orgies, nudity, and sex. As it happens, the promise is barely fulfilled. Libby White.

Resources mentioned in the Introduction -- in the order described:

Taylor, Sydney. *All-Of-a-Kind Family* [audiocassette]

Available from bookstores, online bookstores (e.g. www.BarnesandNobel.com), and Listen and Live Audio - 1-800-653-9400.

Bookmarks were all distributed at convention; no more are available.

Winner and Honor Book seals are available from Linda Silver, linbobsil@aol.com. No charge.

Taylor, Sydney. *All-of-a-Kind Family* series: *All-of-a-Kind Family*; *All-of-a-Kind Family Downtown*; *More All-of-a-Kind Family*; *All-of-a-Kind Family Uptown*; *Ella of All-of-a-Kind Family*. [hardcover and paperback]

Available from bookstores, online bookstores (e.g. www.Amazon.com; www.BarnesandNobel.com), and GRM Associates, Inc., 290 West End Avenue, New York, NY 10023; telephone: (212) 874-5964; Fax: (212) 874-6425. (Note: GRM Associates is the Taylor Family Estate agent)

Sydney Taylor Book Awards: Reviews of Books Submitted to the Committee for the Year 2000.

New York: Association of Jewish Libraries, 2001. 133 pp. \$12.00.

Compilation of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee's reviews of books submitted in 2000. Available from Association of Jewish Libraries (<http://www.jewishlibraries.org> - click on "Publications")

Notable Children's Books of Jewish Content, 1985-2000. New York: Association of Jewish Libraries, 2001. 40 p. [Member: \$10.00; Non-Member: \$12.00]

Annotated lists of recommended books for 1985-2000, prepared by the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee. This list is also known by its former title: *Best of the Bunch*.

Available from Association of Jewish Libraries (<http://www.jewishlibraries.org> - click on "Publications")

Notable Children's Books of Jewish Content: The Best of the Bunch from 1999. by Libby K. White, Beth Israel Congregation Library, Owings Mills, Maryland.

Available from Association of Jewish Libraries (<http://www.jewishlibraries.org> - click on "Awards & Scholarships" > "SSC Sydney Taylor Book Awards" > "Notable Books" in the heading > "Best of the Bunch 1999." (May be copied free from this AJL web page.)

Notable Children's Books of Jewish Content: The Best of the Bunch from 2000. by Linda R. Silver, Jewish Education Center Library, Cleveland Heights, Ohio, and Libby K. White, Beth Israel Congregation Library, Owings Mills, Maryland. New York: Association of Jewish Libraries, 2001.

Available from Association of Jewish Libraries. (<http://www.jewishlibraries.org> - click on "Awards & Scholarships" > "SSC Sydney Taylor Book Awards" > "Notable Books" in the heading > "Notable Books 2000." (May be copied free from this AJL web page.)

Developing a Judaic Children's Collection: Recommended Books and Videos. Edited by Linda R. Silver; Contributing Editors: Andrea Davidson, Julie Moss, Sarajane Dolinsky, Bonnie Shapiro, and Polly Wilkenfeld (members of AJL-Cleveland chapter). New York, Association of Jewish Libraries, 2001. 92 pp. \$18.00 for members, \$20.00 for non-members.

Consists of 16 extensive subject bibliographies subdivided by age level - preschool through middle school. Every title is annotated and publication information is included.

Available from Association of Jewish Libraries (<http://www.jewishlibraries.org> - click on "Publications")

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